

Gump appears at pier, as life again imitates art

Forrest Gump now works at Navy Pier.

Well, he doesn't really work there—he just sits for hours on a park bench, wearing his familiarly dorky outfit of a rumpled seer-sucker suit, drooping white sweat socks and dirty running shoes.

He's sporting a buzzcut. There's a battered suitcase by his feet. And of course, he'll chat up anyone who sits next to him: "My name's Forrest Gump. People call me Forrest Gump. Would you like a chocolate? My momma always said, 'Life is like a box of—'"

Ah, you know the routine. You've seen the movie three times. Once in the theaters, once on video, once on cable.

Obviously, Tom Hanks is not reviving his beloved character in a one-man show playing at Navy Pier. A restaurant called the Bubba Gump Shrimp Co.—inspired by the business operated by Forrest in the movie—has opened a franchise on Navy Pier, and the Gumpian look-alike actor is a gimmick to attract customers who are already overwhelmed with myriad spending opportunities once they step onto the main promenade, from the gigante Ferris wheel to any number of cheery restaurants to the tour boats to the big beer garden.

On weekend nights in the summer, the overwhelming thickness of the crowds entering and exiting the pier gives the area the feel of downtown Tokyo. It's amazing what they've done with the place, considering that just a few years ago it was not much more than a huge concrete slab with a row of tattered and creaky sheds leading the way to the often lonely Grand Ballroom at the far east end. Now the pier is a carnival, a theme park, one of those bright and shiny and LOUD places you either love or loathe.

Last Saturday night around 9:30, Forrest attracted the same amount of attention a mid-level Bulls player would likely receive—and all the guy did was sit on that wooden bench, staying in character.

"Holy ----, it's Forrest Gump!" hollered a 25-ish guy who was holding what probably wasn't his first beer of the night.

"Take my picture with ---- Forrest Gump!" he said to his girlfriend.

People lined up to have their picture taken with Forrest. Women threw their arms around him, men shook his hand. All called him "Forrest." None seemed to question why the heck he was sitting there.

It was weird. When you go to Disney World or you take one of those Universal Studios tours, you expect to see wannabe actors dressed like some of your favorite characters from popular movies—but usually those movies are purely light entertainment. I know Forrest Gump is just a film creation—but he's also a mildly retarded character, remember? Some of the yahoos on the pier who were messing with Forrest seemed to be missing the irony that they were also behaving like characters from the movie—the ones who picked on young Forrest because he had braces on his legs and he had an IQ of 76. And don't forget, Forrest often visited tragedy.

"Where's Jenny?" one guy yelled at Forrest. "Come on, where's Jenny?"

The correct answer would be: She died of AIDS, you idiot.

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Richard
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Winston Groom writes a rollicking novel called *Forrest Gump*. Director Robert Zemeckis guides its transition into a much-beloved, Academy Award-winning film. One-liners from the movie ("Stupid is as stupid does") enter the lexicon. Hats and T-shirts bearing the logo of the fictional Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. are sold on the Internet.

That fictional company becomes a real restaurant chain. And that leads to some guy portraying Forrest Gump on a bench on Navy Pier.

At the end of his shift Saturday night, the *faux*-Forrest actor snatched up his suitcase, walked briskly over to the bicycle rack, unlocked his bike and pedaled off into the night. Still turning heads, still Forrest Gump until he disappeared from view.

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