



Spawn On!

BOB CARROLL

AND THE ART OF DYING

BY JEANNE CARSTENSEN

In 1988, I helped my friend, the solo performer Bob Carroll, assemble the “suicide packets” he was preparing for distribution after his death.

Radically opposed to Western medicine, Bob had relied on various alternative treatments to fight his disease, but he eventually developed a raging case of meningitis that destroyed his optic nerve and left him totally blind. When I first saw him in Davies Hospital in San Francisco in early March of 1988, I was shocked by how sick he looked. Since he was newly blind he didn’t realize I was in the doorway, so I stood there watching him for a few moments, my stomach churning.

Bob was sitting up in the hospital bed, which was cranked up to a 45-degree angle, staring out into the room. At first he seemed no more than a golem—a flimsy frame of mud and sticks draped in a hospital gown. Then I imagined him Christ-like. The light from the window behind the bed created a halo effect around his long frizzy yellow hair, which fell loosely around his shoulders. His translucent, bony hands were folded in his lap, as thin as biblical parchment. It

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Bob Carroll in performance.

was with this ludicrous fantasy of the suffering savior playing in my head that I finally approached him.

“I’m only in here so I can get well enough to kill myself.”

He said this almost immediately, effortlessly wresting control of the master narrative that I had created in my head. The scene would not be between the dying patient and his guilty young friend. Bob had written another *script*, and although he was experiencing some unexpected *plot changes*, he was still in control. Would I help him complete his suicide note? There was still Xeroxing to be done. He passed his hands over the battered files in his old backpack, his fingers feeling between the papers.

What he extracted was a graphically dense five-page document of handwritten text and images that looked like a zine from an anarchist bookstore. The masters of each page were stored in individual clear plastic folders together with scraps of images and text that he would tape to the page and then recopy to make revisions. After months of production, the suicide note was nearing completion, but he needed someone to copy, collate and staple final versions, and stuff them into 8 1/2-by-11 manila envelopes, together with individual handwritten letters from Bob to the recipient in question. I glanced down at page one of the suicide note and saw that it contained Bob’s narration of his own dying process:

original script: *Working, organizing, having sex, dancing up a storm, etc., I exit hearty.*

plot changes: *Difficulty in getting the right drugs slows my dying. Illness has time to become a major character actor. Running time and budget are extended further. Added are some wonderful Gothic horror movie details.*

final script: *1st, like a cheery, anguished stunt at a semi-public sporting event of the handicapped — I return, by familiar hook and crook, to the minimal excellent VITALITY and wish for exit; next I enjoy VITALITY for several months, sharing with others; then I exit hearty.*

bob carroll was an author/actor/storyteller whose jazzy, sung-danced-squawked comic monologues were often compared to those of Lenny Bruce and Lord Buckley. A standout at alternative theater festivals in the United States and Europe in the late '70s, especially the influential New Theatre Festival in Baltimore, he was praised for bringing a social-political dimension to theater at a time when personal angst and formalism were the growing tendencies. "The Salmon Show," his one-man "stand-up, fall-down, lie-down, song-and-dance comedy act," as he described it, became a hit. In a rave review in *The New York Times* in 1979, Mel Gussow called Bob "a born performer... an original, his own species." And in 1980, the *Los Angeles Times*' John C. Mahoney described "The Salmon Show" as "the single most effective... piece of contemporary radical political theater I have seen."

"The Salmon Show" was about death, rebirth and the abuses of corporate capitalism. It was also the story of the life cycle of the salmon, as told from the point of view of the fish. "To the spawning grounds!" Bob would wail as he balanced on one foot and undulated his long white arms. "Steelhead trout, we're moving about, cherry masu we're comin' on through..." Grunting and scattling, making great gawky leaps across the stage and keeping a constant beat by stomping his feet and slapping his rump, he acted out salmon migrating and spawning, Indian fishing and the onset of industrialization: The cosmic flow is replaced with the cash flow, salmon are canned, Black Panther George Jackson is thrown in the can and the whole shebang ends up in the multinational money box.

He narrated the story with humorous, often sexual asides. "Now ladies and gentlemen," he would suddenly say in a serious voice, "a Chinook salmon, at full size." After posing as a mature salmon at the height of its sexual powers, which involved him fluffing out his frizzy hair in a suggestive manner and grabbing his crotch as he balanced on one leg, he'd break in again. "I want to dedicate this section to all the size queens in the audience." He'd get his laugh, then repeat the show's lusty refrain of fertility and rebirth. "To the spawning grounds!" had "the

ring of an anthem," Mel Gussow wrote, "like whaling songs shouted in old New Bedford. Herman Melville might have joined in for a jubilant chorus."

