

A Letter to the Editor

Getting a letter to the Editor printed in the NY Times is a minor miracle. There are people who have been writing letters to the editor for years, maybe decades, but who have never gotten published. What frustration! Here you are, wanting the world to know how you feel about a local, national or international issue, composing a letter containing your carefully thought out position, and—nothing.

I have written a few letters to the editor which were published, but they were minor league: the Brookline Tab and the Jewish Advocate. On one occasion I wrote to the Boston Globe. It wasn't published, but in retrospect, it wasn't much.

I remember a question asked by my friend Irving Weinstein almost 60 years ago: do you write because you have something to say, or because you want to see your name in print? I answered: both. I wrote a few pieces for our literary magazines in junior high school and in high school, and proudly showed them to my mother. She kvelled. To my mother, to be a published writer, is to be immortal. I am not sure if this applies to letters to the editor, but it is a step along the way.

Which brings me to my letter to the editor. On February 20, 2002, the lead news story in the Arts section of the NY Times carried the headline: "An Extra's Unscripted Tumble From the Stage Is Roiling the Met." The story described how a "...\$30 a day supernumerary, or extra...fell in a freak accident" during the premiere performance of Prokofiev's War and Peace.

Even before I finished reading the article, I sat down at my computer and dashed off a letter to the editor, recounting my experience as a super at the Met in the mid 1940's. After writing the letter, I revised it to conform to the way other letters to the editor were written: if you are writing about a story, first give the headline and the date. Then I e-mailed it to the Times.

Within an hour, I received an automated reply from the Times thanking me for my letter (Subject: Met supers, then and now), and explaining that if my letter is selected for publication, I will be contacted. Also, letters should be no longer than 150 words, and may be shortened, and must be exclusive to the Times. The letter was signed letters@mail2.nytimes.com. I was on my way. Two days later, I received another e-mail, this time from a real person, Lawrence Levi, who thanked me again for my letter, and sent me an edited version "which we hope to publish tomorrow" if I approve, and gave me his phone number, if I would like to make any changes. It looks like I really am going to get the letter printed in the Times.

I called him, explained that they took out the names of the operas and performers which gave the letter a flavor of the times, but I am delighted to have the letter published as edited. We chatted further. I asked him if he knew Sara Ivry, a friend's daughter who worked at the Times as a fact checker, and he certainly did—they were friends. Small world. And this should certainly help get the letter in.

On Saturday, February 23rd, my letter appeared with a cute head: “On Stage and Off: My Life on the Edge,” and an even cuter illustration, showing two soldiers marching on stage as one is falling off. I concluded my letter by pointing out that in the late 1940s the Met changed managers (from Johnson to Bing, whose names were omitted) “...and the use of extras off the street was ended. In the years that I served as an extra, I don’t remember anyone falling off the stage. JACOB SCHLITT Brookline, Mass., Feb. 20, 2002”

I received calls and e-mails from friends, and letters from strangers. I was famous. I believe if you had “googled” me around that time, it would mention the letter. One of the letters I received was from Israel Kugler, a friend and former Workmen’s Circle president, who wrote that his letters about Israel and about Bush to the Times and the English Forward go unprinted. I told him that getting my letter printed was “beginner’s luck.”

A letter came from someone in Key Biscayne, Florida who shared his memories as a super in the late ‘30s. Another letter from a former super from Pleasantville, NY remembered Ramon Vinay as Jose to Rise Stevens’ Carmen. Vinay actually fell ON stage, and Stevens looked at him lying there and said, “You schmuck.” The thought occurred to me to start an alumni association of Met supers, but then I thought better of it. Stuyvesant, CCNY and the ILGWU are enough.