

Gary and Zach Conquer Paris



A travelogue
by David Christopher

I rushed in the back door and called, “Mac, I’m home.”

“Oh, good. Dinner’s been ready for 20 minutes. Where were you all this time?”

“Gary asked me to come to Plays-in-the-Park for a meeting about next summer. It took longer than I expected.”

“So, are you directing something next year?”

“It doesn’t look like it. *Seussical, the Musical* is the only one I’d be interested in, but he has someone else for that. He said I should audition for *The Mayor of Whoville*. That could be fun.”

At that time Gary was the Producing Director of Plays-in-the-Park, and he has been a close friend since he was my high school student back in the 60’s. During our time together, we have gone through many theatrical relationships: I directed him in high school plays, we acted in some plays together, in Celebration Playhouse (a theater he founded) he directed me in numerous plays, and finally he was my producer when I directed at PIP. The summer before I had directed *Aida* for him.

“We got to talking about when you and I went to Paris, and he told me that he’s never been and that his son, Zach, was going to have a Spring break in March, and he was thinking about taking him to Paris.”

“That’s adventuresome of him. But frankly, I can’t see Gary managing in Paris. Except for *merde*, he doesn’t know a word of French and he’s not done much traveling. Didn’t you take him to London back in the 70’s?”

“Yes, and I think that’s the only time he’s been to Europe. We had a great time, seeing lots of theater.”

“But without knowing French, that will be hard for them. Why don’t you take them?”

“Good idea! We could both go with them.”

“No, I’ve got too much on my plate. I have a major clock project that has to be done by April. I can’t take any time off.”

“Well, it’s an exciting idea. I’ll talk to him about it.”

So that’s how our whole Paris adventure started.

After settling the plan with Gary, I let Mac make the travel arrangements (he's so good at that type of thing). He also found on the internet an apartment for us to stay in while we were there.

When I showed Gary pictures of the flat, he said, "That's great, much better than a hotel. It looks like there are two beds, and Zach can sleep on the couch."

"And we have a kitchen, so we can have breakfast and lunch there when we want. But we'll want to eat in the French restaurants a lot, too. The food there is so wonderful."

"I may even try frog's legs!"

Just before the trip, Zach came home from Boston College. I was surprised how much older he looked since the last time I'd seen him. I've watched Zach growing up, and I remember when he would run around the theater getting into mischief. Gary was too busy directing, so I had to be the one to reprimand him ("Don't touch the Props, Zach!") But now he was a grown-up guy, if still a teenager. He was in his freshman year at college.

On the day of our departure, Mac took us to the airport; it was JFK since Newark airport wasn't international yet. I think we were all a bit nervous. I was, because I was used to Mac arranging things on our trips, and the Gary and Zach, because they were very new to international travel, and both weren't fans of flying.

Mac said, "Keep in touch with me by email, you guys. If there are any questions you have, maybe I can help. Have a terrific trip."

Thus began our adventure of Gary and Zach in Paris.

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After an uneventful, seven-hour flight, we arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport at around 7:00 in the morning. Groggily we proceeded through customs with our luggage and took the long walk to the suburban terminal to catch the train into Paris.

"This is a suburban train, but it becomes a regular subway, or Metro as it's called in Parea, when it gets into the city. Like all Metro rides, it's important to keep your ticket for exiting the station. You must insert it into the turnstile in order to leave the platform. So, don't lose your ticket."

Gary turned to his son and said, "Give me your ticket, Zach, I'll hold on to it for you."

“Yeah right, Dad, like I can’t hold on to anything.” But he grumpily handed over the ticket.

The train turned out to be an express, because it was rush-hour, so the trip took about a half an hour. “The first stop will be in Paris, and the second stop is *Chatelet-Les Halles*, where we get off. It’s a huge terminal station, with many Metro lines going through it. It is close to our apartment, so it will be our local Metro station.”

During the train ride, I gave them each a slip of paper that I had printed out before we left. “This has our apartment address and the two numerical codes to get into the building and up the elevator.”

When we pulled into *Chatelet-Les Halles*, Gary and I exited, dragging our luggage onto the platform. Of course, we assumed Zach was right behind us. Zach however, had trouble with his duffle-bag, and then a woman with a baby carriage blocked the train doors. Before he could get out, the rush hour crowd pushed in, keeping him from exiting before the Metro doors slammed shut.

