

MOPPING THE STAGE

by

Arthur M. Jolly

[www.arthurjolly.com](http://www.arthurjolly.com)

MOPPING THE STAGE

premiered at  
The Black Box Theatre  
Santa Monica  
Sept 15th, 2006

as part of an evening of playwrights performing their own works  
I SHOULDA EATEN MY PEAS AND CARROTS

Cast: Arthur M. Jolly

Produced by Bill Hyatt & Jeni Elliott  
Directed by Jeffrey VanderByl  
Assistant Director - Sarah Nina Phillips  
Lighting Design - Angela Lingrosso  
Stage Manager - Mercedes Clanton

SETTING:

Pre-show on the stage of the theatre.

TIME:

Present.

ACT I  
Scene 1

AT RISE: There is a mop and bucket/wringer on stage. The bucket is filled with water. ARTHUR is mopping the stage, singing a work shanty.

ARTHUR

*Oh the smartest packet you might find,  
hey-ya, ho-ya, you most done,  
Is the old Wild Cat of the Swallowtail line,  
Clear away the drag and let the bulgine run.  
Tell me hey rig a jig and a joltin' gun,  
Hey-ya, ho-ya, you most done?  
With Eliza Lee all on my knee,  
Clear away the drag and let the bulgine run.  
Oh when I get back to Liverpool town,  
hey-ya, ho-ya, you most done,  
I'll stand you whiskies all around,  
Clear away the drag and let the bulgine run.*

I should've done this earlier. We have an actor warm-up before you guys get here - I was gonna come in early and do it before that, I just got delayed. Too much to do.

*Oh the old Wild Cat of the Swallowtail line,  
hey-ya, ho-ya, you most done,  
She's never a day behind her time,  
Clear away the drag and let the bulgine run.  
Tell me hey rig a jig and a joltin' gun,  
Hey-ya, ho-ya, you most done?  
With Eliza Lee all on my knee,  
Clear away the drag and let the bulgine run.*

I always sing sea shanties when I mop this stage. I live on a houseboat in Marina del Rey - you can read it in my bio there. I don't know, I like sea shanties.

(beat)

I'm not an actor. As you can tell from the mop - I'm a writer. The pay isn't good and there aren't many perks -- unless you consider mopping a perk -- but I feel good about what I do. And someone has to mop -- the play looks better with a clean stage. It's part of getting your stuff out there.

Before I quit to write full time, I was a helicopter pilot -- flew photographers over San Francisco, dropped water on forest fires in Montana, flew tourists into the Grand Canyon... and for a couple of years, I instructed for the US Army. In those two years, I taught forty students how to fly a TH-67 helicopter - know what that is? In taxpayer terms 'bout a million five.

I took that job after 9-11. I grew up in New York, that's home for me, I should have been there. I was in Northern Idaho when I heard. I was driving a pickup truck for the Columbia Helicopter company, towing a dip tank - a big water tank for fighting fires. It was convoy of like eight vehicles and I was in the middle. We were just moving from one forest fire to another. And I was listening to the radio: The Spud Brothers, which is an Idaho thing. And they were talking about a plane had that had just flown into the first building. I thought they were joking. And while I was listening, the second plane hit. I lost it, I was just crying, I pulled out of the convoy at a gas station -- started trying to call my family in New York. That worked.

My father was in an airplane, flying into New York City that morning. Not one of those airplanes -- his flight diverted to Nova Scotia, but it took me six days to find that out. I wanted to do something... I wanted... I wanted -- Then the Army offered me a job as an instructor pilot.

A lot of people work for the army in one way or another, no big deal... but it went completely against how I was brought up.

My dad worked for UNICEF for twenty years. Some of the ideas he implemented have saved the lives of literally millions of children. I'm immensely proud of him. He does amazing work with incredible dedication. It's been difficult living up to him. I went from working in movies to flying helicopters. It was in part a reaction. If you have a father that's a success in anything it's hard to live up to, let alone one who's been knighted by the queen. Oh, did I mention he's been knighted by the queen?

I asked him about the ethics of taking the job.

He told me how in 1956, he refused to carry a gun in the British National Service. Three months after the courts upheld his pacifism, Britain, France and Israel invaded Egypt. It lasted only four days - the UN came out so strongly against that war, Britain had to withdraw; and the Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, resigned in disgrace. My Dad told me "There, but for the grace of God, might I have gone myself -- as an utterly compromised pawn in an utterly discredited war."

He said a lot of things, he's an economist, he'll talk your ear off - he talked about "human security" -- economic stability, the reduction of poverty -- that increases real security. Armies tend to reduce it... but when I asked him point blank: Do I take this job? It came down to his original beliefs. He said: "Lad, killing people is wrong. Not just some of the time." "I'm not killing anyone. I'm just gonna be training them to fly -- they might fly medical rescue missions, whatever. "

He said: "Soldiers kill. That's their job. Training them to fly is training them to kill."

But, I wanted... I wanted -- I wanted revenge. So I went to work for the army, in spite of my dad's advice.

When we first went to war in Iraq, I was in a room full of army instructors. All lifetime military guys. I was one of two guys in there who hadn't flown in Vietnam. And there wasn't one guy in that room that supported this war, and that was when we thought there might be Weapons of Mass Destruction.

I knew it was bullshit -- I knew it was going to be a complete fiasco -- every military guy in that room with thirty years experience on me told me so. And yet we kept on doing our job -- we trained the students, and we sent them on.

So, there I was a civilian contractor for the army -- Initial Entry Rotorwing Training. Initial Entry means I got 'em on day one - the nickel ride. That was their first ever flight in a helicopter. Afterwards, they would give me a nickel from the year they were born. I don't know - some army tradition. I've still got their nickels, in a little box on my desk. Forty nickels.