As in all his other works, Bob used no makeup, no sets and no special theatrical lighting—just his Irish pink skin and lanky limbs in jeans and a T-shirt; his signature wild mop of yellow-red hair; his precise, expressive hands; a 24-ounce can of Colt 45 beer. His body was a strange, elastic marvel, not beautiful, but expressive in a surprisingly precise if floppy manner. Although his movements appeared to be silly in the extreme, Phil Arnoult, founder of the Baltimore Theater Project, remembers him refining them for hours in front of the mirror. "Carroll's is that rare art that appears to be artless," Mahoney of the *L.A. Times* wrote about "The Salmon Show." Even his pre-show routine, which seemed to be totally improvised, was carefully constructed. As he wandered through the audience flicking his hair behind his shoulders in teasing gestures and making funny leaps, he would invite the audience to leave at any time if they were bored or uncomfortable or just had better things to do. "I don't like captive audiences, unless you want to be captive that is." Then he'd pop open a beer and invite people to have sex, or sleep. "I love sleeping, why shouldn't you?"

Sometime around 1982, when he was still living in a loft on East 18th Street in Manhattan, Bob got sick. That year he performed "The Dirt Show" (as in "the dirt" on Diana Ross and Motown) for a short run in SoHo and was a co-organizer of The Radical Humor Festival with Abbie Hoffman and others. In 1983 he helped his close friend Charlotte Moorman put on a benefit for her New York Avant-Garde Festival, but otherwise he was fading from the scene. Friends who knew him at that time say he never told them he had AIDS, but the epidemic had begun to ravage the city's artistic community; when he disappeared, many just assumed that he, too, had the virus.

I met Bob in 1984 when I was an intern at the Planet Drum Foundation, a small eco-cultural organization that emerged out of the '60s Haight-Ashbury free-food collective, the Diggers. By this time he had returned to his hometown of San Francisco to try and heal himself through alternative medicine and do occasional organizing work with Planet Drum. He was also deeply involved in

the artistic and political process of planning for his potential suicide.

His last play was “The (W)hole Show” — “a suicide show for the whole family.” In it he portrayed smaller parts disappearing into larger (w)holes in the ongoing creation/death dance of the universe. Atoms into molecules. Single cells into multi-celled organisms. Individuals into societies. “They dance it/the fit and selected/the unfit and rejected/Bind ‘em and you get: Evolution/In the Go-Go,” he would croon— “In the Go-Go” being the show’s refrain about the cosmic flow, of which death and sometimes suicide is a natural part.

In a scene that has to be one of the strangest theatrical moments ever, Bob acted out the moment when a virus inserts its DNA into a cell, turning it into a kinky act between two species of “low-life trash, the two oldest and lowest life forms.” The bacterium, “like hunky trade/robust/semi-permeable membrane bag,” calls out, “Ooh, I’ve never been pierced by a virus before,” as it lets the T-4 phage (a virus) penetrate its membrane with first one then all six of its spikes, which, as all Microbiology 101 students know, causes the cell to replicate the phage’s DNA: “a sort of suicide on the molecular level” (according to biologist D. Hofstadter, whom Bob cites in the program).

The audience members were participants in a cosmic suicide party that always included the possibility of Bob’s own suicide at any point during the performance, as he would frequently remind them. The letter to “Mr. Eggman” was his potential suicide note:

Mr. Eggman,
Do not leave any more eggs here after today
Whoever has been livin’ here is movin’ away
Just for now leave all your best
And some of the rest
Because there’s a Goin’-Away Party goin’ on.

Other possible notes, such as “Dear World: I’m leaving because I’m bored. I am leaving you with your worries in this sweet cesspool,” were printed in the program along with a bibliography on the international right-to-die movement.

The show ended with Bob asking the audience to “think of ways of doin’ it— your exit—that will make you feel fit.” He performed “The (W)hole Show” at the Boyd Theater in Los Angeles in 1985 to strong reviews and in Edinburgh and London in 1986, as well as more informally in the homes and collective spaces of friends in northern California, but he was never able to take it to New York or tour it as widely as his earlier works.

PLOT CHANGES

Bob’s health stabilized after a few days and he was let out of the hospital. “I did it, I’m well enough to kill myself.”