He cried out, “Dad! David! Dad!” but we didn’t hear him.

Gary turned around as the train left the station, “Where’s Zach? I thought he was right behind you.”

“Me, too. But I don’t see him. Do you think he got stuck on the train?”

As the rush hour crowds left the platform, we searched around to no avail --- Zach was nowhere in sight.

“He probably wasn’t paying attention, as usual. But what the hell are we going to do now?” And a look of sheer panic came over his face.

“He’s a smart kid. He’ll get off at the next stop and take the next train back.”

“God, I hope so. I have his ticket, as well as his passport and the Euros we brought. I don’t even think he has any identification on him.”

The realization of Zach’s predicament --- in a strange city with no identification --- began to panic us. We watch trains come and go into the station, and he was nowhere in sight.

What we didn’t realize is that this station is 5 train tracks wide, and the return Metro would be way on the other side of the station.

“Gary, I’m afraid that he could have gotten off a return train way over there, and we wouldn’t have seen him.”

“And he couldn’t see us. He must be frantic, wherever he is.”

“OK, you stay here and keep a lookout. I’ll go up into the station and see if he’s up there.”

When I return, I said, “I don’t see him anywhere. It’s been half an hour.”

“What can we do?”

“Well, I think he will be able to use the address paper I gave him and find the apartment. So, we should go there and wait for him. Let’s just hope that he remembers that I gave it to him.”

“Oh God, this is horrible. I can’t imagine how scared he must be. He doesn’t speak the language. He has no money or passport. Or even the damn ticket to get out. Who’s going to help him? His mother’s going to kill me.”

On the way out, we talked to three *gendarmes*, and one of them spoke a little English. Gary sputters, “Son. Missing. Lost. Subway.”

The *gendarme* asked how old the boy was, fearing it was a small child. I told him, “*Dix-neuf*”, and tried to describe him, awkwardly miming a sweatshirt with a hood.

They let us know that they would keep an eye out for him, and Gary and I set out to the apartment to anxiously wait.



In the meantime, Zach had been wandering around the station, frantically searching for us. Luckily, he ran into the same three *gendarmes* that we met. After much broken French and English, they looked at him and, to Zach’s bewilderment exclaim, “*Dix-neuf!*” They realized who he was and became helpful and friendly. Zach made them understand that he can’t get out of the station without a ticket, so they escorted him out. First, they took him to a local police station, and then brought him to the address on the slip of paper I had given him.

Meanwhile, once we reached the apartment, Gary couldn't sit still and just paced around the room. "This is unbearable, I can't just sit and wait. I have to do something."

"We passed a police station on the way here. Do you want to go there and check if he's been found? This is a tourist area, so someone there should speak English."

"Yeah, I saw it too. You stay here in case he comes. Just hold on to him and don't let him go anywhere!"

The rest of this story was like a Laurel and Hardy movie. Soon after Gary left, Zach arrived at the apartment, extremely relieved and exhausted. "Where's my Dad?"

"He went off looking for you at the police station."

After explaining the situation to an English-speaking officer, Gary was put into the back seat of a French police car. Driving around the neighborhood, the *gendarmes* had their European siren going and stopped to question every single male in a dark sweatshirt with a hood that they saw.

With Gary and the *gendarmes* circling the blocks, Zach leaves the apartment and goes to the police station.

Then Gary comes back, to find that Zach is out looking for him.

But finally, a policeman comes to the door with Zach.

When Gary sees them at the door, he runs to the burly *gendarme* and hugs him, "My Hero!" Then he turns to Zach, "And YOU, sit down, you're never leaving this apartment!"

We all laughed and thanked the smiling policeman as they left. Collapsing into chairs, we collectively breathed a sigh of relief. "Welcome to Paris, boys, the adventure has just begun."

Once we had recovered from our hectic morning, we explored our new, Parisian abode. There was a nice kitchen, a large living room with 2 couches and some chairs. Gary said, “David, you take the bedroom with the door, and I’ll go in the one with the curtain. Zach can you sleep in the living room?”

“Sure, Dad, I can fall asleep anywhere. I might just take a nap now.”

“No way, we’ve got to see some of the city, I can’t wait.”

