

The Existential Robert Fitch

September 19, 2011

An overflow crowd at New York's Brecht Forum on Sept. 18 commemorated the life of the late journalist, author, scholar, educator, activist, union organizer and frequent New Politics contributor Bob Fitch, who died in March after complications from a fall. Among the speakers were Bertell Ollman, Steve Bronner, Doug Henwood, Christian Parenti, Jonathan Fitch and NP's Michael Hirsch. Below are Hirsch's remarks.

Those of us who ever saw Bob Fitch make a presentation know he followed the showbiz adage that "if it's not on the page, it's not on the stage." Bob said extemporaneous speakers risked shortchanging their audiences. In keeping with Bob's precept, I'll read these remarks.

Shakespeare talks about the seven stages of man. For the Bard they ran sequentially. For Bob they ran more or less simultaneously.

The lover, sighing like furnace; the soldier full of strange oaths, though never "seeking the bubble reputation," And if Bob was on occasion the Justice with the "beard of formal cut" he never grew the "fair round belly," nor sported "eyes severe" nor was he "full of wise saws."

If there were any Globe Theater analogues to Bob, they were John Falstaff, Puck and Henry 5th at Agincourt, who could stir listeners to glory and thought of his friends as "we lucky few, we band of brothers." I was proud to be one of those friends.

Bob was a remarkable guy. He was three dimensional when most of us are lucky to live in two. He was honest to a fault. He had a bullshit meter that was always on and never failed him. He abominated clichés—probably even this one.

He was ruthless in his criticisms of postmodernism, likening it to a disbelief in gravity. He joined me in pronouncing Foucault as "Fuck All" and considered "transgression" nonsense when not strictly homoerotic.

BTW, that bullshit meter got him into plenty of trouble. A brilliant researcher, gifted writer and galvanizing speaker, he was an old-school public intellectual but not enough of a corridor player, elbow bender and hale-fellow-well met to land a tenure-line university job. If I needed one more reason to despise so many leftists supping at the high tables of the elite academic world, it was for their studied refusal to hire Bob.

He was considered collegial enough to adjunct at a smattering of urban campuses, where part-timers had the mystique of savants and the pay, benefits and job security of car washers. Bob was a thoroughbred earning a living as a dray horse.

He was also one of the most impolitic people I knew, not because he was clueless—he was hardly that—and not really confrontational.—It's just that he wasn't a flatterer when flattery was called for. When for example, he was tasked to review a book dear to the heart of a certain Tikkun magazine editor, he decided the book was rubbish and said so in the draft. It didn't run and he didn't get asked again.

So while he was the Peck's bad boy of iconoclasm, he was intellectually scrupulous. Unlike Humpty Dumpty, he was ferocious about words meaning one thing. A blood enemy of union corruption who believed that institutional shape-changing from four legs to two was endemic to the

American trade union structure, he also insisted that trade union tops weren't bureaucrats, but elected officials, a distinction with great difference for Bob. That distinction didn't make them better for Bob; it was only more accurate, more factually descriptive, more explanation than epithet.

And he and I argued intensely about some of his formulations, especially his key one; that today's unions as bargaining and service agents were hopelessly parochial and padrone-like, ripe for —or already mired in —oligarchy and corruption. He wanted the unions torn down and rebuilt as class institutions.

If I didn't and couldn't go that far—at least not to the tearing-down bits—I never for an instant thought his ideas came from either jealousy or hatred or sloppy thinking or inexperience or wish-fulfillment or even from exhaustion over what else is to be done. Intellectually he was never exhausted. For him breaking up service-model and undemocratic unions and starting over was just his Occam's razor.

I think we do a piss poor job of supporting our iconoclasts. Instead of playing "What's my line?" or my dogma's bigger than your dogma or my CV winds down the street and around the corner while yours barely makes it to the kitchen, we should all have the intellectual curiosity of Bob Fitch.

Any of us who knew him well can tell stories about how he made us better, both as thinkers, writers and as people. He was generous with his time. For me, he was unendingly helpful when I started freelancing. He was there with suggestions on stories, on venues, even on how to massage editors. He was extremely supportive of others' work. His critiques of my work were often penetrating even as they were often ego-deflating. And he always repaid a kindness with a kindness.

He never turned down a request to speak—always did his job well—and always agreed to write for *New Politics* when I asked. He even thanked me once for picking a topic he wasn't on top of. By the time his talk was ready, he was way on top, mounted with bridle in one hand and whip in the other. Only it wasn't the steed that took the whipping. Those of you who ever got a chance to phone Bob at home should remember his answering-machine voice—and least on those rare occasions when he wasn't at home, working, reading, writing, listening to music. "Hi, this is Bob Fitch. Can we talk? Of course!"

Bob was a great talker, and a great listener. Time spent with Bob was time when your brain percolated. Sure, he was a master at pushing the envelope; a read of any article or book of his will tell you that. But he was also someone who pushed to see the logic in his own ideas, and yours.

In a review I did of Christopher Hitchens' memoir for *New Politics*, I basically panned the book for, among its sins, a sort of fawning after people he liked for the instant, while scurrilously blasting those he did not. After the piece came out, Bob summarized that point as "He's either at your feet or at your throat," and I told him I wished that I written that.

Later, when I found it was Churchill who said it first in regard to "the Hun," Bob insisted that Churchill had cribbed it from someone else. I'm sure he was right.

So I owe him a lot. He was my truest critic. He even helped get me a job. In a world where know-who overshadows know-how, this was my solitary experience in that milieu. He even went to bat for me when a piece I'd submitted to *The Nation* languished in someone's in-box.

A lifetime ago I attended a memorial service for Lenny Bruce. One of the speakers—and it could have been Ed Sanders or Paul Krassner—asked what would Lenny have wanted? He answered his own question: Lenny would want to be here! I don't know that Bob would want to be here. "Why are you guys talking about me?" he'd say. "Aren't there more important subjects to tackle? This is after

all the Brecht Forum!”

Well, I’m going to disagree with Bob again. No, there are no better things to do here. When a comrade passes, one who brought insight out of everything he examined, it’s worth considering what he taught us, and what we’ve lost. Bob was an atheist, he didn’t believe in an afterlife. We are what we do here.

I remember when his book, *The Assassination of New York*, came out. Others would have had the publisher organize the event and keep the proceeds. Bob held his at the Chinese Restaurant Workers Association and gave the proceeds to them. Who does that?

Now he’s gone. We can learn from his example. He was always *presente!* He was one of the least schematic and most intellectually curious people I ever knew. That curiosity was infectious. I learned from him not only how answers could be found, but how hunting for them could be joyous, too.