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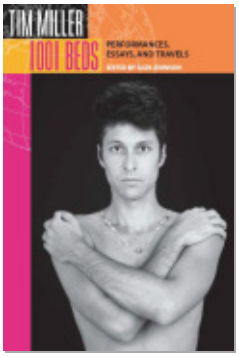
1001 Beds



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1001 Beds

Travel is work. I mean that statement literally, because I am one of those grunts who make their living out on the road performing. My life as an artist and activist is built around constant travel, twenty-five to thirty weeks a year doing gigs all over the world. Tokyo one week. Cincinnati the next. Glasgow right after. My life is that of the wandering queer performance artist minstrel, or a Johnny "Fag" Appleseed. Believe me, this constant schlepping takes its toll: time-zone confusion, sleeping on the floor at O'Hare International during snowstorms, the permanent sinus condition I share with all flight attendants, having to ask myself "if it's Tuesday this must be Tennessee?" On the plus side, I can see myself as a fierce culture worker out there nurturing those ever-crucial Whitmanic leaves-of-grassroots. But on the downside I sometimes feel exactly as one "friend" once referred to me, I thought insultingly, as "Tim Miller, the Willy Loman of performance art." As the son of a traveling salesman dad and a mom who worked for years behind the wristwatch counter at May Company department store, I took slight at that!

I did the math recently and figured that I sleep in a minimum of twenty-five different beds each year as I travel and perform. If I continue to tour for another twenty years as I have for the last twenty-one, I will end up sleeping in at least 1000 hotel beds in my lifetime. For maximum poetic oomph, let's say 1001 beds. This scary statistic

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seems important, but we do the math on our lives at our own peril. What seems pleasurable in week-by-week doses can add up to an exponential horror show, an endless phalanx of beds extending as far as the eye can see.

I was thinking about these metaphorical 1001 beds tonight as I checked into the Vernon Manor Hotel in Cincinnati for a gig at the Cincinnati Playhouse. The Vernon Manor is a huge old sprawl of a hotel. Designed with a Gothic-cum-Tudor confidence, it's like the set for a well-funded touring production of *Camelot*. The hotel was built in 1924 as a retreat for wealthy Cincinnati residents from the busy downtown riverfront district. That part of Cincinnati was referred to as "Porkopolis" in acknowledgment of the squeals of protest from pigs that were becoming hot dogs at the many pork processing plants of sharp-knifed Cincy. Over the years the Vernon Manor Hotel has hosted everyone from President Kennedy to Judy Garland, the Beatles to "Barney," Bob Dylan to Kevin Bacon—returning us to the pork-theme of Cincinnati.

I checked into Room 626, right next to 624, The Beatles Suite. There's a huge sparkly star on the door of 624 in honor of the two times the Beatles stayed there in the '60s. The Vernon Manor is very popular with performing artists who tour to Cincinnati, our guildhall tavern in a way. It's used by many road shows and by Cincinnati Playhouse actors, directors, and designers. I sometimes think that there is no real difference between some actors' bar in Athens during the fourth century B.C. and the late-night bar at the Vernon Manor, where we can order our third Jack Daniels and Coke and the Beggars Purse appetizer plate. Those ancient Greek actors getting ready to head out to Samos for some Euripides premiere are in a direct genealogical line to me gearing up for my show tomorrow night at Cincinnati Playhouse. I like feeling that deep historical link, just as I do the more recent histories of the Vernon Manor. Certainly the Beatles-who-are-lost-to-us haunt this hotel. John Lennon at the ice machine. The young George Harrison in 1966—a real

look alike for my partner, Alistair—running from the screaming teens outside the hotel.

How many stories the five hundred or so beds that I have already encountered could tell if they hadn't agreed to the confidentiality clause! Just as every hotel is haunted, every hotel is a sex hotel. Certainly a good percentage of my already-slept-in hotel beds have been sex beds. There was a time in my life when the main perk of the road was savoring the local brew of the boys of Edinburgh or San Antonio or Palermo. Finally, in 1994 in a hotel bed in South Kensington, London, I met my partner Alistair—and that put a stop to those sexy shenanigans with boys of the world!