When Gary went into his small bedroom, he shouted, “Hey look, there’s a computer in here, let’s hope it has Wi-Fi.” Which indeed it did, so ‘Mr. Tech’ was extremely pleased about that. It would help us as the days went on to plan our trips around the city. As well as connecting us with email to Mac and Zach’s mother. Amusingly, we later discovered that the Parisians pronounce the service as “Wee Fee”.

My favorite part of the flat was the charming terrace with a table and chairs and a splendid view of *rue Montmartre*.



“I’ve got an idea of how I want you to encounter Paris today. When Mac and I came for our first time in 1987, the first thing we did was take a ride on the *Bateau Mouche*. That’s a boat ride on the River Seine. It passes some of the most famous sights, including the Eiffel Tour.”

“That sounds great, but Dad, let’s get some breakfast first. I’m starving.”

So, off we went, stopping at a café for coffee and croissants. “You have two choices of coffee here: a small espresso or a large cup of *café au lait*, which you can only get in the morning.” We all ordered the *café au lait*, which was delicious, if not what we usually drank. Zach devoured 3 croissants.

I decided to walk them over to the river, not wanting to venture into a Metro again so soon after our trauma. So, we passed some interesting things along the way. We were near *Les Halle*, which was now a huge underground mall, instead of the famous vegetable market of the past. Outside it was a park with the amusing head statue.

The trip on the Seine was, as predicted, a perfect introduction to city, and it gave the Cohens a splendid start to their week of touring.



Since we were all jet-lagged, we made it an early night, each settling into our respective beds and sleeping soundly. The next morning, I was up earlier than the boys, so I went out to a local *Maroc* (which is Parisian version of a Bodega run by Moroccans), to buy items for breakfast and lunch. When I got back the guys were up and ready for something to eat. And I was able to make coffee more to our taste. Gary and Zach adored the fresh French bread and were happy to finish it all off when I told them it’d be stale by the afternoon. Then after breakfast we were ready to set out for more Parisian touring.

This account of Paris will consist mostly of places that I'd never been to but experienced with the Cohens. The first place we went, I had always wanted to visit but never had the chance before. That was inside the great Parisian Opera House. I'd passed it many times, but Gary found that for a small fee, we were allowed to wander around the magnificent theater in a tour.

When we entered into the fabulous opera house, we were struck dumb by its opulence. Until Gary pointed to the ceiling, "Look up there, the dome is painted by Marc Chagall, and that must be the chandelier that falls in "Phantom of the Opera!"

As we descended the grand staircase, he began to sing, "Masquerade, all those tourists on parade; Masquerade." A couple of fellow tourists chuckled at that, along with me.





One excursion that I didn't particularly want to take was to the Catacombs. I waited in a nice café while the guys went down under the city to view these walls of bones and skulls.



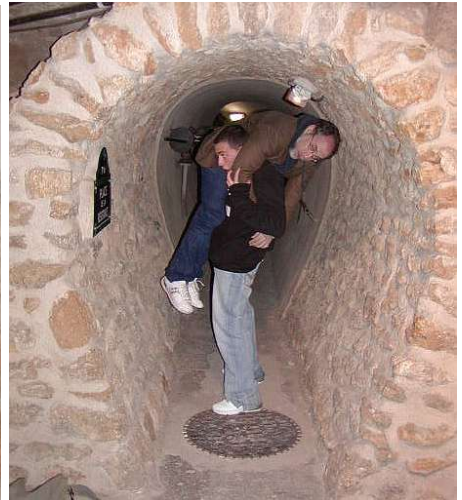
The next day Gary said to me, “We want to do another theatrical, underground experience, the famous “Sewers of Paris” that were part of *Les Miserables*. Will you come with us on that?”

“Sure, there won’t be creepy skeletons there, but it might not smell too nice.”

“If Jean Valjean can stand it, so can I.” So down we went, and it was smelly, but remarkably interesting. On the tour, they showed the huge balls they used to clear out the tunnels.

When we came to a spot that represented the scene in the *Les Miz*, Gary said, “Zach, here’s a photo-op. I’ll be Jean Valjean carrying you, as Marius, through the sewers. See if I can pick you up.”

“Okay, Dad, if you insist. But I think maybe I’d better pick you up instead.” Looking up at his tall son, Gary agreed so, shaking his head, Zach lifted his father onto his shoulders, and I took the pictures of this famous scene.



