

Missionaries

Sunday, April 12, 2009

About twenty years ago, I was walking across the campus of USC in Columbia when a brown Toyota station wagon pulled over to the curb and, as I remember it, the driver leaned out of his window to ask me what I was doing with my life. His name was Buren Martin and I hadn't seen him since he'd played the Toy-maker opposite my Barnaby in a production of *Babes in Toyland* we'd done several years prior in Sumter, SC. Buren was about to accept a teaching position at North Greenville College (later University) as that school's only drama instructor. More to the point, he was about to form a touring company in residence there and he needed actors. Ten years later, Southeastern Theatrical Productions had toured over a dozen shows, most of them written and scored by me, all of them booked and produced by him, many of them featuring one or both of us as performer or road manager.



Dottie and Buren Martin in the kitchen of their new loft apartment in Inman, SC.

One of Buren's students at NGC, Dottie, would become his wife. They'd have two children together, Gloria and Milner, whom they'd home-school and whose formative years would be spent on the road, performing from New England to Texas to Florida as the younger members of the Martin Family Cabaret ... hundreds of shows a year and hundreds (yes, hundreds) of trips to Disney World for diversion and inspiration. A former service station owner, taxi cab driver, public school principal and private pilot with two Masters degrees (one in theater, the other in education), Buren was seldom confronted by a mechanical, bureaucratic or artistic obstacle he couldn't overcome ... or get around.

Now he and Dottie are renovating the Inman, SC high school gymnasium where Buren's mother attended basketball games as a girl. As of this writing, the gym has been stabilized and the living quarters complete. Buren, his "child bride" and their two children have taken up residence in the very well-appointed three-bedroom loft apartment they built inside the gym above what eventually will be the lobby of a performance venue of as-yet-undetermined configuration.

At one time, back in "the day," Buren and Dottie occupied a cluster of several houses at the edge of a low-income mill village where they boarded actors, ran a phone room and managed the only professional touring theater company of its kind in South Carolina. "The compound," as they called it, was our base of operations for school tours, as well as entertainments produced for retirement communities and small town arts centers. We were missionaries, I think, though it didn't seem that way at the time. At the time, it seemed like boot camp, which probably says as much about my attitude toward organized religion as anything else.

Whatever the actual nature or effect of our work, I'm glad for the experience. And I'm glad for my association with Buren, one of the great confirming influences of my life. He's accomplished the whole suite of conventional goals by mostly unconventional means. Even when he seems to be playing by the rules, the rules are his own and they're infinitely malleable. "Slippin' and slidin'," as he used to say. A master improviser ... and, despite his disarmingly self-deprecating manner, nobody's fool.

Length: 4:13

Music: *King of the Road* sung by Roger Miller and *I'll Fly Away* sung by Kim Hopper and David Phelps

Writer, voice: Tim Brosnan

