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Death in Vegas

Omens of doom, from Bodies to education to our frayed social contract. An essay from the new book *Fade, Sag, Crumble: Ten Las Vegas Writers Confront Decay*

by STEPHEN BATES

Imagine the apocalypse. Earthquakes, pandemics, terrorists, catastrophes at revived Yucca Mountain. Tourists flee, leaving their winnings behind. The city is uninhabitable.

Without irrigation, fronds on palm trees shrivel, and lawns give way to weeds. Without human-generated food, house mice, birds and other animals die or depart. But unlike the swift, watery collapse of New York City that Alan Weisman depicts in *The World Without Us*, land and structures in Las Vegas change slowly. "Most estimates are that open areas would take at least a century to start looking like a natural desert again," says Stan Smith, a plant ecologist at UNLV. "The Strip would be a fairly lifeless, bizarre cityscape for a very long time."

Gradually, though, the cityscape surrenders. Crevices scar streets and sidewalks. The Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower topple. The Ruvo Center crumples even more. At UNLV, Lied Library's swooping roof crashes down on yellowing books and lifeless computer monitors. The desert reasserts its primacy. Bit by bit, Las Vegas vanishes, until only a few carcasses of casinos remain.

Centuries later, the archeologists arrive. After delightedly discovering petroglyphs at Red Rock, they reach what was once the Strip. There, surrounded by the remnants of a once-mighty glass pyramid, they unearth meticulously preserved cadavers, all in action poses -- leaping, running, throwing. These, they think, must have been the royalty of the ancient American empire.

"Unlike decay, which is associated with visually stressful processes, plastination makes it possible to calmly look death in the eye," Gunther von Hagens told an interviewer. He invented the method that *Bodies: The Exhibition* uses for its show at the Luxor. In plastination, a cadaver's fluids get replaced with polymers, producing statuary that's around one-quarter human and three-quarters plastic. In death, the figures are virtually immortal. Polymers won't decompose for thousands of years.

People protested *Bodies* in New York, and the state attorney general's office investigated. Some of the cadavers evidently came from Chinese prisons, a fact that the exhibitors hadn't advertised. Under an agreement with the state, the New York *Bodies* show posted a sign saying that the full cadavers may have been Chinese prisoners who died of natural causes, and the separately displayed organs, nerves and other body parts may have come from executed prisoners. Perhaps *Bodies* has become a postmortem penalty, with China sentencing dead convicts to be plastinated and shipped to the United States to be gawked at by tourists who pay, in Vegas, \$32 for admission.

There's no mention of prisons or executions at the Luxor. Protesters



PHOTO: SAEED RAHBARAN
Stephen Bates

haven't raised a fuss. In fact, people in Las Vegas don't raise a fuss over much of anything--trigger-happy cops, venal public officials, supine medical regulators or imperiled colleges and universities. Like Carrot Top and *Menopause: The Musical*, dead Chinese prisoners bring in dollars. That's all we need to know.

Gore Vidal's grandfather, Senator Thomas Gore, once remarked of the edifices and monuments of Washington, "They'll make wonderful ruins." After 9/11, I fretted that the age of ruins might be at hand. My office was midway between two prime targets, the Capitol and the White House. A haze lingered around the Pentagon. Olive-drab military trucks lumbered down Pennsylvania Avenue. The area was awash in terrorism warnings.

I was literary editor of the *Wilson Quarterly*, and publicists sometimes sent me promotional gimmicks. A book called *Zombie Survival Guide* arrived with a tote bag of items to help you flee from the living dead. It contained a compass, water-purification tablets, a whistle, and matches. For anthrax, I added face masks; for a dirty bomb, a miniature Geiger counter; and, for all purposes, Valium.

I contemplated death in D.C., but only in Las Vegas did I grow fanatical. As I was getting ready to start a new job teaching journalism at UNLV, I tripped and fell in a parking lot. The retina in my left eye came unmoored. I had surgery and spent a month lying in the dark. Through the fog of pain pills, and facing the prospect of losing the sight in one eye, I obsessed over mortality. It seemed intertwined with all this glitz in the desert. Vegas is life -- frenetic, cacophonous, precarious -- surrounded by the noiseless desolation of death. And the palm trees, the golf courses, the Bellagio fountains: they all deny the obvious. We pretend that we'll never run out of water, just as we pretend, day in and day out, that we'll never die. Vegas, like life, is all about self-delusion. The good times will never end.

After I recovered my sight, I was hooked. I spent an afternoon scrutinizing the plastinated cadavers, and UNLV let me teach a graduate class about the show, as well as an Honors College seminar called "Death in Vegas." In the classroom, we discussed Nevada's sky-high rates of suicide and cremation. We examined photos of unidentified bodies on the Clark County morgue's website. And we talked about the state's solicitous laws governing the dead. For using profanity in the presence of a corpse, you can lose your funeral director's license. Necrophilia means life in prison.