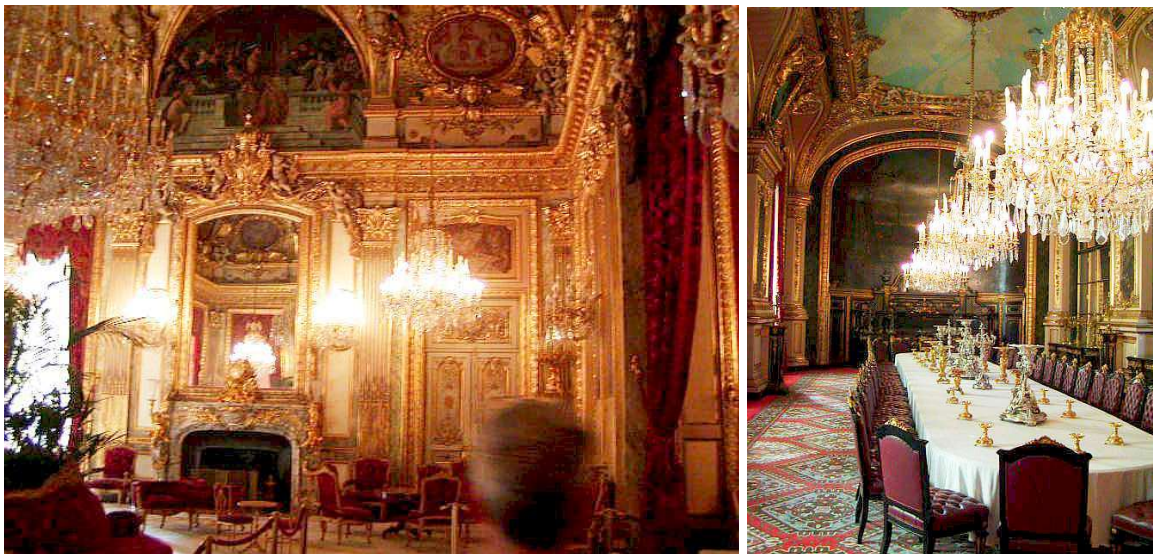
Although Mac and I had been there the year before, I had to show the Cohens the Louvre. It was a rainy day, so I told them, “It’s a perfect day to spend in the Louvre. It went through major renovations a few years ago, so the multitudes of French art works are much better displayed than they were the first time I saw them.”

As we entered the courtyard, Gary said, “Wow, that glass pyramid in the courtyard must be new, it’s spectacular.”

“Yes, you’ll see it from below, because it is over the main lobby that connects the various buildings. We won’t be able to see the whole museum in one day, but you must visit Napoleon III’s apartments. We’ll start there.”



When the Cohens saw these magnificent rooms, they were blown away. Neither of them had seen this kind of opulence before.





The paintings and sculptures that we saw were wonderful, too, but Gary's favorite was the Venus de Milo. I told him that it was sculpted in the year 130 BC. His comment was, "Quelle tush!"



It was still raining when we left the Louvre, but Gary said, "There's one more place I want to go today. I want to see Jim Morrison's grave."

Not particularly thrilled with the idea, I said, "Oh, really, where is that?"

“I found it on the internet, it’s called *Cemetery du Pere Lachaise*. On the map I saw that it’s only a Metro ride away.”

“Dad, I’d like to see that too, but do we have to do it in the rain?”

“Aww come on. We have umbrellas, it’ll be an adventure.”

Gary was really taking Mac’s place for searching out places and finding them on the maps, so I just shook my head and followed him.

The cemetery was enormous, but a popular tourist destination, because of the famous inhabitants: Oscar Wilde, Chopin, Gertrude Stein/Alice B. Toklas, and many more. But most popular with younger tourists was 60’s rock star, Jimmy Morrison.

Fortunately, there was a map of the place, so we could get to Jimmy’s plot fairly quickly in the rain and Gary was over the top about finding it. There were quite a few others visiting the Doors’ lead singer’s grave; mostly young women, many leaving flowers and other gifts.



Our next two expeditions were definitely Gary's choices, being distinctly sexy, in a heterosexual way. First, he wanted to go to the section of Paris called *Pigalle*, which I had heard was very seedy now.