Although he was terminally ill at this point, his spirits were high, even manic, because he was still directing the show. As outlined in his suicide note, he had already had to incorporate serious *plot changes* into his script. Although he had always lived a life of (mostly voluntary) poverty, working frequently for barter and owning no more possessions than could fit in a daypack, as he became sicker his lack of a permanent home and income forced him to lean more heavily than he liked on friends and family, principally his brother Don, for support. He was already enduring terrible pain and severe loss of weight and strength, but the blindness was a *horror movie detail* even he couldn’t have predicted. When he left the hospital it was with the determination to act out his *final script* (with a few more revisions, of course): Enjoy life, *VITALITY* and friends, at least for a few days, then *exit hearty*.

As the youngest and most recent friend in the small coterie close to Bob at the end—I was 27 and he was 47—I was in some ways the best audience for his suicide story. I was in thrall to Bob as an artistic figure and perfectly willing to go along with the mythology the master storyteller wanted to create around his death. He was extremely mysterious about his private life. Although a few of his friends told me about personal conversations they’d had with him about relationships and family, he is better remembered as a joke-teller (he was a huge fan of the raunchy 430-pound Baltimore comedian Tubby Boots) and well-read

conversationalist. When pressed about his sexuality, he'd generally refer to himself as "omnisexual," meaning he liked "all species," and didn't talk frequently about sexual partners, regular or otherwise. In a rare interview from 1983—he received a lot of press but it was almost exclusively reviews—the *L.A. Weekly's* Susan Block couldn't get anything out of him about his past:

Block: Where do you come from and how did you first get into the theater?

Carroll: I don't cultivate memories about myself. I think it's fine to be me, but it bores me to keep rehashing what I've already done.

So even though Bob was on or near his deathbed, we never discussed his upbringing—he was from a prominent San Francisco Irish Catholic family and was a seminary student for 10 years—or his feelings about his own death. He did tell me about the summer he spent with fellow seminarian Greg McAllister in Shelby, Miss. in 1965 as a civil rights organizer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). But it wasn't until later that I learned that he made a deeply anti-clerical underground film during that same period—"like everything else Bob produced, the political message was designed to create maximum discomfort," Greg writes in his unpublished memoir—that caused a seminary-wide scandal and cemented Bob's reputation as a provocateur. One of his first performance pieces, "W.C. Fields," began as a free multimedia "theatrical" that he wrote, directed and performed with technical support from Greg and other film-crew members from his seminary days. Another early piece, "One Night in Roseville," was based on his civil rights work in Alabama. What mattered to Bob was not his history, but staying on script. I solidified my role as faithful audience member by documenting the final days of his show with a borrowed video camera.

Two days after he got out of the hospital, I found myself taping and participating in the following scene:

Bob sits at a wooden table in a cramped kitchen in an old Victorian in San Francisco entertaining a small group of friends. It's St. Patrick's Day, 1988. He tells his favorite Tubby Boots joke about the guy who went to his doctor to complain about having a small prick. "What's the matter?" the doctor asks as the patient unzips his fly. "You don't understand. It's swollen." The three women chortle, savoring the dirty story they've heard Bob tell countless times. "If there's anything I hate," Bob continues, goading them on, "it's a size queen and a small cock." They recite the words in unison, giggling and pinching their fingers together to indicate a male organ the size of a Cheetos corn puff.

Bob is sipping Irish whiskey from a small juice glass. This morning, after planning his suicide for many years, he called his friends to say a final goodbye, only to call again later with an unexpected plot development—"Hi, I'm at Fran's, why don't you come over." Fran, who knows Bob from his seminary days, puts on the original Broadway cast recording of "South Pacific," Bob's favorite musical. He punctuates the music with bits of commentary about jazz musicians who played in Tin Pan Alley orchestras and gossips about Mary Martin's possible lesbian relationship with Janet Gaynor. When Ezio Pinza sings "Some Enchanted Evening" in his honey bass, the room goes silent. Eyes lock around the table: "Is he still planning to kill himself?" is the collective unspoken thought. "Later tonight?" He is blind and can't see the tears in Fran's eyes. "Nobody sings it like that," Fran coos after a few bars. Bob nods his head in agreement, his eyes glistening. "Do you know Dolly Parton's line about why she doesn't jog?" Bob says all of a sudden. "Because she'll get black eyes." They all laugh.

We all knew that Bob had intended to kill himself that day. But the plans changed somehow between Bob and the friend who was going to help him take the pills and stay comfortable. When he called from Fran's apartment, it was a very dramatic plot twist. None of us offered to assist him with his suicide that evening, even though our gathering around that table could have been a suicide

party scene from “The (W)hole Show.” “There is a Goin’-Away Party goin’ on...” Although Bob’s talk about suicide was outrageous and seemed at times “designed to create maximum discomfort” for his loved ones, he was scrupulous about never pressuring anyone to be directly involved or take any personal or legal risks. We didn’t offer; he didn’t ask.

