

# A Day in the Life of a Public Transit Mime

*by* Con Chapman

BOSTON. Park Street Station, six a.m. The oldest subway stop in America is the gathering place for the MBTA's newest weapon against rude commuters; a specially-trained team of mimes whose only job is to fight inconsiderate behavior by passengers.

"Okay, everybody, quiet down," says Director of Operations Patricia Riley. We look at her as if she's daft.



*"But--we were being quiet!"*

"Sorry-I say that every meeting," she says. "Anyway, we got a lotta people ruinin' the T experience. Talkin' loud on cell phones, clippin' fingernails, even flossing their teeth. So let's run through a few do's and don'ts. Do *not* say anything to an offender."

We nod in agreement.

"Second-use discretion. If somebody doesn't get up for a pregnant woman, don't go ballistic on 'em. Use your mimetic powers. Any ideas?"

A man rocks his arms as if lulling an infant to sleep.

"Great-silent shaming, so the guy gets the message without a word being said," Riley says approvingly. "Everybody ready? Let's roll!"

I take a position on the Red Line platform outbound to Cambridge, the smarty-pants capital of New England, where I'm sure to see some of the most egotistical behavior on the entire

system. As a train slows to a stop, I spot my first perps; two intellectuals having a loud discussion.



*Husserl: Gesundheit.*

"I divide Husserl's thinking into two segments," one of them is saying about the German phenomenologist. "Halle and Freiburg."

His friend begs to differ. "His definitive work is *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, which he wrote in Göttingen."

Incredible--the guy is literally speaking in italics. Nobody has the right to disturb the peace of a subway ride that way. It's time for action.

I take a seat opposite them and mock their pretentious dialogue by a pantomime conversation with a man sleeping off an alcoholic binge. The eggheads get the message and turn the volume down a notch. Justice prevails.

I get off at Central Square and board a bus for Watertown. I spy a cocky young man with his legs splayed out, taking up two seats. I'm on the case.

I indicate by gesture that I'd like to sit next to him.

"There's seats all over the place," he says dismissively.

How do I convey that other riders may get on, filling the bus up? I grab the metal bar overhead and make like I'm being squeezed from both sides.

"What is this--charades?" he asks. "Beat it!" He pushes me to the floor where I grimace as if in pain. Life and art intersect, as I've banged my head on a metal seat. I crawl forward and make silent begging gestures, hoping for a transfer.

"Where you goin'?" the driver asks.

I pretend I'm an engineer and pull an imaginary train whistle.

"There's no bus-to-subway transfers on the commuter rail," the driver says. "You have to buy a ticket on the train."

Fair enough. He drops me off at the Auburndale stop and I board the train, where I hit a free-fire zone.

"I'm on the train . . ." says one man into his cell phone. Duh.



Small potatoes. There are bigger spuds to deep fry. As I reach the middle of the car, I spot the Moby Dick of Obnoxious Commuters; a big man, his tie loosened at the neck.

"Why would I do that?" he brays into his phone. "If I don't get 2 mill, I'm walking!"

His kind are the worst. They don't just talk-they've got to show off. It's Mime Time.

I plop myself down and pull out an imaginary cell phone of my own. I dial, wait for a fictitious friend to pick up, and then begin a silent conversation, complete with gestures. My deal's bigger than yours!

The guy looks at me like *I'm* the social nuisance. His voice grows quieter.

"Listen, I'll call you back. I'm sitting next to a real nut."



I bow low and bid the man *adieu*--mission accomplished.  
All in a day's work--for a public transit mime.

*This piece previously appeared in slightly different format in The Boston Globe Magazine. Available in Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection "Boston Baroques."*

