

THE STAFF PHILOSOPHER

Stairs to the Roof

BEN: It seems to me, Mr. Gum, that reflections on the nature of the universe have got some general bearing on everything there is. GUM: We have a philosopher here—Benjamin Murphy, Ph.D.

Tennessee Williams completed *Stairs to the Roof* only days after Pearl Harbor. He explained, “Wars come and wars go...but Benjamin Murphy’s problems are universal and everlasting. ...Something way, way down—basic and fundamental—is at the seat of the trouble. ...What could be more appropriate at this moment than inspecting the bottom?” This is the philosopher’s quest. It is the quest of Benjamin Murphy, so-called Ph.D.

At the seat of Ben’s trouble is *how he can live in society without losing his identity*. We crave community, but why do the compulsory compromises often leave us wondering who we are? It is a universal and everlasting conundrum. We are taught that we are here for others—but, then, what are *others* here for? We admire the saints. But we envy the heroes. Marx calls it alienation—being made foreigners, even to ourselves, by society. Rousseau memorably declares: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”

Ben, wild at heart, is in chains. He once dreamed of adventure, but each new decision dimmed that dream. He took a wife, he took a job, and now the over-mechanized workplace threatens to take his soul. The Girl, too, recalls how “beautiful and mysterious” the world was when she was little, a vision now ruined by unrequited love. Society has closed in on others too—the clown’s dog, the caged foxes, and a chained gang of secondary characters chafing at their own constraints.

Everyone tries a different combination to the lock. Thatcher cheats at Carefree Cabins. Bertha and Jim disappear. The foxes head for the hills where they were born free. The workers storm the roof. (“Workers of the world unite!” seems almost on their lips.) The trained dog jumps high, high over the hoop. Ben and the Girl jump even higher--over arithmetic!

“I’m not very much of a political theorist, Mr. Gum,” Ben says. Williams says this for himself elsewhere: “I wish I were sufficiently a...political theorist to advance a scheme for correction of these unlucky circumstances...” Yet Williams *does* advance a scheme—an *individual*, not a political one. *SCENE ONE—BEN: “So people have got to find stairs to the roof.”* People must find their own freedom, mystery, adventure, and individuality. These are not gained in a single leap. The dog jumps to freedom, but is recovered and re-chained. Ben and the Girl zoom towards a new star; but the society they beget will inevitably threaten their Eden.

As Williams finished *Stairs to the Roof* in St. Louis, Albert Camus was completing *The Myth of Sisyphus* in Paris--a world apart, but on the same page. Sisyphus is doomed to eternally push a boulder up a hill, only for it to always roll back down. Camus writes, “The workman of today works every day in his life at the same task, and this fate is no less absurd.” Sisyphus, without the option of a new star, nevertheless finds joy. Ceaselessly ascending and descending, he recognizes that “there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.... His fate belongs to him. ...The struggle toward the heights is enough to fill one’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

Society persists. So people have got to find stairs to the roof, even if in their own minds. The struggle toward the heights can be enough to fill one's heart.

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