20 January 2013, late afternoon

January 22, 2013 By Jay Vithalani

Got on the 9 o'clock bus at Alewife in Cambridge. Decent Wi-Fi. Read the newspaper. Reached the Penn Station area by 1:15 or so. Grabbed some food (foot-long Veggie Delite) at Subway; yep I'm a culinary connoisseur alright.

Then headed to the Penn Station toilet, the handicapped stall. Changed from my jeans and t-shirt/sweater into my suit. An excruciating (but, in retrospect, also comical experience). Walked briskly to The Cutting Room on East 32nd Street, near 6th Avenue. By 2:45 the room was already packed, background music playing. The occasion: A Memorial Service for Spencer Cox, and a Celebration of his Life. Spencer died of AIDS on 18 December 2012. He was 44.

The program was a "Playbill" -- Spencer, I'm told, would have loved that. One sheet, recto-verso, recto-verso, a play on words I hope I'll be pardoned for

I didn't know Spencer, though I certainly knew *of* him; we also had many friends in common. I didn't have to travel to NYC to be at the service in person, since a video of the whole thing was being made and will soon be made available on the Interwebz. But I knew, just knew, that I did, in fact, want to be there, in that Cutting Room; my cluttered mind thought of the three Fates, and of Atropos in particular, who cuts the thread of life.

I had seen the superb Oscar-nominated documentary *How To Survive A Plague* twice. I had also read many obituaries. (The one by John Voelcker -- Huffington Post -- was one that I admired for its insightfulness, its focus on certain often-overlooked concerns, and also for its being the product of Voelcker's long friendship with Spencer.) No doubt there will be more obituaries, appreciations, tributes, reminiscences. *I* am simply recounting, very selectively and briefly, some of my impressions of two hours on a Sunday afternoon.

Klutz that I am, I tripped on some of the folding chairs. I had no idea where to dump my coat, small bag, and suit-zippy-thingy. But once the presenters started, I listened to every word and saw every image. Gripping eulogies -- friends from Benninton, brothers-in arms and also Spencer's brother, a former lover. Video tributes (Dr. Anthony Fauci and Larry Kramer being the two most famous names, I suppose). Musical performances. Photographs and movie clips (Bette Davis, Liza Minelli, pics from childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, friends, beefy Chelsea guy, leather gear, pic or two of a tired and older-seeming face, a face that was partly the result of an off-on addiction to

crystal meth, an addiction not glossed over in the memorial). I didn't sit in one place; every 20 minutes or so I wandered round the large room to look at not only the stage from different angles -- how theatrical! -- but also at the "audience," laughing and crying, whispering to each other, holding hands.

I bawled when Spencer's mother spoke, for a few minutes only. (She wasn't on the program actually.) What a model of unproud grief and unqualified dignity!

Two hours. I'm not reviewing this event as a film. (But Spencer perhaps might have liked me to?) He hated sentimentality, I was told; but of course he was a sucker of a sentimentalist -- I could be wrong, but my intuition about that is strong. Two nearly flawless hours of tribute -- but not of hagiographical sanctification. A few false notes, a few unnecessary *bon mots*, but these are trivialities; and considering that the organizers -- opinionated all, I have no doubt, "early ACT UP" as Peter Staley said -- managed to pull off this "extravaganza" in a month -- they were on the phone *just one hour* after Spencer's death -- is humbling, satisfying, exalting.

Bus back to Boston. Bitterly cold night, welcomingly warm home. And, at home, bitter and warm tears.

In Memoriam. Patrick Spencer Cox. 1968-2012.

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