The Impossible Dream

Athens Georgia, 1975

I sit crouched, arms around my knees, on an elevated catwalk high above a protruding stage apron. It is opening night for the first Main Stage production for which I have built scenery as a graduate student assistant working in the University of Georgia theatre department scene shop. My perch, high in the overhead light bridge, extends well over the upfront house seats. My helper, an undergrad sophomore who actually knows more about scenery construction than I do, sits beside me. We speak in whispers, communicate with gestures. Not even the omniscient production stage manager knows we are here. Large, torpedo-like lights surround us. Each of these tightly focused spotlights is precisely directed at the action about to begin below. Here, high up in the rafters, they keep our temporary quarters, cramped … and warm.

It’s just before curtain. We are perched on a network of catwalks. We can see both the house filling up and orchestra members taking their seats beneath us. I see what the eager audience cannot: Taking oﬀ coats, checking sightlines, and negotiating better views, excited ticket holders settle in like flamingos on a favorite pond. They check watches, flip playbills. The house lights dim. Musicians are poised to begin. The conductor looks each musician in the eye, raises a baton, and taps it on his stand. Abrupt opening notes of a familiar overture fill the hall and silence the crowd.

Stage light rises slowly from where we are, behind drapery, and from the wings where actors wait for cues. On stage, a rustic scene emerges slowly. Stone walls appear. The floor is strewn with straw. There are bunk beds, rustic cots, and mats for sleeping. Gradually, we notice people in this live, 3D picture—some standing, others crouching. A few lie as though sleeping on the floor. One twitches. Another moans. Far upstage, a couple cuddles. In less than sixty seconds, I am captivated and thoroughly convinced I am in a dungeon.

Music rises to a crescendo. Then, a deafening, grinding, grating noise conjures the presence of a giant-link chain on an enormous cog wheel. Far upstage, a wall opens and a monstrous staircase descends as though from heaven—or perhaps it is leading into hell. All eyes on stage and in the audience are fixed on the staircase. Suddenly, two bodies spin down the stairs onto the dingy floor.

Not long after, I hear the words as though I have never heard them sung before. They become my personal new anthem for life:

*To dream, the impossible dream … To fight, the unbeatable foe … To bear, with unbearable sorrow … To run, where the brave dare not go …*

This is the opening night of *Man of La Mancha*, the first play I help stage as a member of UGA’s theatre department. Even though I have been granted a fairly generous position, I am a rookie when it comes to stage design and execution.

Six months earlier, I was enrolled in an entirely diﬀerent curriculum. My colleagues there were mostly intent on becoming on-camera talent, reporting into the lens with sharply tailored outfits and gleaming smiles. I had come to Athens to advance a professional career but soon discovered I was not comfortable in front of the camera.

What I could do was write intelligible words for others to say. I learned to eﬀectively light a scene and focus a camera. But the curriculum didn’t support my urge to create in unconventional ways. Assignments in the J-School were dull. Class lectures were tedious. Location work was laborious.

But on a metal catwalk, high above a live audience that I can see, I feel I am where I truly belong. I am alive, inspired, with all my senses on overload.

One year earlier, following graduation from Washington and Lee University in 1973, I spent an interesting, directionless year while my classmates pursued careers in medicine, law, and family business. It was during this time that I learned my heart was in the arts. I craved to create.

My family was mostly dissolved. My mother had succumbed to a wretched disease. My grandparents, who sheltered my sister Neil and me through our college years, passed away. My distant father was charting a rewarding path with a new family. I was mostly left to forge my own way with a fully funded college experience and a tiny salary from an academic assistantship. But there was no clear path ahead yet.

For several months, I adopted an unfamiliar life. I had no limits. No advisor. No advocate. And, really, not much of a plan. I was intent on finding my next self. It was daunting. Being a nonconformist, I suddenly found myself seeking structure, looking for process, and examining paths forward to accomplishment. I had already survived domestic chaos, traveled to three continents, and wet my toes in real estate development. I was twenty-four and clueless about what would happen next. In many ways, I guess I was fortunate to have no one admonishing me. I was hungry for adventure—the next big thing—and that yearning allowed me to follow my impossible dream.

On this particular evening, sitting as a lowly stage hand high above the action, I watch *Man of La Mancha* which features a convincing, stage-dressed Miguel de Cervantes*,* assuming the role of his alter ego, Don Quixote. In this award-winning musical, the Spanish writer has been imprisoned by leaders of the Spanish Inquisition, and now he is citing his creed and describing his noble quest. Others in the squalid prison gather around him. A woman, Dulcinea, stands apart but is most attentive as he takes center stage, his faithful squire Sancho Panzajust behind. Like a greedy moth to an enormous flame, the actor playing Cervantes is drawn to the convergence of two follow spots near the front edge of the thrust stage. The live orchestra introduces a familiar melody.

I don’t recognize it at the time, but I am clearly hearing the new anthem of my life. Listening to this famous song—drawn from the Tony-winning musical of about ten years prior—being delivered live by the ensemble, I know I am being validated for my choice of being here, complete with a theme song for my emerging career.

It is a fluke that I am here; that I have made this choice. And it is hard to understand the luck this will bring me. I leave the catwalk at Intermission to prepare for my first significant stage “strike.” I am totally absorbed into this new life, one that I will realize over the next decade.

The production, and particularly the recurrent theme song, is speaking to me as an aspiring “whatever” and encouraging me to move forward without looking back or needing to seek validation from others. I can see now that I have mostly lived my life this way without realizing it. I am inspired to reach high and reach often—even in face of odds, criticism, and setbacks. Maybe I am a knight-errant. But this early period in my life inspires me to seek out accomplishments measured by things other than paychecks.

When I first enter the department, I inquire about the courses of study there. I am told I can immediately enroll in a Master’s program toward an MFA with PhD options as well. I choose the MFA degree in Technical Theatre because it is practical and hands-on and also considered a terminal degree, which, in this case, means it is the highest degree that can be awarded in that specific professional track. Following an academic path does not interest me. I am also lured by the prospect of receiving a financially rewarding assistantship benefit which basically pays for my studies and provides a $350.00 monthly stipend. At the time, it seems like a fortune. I tell my soon-to-be academic advisor Stanley to sign me up. My abrupt change of curriculum with attendant “bennies” takes hours rather than days. I feel liberated.

For my assistantship duty station, I am assigned the scene shop. I join a team responsible for building, mounting, lighting, and decorating scenery for every UGA stage production. As the technical director of the department, Steve Rees jangles an enormous collection of keys. I learn he comes from Wisconsin and figure that is the reason he sports a natty orange goatee. He reports to work every day in jeans, a short-sleeve work shirt, and steel-toe boots. He introduces me to the work space, performance spaces, storage nooks, electronic hubs, stage doors, and the pin rail. Ahh, the pin rail. It is soon to be my new home where the magic of the theatre truly flies.

Steve also introduces me to my new techie colleagues. There is gentle John Partyka from upstate New York who wears comic-looking round glasses and seems to always be addressing the floor. Ebullient Lou prefers overalls and speaks warmly. He has big hands and a big heart. Gene Price is introspective and tends to lurk in quiet corners. Tom Fichter, from South Florida, always has a sassy retort and a gleam in his eye. And, wisecracking Judith Midyett—who keeps the guys in line with wry comments—works mostly in costumes. They are to be my cohorts for the next two years.

All are more experienced than I am and they each teach me important lessons. My association with UGA’s theatre department leads me to my next big breakthrough: a brief, colorful tenure with a ballet company in Atlanta. All these moments are responsible for the birth of Chip Hunter, stage monkey.