

BACH to BACCHUS

Audiences are not all alike. Years of public performance can develop one's instincts for sensing 'crowd-consciousness.' Gatherings at musical, dramatic, or sporting events hardly last long enough to establish a group character (unless events are oft-repeated in the same venue). But time, place, and circumstance do combine to effect a kind of mode; a tonality, so to speak; a feeling that differs from audience to audience. To really 'play' a crowd, then (as most sensitive and experienced performers will attest), one must find its 'key.'

Some groups are stiff: a little too formal, perhaps, or somber. Others (as more likely to be found at a place like Pete's Planetoid) tend toward the looser end of the scale, exuding an obvious lightness and gaiety. Some challenge the entertainer to amuse them; some practically entertain themselves. No matter what their attitude, if one has the knack, any of these cognitive assemblages can be swayed.

Some particularly charismatic personalities have the power to create and change a crowd's mood, controlling it, even manipulating a mob and actually inciting it to specific action. Professional speakers, actors, and musicians learn through long experience that skillful combination and alteration of pitch, rhythm, and timbre can focus the otherwise chaotic energy of an audience, intensifying and directing it so as to lift its members to a higher rung on the ladder of sensitivity. For an hour or so, or for merely a precious moment during that hour, listeners can be elevated to an otherwise inaccessible plane of consciousness for a glimpse over the gray walls of routine. They can step out of their skins, so to speak, and explore mindscapes beyond the narrow corridors of daily life.

That is why Vyncent's concerts and recitals were always well attended, for he had this magic in abundance. He was able to conjure that elusive group spirit consistently; to manipulate its emotions; to get it dancing or weeping or soaring but always shouting for more until the sorcerer, himself, was practically exhausted.

Strangely, tonight (it was always 'night' at Pete's), with the last concert in his 'vacation' series less than an hour behind him, he did not feel at all tired. It was not as if he hadn't put himself wholly into it. That was a 'given' at his every appearance. Some performances were less draining than others, but he usually wanted to relax after his exertions. Instead, possibly due to the charged, ever-festive atmosphere at BACCHUS—maybe it was the low gravity—he now felt unusually energetic. Rather than rest, he sought more excitement.

Gaming, by far the major activity at Pete's, was not his weakness; nor was alcohol; nor were this era's favored drugs of pleasure, despite the common assumption connecting artificially induced weirdness with artistry. Actually, in most cases, artists are more than sufficiently weird by nature. While they do not really need drugs, many of them are weird enough to experiment with altered body chemistry. Vyncent had been known to imbibe from time to time—all in the unending pursuit of heightened awareness and deeper pleasure. In truth, though, his only serious vice (perhaps Plato had it right when he recommended not encouraging the habits of the *virtuosi*) was his profession—and, right behind it, love. Although in his hormonally super-active state, it was hardly more than a pseudonym for sex.

Hab! That was it: sex! He had to admit the considerable probability that this latter-named addiction was behind his aimless wandering along the strip. Instead of seeking the peace of sleep in his luxury accommodations, he had meandered several kilometers from the Asterton-Axis (a posh subterranean inn hollowed out around the 'polar' mineshaft that pierced through the center of the irregular worldlet at its shortest diameter).

Conveniently, that revelation of his true quest struck him just as he was passing a seductive-sounding club—a grotto-like venue, roughly carved into the rock centuries before by the last of the asteroid miners scrounging a nearly exhausted vein of nickel.

Peering through a thick pane of red acrylic, he could just make out the figure of a woman—at least it moved rather like a woman, turning, twisting, gliding erotically among shadowy customers barely visible in the semi-darkness. He hesitated, started to leave, then turned back to look again. Finally, curiosity prevailing, he placed a plastic token in a slot by the doorway and entered—scrutinized by a burly, Martian-dominant mixed-breed.

Tokens—the best part of Pete’s. Well, *one* of the best. Tokens could be used for everything—anything—so there were no computer records of expenditures. It was an important aspect of the giddy sense of freedom experienced here. The anonymity of ‘cash’ was especially precious to celebrities and Fleet VIPs. One could choose from an extraordinary range of otherwise forbidden pleasures (for the right price) and no one would ever know. At least there would be no official record of specific activities; only that you had been at BACCHUS, when, how long, and the total credits spent—or gained, in the rare case of winners—when the tokens were exchanged for bona fide credits (which had to be done, if any were left, because they were illegal and useless anywhere else in the Fleet—that is, ‘officially’). Of course there were reporters and investigators and a Fleetwide audience hungry for gossip, which motivated many of the visitors to wear masks or clever disguises.

