

2005

Twinkle while you shake it.

Thomas Hallock
thallock@mail.usf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/fac_publications



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hallock, T. (2005). Twinkle while you shake it. *Modern Language Studies*, 35(1), 50-53.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the USF Faculty Publications at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in USF St. Petersburg campus Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

Twinkle While You Shake It

THOMAS HALLOCK, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA, ST. PETERSBURG

That's my mom. In a red fringed bikini strung with Christmas lights. And a big smile. The battery pack is tucked behind, under the fringe. The year is 1978. My family was living in Corinth, Mississippi. We had just moved there from suburban Philadelphia. Mom had no ties to the small-town South, she had nothing to lose, so she took the role of Electra in a community production of the musical *Gypsy*.

Gypsy—as any theater buff will tell you—chronicles the transformation of the two-bit vaudeville act Baby June into the burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee. Electra helps along this transformation. For a show-stopping number near the end of the play, she joins the ersatz ballerina Tessie Tura and the trumpeter Mazeppa in “you gotta have a gimmick.” Gypsy Rose (previously Baby Louise) never takes off her clothes—that's her gimmick.

Electra's more ephemeral star shines through electricity. The stage lights dim, she does a bump-and-grind to the drum solo, then flashes

her outfit. I can still hear mom's big line, sung off-key with a Jersey accent—“If you wanna make it, twinkle while you shake it.””

She called it one of the proudest moments of her life.

In this photo, Mom is just over forty, about the age I am now. She looks good for a mother of four. She also looks like she's having fun, which is something she didn't get a lot of at this time. Neither of my parents adjusted well to Mississippi. Dad at least had work, but mom (a Cornell alum who can rattle off lines of Ben Jonson) sacrificed her wants and needs for a family. The role of businessman's wife took her to—what seemed to her—the far ends of the earth. “Corporate gypsies,” Mom called us.

When I first started graduate school in the early 1990s, I did not imagine the same path for myself. But my partner Julie and I traded roots for work. Shortly after I finished my Ph.D., we moved to Philadelphia, where we were happy, poor, and uninsured. Two years later, we relocated to

Valdosta State University, in South Georgia, where I began a tenure-track line. Julie (who had fought her way into a permanent position also) then got an offer from the University of South Florida. We moved again. Now she's up for tenure and I'm still scrambling for steady work. We own a cute house in a funky neighborhood, my sister and brother-in-law have relocated to be near us, and I can go fishing whenever I want. Even so, more than I ever would have imagined, work has defined my existence. It has shaped the important things—who joins us for Thanksgiving dinner, when or whether we will have kids, where our parents will retire.

The profession exacts this cruel demand: the jobs are fixed and the people move. Not that I mind Florida. But I have to admit that putting my career behind a partner's has tried my patience. When I left Valdosta State, I took a twenty-thousand-dollar pay cut and rejoined the adjunct army. (Adjuncting stinks. Imagine working out of that swamp twice.) Each year has brought slightly better visiting lines—first a gig teaching first-year writing; then a visiting position at Eckerd College, a quirky liberal arts school within biking distance of home; now a half-time position in a fat department at Julie's school. But I left certainty behind when I left Valdosta. Each year's hope for a permanent position has turned out to be a mirage. At Eckerd, I published a book, developed innovative classes, was recommended for a Fulbright, and took an interest in the students. Eckerd finished the year for me with a thank-you card and a \$50 gift certificate to a local restaurant.

My job this year was the most obvious spousal hire, and as a consequence, I dwell in my wife's shadow. The director of the Florida Humanities Council, which is housed on campus, likes to call me "Mr. Julie Armstrong." Her joke hearkens back to the days when Adrienne Rich

dove into the wreck and Sylvia Plath put her head in the oven. No matter that the genders are reversed. I seethe. Feminism does not have to be emasculating, I tell myself, and this woman's a dipshit. When I last asked her to stop, she laughed and walked away.

So what would Electra do? How did a mother of four with a Jersey accent adjust to life in Mississippi? I think the stage served as a release. Corinth Theatre-Arts provided a place for people who were at the fringes of the community. Through the theater, I learned about homosexuality; a gay man, the only paid employee, served as producer and director. He told me not to use racist epithets. Mississippi being what it was, the all-white company dipped its collective toe into the waters of integration. There was some relieved gossip when a black man auditioned for a part. A retired army officer who set opals wired my mom's bikini, and an obese columnist for the local paper worked on the board. My Yankee father took the lead in *Hello Dolly!* and my mom shined as Electra. Neither of them had ever acted before in their adult lives, nor have they acted since.

But my parents taught me a lot through the theater, and maybe the theater has something to teach me today. I find myself in a similar situation, with a job determining where I live. And as my age nears theirs, I feel the need to realign the place of art in my life. Work took them to Mississippi and the theater provided an outlet from the everyday. Academics in the humanities face a different problem: literature (or, if one prefers to keep the analogy, the stage) becomes one's work. An unexpected consequence of my graduate training was that my passions became professionalized. I can't finish a good book without thinking about possible articles or syllabus fodder. I spent the past decade writing and pub-

lishing in order to build up a c.v. I finished an academic monograph (and landed it with a decent press) for the sake of professional recognition. Now that the book is done, a paltry few may recognize my name at conferences, and job prospects are looking up. "Are you going on the market now that your book is out?" a colleague recently asked. I couldn't help but think, "do I really want to move again?"

What would Electra do?

I have conditioned myself to think about career first. Ten years of sending off applications, booking reservations for MLA, checking the atlas when an interview came, and ruining holiday plans have led me to downplay what I might want personally. Truth is, I would probably be happier checking out of academia. I have always struggled with teaching, service work bores me, and scholarly writing can kill anyone's prose. Julie has a good job, we bought a rickety old house when the houses were still affordable, and the bills are paid. Adopting a tyke sounds pretty cool. Why not trade academia for dirty diapers and a three a.m. wake-up call?

Or maybe not. At the very least...sever the Gordian knot, secured in grad school, that binds literature and career. I can't imagine parting permanently with my academic hood. (Why would I? The color for my school, NYU, is violet. Who'd let go of that?) I should at least recognize, however, that my most rewarding publications are for nonacademic audiences. Writing an op-ed piece, poem, essay, or a personal narrative (like this one) makes me far happier than career-building midrash. Last week, I dropped off the draft of my most recent project, a selection of letters by the naturalist William Bartram, with a ranger at the local nature preserve. He seemed thrilled to look over the manuscript. Before I went into the business, I knew that literature thrived beyond cam-

pus walls. Somehow I lost sight of this obvious fact when looking for a job.

I see my mother's smile as Electra.

The next few years will demand some difficult decisions about work and personal happiness. The relationship between the two changes after graduate school. It almost has to change. When I met colleagues during an on-campus interview last month, at a Research I university, I found myself looking at the photos on their desks; ten years ago, I would have focused on their bookshelves. Perhaps I see the profession differently because I am no longer tenure-line. A less-than-perfect career will force anyone to reconsider work. For Julie and I both to land tenured slots, we probably would have to move. And that takes us back to the same set of problems.

Career-driven scholarship can easily overwhelm what got us into this business in the first place—a passion for the written word. Florida's not so bad. I wake up early each morning, take my coffee to the guest cottage behind our house, and fire up the computer. Art needs an existence separate from professional ambitions. I'm slowly learning this lesson—to loosen the equation between creativity and a job, to see the world of letters beyond professional identity, to recover what I love, *to twinkle while you shake it*.