But it's not just the hotel as erotic vortex that I'm interested in here. These 1001 beds have become my symbol for the burden of these endless journeys. Each of those beds means I have to face the ordeal of prying myself out of the bed I have shared for many years with Alistair in our home in Venice Beach. Peeling my limbs out of the sheets and bedclothes, I then fling myself somewhere in the world far from my man. I am doing this partly because on the practical level I need to make a living, but mostly because I have a deeper calling to run around the world and create queer space in small Southern colleges or fading industrial cities in the Midwest of America or the Midlands of England. I believe that real, face-to-face culture is retail not wholesale. (Back to my traveling salesman motif.) It relies on us being near each other, in the same room.

My mission—and I have decided to accept it—is to be always ready to run around doing my lean-and-mean homo-drenched performances, my cultural agitating and teaching—and offering myself as a way-out gay role model and/or target. Whenever I need to hop on a tiny plane for Des Moines or Chattanooga to show the rainbow flag, I am ready. Sure, I usually feel blue on a Sunday night nested with Alistair, knowing that the next morning I need to hit the highway. But I know that whatever cultural agency and visibility I have accrued over twenty years as a performer and sparring partner,

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duking it out with American homophobia, make me a useful cultural provocateur. This doesn't make me dread the nuts and bolts of travel any less. In the two days before a trip I begin to feel depressed and anxious. The tribal anxiety-attack drums gear up as the stress and challenge of my travel schedule begins to undermine any sense of a "normal" life Alistair and I try to have together.

I make a very unlikely traveler. I love my domestic patterns and I am incredibly disorganized in my travel preparations. I have never had that glacial travel cool that Joan Didion—my personal uberdiva of California first-person narrative—describes in *The White Album.* La Didion tells us of her precise check-lists for travel and how she always has a bag packed ready to go to Viet Nam or Cannes. Not me. I am always scrambling at the last minute through the dryer for my costume, or wondering where I put my passport, or have you seen my mini-disc with the show's sound cues?

These days there is another spotlit irony as big as the Hollywood sign in my situation. I force myself into these two dozen annual mini-exiles from home and love to perform a piece about a larger exile that haunts Alistair's and my household. Since Alistair is a U.K. and Australian citizen and we are gay men, I am unable to sponsor him for a green card in the U.S. even though we have been together for more than ten years. Contrast this with any straight American, who can meet their foreign sweetie for the first time today in Las Vegas, head on impulse to the Elvis Marriage Chapel, and tomorrow have provisional immigration status in the U.S.

This issue obviously provides lots of fuel for performance art interventions, and I am confident that the hundreds of traveling gigs I have done exposing this injustice have contributed in a huge way to public awareness and incremental political progress. Just "Google" the issue and you will see how much focus I have brought to the subject. But what a big, fat contradiction, that I have to leave my partner constantly to decry the injustice and exile we face—and meanwhile we are apart for close to half the year. Well, back to that Johnny Appleseed, Walt Whitman part of myself: "You say I contradict

myself—well then, I contradict myself!" The truth is, each time I pry myself out of our home to hit the highway and raise awareness about the human rights violations gay Americans face, it is really a tribute to the depth of love I feel for Alistair and the longing I have for home. It is exactly because it's so hard for me to be away from him that I must travel, agitate, and educate to try to make our country grow up. And each time I get on a plane I enact the exile that Al and I together face, from our home and my country.

The comfort I can find in that scary statistic of 1001 beds lives strongest in the knowledge that those beds have meant something. They symbolize a life and art dedicated to reaching out toward folks from Bozeman to Tampa. A life and art that has traveled widely and, I believe, reached a couple hundred thousand people with my stories of queer life and love. My journeys are dedicated to nurturing that spark of vision, that someday American gay people won't be second-class citizens in our own country. Connecting to other lives and communities is the only way I can avoid seeing those 1001 beds as a Sisyphean hell. Is that really me carrying the plush Simmons double-king Posturepedic on my back up a steep hill—only to have it roll back down again and again? Not entirely: that endless parade of beds marking the journeys of my life instead becomes my own personal Boy Scout merit badge, for a life that has a strong sense of service and mission.