

TO GHENT AND BACK *with snacks*

Nick Lenz

Of course it was the lure of the great inter-European bonzo show that lured me and my drinking buddy Krunk to endure 16 hours of airline food and trash movies to see what Herr Pall called ZE BEST BONZAI IN ZA ENTIRE VORLD. Not quite so – the show was a bit disappointing. Eight to ten of the trees were a joy to behold. Another dozen were really good with only a few alterations or manipulations required to make them super. That left a hundred bonzo bushes, often huge ‘n impressive, that received my re-design critique to my two students. Hands gesturing, heads turning or slanting, bodies moving around the trees, it was always possible to find a better design. All the while, a thuggish oaf-guard glowered at us, often interrupting with DON’T TOUCH, which we were not doing. There were then another 30 Japanese trees of great craftsmanship and boredom. Another twenty trees were just bad, even if the show was juried. The worst was a sickle tree with a wimp branch dragging out of the great curve.

The show layout was very good – stretched canvas backdrops and table covers. Some of the presentations of artifacts and companions were more fun than the trees. Some were presented with complete dullness. All the big pots were boring or just plain bland except for three I duly noted to my beer break requiring students.

And yes, the beer. You had to stand in a long line to buy tickets to stand in a long line to get your beer and then walk a quarter mile to the food stand to wait in line for your hot dog. You waited in a long line to get your ticket to stand in line to get a wristband to show you belonged. You stood in a long line to buy a ticket to stand in line to piss. Consequently, Krunk and I walked into the back of the nursery and fertilized the bonzo stock for free.

Pall was astonished to see me there and fussed that he could not arrange “things” for me. That was the idea behind being secretive about the trip. Later, I complemented one of his larch and he gave me a free beer ticket. This I accidentally dropped in the toilet that night, washed it off, and stuck it back in my pocket. Later, perplexed, Pall accosted my whacko Swiss student, fetching me a beer. “VAT IS NICK LENZ DOINGK HERE, NOT TELLING ANYBODY?” Answered my student: I don’t know – he told me to fetch a beer and I always obey my master. Moments later, Krunk came by and claimed: Hey, Walter, Nick pissed on your beer coupon. I VILL NEVER GIVE HIM ANOZER VONE, he grumbled. Much fun in the land of lines. Little humor was visible anywhere. But I did have my Pall piss beer.

Ghent is a delightful town to spend a couple days in. There are 3 cathedrals of excitement and a 12 story clock tower of medieval clunk construction, all very cool to be in. There are myriad canals of stinky water and dying water birds, so the streets are very narrow and go nowhere. However, trolley cars run everywhere, so the antique streets with no cars are covered by a canopy of trolley wires. Quite enough of the medieval architecture of the filthy rich Bush lovers remains along the canals to give you the feel of a 600 year old city, and it is ornate. Unfortunately, their concept of restoration is to gut the houses except for the façade and put a concrete modern building behind it.

There is a restored castle very close to where we stayed. They had a large display of medieval torture. According to the Bush schemata, thumbscrews, inside barb collars, and a slow stake burning would not be torture, but a fast burning or a multiple limb amputation would, so we would never do that. VE WUD NEVER DO ZAT!

The food was pretty good, especially the vegetable stuff that seemed fresh from the field rather than stupor-marketed. No duck to be found anywhere, but the beer was heavenly, the main reason Krunk wanted to go. For lunch he would have two entrees for my bowl of soup and for dinner, three. His beer consumption was 2.73 times mine and he usually ordered triple strength. He was happy.

But not altogether by our cheap accommodations. We were in a limited B&B. That means that it was a house only 20 feet wide. The first three nights we spent in the attic, reached by a ladder. The access hole in the floor frightened me somewhat, being tottery, but there was a sink and crapper. The landlord, a consummate hippy artist of fun stuff, and alcoholic, shared the second floor with a charming unfinished transvestite who spoke only French. In the back yard, a disheveled and rotting mess of curious plants, including the one legal marijuana plant, were brown and stinky with the season. Willy the dog shat all over, including the walk to the cabin in the back where we stayed for a couple of nights. At our arrival, Krunk asked the landlord where food could be found, as he was faint from hunger. The man immediately took us out on a beer binge that left the Krunk bloody and scabbed when he fell over. The landlord liked to show off his belly boils by taking off his shirt. He also liked to show his hairy legs by taking off his pants. At one time, he brought up blankets in the raw and Krunk had to literally kick him back down the ladder to keep him out. As I napped in the cottage one evening, he came in, kissed my cheek, covered me with a blanket, and went back out to tell Krunk: "This is a mystery – there is someone in there I don't know. And that wasn't the bottle of gin afternoon.

We left a day early for the Dutch coast and wound up very close to the Amsterclam airport International, but on the ocean dunes. Grabbing some beers, wedging through the barbwire fence, and violating the national dune reserve, we soon found ourselves alone and isolated in a strange and lovely habitat, without power grid, freeway, or windmills. I didn't know such a place could exist in modern Europe.

And of course, US customs sucked. The lines were considerably longer than those of the bonzo show. The drug dog did more than sniff my bag - my crotch also, and licked it. The fascist cop handling the hound yelled at me: CREEP, DON'T TOUCH THAT DOG! EVERY ONE STAY IN LINE SINGLE FILE! We went through baggage security twice. The second time, I asked the glowering fat woman why I was being searched and she answered: YOUR BAG IS DISORDERLY. She fished around in my pill bag and her eyes widened with triumph and joy. And then she pulled out my toothbrush. THIS IS DIRTY! And she trashed it. Whee. Welcome back to Empireland.