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Stephen Fry in America

Stephen Fry

Illinois

'I am assured that here I will find the most glamorous objects in Chicago, perhaps, in the whole wide world.'

North Lynch Avenue in Chicago's dowdy and unremarkable Jefferson Park is far from glamorous and yet I am assured that here I will find the most glamorous objects in Chicago. In all America. The most glamorous objects, perhaps, in the whole wide world.

Oscar

On a bitterly cold morning I find this neighbourhood entirely without appeal and begin to wish I had not bothered to come. I am standing outside the door of a low, aesthetically null building, the wind and snow whipping my face with cruel, icy flails. After a muffled knock that is the most my bemittened hands can manage, the door opens. A wave of warm air wafts about me, bearing the alluring scents of kielbasa sausage, stove enamel, glue and swarf: a seductive aroma that says 'workshop', 'precision', 'skilled routine', 'cosy warmth' and 'breakfast' in equal and beguiling helpings.

I am here to help make an Oscar. A genuine Academy Award. For I have entered the factory of R.S. Owens, where the most famous statuette in the world has been made for the last quarter-century.

I am given an apron and gloves while the various stages are demonstrated before I am allowed to take a turn on my own. The basis of the Oscar is Britannia Metal, or Britannium, a Sheffield pewter alloy compounded of tin, copper and antimony. Antimony is highly toxic, of course. So Oscars are poisonous. A splendid murder mystery suggests itself – The Actress who Shaved off Parts of her Oscar and Fed Them to her Agent . . .

The rough figure, once it has emerged from its mould, is buffed on a buffing wheel (my hand keeps slipping) and then taken through to be dipped in copper and nickel. Within a surprisingly short time I do the final dunk, into a tank of pure gold, and there it is. My own Oscar. At this moment I am as close to an official Academy Award as I am ever likely to be.

Of course Owens makes hundreds and hundreds of other awards too, acrylic, perspex, plastic, copper, silver and jewelled, but the Oscar is the one that everybody knows.

I wonder where mine is now. On a Coen brother mantelpiece, in Javier Bardem's lavatory, on a shelf in Daniel Day Lewis's bathroom? I shall probably never know.

Just so long as they don't lick it . . .

Buddy Guy

There is time to stop for a genuine Chicago hot-dog at the Wiener Circle, one of the most appealingly impolite fooderies I have ever visited. Their Vienna beef franks are served up with heaping handfuls of onions, gherkins and rudeness, or 'sass' as the local listings paper calls it. This kind of food is worth living in Chicago for. I dare say the dogs are made of the worst kind of meat ('eyelids and assholes' a fellow diner suggests, chomping happily) but they work.

I am on my way to visit Buddy Guy, one of the last of the great bluesmen. He has his own club, Legends, where I will hang out this evening, but first he takes me on a tour of the South Side, the tough, mostly African-American neighbourhood where this native Louisianan made his bones as a young guitarist and singer of the blues.

Over the past weeks I have travelled up the Mississippi – through the Delta and up here to the Lakes. This is how Buddy travelled, when he was a boy, how Louis Armstrong travelled and it is how jazz and the blues themselves travelled.

Buddy is relaxed in the back of the cab as he shows me the haunts of his youth, and he is relaxed on stage as he sips from a brandy glass and jokes with his fans. In his seventies, he dresses as snappily as ever and flirts charmingly with girls young enough to be his granddaughters.

Skyscrapers

Music is not the only cultural product that Chicago has exported around the world: I will come to that dread bitch, comedy, in a moment, but first it is worth remarking on Chicago's pre-eminence as a centre of great architecture. Most people who have visited both would agree that the quality of Chicago's skyscrapers is every bit as good, if not better, than New York City's. Mies van de Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright and

Buckminster Fuller are just the best-known architects to have lived and worked in Illinois; they and their reputations attracted hundreds of others. From its completion in 1973 until the erection of the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, the tallest building in the world was the Sears Tower in Chicago's Loop, the historic heart of downtown. The view from the Sears Tower Sky Deck at night shows that Chicago is still a heartstoppingly beautiful city, one of the greatest in the world.

That Bitch, Comedy

Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Ed Asner, Paul Mazursky, Alan Arkin, Joan Rivers, Peter Boyle, Harold Ramis, John Belushi, John Candy, Bill Murray, George Wendt, Shelley Long, Jim Belushi, Dan Castellaneta, Mike Myers, Chris Farley, Steve Carell, Stephen Colbert, Kevin Dorff, Tina Fey . . . the list of Chicago Second City alumni is extraordinarily impressive. It is here in Chicago that the traditions of improvisational sketch comedy have reached their pitch of refinement and influence. TV comedies like *Saturday Night Live* and Hollywood have all consistently been fed by those who have trained here.

Absolutely not my thing. I may have started my life in comedy, but this kind of improvising is as alien and embarrassing to me as the prospect of ballet or powerlifting in public. It brings me out in hives just to think about it. And so what happens when I go and pay the Chicago Second City a visit? They, charming, fluffy, gleaming-toothed and sweet-natured every last one of them, insist on my joining in as they rehearse. Worse than that, I am slated to participate this evening on stage. In front of an audience.

Hell's teeth, arse and damnation. Never again. Not if my best friend's life depended on it. I can remember almost nothing of the deep torment of the performance, which passed in an agony of embarrassment and horror. Audience members shouted things out and we had to respond to them. The troupe was all very kind afterwards and claimed that the show had gone well, but frankly I have never dived into a vodka and tonic with such reckless abandon in all my life. I thought I would never emerge.

What a way to say goodbye to one of my favourite places in the world, Chicago, IL.