

Recently I have posted on Face book some early information on the project I am currently working on in Wilmington North Carolina to facilitate a production of Joshua Logan's "Mister Roberts" on the aft deck of the WW2 battleship USS North Carolina, which is a maritime museum moored in Wilmington Harbor. This project is still in its very early stages, but I have received many requests for details. Instead of just trying to answer individual questions I thought it would be fun to tell you how I came up with this crazy idea which is likely the last chapter of my 50 year love affair with this classic play.

MISTER ROBERTS – A 50 YEAR LOVE AFFAIR

I think it's safe to say that most actors have a favorite role, character, film, or play – some role that they love above all others and will reprise as often as possible. For me that play has always been "Mister Roberts". Over the years I have performed in it four times and directed it twice. I have never tired of it. I have often said my only condition in being involved in a production is "when is it – where is it – and when do you want me there?"

I cannot honestly say why I developed such an affinity for this play. I was way too young to see the original Broadway production. Perhaps it was simply because I was part of the first post WW2 generation. I do know that I was always fascinated by the Pacific campaigns of WW2. I watched movies like: "In Harm's Way", "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo", "Run Silent Run Deep", "Tora Tora Tora" and such TV shows as "Victory At Sea". I also enjoyed reading books like "At Dawn We Slept", "Midway". And "Rising Sun" which details the war from the Japanese point of view. I also specifically remember watching the 1955 film of "Mister Roberts" over and over as a young boy.

Whatever the specific catalyst might have been, what I am absolutely sure of is - I adore this play. I have strong opinions about it both from an actor's standpoint and a director's standpoint. It was one of the very first plays I performed in, and if everything works out in North Carolina it could possibly be the finale of my *treading the boards*.

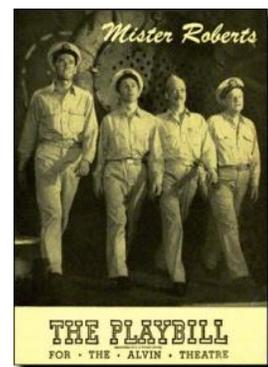
So – for what it's worth, here is the story of my favorite play.

Brief History of Mister Roberts

The Play

Mister Roberts began as a collection of short stories written by Thomas Heggen. The stories were based on his recollections of his service aboard that USS Virgo (AKA 20) a small cargo ship supplying US troops in the rear areas of the pacific theatre during the last days of WW2. Broadway producer Leland Hayward thought it would make a great play and hired Thomas Heggen and Josh Logan to write the adaptation.

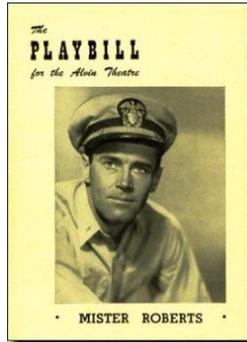
Mister Roberts opened February 14, 1948 at the Alvin Theatre. It starred Henry Fonda as Lt. j.g. Doug Roberts, Robert Keith as Doc, David Wayne as Ensign Pulver and William Harrigan as the Captain. The play won the Tony



award for best play of 1948 and Henry Fonda also won the 1948 Tony for best actor in a play. The production ran for 1,157 performances and closed January 6, 1951.

Brilliantly written with vibrant characters, the plot centers on the tedium and boredom of ordinary sailors aboard a small cargo ship in the back waters of the Pacific. Making their lives more miserable is the dictatorship of a brash uneducated merchant marine officer, Captain Morton. They are championed by Executive Officer Doug Roberts who runs the ship as effectively as possible, and maintains morale to the best of his ability by baiting the Captain almost to the point of insubordination. Roberts is supported by the ship's physician, Doc, whose wisdom, counsel, and friendship are instrumental to keeping Roberts sane. Ensign Frank Pulver, as the ship's laundry and morale officer and Doug's bunk mate, provides marvelous comic relief, constantly imagining outlandish plots to undermine the Captain's authority. Unfortunately he never carries out any of his schemes because he is terrified of the Captain and hides whenever the Captain passes. The Captain actually has no idea he is even aboard.

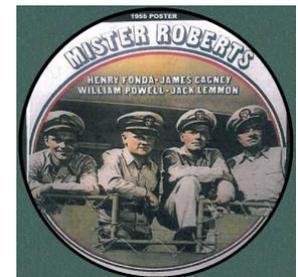
Like many champions Doug aboard ship. His fervent repeatedly denied by the endorse his requests for about it. As the wonderfully is the last absolute monarch haven't got a chance". The Roberts is to deny what country. By refusing to Roberts marooned aboard his ship.



Roberts pays the price for preserving stability desire to be transferred to a fighting ship is Captain who loathes Roberts and refuses to transfer. Roberts is helpless to do anything sage, Doc points out:"the Captain of a navy ship left in the world. Without his endorsement you Captain also knows the one power he has over Roberts wants most and that is to fight for his endorse Robert's request for transfer he keeps

I do not want to give away the entire plot of the play. Suffice to say, eventually, Roberts sells his soul to ensure his crew gets a long overdue leave at a liberty port. The Captain grants liberty only after receiving Robert's promise that he will stop being insubordinate, stop requesting a transfer, and maintain much stricter discipline over the crew. Back at sea, when Roberts honors his agreement with the Captain, the crew feeling they have been abandoned, turn on Roberts and ostracize him. As VE Day is announced a despondent Roberts realizes his chances of being an officer aboard a fighting ship will never happen. In a fit of childish rage he commits his greatest atrocity against the Captain. The subsequent confrontation between Roberts and the Captain is overheard by the crew who realize what Roberts gave up for their liberty. What they do to show their gratitude, changes the course of Robert's career and sets the stage for the climax of the play.