The reduction in light-intensity hindered him momentarily, but he soon found an empty table—and right at stage-side. More out of custom than desire, he reached for the nearest menu-panel and punched-up a twelve-annum Demetrian sour mash, over, with a twist.

The act he had seen dimly through the colored window was ending. The place went wild with whoops and shouts and a great variety of multicultural obscenities. A barrage of tokens hit the low-profile stage, some bouncing off the buxom dancer who had encouraged the plastic avalanche. Lifting her ample breasts outward with the palms of her hands, she proffered them to the gawkers and curtsied mockingly. She continued striking seductive poses until the jackpot petered out, then ran off to the right wing while a stage assistant quickly vacuumed the tokens off the floor.

A gorgeous and tall brunette approached his table. Hair to her waist and wearing a wonderfully revealing costume, she carried an armload of drink capsules. Vyncent’s immediate notion was to make a play for her, but he managed, somehow, to restrain himself. This was not exactly his territory; not at all like the fancy receptions after his concerts where the society girls lined up for autographs, or for just a glance and a smile. This woman wouldn’t know him from any of the drooling trip-hammers that filled this place period after period, and he was not about to make himself the object of her disdain, or risk an embarrassing rejection within earshot of all these low-life club-hounds.

Somehow, UIMS only knew why, he wanted her respect. No—that wasn’t it. ‘Adulation?’ Hardly. More accurately, he wanted her to feel something akin to the desire she generated in him. Nature wasn’t fair. All this shapely female had to do was enter into his line of sight to bestir his hormones. He, on the other hand, had to produce; perform; entertain; impress; *work* at getting women interested.

Smiling pleasantly, he tipped her generously in tokens. She paid no attention, except to thank him expressionlessly. What was she—a robot-doll, maybe—like in the tales of the ancients and their old-fashioned ‘service’ androids? *Void!* MINERVA had more personality—a *lot* more. But how about the way she walked! How could she wiggle so and still make forward progress? No animatron ever constructed could move its posterior like that.

She must know that he, like every heterosexual male worthy of the name (and it appeared there were at least a few others present) wanted nothing more urgently during her close

proximity than to rip away her almost-costume and penetrate her vaginal orifice with an engorged phallus, while learning as little as possible about her life—and caring even less.

How about the old ‘formal-invitation-on-a-napkin’ trick? It actually worked more times than not; and was at least good for a laugh—usually. On second thought, this was no place for formality, even of the mocking sort. Probably feigning a sincere personal interest in her would be equally silly. In the first place, she’d never believe it, so he’d be expected to prove it before any real action could begin. Such proof (if he even got the chance to try) would require time (of which he had precious little) and effort (which he didn’t care to make) and lies, since the truth was: she’d be right—he really didn’t care. She must be confronted with such crude excreta a dozen or more times every shift. It would be hard to find a line that wouldn’t make her want to spit on him. He guessed there was little chance, under these circumstances, of fulfilling his wildest fantasies. But, *UIMS*, she was incredibly alluring!

What if he were to risk insulting her (and having a drink capsule emptied in his face) by offering her money? Chances were pretty good, he calculated, she would not be insulted. It was Pete’s, after all; and this certainly seemed like ‘that sort of place.’

He called her back. She said nothing as she stood invitingly before him; so near, it was all he could do to prevent his hand from involuntarily sliding gently upward along her softly rounded bare thigh and under...but this was too public! A transferential had a sacred obligation to observe and experience the present-day—in all its aspects—that he might carry these memories and impressions to the future, but he also had to be careful not to bring utter disgrace upon himself. Besides, there was that cretin clone-of-a-beast at the door, and it just wouldn’t do to be thrown out of the most depraved joint he’d ever entered. Anyway, never having sunk that low before, he could not bring himself to the point of proposition.

Instead, he improvised the (oh so original) story that his drink tasted a little weak. No smile; no apology; no warmth evident in her reaction. But then, he wasn’t really all that attentive to her response as she leaned forward to retract his whiskey, voluminous mammaries approaching within inches of his nose, cleavage receding deep into the inviting darkness beneath her thin clothing. Those marvelous breasts! If only he might hold one, naked, softly in his bare hand.

He mumbled a few unmemorable lines of drivel; something having to do with his surprise at someone of such beauty and quality working in a place like this. But, nothing. Not even a laugh. Not even a *fake* laugh. Not even a smirk! To her, he was just another hyperactive scrotal-sac. Who else would be drinking in a place like this?

The emcee or club manager—or owner (who could tell?—though the owner probably wouldn’t be caught dead ‘in a place like this’) mounted the stage to announce the next act:

Ladies and gentlemen—and I use those terms advisedly in this club...