To write an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, I got a press pass to a funeral directors' convention on the Strip. Banners proclaimed premium "deathcare." Speakers touted the untapped profits in pet cremation. One exhibitor showed me a frilly dress for corpses. The front was sewn together, and the back was open from top to bottom, with Velcro to fasten it in place. Another exhibitor, not seeing my press badge, leaned across his table and asked matter-of-factly, "What embalming fluid are you using now?" A display case featured a bronze reliquary for keeping a lock of the deceased's hair, called, mysteriously, the Hymen.

I started a death collection. From the county coroner's office I got a T-shirt showing a slot machine labeled "The Game of Life." At the bottom it says "Cashed Out in Las Vegas," a tender euphemism. Online, I bought 19th-century photographs of families posing with their dead children; books about funerals, cemeteries, executions, corpses, mummies, autopsies, embalming and grave-robbing; a plastinated frog; and a human skull.

An anthropology student from my graduate class borrowed the skull to take measurements and enter them into a database. Based on its dimensions and condition, he reported that it had come from a thirtyish woman from northern Japan. He couldn't say how long she'd been dead or what had killed her, but he did say that the chalky lines snaking along the cranium had been left by plant roots. She'd been dug up, perhaps by the eBay Power Seller.

I keep the skull in a file cabinet at work. Every semester I take it to class and tell students to write descriptions of it. So far, nobody has asked what I'm doing with a human skull. Students can be incurious.



Death as tourist revenue: *Bodies* ... the Exhibition at Luxor.



On reflection, I suppose I don't really have moral standing to talk about *Bodies: The Exhibition* and the dignity of the dead.

I got a press pass to another event on the Strip, the annual gathering of celebrity impersonators. While I chatted with a Marilyn Monroe, an Anna Nicole Smith wandered past, looking a bit forlorn. The real Anna Nicole had died a few months earlier. "How much longer do you think she'll be getting work?" I asked. Marilyn thought for a moment. "Around six months," she replied. It's a pitiless business. In the corner, doubles of the long-dead Bing Crosby and Don Knotts chatted. I wondered how many gigs they got, but I didn't have the heart to ask.

My next press pass got me into the adult-entertainment convention. This, too, seemed tinged with mortality, or at least disease. At one seminar, industry lawyers complained about a proposal to prevent the spread of contagion. California's Department of Industrial Relations wanted porn actresses to wear "appropriate personal protective equipment" -- namely, safety goggles -- in the presence of bodily fluids. Producers worried that voluptuous naked women in goggles might be something of a turn-off. The adult film industry pours millions of dollars into the California economy, the lawyers said. If the regulators didn't back down, producers would go elsewhere. Sex-friendly Nevada, maybe.

On the exhibition floor, a booth catering to strip clubs was emblazoned "The Leader in Pole Technology." A prim young woman in front of another booth held out a tray and asked passersby, "Butt candy?" One exhibitor showed me his line of skimpy outfits. The corpse clothes at the funeral convention had Velcro for speedy dressing; these had Velcro for speedy undressing. Another booth featured sex dolls more human-looking than the Luxor's cadavers. The company rep explained that his dolls were made of the highest-quality medical silicone. It wasn't handled under the same sanitary conditions as the silicone used for breast implants; that was the only difference. Great, I thought. You could pick up an infection from your sex doll.

It was 2006 when I left the Washington for UNLV. I was a 48-year-old writer with a law degree. Previously, I'd spent little time in the classroom and no time in Vegas. Changing careers and cities was a gamble.

At first, I thought I'd hit the jackpot. The university turned out to be plucky, scrappy, up for anything, even courses about death. UNLV helped compensate for what the city lacked in bookish culture, too, with visiting literati such as Paul Theroux, T. C. Boyle and Barbara Ehrenreich. In the journalism department, we were pursuing academic accreditation, which would burnish our reputation. We hired new faculty, shrank classes and upped the entrance requirements for majors. We were on the rise, like the city itself. Back then, one local woman told an interviewer, "Growth will continue; that's a given." The good times would never end.

But they did end. State funding for higher education has dropped by around 15 percent. And that's great news. Gov. Brian Sandoval's initial budget proposed a cut of nearly twice that size. Then, in a bizarre *deus ex machina*, the state Supreme Court upended part of the governor's revenue plan. In response, Sandoval agreed to retain some existing taxes that were going to expire -- this was not, he insisted, an abandonment of his no-new-taxes campaign pledge -- and legislators restored some funding to education.

In the journalism department, we jettisoned our new entrance requirements, increased the size of classes, got by with one fewer professor after a resignation, and quit pursuing accreditation. At one point, it looked as though we'd have to vote on which colleagues should lose their jobs, like booting people off a lifeboat. Even then, things could've been worse. The university briefly planned to shutter the philosophy department altogether. Cashed out in Las Vegas.

Other than a few student rallies, the public barely responded. Maybe UNLV isn't like *Bodies: The Exhibition*. Aside from the Hotel College, the Center for Gaming Research and a few others, the university doesn't do a lot for the tourism industry. Education usually correlates with income, but here, employed residents have below-average educations and above average earnings. Valets, cocktail waitresses, and blackjack dealers can make comfortable livings. So, in purely instrumental terms, higher education may not seem worth the investment. And Vegas is a purely instrumental place: there's scant support for the humanities, for the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake, or for the notion that college trains you for making a life and not just for making a living.