"We have to see the Moulin Rouge, it's one of my favorite movies! Maybe they'll have one of their spectacular shows."

Zach got excited about that, too, "I loved that movie, and I hear there are naked girls in those shows! Let's go!"

I warned them that the area was not what it used to be, but they insisted, so off we went. Indeed, it consisted of blocks and blocks of sex shops and porn movies. And during the day, it was rather depressing.

"Look, there's the famous windmill on the Moulin Rouge. It's sure not as glamorous as in the movie. Let's see if they have any shows running," I said.

Sadly, they ran on a limited schedule, so there were no shows while we were in Paris. But as we walked down one of the streets, Gary stopped us, "What is this place with the funny, fat statues in front?" It turned out to be the Erotic Museum "Oh, this we must see!".

It consisted of 8 floors with amazing erotic art from many centuries and cultures. Some of the art was really wonderful (some not), with lots of tits and dildos. The curators had a sense of humor, too. It wasn't the Louvre, but we all got a kick out of it.





One other thing that we came across while walking to the *Pigalle* was a tiny theater, the *Theatre de la Huchette*. As we walked past it, I stopped dead in my tracks. “Oh My God! They’re playing Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano*! I saw this production back in 1964, on my first trip in Paris. That’s over 40 years ago, I can’t believe that it’s still playing.”

Later Gary found it on the internet and told me that it’s been playing in this theater, in repertory with Ionesco’s *The Lesson*, since 1957. And as I’m writing this, I know that it is still playing there today. Amazing!



“What do you guys think of seeing this tonight, if we can get tickets?”

“Well, actually I have something else in mind. You’ve seen this before, and Zach and I would rather to go to the famous strip club called Crazy Horse. I guess that erotic museum has got us all excited.”

“Oh, it’s certainly not a place I’d have suggested, but if you’re interested, by all means. I’ll tag along and see what it is.”

So that night, Gary got tickets online for the 8:00 show and after dinner we took a bus to the Champs-Elysees and around the corner to Avenue George V, which was a very posh neighborhood. There we found the *Crazy Horse de Paris Cabaret*.

The show was extremely classy, with gorgeous costumes, a very funny comedian, excellent sets and technical effects, but mostly beautiful women, dressed in as little as possible. The Cohens were quite thrilled with the show, as you can imagine. I enjoyed the comedian.



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We had two more major sight to see before we headed home, *Notre Dame* and *la Tour Eiffel*, and we did them both in one day.

When we reached the plaza in front of *Notre Dame*, Gary asked, “Can we go up in the bell towers? I’d love to see where Quasimodo rang the bells.”

“I guess you can, for a price, but you’re not going get me to climb all those stairs. How about you, Zach, are you up for a hike.”

“Sure, it should be a great view.” After we viewed the magnificent cathedral, I found where to buy tickets for the bell tower. So, up the Cohens went, while I waited, once again, in a café around the corner. The views were indeed spectacular, including the famous gargoyles.



When they descended, we all enjoyed an espresso in the café (my third).
“Now, the Eiffel Tower, which should be the most spectacular part of your trip.”

“Oh, I’ve seen pictures of that for years, it doesn’t look that tall, I’ve also been up in the Empire State Building.”

We were able to take a Metro from *Chatelet-Les Halles* directly to *Pont de l'Alma*, a block away from our destination. When we emerged from the Metro the tower loomed above us like a giant.

“Holy Shit!”, Gary gasped, “That sucker is huge! It never looked that big in the photos.”

As we walked closer and finally under it, he said, “We have to go up to the top! Right Zach?”

“You bet, Dad, that thing is awesome!”

“Um, you guys go on without me. I’ve been up there once, and it was enough for me.”

“Aw, come on, don’t be a pussy. At least part way.”

I acquiesced but told them I’d only go up to the first platform, “You two can go to the top. I’ll never do that again.”

So, we took the elevator up to the first level, and even from there the view was overwhelming. It was quite chilly, but the Cohens didn’t seem to mind.

They made me stand to the grid and look like I was enjoying it, but I wasn’t.

“Come on, Zach, let’s go to the top, I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” And off they went, while I went down to the ground with great relief.





This highlight wrapped our Parisian vacation up beautifully. The trip home was uneventful. I believe that the Cohens had the kind of experience I'd hoped they would have. And I enjoyed it tremendously, too.