Around midnight I drove Blind Bob, as we’d taken to calling him, back to the Planet Drum Foundation, which was also the office/home of his dear friends Peter Berg and Judy Goldhaft. I helped him onto the sofa-bed in the cluttered office in the basement and put his backpack where he could easily reach it, said good night, and left. That night, alone, he swallowed the barbiturates that he had obtained, following the dosage recommendations of the right-to-die organization, the Hemlock Society.

But several days later I was taping Bob again:

“Yes, that supposedly final sleep that wasn’t final—fuck it.”

Bob is sitting on the couch in Peter and Judy’s basement where he attempted suicide a few nights ago. He’s wearing a plaid wool jacket over his blue hospital johnnies.

“Bob, I’d like to tape you on that couch talking about what it was like...”

“Yes, that’s good. ‘And then I woke up from the botched suicide in the hospital psych ward...’ We already shot the party, right? I think the narrative should take up from when I get back here. Keep it chronological.”

“What happened?”

“I took the pills but the suicide was ‘botched’ because the ‘expert’ didn’t give me a big enough dose.”

“How did it feel to take the drugs, Bob?”

“Oh it was lovely, just like falling asleep. Ever since I was a child I’ve always loved falling asleep... I had just returned from that lovely gathering with friends where we were listening to Otis Redding and ‘South Pacific’...”

“Bob, don’t forget to speak into the camera.”

“Right.” He turns toward the direction of my voice. “You know, a peaceful and painless death, that’s enough for me, but I also tried to add a sense of showbiz and imagination and group political activity and ecology to my dying process.” Silence.

“Do you want to know what my final image for this film is?”

“What, Bob?”

“Me wandering into the bushes somewhere in the wilderness of northern California after a picnic with friends and the friends being able to just drive away.”

FINAL SCRIPT

Ever the agile storyteller, Bob told the video camera how he envisioned his final exit even though he knew by that time that the scene would never be shot. It was an image he’d evoked many times, a small party with friends in the wilds of the northern California bioregion, his literal and symbolic spawning ground. In the interview with the *L.A. Weekly*, this is how Bob described salmon spawning:

“The salmon themselves look ugly because they’re in a state of partial decay. But the mating dance itself is beautiful—those ugly monsters doing these lovely, sensual movements. Then their flesh begins to fall away, which is incredibly funky and beautiful at the same time. The representational forms become more and more abstract until finally they don’t look like fish at all anymore, just like glittering white pieces of flesh.”

Bob’s flesh, too, had begun to decay. His failed suicide had been the one plot twist that he couldn’t rewrite into the script without changing the ending. After swallowing the pills, Bob went into a coma, but many hours later his chest was still rising and falling deeply. “I love people with excessive energy,” Bob’s friend Eiko, of the contemporary dance duo Eiko & Koma, told me when I met them earlier this year in New York. “He really had that.” Not only in life, but in death.

An ambulance team, wearing bright white biohazard jumpsuits that left no skin exposed, transported him to the emergency room where he was revived,

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against the do-not-resuscitate directive stated in his living will. And for a final absurd *plot change*, he was placed in a locked psychiatric ward for having “suicidal ideations” even though he only had a short time to live, whether he killed himself or not. He was still alive and he was pissed. And he was very, very ill.

POSTSCRIPT

What made me want to write about Bob Carroll 14 years after his death was the idea of memorial. I missed Bob on Sept. 11, because that day I missed everyone I love or have ever loved.

But memorials can make simpletons of us all if, in our grief and need to praise, we reduce tragedy to formulas. There is no connection whatsoever between the suicide bombers who attacked lower Manhattan and Bob Carroll—he taught me about the art of dying, not killing—but the ironic thing about Bob is that his life and death stand in equal opposition both to terrorism and to global capitalism, as symbolized by the World Trade Center. But maybe that’s not ironic.

Bob Carroll died on April 7, 1988 in the Coming Home Hospice in San Francisco in the presence of his brother Don and a few loving friends.

Bob’s view of his own death? He wrote it down on page five of his suicide note. Naturally, Bob should have the last word.

About this death of mine?

your view: It’s up to you.

society’s view: Used to be up to all of us. Now it’s up to just all of you.

(Parting shot: More variety please! Use your heart, imagination, and brains to develop your own dying style!)

my view: Many views are possible. My death is an all-right multi-activity achievement of many of us. It’s worthy of being critiqued, criticized, learned from and improved upon by others in their living/dying. May it contribute to life’s quality hereabouts!