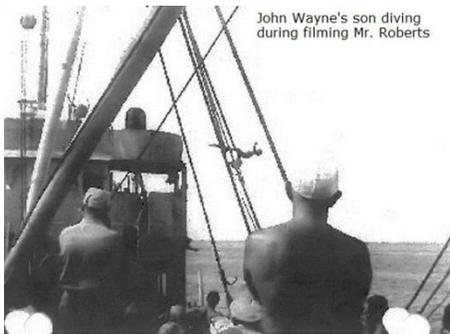
A brief side note. The name of the ship in the play is the USS Reluctant (AK 601) disdainfully called the "Old Bucket" by the crew. There was never an AK class cargo ship with that name or designation.



The Film

In 1955 Warner Bros. decided to make "Mister Roberts" a major motion picture. Interestingly Henry Fonda was not considered for the title role for which he won the Tony. At 49, he was considered too old for the role and not enough of a modern box office draw. The role was initially offered to Marlon Brando. Fonda was eventually hired only because director John Ford insisted. James Cagney portrayed Captain Morton, William Powell played Doc, and a young Jack Lemmon took on the role of Ensign Pulver.

With such a heavy weight cast it was slightly ironic that the relatively unknown Jack Lemmon walked off with the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. The film was nominated for Best Picture but did not win. From the beginning the production was besieged with problems, the worst of which was director John Ford. He had terrible personality conflicts with both Henry Fonda and James Cagney. There was an actual fist fight between him and Fonda and Cagney was heard to challenge Ford to "kick asses". Years later when asked about Ford, Cagney told a reporter: "He was so god dammed mean to everyone. He was truly a nasty old man." John Ford did not finish directing the film. Mervyn LeRoy took over part way through the filming. Even he did not get to the end. Not liking the liberties being taken with the script, Henry Fonda requested and got Josh Logan hired to re shoot many scenes so the film would stay true to the original play.



John Wayne's son diving during filming Mr. Roberts

Some trivia - - The ship used in the film was the USS Hewell (AK-145). Mister Roberts was William Powell's last film.

Interestingly, he was also not the first choice for the role of Doc. The part was originally offered to Spencer Tracy who turned it down. The photo at left taken from the film shows John Wayne's son Patrick who had a minor role diving off the ship in one of the scenes.

Me and Mister Roberts

I have to preface this by giving a brief explanation of how I became an actor. All I can say is I have always had the urge, need, instinct to perform, to be out front, to be seen, show off, etc. I knew it when I was five. It was a driving passion that I couldn't ignore. I also knew that these personality traits and the incredible insecurities that accompanied them were perceived as less than admirable. I chose to accept this. Over the years I have asked many people to give me a good definition for what an actor is. The predominant consensus has always been: an actor is somebody whose main desire in life is to pretend to be somebody else. Funny! That's pretty much the same definition as for a paranoid schizophrenic. So, I think it's safe to say that anybody who wants to be an actor is crazy. Heck, I have known I was crazy all my life. For me the trick was not to deny it; but to embrace it.

It was not easy. I was not encouraged. I was heavily criticized. My father brutally disapproved of my dramatic tendencies and did everything he could to beat them out of me. What made his dislike of what I was to become even more intolerable was the fact that, as a young man, his ambition was to be a

writer. He abandoned that dream when he married and had to support a family. He was an early television producer and major advertising executive. He was the real Don Draper.

In 1964 I enrolled at Northwestern University intending to get a degree in theatre arts. This was at the height of what was called method acting, the technique formulated by Lee Strasberg and made famous by such actors as Marlon Brando, and Montgomery Clift. The cornerstone of the method was to use your own life experiences to identify and understand the character you were portraying and the situation surrounding that character. My problem was, growing up in Connecticut and attending prep school from eighth grade on; I didn't have a wealth of diverse life experiences to draw from.

Another aspect of the method was to endure and learn from harsh critique not only from your teachers but also from your fellow actors. I did not thrive in that environment. I had been disapproved of and criticized enough throughout my youth. I also had trouble finding life experiences relating to Shakespeare and being a bobsled. Half way through my freshman year I was told by the head of the drama department that I would never be a good actor. He advised me to transfer to liberal arts.

I would not quit because it would prove my father right. I managed to keep my head barely above water by appearing in all the musicals. What saved me was an assistant professor who told me early in my sophomore year that the spring *senior directed* play was going to be "Mister Roberts", and in his opinion, since I was "the most hapless, lazy, disorganized, and in general the most lecherous person he had ever known", I was born to play Ensign Pulver.

I auditioned and got the role. I loved every aspect of the play from the first time I read it - - the subject matter, the issues of human integrity, the morality, the comedy, and especially the characters. There are 18 roles for men in "Mister Roberts" and everyone is vital.



I couldn't wait to go to rehearsal every day. I relished every scene I was in. I knew Pulver. I was Pulver. I was brilliant - or so I thought. About half way through rehearsals the director came to me and said I was absolutely fantastic at being Jack Lemmon. He thought I might be better if I stopped mimicking and made Pulver my own. That's when I understood. That's when I truly got it. I trusted the method and I trusted myself. I simply went back through all my memories, my exuberances, my fantasies, my fears and

disappointments, my lusts, and there was Frank Thurlow Pulver.