The students get graded every flight. They live in fear of getting a pinkslip -- a failing grade -- and maybe getting washed out of the program. I told each and every one of them "the only test that matters is the pop quiz you *will* get at some point in the next twenty years: you will have to do one of your emergency procedures for real -- and if you fail that one, you will die. That is the test that matters." They were more worried about the pinkslip -- they were eighteen and invulnerable.

All of my students made it. Passed first time. I never pinked anyone. Only guy that really came close was Lieutenant Edward J. Weston. I inherited him from another instructor who went on active duty. When I got him, Eddie couldn't hover to save his fucking life.

You can laugh -- I did -- but it's not easy. D'you want to know how to hover a helicopter?

(he looks at the floor)

We got time. A helicopter hovering balances on a column of air. It's like balancing a broomstick on your finger.

(he balances the mop as he continues: )

It wants to fall over - you physically balance the damn thing every moment.

(he dumps the mop, and sits down on a box)

To do this you have four controls - your right hand is controlling the cyclic - like a joystick, left hand on a lever - the collective - and two pedals: lateral motion, vertical motion, and pivoting. But it's not as easy as that - they interconnect.

Every time you move any one control, you must compensate with the other three. Moving laterally uses power - so you increase the collective - which changes torque, so you must adjust the pedals... And the heli's affected by wind gusts, balance shifting -- you can feel if someone leans over in their seat to look down at a reference point... it shifts the weight a little, you have to compensate. It works out to about seven control inputs a second -- but it's all feel. You learn to balance your broomstick, using these four controls.

(beat)

But it's not as easy as that, because there's a lag.

It takes about three seconds from when you move a control to when the helicopter responds. So, we would be drifting left, and the student would put in a correction - nothing would happen, so they'd put in more, and more -- then the heli reacts, and we'd go swooping off to the right. They over-react, we swoop back -- we'd end up forty feet off the ground, spinning around and sliding sideways... I loved it!

As an instructor, you've got your own controls, so at that point, you take over, bring it back to a three foot hover, and let them try all over again.

Everyone got that? You know how to fly a helicopter? Outstanding... You've got the controls, you've got the lag...but it's not as easy as that. There's a kicker - helicopters are subject to what's called pendular action. Along with everything else, the helicopter is hanging from those rotor blades - like a weight on a string.

When you do finally stop it moving - it's gonna swing back the other way, like a pendulum. Most guys will get this by the third day of hover practice. They won't be good, but it'll be basically under control. Not Weston. The pendular action was kicking his butt. He couldn't feel it. He didn't *get* it.

So Weston was gonna wash out.

(beat)

He had a wife who was also twenty -- and she was pregnant. She used to stay up nights helping him study his manuals. I met her once. She was a sweet girl, and scared as hell about... everything. I told her I'd get him through it.

But it came down to the wire, and he still didn't have it. He had one last chance, an evaluation ride with the flight commander. A decision - *pinked* or in.

It's 5:30 in the morning, briefing's over. I had half an hour before he had to go out to the flightline. I told him "Stand up, and take off your left boot." - "Sir, yes, sir!" Off comes the boot.

(ARTHUR removes a boot)

I *liked* instructing for the army - you say, they do. I told him to grab the laces by the ends - and move the boot from here to there without letting it swing.

(ARTHUR demonstrates)

It's five thirty five in the morning, less than half an hour before his evaluation ride - I've got this short, curly-haired gawky kid running back and forth in his one one army issue sock and his one boot, holding the other by the laces. For twenty minutes. The Flight Commander came in from his office and just watched us - crazy civilian instructor, making his student swing his boot around.

But to do it - to stop it swinging, Weston had to put a little control input in and back to neutral before the boot reacted...

(the boot stops dead in mid swing)

That is pendular action. And once he could do it with a boot on the end of a four foot lace, he could do it in a million dollar helicopter. He got it.

He passed the evaluation ride and made it all the way through the program. He went from being the worst student in the program to passing with an 87 percent. I was a damn good instructor. And I quit.

(Beat)

I quit after three of the kids were dead. Not my students, but it was coming. It was a matter of time. It *is* a matter of time.

(beat)

As of last Sunday, mine are all still alive. Every week, I go through the list of casualties and check the forty names in my logbook against the 2,687 - so far - names on the list. No matches yet.

Those are the names I can check. There's also estimates I've seen from 38,000 to 100,000 Iraqis killed. How many of those people were shot to pieces by a random guy behind a tinted visor in a random helicopter. How does anyone know? There are no names there. I can only know my own, so I check those... and I wait. And maybe next week I call my Dad and say: "Hey, one of my students went down. 2nd Lieutenant Edward J. Weston leaves a widow and a toddler behind because I told him to swing his boot." Where's the line, where can you say - that's not my fault. I'm not responsible. I didn't send him. I didn't kill him. I just trained him. And I sent him on his way.

(beat)

If he's a compromised pawn in a discredited war, what does that make me?

(beat)

The thing is my dad would be very understanding. I think he would be very understanding. He wouldn't say "I told you so." He would be... disappointed in my choices. Only deeper. I let him down.

(ARTHUR sees a wet spot on the floor and dries it.)

I shoulda started mopping this floor earlier.

(beat)

A few years earlier.

(ARTHUR picks up mop and places it in the mop bucket.)

*Oh when I get back from across the sea,  
hey-ya, ho-ya, you most done,  
Eliza Lee, will you marry me? (No!)  
Clear away the drag and let the bulgine run.*

(ARTHUR exits with mop and bucket.)

END.