Between boisterous demands for more girls, hoots and hisses issued from every side. Not much laughter—but then, it was not much of a joke. In fact, it *wasn’t* a joke. Undaunted, the announcer continued his spiel, actually encouraging more obloquy from the audience.

Hey! How about those protuberances, huh? Yea-zeus!

Finally, as hopes for more female anatomy lessons faded, so did the crowd’s noisiness.

Yeah! the speaker resumed, **All-right!** He paced restlessly about the slightly raised platform. **Reminds me of my last companion.**

Hah! came a loud retort from somewhere in the darkness, easily getting the best laugh of the period.

Sure...I know, the ‘comedian’ answered, feigning self-deprecation: **How could a guy who looks like me *have* a companion?**

Was it a woman? someone else shouted, engendering more laughter. The crowd was outdoing the entertainer.

'Was it a woman?' the comic repeated in his most mocking manner. **Whadya think, gasbag—I'm some kind of homo, here? Huh?**

Maybe! the antagonist contended, sparking considerable affirmation from the audience.

Sure, go on—laugh! But it's tough, ya know; tough for a face like mine to find love. An', you figure: 'How else could a guy work in a sin-dump like this, if he wasn't some sick old fart drooling after clams; a burned-out numb-nuts; or some kin'a joy-boy?' Hey, maybe I used to be a little limpy. But that was before I met Bloatunda!

The few laughs were due only to the sheer silliness of that sound-gag name.

What kind-o' woman would live with you? another heckler demanded.

What kind of woman? An *ugly* woman, that's what kind! [sparse laughter] **Yeah, she was ugly, all right. She was so ugly, the market emptied when we went shopping! ... We went dancing once. The band had to play from the men's room! ... I took her to the beauty parlor and asked for a new look. They gave me a pair of black glasses! ... But, seriously, she had her qualities. Most of 'em were hidden behind all that Junon quantity. But—*whoa-ho*—there was a *lot* of her to love, ya know? I mean, talk about yer protuberances! ... She had lungs that defied reality! To bad they couldn't defy the centrifugal tendency! ... But I loved every kilo of 'em. Gave me a little protuber of my own, I'll tell ya; 'cause I like my women 'healthy'—ya know? ... I mean *healthy* [indicating how 'healthy' by extending his arms forward, palms facing his chest]. **Find a fold and fill it! That's my delight,** he claimed. **And she had *plenty* of 'em!****

Face it, buddy! another voice emitted from the crowd. *She was a fat slob!*

'Face it?' the would-be funnyman repeated. **Love to! How'd you know?**

Laughter belched forth from the sicker and drunker elements.

She was well balanced, too! Her aft was so broad it inspired a song: 'I can't get over a girl like you, so you'll have to get up and answer the door yourself.' ... She was a big one, all right—so big, we had to live at the core of our drome so she wouldn't throw the ship off-axis! ... When we went to the rim to visit her mother, they had to counterbalance the city with a big blob o' lead. If she went for a ride, the load o' lead had to be moved in the same direction on the other side of town. When we went shopping in the eastern quadrant, the load had to go shopping in the west. If we went back to the spaceport to tube-in to the core, the load had to come in from the other side. Once, on my way home from Pete's, I met the blob at the middle of the spaceport. I tried to take it home by mistake. I thought she'd done something different with her hair. I hugged the load and gave it a big kiss. Just then, Bloatunda came out of the ladies room—so the load had to go in. Too bad for the blob! It missed out on a great time! ... But it took half-a-cycle to get the drome back on true heading! ... That's when we were granted our permanent vacation, here at Pete's, and I lost her to a Pluton ex-priest refugee in a no-limits card game.

But enough of this tender reminiscing. [cheers and clapping] **Before I cry again, I'd better introduce the next act.** [more whistles and shouts]

A tabla-drummer and a woodwind player enter, costumed in softly draped, traditional Arborean fashion. Between them, they drag a capacious, nearly chest-high, woven basket.

So here's a real treat, folks, the comic continues. Not only a beautiful dancing girl, but a truly death-defying act—among the very best at BACCHUS, my friends—and with an unusual—and pretty scary—surprise guest.

The musicians place the basket toward the rear of the stage.

Seating themselves on the floor just behind it, they strike up a lively rhythm as the emcee completes his intro:

So now, drink up—you may need it—and welcome our lovely and charming bacchante: the daring and incredible queen of cockatrice, *Nibarnazus!*

(Her dance is then described, and an incident leading to a meeting with Vyncent. The cockatrice dance is an adaptation by Nibarnazus of an erotic Venusian ritual performed by specially trained Arborian priestesses [Aborians are a laboring caste at the eikodrome VENUS] involving the handling of a fearsome python-like serpent with a feathered crest that is native to the Venusian 'Orchard.')