Unfortunately, college productions do not have long runs, and there were only eight performances. It wasn't nearly enough. I wanted it to go on forever. I was depressed for weeks after I screamed for the final time: "Captain, it is I Ensign Pulver and I just threw your stinking palm tree overboard. Now, what's all this crap about no movie tonight?" However, in the spring of 1966, I knew in my heart that "Mister Roberts" and I would meet again.

AND - I will also be eternally grateful to that senior director who told me I would be a really good actor if I just believed and trusted myself. I think he went on to be a successful stock broker. I went to New York.

A relevant side story - - many of the WW2 liberty cargo ships were built and launched from Luder's Boat Yard in Stamford CT, where I grew up. In late 1970 I read that the last liberty ship constructed there was being towed back to be broken up into scrap. I was curious, so I got on the train to Stamford and went over to see it. I talked with the foreman of the yard and asked if he might be willing to let me go on board. He wouldn't let me go alone but agreed to show me around. I was thrilled. This particular ship actually had carried cargo and men to Iwo Jima, Tarawa, and Okinawa. As I stood on top of one of the hatch covers on the fore deck – just trying to soak everything in - a crazy idea came to me that staging a production of "Mister Roberts" on the deck of a cargo or other type of naval vessel was something that had never been done. I thought it would be a great idea. I have had that idea tucked away ever since.

As I was leaving, I noticed this pile of heavy brass banded wooden hatch covers that had been removed from the ship. Since everything was supposedly going to be sold for scrap, I asked what one cover would cost. The foreman told me if I could find a way to take it with me, he would give it to me. I found the nearest U-Haul, rented a van, went back and schlepped it into New York. I found a guy who restored furniture. He cleaned it, sanded it, polished all the brass banding, and bolted trestle type legs to it. I used it for a coffee table for thirty years.

It would be 1974 before "Mister Roberts" and I crossed paths again. I had left New York after starting and starring in "All My Children", doing 386 shows over three and a half years. I had moved to California and was trying to further my television career. One day I read in the trades that a revival of "Mister Roberts" was being produced for a six week run. I couldn't get to the casting call fast enough. I think I was the first person to audition. I was cast again as Ensign Pulver. I had such fun. From the first read through on, I felt like I had come home. Also being older and with a lot more experience I found new elements to bring to the character. I actually won that theatre's award for best supporting actor for that season. It was during this second go around that I had the epiphany that has remained with me for 45



years. I wondered if - at least for me as an actor - the characters of Frank, Doug, and Doc might possibly be part of a trilogy – that given certain circumstances each one could morph into the other. I had never looked at the play that way before. I wanted to find out. I knew then that I had to move on to the part of Doug to see if this idea had any merit.

It would be another ten years. I started to work doing a lot of commercials and episodic television. One of the drawbacks of having a television career at that time was there was very little opportunity to appear in a play. Most episodic TV shows filmed late on Friday night because there was no turn around to worry about on Saturday. You could absolutely guarantee that the minute you tried to do a play you

would get cast in some show and be unavailable for a Friday night performance. There was also the fact that TV paid very well and theatre usually cost you money.

Frankly, I would have preferred to have spent my entire career in the theatre. I loved the process of beginning rehearsals, working to put on the best production possible, and then being able to do a complete performance every night. I liked having a project that lasted for months rather than for just a few days or a week. I also loved being in front of an audience and of course – the applause.

Unfortunately, I liked getting paid better! TV certainly was more lucrative, but the emotional price was high. The only security in TV was being on a successful series. Most actors – me very much included – went from occasional job to occasional job with long periods of idleness in between. I loathed the audition process. It was a minefield, usually requiring two or three readings before you got to the decision maker. At any time during this ordeal you could be eliminated by somebody's 22 year old niece or nephew who had been in the business for a month. This person had no authority to hire you, but held great power by having the ability to keep you from getting to the person who could hire you. My theatre training helped me immensely, and I usually auditioned well because I would get the material beforehand, and then use that time to rehearse the same way I would do for a play. I also learned early to be especially nice to all the nieces and nephews.

My most successful years as a working Hollywood actor went from the seventies through the mid eighties. During that time I went back on a daytime drama for a year, "Young and Restless" – which I hated - was a cast member of the original "Battlestar Galactica, did pilots for my own series four times, appeared in around fifty prime time shows and filmed around 150 commercials. I was considered a successful working actor. Still, I missed being on stage. Unfortunately, I just never found the opportunity to devote two to three months to do even a limited run of any play.

In show business, I think more so than any other occupation, there is a very small window of opportunity to get on that elusive "A" list. The years go by and suddenly you're older. The business wants a new look, you have been around a long time, fresh faces are a dime a dozen. By the mid eighties, the studio system I knew disappeared. The star driven TV series which afforded me so much episodic work had mostly become night time soap operas with huge ensemble casts. There was less opportunity. The idle periods between jobs became longer. I was also pretty sure by this time, my chances of being a series star was becoming more and more remote.