That attitude may carry a price. We're told that schools don't matter -- low taxes will bring industry and jobs flocking here. But it's not happening. In both foreclosures and unemployment, Las Vegas leads the nation. When I asked how the desert might retake an abandoned Vegas, Stan Smith, the UNLV ecologist, said, "Well, the first wave is already here": the weeds conquering lawns in front of empty houses. The Ruvo Center and the Smith Center for the Performing Arts, the current putative game-changers for the economy, are nonprofits. Low taxes didn't lure them here. An earlier game-changer, CityCenter, hasn't resuscitated the region. The impact of Celine Dion's return remains to be seen.

Right-of-center New Hampshire thrives with low taxes, but it has Dartmouth College, the University of New Hampshire, Plymouth State University, Franklin Pierce University, St. Anselm College, Daniel Webster College and lots of others. New England has always embraced education. Nevada, not so much. Historian Harold Brown writes of the "tardy development of educational institutions" in the region. In his account, settlers erected a schoolhouse at Franktown, north of Carson City, in 1857, but never got around to holding classes. The building was later moved and converted to something more practical: a stable.

Well-educated New Hampshire has tens of thousands of high-tech jobs that pay on average more than \$84,000 a year, according to a TechAmerica Foundation report on "cyber companies." The biggest cyber company here sells shoes.

In a sense, the passing threat to UNLV's philosophy department seems apt. Nevada is a state without much of a philosophy. People talk about libertarianism, and we do have the nation's lowest proportion of residents working for state and local governments.

But that's only half of the story. In the libertarian utopia, civil society -- individuals who form groups and do good works -- makes up for what the minimalist government leaves undone. In fact, David Boaz of the Cato Institute devotes a chapter of his book *Libertarianism: A Primer* to civil society. "People have a natural desire to help the less fortunate, and they form associations with others to do so," he writes. When government gets out of the way, according to Boaz, civil society thrives.

It doesn't seem to be thriving in Las Vegas. We have major philanthropists, but there's not much going on underneath. Researchers a few years ago found that Vegas has the lowest level of volunteerism of 50 cities studied, and that Nevada has fewer nonprofits per capita than any other state. Many people here seem to be unencumbered not only by taxes, but also by much sense of civic responsibility. The web of human networks that makes up civil society is feeble and frayed. Las Vegas is a city of "mistrust and fragmentation," according to a 2004 report from the Maryland-based Harwood Institute. Based on hundreds of interviews with Clark County residents, the report says, "So much of what we heard across these conversations is that as individuals, Las Vegans are strong and optimistic, but as a community, their connection appears fragile."

Transience is plainly a factor. Before the recession hit, the city was adding 6,000 people a month. Unpack that statistic, though, and you find a more complicated reality. According to the *Las Vegas Sun*, 9,000 people were coming here and 3,000 were leaving. Now, although there's a net outflow, the population is still churning. (Hence, I think, the appeal of cremation: People want their loved ones to be portable.) There are exceptions, of course, but on the whole, wanderers aren't joiners. They don't care about building institutions of charity or culture. They don't care about nurturing schools and universities. So we get wealth without commonwealth, cupidity without community. Forget "What Happens Here Stays Here." Our motto ought to be the one Mike Royko proposed for Chicago: "Where's Mine?"

During what proved to be Siegfried and Roy's last performance at the Mirage in 2003, Roy Horn stumbled and fell, and a white tiger named Montecore grabbed him by the neck and dragged him across the stage. From blood loss and brain swelling, Roy nearly died. But he insists it wasn't Montecore's fault. On the contrary: The tiger sensed that he was having a stroke and tried to pull him to safety.

Like Roy, Las Vegas will emerge from its near-death experience. The desert isn't going to swallow up the Strip anytime soon. Employment, population, housing prices and room occupancy will rebound. The skyline will once again become a changeling, with casinos getting imploded when they grow older than their cocktail waitresses. Nonstop reinvention will again become the norm.

But the city's dominant values are likely to remain as fixed as the faces of the plastinated prisoners. Newcomers will cash in and move on. Politicians will rebuff every proposal to tinker with the tourism-dependent tax structure. And education in Vegas will be like chastity in Pahrump -- fine for those who want it, but hardly what folks come for. Confidence that the city will change anytime soon, that it will develop a thriving civil society, seems as touching as Roy's confidence in Montecore.

In my class on journalists' rights one semester, I brought in a prosecutor and a judge as guest speakers. They talked about their work and some of the First Amendment issues they had confronted. To my chagrin, an older student insistently asked both of them, "How much do you make?"

If you take away the Strip, locals say, Las Vegas is just like any other place. Not so. In most places, money isn't the only way to keep score.

On Oct. 27, several contributors to Face, Sag, Crumble will join a panel discussion and book-signing at 7 p.m. in the Clark County Library. The event is free.

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