

A Talk with David Levine

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by Pete Eikenberry

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In the picking up a new issue of the *New Yorker* many first turn to the cartoons, and in receiving a new issue of the *New York Review of Books* others turn to David Levine's caricatures. There is no prominent U.S. author, artist or political celebrity that does not secretly wish David Levine to have captured him or her in one of David's caricatures – no matter how unflattering the sketch. David has been with the *Review* for approximately forty years. He has also done sketches for the *New Yorker*, *Esquire* and *Life*.

In the *Review*, David merely attempts to reflect the point of view of the author whose piece his sketches accompany. Therefore, he rarely receives criticism for a sketch which is, rather, directed towards the author of the piece. Also, he almost never has had any editorial interference or complaints from the subjects of his work. He remembers three or four exceptions. When he portrayed Governor George Wallace of Alabama, he noted that he had a pronounced cleft in his chin – which in David's sketch took the form of a swastika. Wallace threatened to sue but nothing came of it.

In sketching President Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brezezinski, David depicted him foaming at the mouth. An editor suggested that David had already satirized him well in the sketch and that perhaps the foam was overkill. David removed the foam. Once he depicted Ariel Sharon and Mohammad Abbas disputing vigorously over a table. A *New Yorker* editor suggested that David add some sinister hooded figures to stand behind Abbas. David added the figures, but then also depicted Sharon with a cluster of bombs arranged behind him. The editor protested about the bombs and without David's permission the sketch as published depicted the hooded figures but not the bombs.

David can often be found reading *The Times* next to the tennis court at the Brooklyn

Heights Casino Tennis and Squash club, or he can be found across the street at Teresa's, a Polish restaurant, nursing a cup of coffee and exchanging political and artist chatter and gossip with friends. Each week the *Review* delivers to the Casino the texts of the stories that David's sketches are to accompany, along with two or three photographs of the persons to be sketched on Friday before 10:00 a.m. At about 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday the *Review* picks up David's sketches.

In his youth, David, who grew up in Brooklyn, joined the Communist Party and demonstrated his allegiance by trying to sell copies of *The Daily Worker*. He never signed any membership list, he was issued no card and he paid no dues. He laughs that Lenin would not have been happy – because in Lenin's view you could not have a party without dues. His youthful communist background only became an issue in two instances. The first instance occurred when he was in graduate school where he circulated some caricatures of faculty members at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. As a result, he was not permitted to finish his work for his masters degree – purportedly because of his communist background.

In the second instance, as a young artist, he and other artists in the downtown Brooklyn area had made the acquaintance of a man- who unbeknownst to them was the not yet famous Soviet spy- Colonel Abel. (Abel was later traded to the Soviets for Gary Powers.) Abel (known to David as Emil Goldfus) was not much of an artist but was popular because he intricately played a guitar intricately and he knew how to obtain paints in colors desirable to the young artists in David's circles, e.g., "Naples yellow."

There came a time when Abel was going to be away and he asked David to take over his small studio in the interim. David agreed since the studio rent was only \$10 per month and the studio was nearly adjacent to David's. The studio was in a now demolished building on the Brooklyn side of the Brooklyn Bridge. Abel never returned but David was interviewed by three F.B.I. agents. They wished David to identify which of the items in the studio were being stored by

Abel and which were David's. David expressed concerned about his Communist background getting him into trouble, but the F.B. I. guys only laughed and said, "Don't worry, we know all about you; we know you didn't do anything." During the F.B.I. interview there came a knock at the door of Abel's studio and the F.B.I. men drew their guns – to the great shock and surprise of the ne'er-do-well Polish artist who stood outside as the door opened.

David later started a group of artists and students who have met weekly for 30 years to do studies of a life model. Somehow the producer of a documentary about Sandra Day O'Connor learned about the group and asked David if she could sit for them. She, of course, sat fully clothed as television cameras recorded the event. She not only sat but she entertained the artists with anecdotes from her Texas origins. (The portraits that resulted are now part of a traveling exhibition.) After the session was over, David approached Justice O'Connor and thanked her for her graciousness. David told her that he was so appreciative that he was going to get rid of the drawing he had previously made of her for the *Review* (which even he felt was a little harsh.) She said, "You do that!"

David has spent much of his working life painting scenes of Coney Island for which he is not quite as well known as he is for his political cartoons. He is also a wonderful tennis player. Once I saw him fill in for a "no show" in his street shoes, white shirt, tie and suit pants, and he played a marvelous game. One commentator has characterized David as the American Max Beehrnbaum whom the Encyclopedia Britannica describes as the English illustrator who was "unique" in his ability to "capture the pretentiousness and affectations of his contemporaries." David is like an impish elf let loose to create delightfully tormenting images of the leaders of our time.