An actor needs to work. I disliked being stagnant. Consequently, I started exploring more opportunities to get back on the stage. I auditioned. I read a lot of experimental scripts. I starred in a play entitled "The Hazing of Mr. Barrow" in which I played a prison psychiatrist who is captured by prisoners during a prison riot and tortured to death. I took the job because I knew the producer, and he assured me big time people were interested in taking the play to Broadway. It lasted two weeks and went into the dumpster.

Naturally, I was always on the lookout for any company that might be doing "Mister Roberts. I actually approached many theatres. Every time the artistic director told me "Mister Roberts" was a dated old war horse about a boat during WW2 and nobody would want to see it. I never understood that attitude

because, I thought the central theme of the show was about how ordinary men, and those who championed them, found ways to survive the tedium, boredom, hardships, and inequalities of daily life. The location and time period just happened to be a cargo ship during the last days of WW2. Of course I was slightly prejudiced.

One afternoon in 1984 I was having coffee with Lin White, a director friend whom I had worked with on several occasions. I had always loved working with her because she was a wonderful *actor's director*. She had gotten tired of all histrionics in television and had returned to her theatre roots. The niche she found was opera. She couldn't sing a note. What she was great at, was teaching singers how to act. She was in great demand as a director for many opera companies. Anyway – over the years she had endured many discussions with me about “Mister Roberts”, so she simply said: “If you want to do “Mister Roberts” so badly, why don't you produce it yourself?” I said back to her: “If I do it, will you direct it?” She said: “Yes.” And that's how I founded my own theatre company - Associated Professional Theatre Artists

Honestly, it wasn't just because I wanted to do this one play again that I decided to do this. I really wanted to get back on stage which had always been my first love. There were also other shows I wanted to do, and I especially wanted to branch out into directing. At the time I had the money to do this. I had always been a saver and for many years put the majority of my earnings away for that inevitable *rainy day*. Of course founding a theatre company isn't in anybody's manual for sound financial planning, but that didn't occur to me at the time.

Casting the show was a snap. I knew the producer and director so the first person we cast was me as Doug Roberts. I then called a bunch of actors I knew, and we put together a terrific cast. We hired great set designers, lighting designers, builders, a backstage crew, and made arrangements with a small waiver (99 seat) theatre. You may notice the operative word seems to be HIRED. Everyone that came on board was a professional in the industry, and I wanted to make sure everybody got paid. More about that later!!

I couldn't wait to see if my theory of Frank, Doug, and Doc possibly being extensions of the same person was valid. I also, remembering the guidance of that student director at Northwestern, wanted to make sure I didn't copy Henry Fonda's brilliant interpretation of Doug Roberts. That was much harder than I anticipated, because I knew by heart his manner of delivery and every inflection he used in every line. By the end of the first week of rehearsals I knew – at least for me – this was the best approach. I knew I could capture all the maturity, stoicism, dignity and the tragic sense of responsibility that was Doug. What I wanted to add was a dose of the childishness that was so much a part of Frank Pulver. For me, it had to be there, because the biggest temper tantrum in the play is when Doug heaves the Captain's palm tree overboard. I also knew it would color the way Doug baited the Captain, and the way he talked to Doc, Frank, and the crew. It worked. The show and I got spectacular reviews.



Again, the run was over way too soon. We only ran for three weekends, twelve performances. I couldn't take the chance of anticipating a longer run. We were not an established company, and the advertising budget was extremely limited. The first weekend was friends and family so we did well. After the reviews came out we sold out the last two weekends.

Remember that word - - HIRED??? I was not talking AEA salaries here. This was gas money and maybe a couple hundred bucks left over. I just wanted everyone to know their efforts were appreciated and worth at least something. Alas - I had never taken Producing 101 at Northwestern which stressed - If you want to produce - **NEVER USE YOUR OWN MONEY, STUPID!** After we banked all the revenue from \$17 ticket sales, it only cost me around \$15,000 to produce the show.

Associated Professional Theatre Artists stayed in business for eighteen months. We did four shows. I starred in two and directed two. What made it all worthwhile, was everything I knew about acting and directing and how actors should be treated was validated. I have always felt, in the creative process there is nothing you can do that is wrong – so there is never a reason to be afraid. Whether it is in front of the curtain or in the booth, you get better performances by nurturing and encouraging rather than by berating and screaming.

When APTA closed its doors I had lost around \$35,000. It was worth every penny.

The next time the USS Reluctant and I met was under different circumstances and the only time my association with a production of "Mister Roberts" left me unsatisfied. I was called one afternoon in 1988 by an actor who had actually played Insigna in the APTA production of "Mister Roberts". He had been cast in a community theatre production in a theatre south of Pasadena.

Immediately, I want to stress that the term community theatre is absolutely not synonymous with unprofessional, amateurish, or inferior in any way. A community theatre simply is a theatre company that produces shows utilizing local non union talent instead of professional talent. It provides a creative outlet for many extraordinarily gifted people who love theatre but have day jobs so they can support their families. Some of the best shows I have ever seen have been community theatre shows. I have also walked out at intermission of many Broadway shows with big name casts.

Anyway, after a couple of weeks of very contentious unproductive rehearsals, the director was fired. I met with the artistic director. I knew the play so well, I was sure in the three weeks that were left, I could fix any problems. I agreed to take over. Looking back, I let my ego get in the way of wisdom. One of the jobs of a director is to choose a cast he thinks is talented, will work well together, and will accept



his vision of the show. I inherited a cast of inexperienced undisciplined actors who had not even done the most basic homework. They had no feel for the play and had no sense of the 1940's time period. Nobody had written down any blocking and nobody had worked even remotely on learning lines. Basically I walked into chaos. I was Doug Roberts for real. Topping it off, the actor playing Doc said every line and duplicated every mannerism William Powell said and used in

the 1955 film. When I suggested he play Doc instead of William Powell, he informed me that he had performed this role several times to local rave reviews and had no intention of changing anything.

I called a tech meeting so I would at least know how the show was supposed to look only to be informed that the set and light designers were waiting for me to tell them what to do. I tore the last page out of the Dramatist script that has a set diagram on it, handed it to the person in charge of the set, and said: "Build that!" After one look at what was available in the way of lighting, I told the light designer to come to rehearsal and make sure wherever an actor stood I could see his face. That and make sure there was a light on the frigging palm tree. As for the actors – I tried – I encouraged each one to be inventive, to think about his character. Where did he come from? What was his back story? What did he do aboard the ship? Who were his friends? I told them to be positive because nothing they tried to do would be wrong. Every night I would arrive at rehearsal - hoping. With 8 days left I resorted to 101 children's theatre and said: "Let me be you. Watch. Walk over here, turn and say the line exactly like this." The show opened. You got it. Doc got a rousing standing ovation.

Suddenly it was the 1990's. I was doing much less television. I was also doing far fewer commercials. I had done so many over the years, and there were newer less exposed faces out there. I was directing more local theatre and had a job as an artistic director for children's theatre through the City Of Los Angeles Parks and Recreation. Teaching theatre arts to kids made me really appreciate the difficulty some people have just expressing themselves – something that was natural to me.

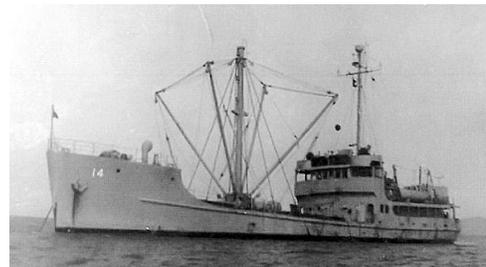
In 1992 my career changed course again. My good friend and APTA partner Lin White called me. She had been selected to be the artistic director for a big summer theatre arts festival down in Orange County. Included in the programming was a production of "La Bohème" and the great Frank Loesser musical "Guys and Dolls". She wanted me to come down and play Sky Masterson in "Guys and Dolls". I alluded earlier that doing musicals was how I skated through Northwestern. I had not done a musical or sang since then. I laughed out loud and told Lyn there was no way I could play that part because I hadn't sung in 25 years. Remember now that Lin's forte was teaching opera singers to act. She had a lot of legitimate voices at her disposal. She wanted an actor for the role in order to illustrate that what you are singing about is as important as hitting all the notes correctly. I was to be the ringer she brought in to help prove the point. She assured me my voice would be fine

I was a confident actor. I was confident in my abilities and my technique. I was never intimidated by a role or other performers. I knew "Guys and Dolls" and had great ideas for the character of Sky. We started rehearsals and within two days - **I WAS TERRIFIED**. I couldn't sing the role. I sounded like a seal on steroids. Fear enveloped me to the point that everything I had been taught, everything I knew and had passed on to others, went right out the window. Lin's style of directing was identical to my own. She kept encouraging me and never said a negative word. Every performer in the cast kept reassuring me I would be fine. I begged Lin to replace me with someone who could sing the role. She wouldn't do it. On opening night I stood in the wings absolutely sure that I should have been an accountant. My cue came. I walked into the light – and I was fine. I tell this story because what I went through that summer made me a much better actor and more importantly a better director. I certainly understood more completely the things that caused actors to be afraid and to lose confidence.

Suddenly, I found myself right back where I started- musical comedy. From 1993 until I left Los Angeles in 2000 the majority of my performing was in musical theatre. I developed a reputation as Harold Hill and did "The Music Man" four times. I also did many other shows and enjoyed all of them. My final show was "My Fair Lady" which I did with "Phantom of the Opera" star Dale Kristen. You would think during this period my obsession with "Mister Roberts" might have diminished. Nope!

In 1995, one of the theatre companies where I had performed "The Music Man" announced "Mister Roberts" as a part of their season schedule. The artistic director of the company who knew of my passion for the play suggested I drive down and meet the director, who had spent his life in the navy and retired as a chief petty officer. His love of the show matched my own, because, as he told me, he actually lived it. In early 1944 he had enlisted and served on an AK in the South Pacific. When he retired he became associated with the theatre company with the specific intent to direct "Mister Roberts". I didn't really audition. We just talked. We shared stories and our ideas and philosophies of the play. He especially liked my notion of Frank, Doug, and Doc possibly being an extension of the same person. He hired me that evening to play Doug.

It was a terrific production with a great cast. What made it unforgettable for me was the direction. From the first day of rehearsal, our director stressed the importance of how young men in general acted at that time. Attitudes were different. Postures were different. You talked differently. Being a military man, he then added on what it was like to be on a navy ship in 1944. For the crew, he especially stressed what it was like to be cooped up with other men, some of whom you didn't like, on a small cargo ship. He focused on the tedium and the petty irritations that led to arguments and fights. He also made sure the actors understood, as sailors in 1944, how they would really behave under such a tyrannical Captain, how important it was for them to have a liberty, and the necessity for them to believe and depend on Doug.



As for me - he provided new dimensions to my portrayal of Doug. We had agreed that first night on how I wanted to portray Doug. Nothing changed there. What he gave me and why I will always be grateful to him - he made sure I was an officer of that time. He taught me the proper way to salute, the difference in the way an officer talked to his fellow officers and the way he talked to the crew. He was especially strict about the way I taunted the Captain, because in the real navy an officer like Doug Roberts had to know the limits of his insubordination. These were subtle changes but they added much texture to my performance.

He also accelerated the pace of the show. "Mister Roberts" is a long script with a lot of dialogue. It wasn't a question of just talking faster. We picked up cues quickly and tightened all those dramatic pauses and reactions. I think the playing time of this production was almost 15 to 20 minutes shorter than shows I had done previously. It was better. I remembered that.

We were also blessed with a wonderful set and lighting designer. The show looked great. It did really well. I was nominated for best actor in the theatre's awards for that year, but I did not win. What I did come home with was more ideas and things I would incorporate when I got to direct the show again.

That opportunity came in 1998. I petitioned one of the theatres where I had done a lot of shows and was given the winter slot. There was great reluctance at first because like so many people the committee responsible for setting the season, felt "Mister Roberts" was an outdated WW2 play. I lobbied hard to convince them that it was much more than that. I also promised that I would make the show look different from any other production. As a director, offering a unique point of view has always been one of the most important things to me. I never want to recreate what somebody else has done. I always want to add something or present the material in a different way. I had never forgotten standing on the deck of that old liberty ship in Luder's boat yard. I didn't have a ship to stage the show on, but I wanted to make everything look and sound like a real beat up cargo ship.

The first thing I did was adhere to the best advice I had ever been given in my life. I surrounded myself with incredibly talented, motivated, and capable people and let them do their jobs.

Our set was incredible. It was designed and decorated by a retired Hollywood set designer who had been in the navy. The attention to detail far surpassed anything I had seen before. The "old bucket" really looked like a worn out cargo ship. There were rust stains and peeling paint. The two interior officer's quarters featured conduits and piping overhead complete with the appropriate stenciling. The furnishings from the bunks to the lockers and the desks looked exactly like what would have been on this type of boat. The ship faced the audience bow on so the fore deck was downstage and the raised bridge was farther upstage. The windows of the bridge were made of overlapping fine screening that he painted so they reflected the island when the ship was docked and the ocean when the ship was at sea. The artistry rivaled anything I had seen on any stage anywhere.

Our lighting design reflected my strong opinion that I never want to look at a set. I want to see what is actually there in real life. I love practical light and the natural shadows and levels they provide. It's always a battle to balance this with having enough light to see the actor's faces. I told the designer I really wanted the feel of a ship in the water. Now this was not a brand new state of the art building. This theatre had been there a long time and had limited lighting fixtures and electrical capabilities. What he accomplished was beyond remarkable. He laid out gutters filled with water all around the stage. He then reflected different shades and intensities of light off the gutters on to the set. I especially loved the night time sequences on deck. To compliment the reflected light off the water, he employed practical port and starboard lights and lights from companionways, bulkheads, and through portholes. He then feathered soft light so it looked like moonlight broken up by the ships cranes.

Just when it was perfect, I asked him to add an effect that I had always had in the back of my mind. I had never seen it done, but to me it was logical and I wanted to try it. The first three scenes of the show are Doug and Doc's long conversation, the scene with Doug and Dowdy, and then the long sequence with the crew. The time frame of this goes from just after daybreak through mid morning. I wanted to have the lighting reflect this. I also wanted to include a pre show effect for about fifteen minutes before

the curtain that brought the stage from night time to dawn. I doubted most of the audience getting seated and chatting would even notice it but I wanted it. Basically I wanted a 45 - 50 minute fade up sequence. When I brought this up I thought my lighting designer was going to have a heart attack. The light board did not have the capability to do that. Light cues were programmed into a lap top using very basic lighting software. The longest fade programmable was one minute. SO – we put in 50 separate one minute light cues that gradually changed the light on the stage from night to day. It was ridiculously hard to do because each cue only changed the intensity and the coloring a tiny bit. It took us a whole weekend to put this sequence in. Additionally, the probability for screwing up the sequences was high because whoever was running lights for the show had to hit the GO button fifty times at fifty predetermined moments. This task fell to my assistant stage manager, whom I could never thank enough. I included her from the beginning of the whole process so she was thoroughly familiar with how it should look. For the run of the show, six weeks – four shows a week - she was on the money every night. Often I would attend performances so I could overhear the compliments for this magnificent idea. Not one audience member ever said a word.



The sound plot was a piece of cake. This was a ship either at sea or moored in a harbor. There were also scenes below deck. I wanted constant appropriate ambient ship like and ocean like sounds. The person who took on this responsibility was a high school theatre student volunteering at the theatre. I had one meeting with her at which I bumbled and stumbled trying to explain why I wanted something that was hardly audible but whose absence I would notice. She listened and said: “leave

everything to me.” Several days before we went into tech, she handed me a disc and said: “Here ya go. You’ll like this.” I hope this girl went on to be president of THX. She gave me harbor sounds, ocean sounds, engine sounds when the ship was under way, sound of steam in pipes and bulkheads opening and closing for the interior scenes. Everything I could possibly want all in perfect sequence with the show. Naturally, no audience member ever said anything to me about liking the sound of the show.

Having now been a staple on the Southern California theatre circuit for many years, I knew a lot of actors. I made phone calls and put together a first rate cast. I even recast several people who had done the show with me previously. As we progressed, I made sure I included everything I had learned from the last production in which I played Doug, especially the pacing. I did not want the show to run over two hours.

There are always differences in each production. Nothing is ever completely the same. My big surprise in this show was the young actor I cast as Frank Pulver. He chose to play Frank as a quieter, sly, calculating, I know something you don't know, person rather than the over hyped, oversexed, puppy. I wasn't sure of the approach at first, but adhering to my philosophy of nothing being wrong in the creative process, I wanted him to be confident in his choice. Within a week I knew that for him, this choice was perfect. I was also pretty sure he would steal the show. He underplayed everything except when he physically fled from the Captain and the sequence with the firecracker which was absolutely hysterical.



I also came up with the perfect solution for the goat that is stolen and brought aboard ship during the crew's liberty. Bringing any live animal on stage is fraught with peril. I won't divulge what I did, but it turned out very well... The show was a huge hit and won the theatre's awards for that season for best set, best lighting, and best sound, as well as best supporting actor for Frank Pulver. I did not win for best director – go figure.

In August of 2000, I left Hollywood and moved to the Monterey Peninsula. It was the most difficult decision of my life. I didn't want to go, but I think if I had stayed what little that was left of my marriage and my sanity would have dissolved. My television career was stagnant. In late 1998 the vestibular nerve in my left ear got wiped out by some unknown virus completely destroying my equilibrium. That put an end to my doing musicals because I couldn't dance. So I left.

For the last fifteen years I have stayed active directing many shows in Monterey and even performing in a few in Monterey and San Francisco. I have never had any luck getting anyone interested in "Mister Roberts". Shortly after I arrived, in 2001 I approached the biggest theatre in the area and pitched the show starring well known film and TV actor Robert Hayes as Frank and myself as Doc. I didn't know Robert Hayes well. We had met on a couple of occasions. We both were aware of the other's passion for the show. He had recently starred in a revival at the Old Globe in San Diego. I called him and asked if he would be interested in doing the show in Monterey if I could arrange it. He laughed and said: "Jack, I am like you – anywhere, any time." I arranged a meeting with the artistic director of this theatre and proposed my idea. His response was: "That's an old show nobody would want to see, and regardless we don't need or want Hollywood types in our productions." I quietly left the building. I have brought up "Mister Roberts" several times over the years to several other artistic directors in the area but with no success. Given that the Naval Post Graduate School and the Defense Language Institute are both located in Monterey, I thought there might be some interest. I guess not. So I gradually accepted the fact that I was probably not going to finish my trilogy by playing Doc.

In October of 2015 I visited my closest high school and college friend Scott Conant who had retired and was living in Wilmington North Carolina. Scott had enjoyed a long career in marketing as a Senior Project Manager at FOX Sports Net. He was giving me the grand tour of the city which has played a significant role in this nation's history all the way back to the Revolutionary War. We were driving

parallel to Wilmington harbor. Moored close to shore were two Coast Guard cutters. Behind them I caught a glimpse of what appeared to be the top of the super structure of a larger ship. I asked Scott: "What is that?" He casually replied as he turned away from the harbor: "Oh. That's the North Carolina." "STOP!" I screamed. Do you mean the battleship USS North Carolina?" "Yes. It's a museum." He casually replied. "Turn around. I want to see it." So we did.



At the very beginning of this essay, I referred to my fascination with the Pacific campaign of WW2. We entered the war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor which destroyed practically our entire fleet of battleships. The USS North Carolina was one of three North Carolina Class battleships built during the war. It saw action from late 1942 to the Japanese surrender in 1945, winning numerous commendations as a primary defender and escort ship for the USS Enterprise. Anything you might want to know about the ship's history can be found at the ship's web site <http://www.battleshipnc.com/>. In 1958 this magnificent warship was scheduled to be broken up for scrap. It was saved by a statewide campaign by the citizens of North Carolina and brought to Wilmington in October 1961. In 1962, she was declared a museum and state memorial to the 11,000 North Carolinians who perished in WW2.

This ship is part of our history and our heritage. I had to see it. I had to go on board. We bought two tickets and for the next three hours toured the ship. I was overwhelmed by its size, its grace, and its power. There are no more ships like this. I also became aware of the incredibly huge ongoing effort to raise millions of dollars to restore and preserve this warship which is deteriorating and slowly rusting away in Wilmington harbor. I was standing on the teak aft deck just gazing at everything from the massive 16 inch gun turret to the smaller anti aircraft gun mounts - - completely lost in my reverie. Scott tapped me on the shoulder and asked me if I was all right. I turned to him and with a gleam in my eye reminiscent of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, said "I know a great way to raise money for the ship's restoration that I bet has never occurred to anybody. Why don't we mount a production of "Mister Roberts" on the aft deck of this ship? Scott blinked twice, took a slight step backwards and raised his arms over his head. "WOW!! Tell me how you would do it". For twenty minutes I told Scott my entire history with the show including my long standing idea to stage the play aboard a ship, and also my need to play Doc in order to complete my personal trilogy. Scott listened and then said: Jocko, you know I was a premier marketer for many years. I can sell ice in Canada. This may be the best idea I have ever heard. Give me five minutes." He then took out his cell phone and walked up towards the aft 16 inch turret. After a short conversation he walked back and said: "We have a 10AM meeting tomorrow with Captain Terry Bragg who is the Executive Director of the USS North Carolina. He is the person overseeing the massive renovation and the fund raising campaign.



The next morning we met with Terry, and I don't think I stopped talking for twenty minutes. When I finished my impromptu presentation he looked at both of us and said: "I'm in charge of preserving this ship and making sure we have the money to do it. I'm an engineer. I don't know about show business. However, as long as you do not damage the ship or change anything that is part of the ship, I think it's a

great idea. What you need to do now is find the right people in Wilmington to move the project forward.” Logically to me the first place to start would be with the theatre community in the area. I asked Terry for a suggestion. He immediately said he knew Tony Rivenbark, Executive Director of Thalian Hall, which was the big theatre in Wilmington. Thalian Hall was home to the Thalian Association which was the parent company for the largest community theatre in the area

I was going home the next day. I wouldn’t be able to pitch the idea. However, I was absolutely sure if Scott had all the information at his fingertips, he could present our idea as well as I could. That night we strategized for hours. My biggest concerns were protecting my idea, and making sure if the project went forward, I was part of it.



In the end, we concluded to proceed one step at a time. Scott would take advantage of Terry’s introduction and contact Tony Rivenbark, present our idea, and see if there was any interest in even doing something like this. If the reaction was positive, Scott could then bring up my desire to be involved as part of the artistic effort. Basically, I wanted to play Doc, but given my extensive knowledge and experience with the play, I would be willing to contribute in other areas if they needed me. That’s how we left it. I went home.

Scott called Tony Rivenbark and had an extremely productive conversation. Tony gave him three possibilities plus a host of helpful hints about costs, advertizing and seasonal timing. Scott then contacted Susan Habas the Managing Director of the Thalian Association. She oversees America’s *oldest* community theater organization. She took Scott’s 15 minute phone pitch to heart and invited Scott and Terry Bragg to see her. That meeting and I believe one other (not being there I am not completely sure of the sequence) included David Loudermilk who is the Thalian Association’s Artistic Director and Tori Jones, the president of Clove Marketing. She works closely with the Thalian on all marketing-related projects. As a result of these meetings, it was decided that “Mister Roberts” would be staged aboard the USS North Carolina opening on July 4, 2017 and run for the month of July which is the peak tourist season. Terry & Crew would handle all concessions, receive 50% of the gate (except opening night), have a discounted Military Day each week and work in partnership with the Thalian Association. Susan & Co. will be in charge of all things creative: casting, directing, sets and lighting, rehearsals and the play’s run. Tori and Clove Marketing will be responsible for promotion and obtaining sponsorships.

ARE YOU KIDDING ME??? Arranging something like this usually takes up to a year and way too many meetings to accomplish. Scott got our crazy idea embraced and set into motion in a couple of weeks. Selling ice in Canada was way too much an understatement. Show business: gotta love it.

SO – that is where everything stands right now. The Thalian Theatre has current productions that demand everyone’s immediate attention and their schedule of shows is set through 2016. The next scheduled meeting concerning “Mister Roberts” is April 13, 2016. I will travel back to Wilmington at that time, because one of the reasons for the meeting is to introduce me to all the Thalian people. Right now I am a stranger. Scott was the person who convinced them. I hope they want me. I have been through the “audition process” a couple of times. If they want me to read, I will read. If they want to pick my brain, I will help in any way I can. I have one objective. I want to be included.

I have imagined being part of something like this ever since that day in Luder's boat yard. It will be incredible! This production is going to be presented on an actual WW2 battleship. Just thinking about the logistics is mind boggling. It will require imagination and planning far outside normal theatrical productions. This isn't a stage with wings and entrances and exits. Designing and building a set will be a challenge. How do you make a battleship look like a beat up AK cargo ship? How do you even make the set stable because you cannot anchor anything? Putting screws or bolts in the teak deck will not be an option. There is also the small matter of a rather large 16 inch turret in the middle of the deck. How are you going to light it? There are no banks of lights already in place. Some sort of portable scaffolding where the lights can be mounted will have to be employed. There will also have to be power to run theatrical lights. Where do you put the booth? Heck, where are you going to seat an audience? I want to be a part of it all. And - - I want to play Doc. I want to finish my trilogy.

Finally, I have a feeling about this. I think what started as "what if....." will garner more attention than anyone expects. I think when the first promotional material goes out it will immediately spread far beyond local affiliates. I think the Thalian Theatre production of "Mister Roberts" and the city of Wilmington will attract national attention.

There are eight other battleships left in existence. All of them are owned by private enterprises who are trying desperately to renovate and restore them. They are: USS Alabama, Mobile, Ala, USS Iowa, 250 S. Harbor Blvd. Los Angeles, CA, USS Massachusetts, Fall River, MA, USS Missouri, Honolulu HI, USS New Jersey, Camden, NJ, USS Texas, La Porte, TX, USS Utah, Honolulu , HI, USS Wisconsin, Norfolk, VA.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to raise the funds to preserve these vessels. There are two generations of Americans who have virtually no knowledge of the history of these warships and their place in American history. If the Thalian Theatre production of "Mister Roberts" is successful, the formula they used could easily be duplicated elsewhere to raise the capital needed to save these other ships.

I will keep all of you posted as we all move through this process. Stay Tuned.....