

**WHERE THERE'S SMOKE . . .**

Musings of  
a Cigarette  
Smoking Man

A Memoir by  
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2120 Queen Street East, Suite 200, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4E 1E2

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## **Preface**

I'm standing beside a filing cabinet. To my right is the actor Charles Cioffi, and to his right is Ken Camroux, the actor playing the Senior FBI Agent, the part I read for and didn't get. I got this weird part with no lines. All I do is smoke. On the other side of the desk is a young unknown actress with red hair. We are doing a low budget pilot for an obscure science fiction show about alien abduction, if you can believe it. Well, a gig is a gig. I'm getting paid. Scale, I think.

I'm feeling pretty dumb, just standing there like a statue listening to the red-haired actress talk about someone called "Spooky Mulder." I look at the cabinet beside me, the top just below my shoulder. I think, 'If this were really me, would I stand here as if I were part of the scenery?' which of course I was. 'What's to lose,' I think. So I stretch my elbow across the top of the cabinet, cross my feet, and watch the action from this new position, a praying mantis with a cigarette. An icon was born. You can buy the trading card if you want.

At that moment my career went up in smoke. Well, perhaps it had been smouldering for some time. Once a boy wonder, I had failed in my major ambition. I was not the Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival at the age of twenty-nine, unlike my idol, Peter Hall, who headed the Royal Shakespeare Company in the UK at that age. Still, always torn between directing and teaching, I was



getting along, making a good living, until that fateful day when everything changed.

At the time, of course, I had no idea anything had changed. I had played a non-speaking role in a pilot for a television show whose chances of being picked up were about as good as the Chicago Cubs winning a World Series. It would be another year or two before the show and then this character became household names. At age fifty-three, I would become a full-time actor, a star even, dealing with fan mail to this day.

One of my pet peeves are workshops conducted by successful people in the film business. Do what I did and you too can be a success. What did I do to become a successful actor and minor celebrity? I auditioned for a small role, didn't get it, and got an even smaller one with no lines. If you do that, you too can become a television star. Life is random. David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson became stars by chance. That is not to say

they weren't and aren't worthy. They are talented actors and I wish them the best. But there are hundreds of other talented actors who were not so lucky. I'm waiting for the workshop where a lottery winner tells her story and inspires us to follow in her footsteps. It's all a question of where and when you buy the ticket, the 7-Eleven on Main Street on the second Monday of the month.

It may be that life is really a series of random events. But being biologically human, I am going to make a story out of them. The story will be a lie, of course. But then so are the best stories. Richard III was actually a good king and Macbeth ruled for years. I don't promise a story of Shakespearean scope, but hopefully it will be entertaining and occasionally enlightening.

I may even open a window into my soul — well, not my soul actually, I don't have one of those, but I will let you inside, as far as I dare.

Should the story be lineal? Should I start at the beginning and finally arrive at now? I am a product of the print generation and for us, according to Marshall McLuhan, lineality is natural. But many readers will be younger and will have grown up in the electronic age. When did you last see a movie where the story started at the beginning? In fact, when did you last see a movie where you could follow the story? Well, perhaps that's another issue. Suspense in a movie used to be about how the movie was going to end. Now it seems to be about how the story is going to come together. I could weave a tapestry of events and you could be on the edge of your proverbial seat wondering how it will all come together. And then, the joke would be on you. It doesn't come together.

It may feel like one life, but is it really? They say that every seven years each cell in our body has changed. Am I the same person that I was seven years ago, or in my case,

seventy years ago? Bill Davis has had many lives, many loves. These stories may weave together into a coherent whole or they may not. There will be stories of life in wartime Ontario, of early Canadian theatre and radio, of university life in the late fifties, of Britain and British theatre in the sixties, of the National Theatre School of Canada and Festival Lennoxville, and finally, *The X-Files*. But is Bill Davis an actor, a teacher, a director, a skier, a water skier, a lover? Wasn't he once a birdwatcher and a bridge player? Who is he, really? It's all very well for Polonius to say, "To thine own self be true," but who the hell is thine own self?

I will leave it to you to decide about meaning; all I can tell you for certain is that it's been quite a ride and it's not done yet.



# PART ONE

## **Before**

I questioned whether to include a chapter in this memoir on ‘my early life.’ My younger years seem to have had little bearing on my future career and, after all, everything in my childhood seems to me so normal that I wondered why those years would interest anyone else. But then everyone’s childhood seems normal to the adult of that child.

How things were when we are growing up is how they ought to be, now and forever. Southern Ontario in the forties is how life should be. It is an anomaly that the Muskoka

Lakes are now full of boats. What's right is that there should be no more than five boats go by in a whole day, pleasure boats all being up on blocks as a result of rationing. Or that dogs should run loose in the neighbourhood. That milk and bread were delivered by horse. That horse manure on Eglinton Avenue was normal. That movies in the brand new Nor-town Theatre with pushback seats cost fourteen cents. That we listened to plays on the radio. That most middle-class families had household help. That there was no television, and certainly no computers, cell phones, internet, terrorists, security. The big ski area in Ontario, now called Blue Mountain, then called Jozo's, boasted nine rope tows. And the giant ski area in Quebec, Mont Tremblant, had two chairlifts, one of which was broken. The speed limit was forty-two miles per hour and everyone had ration books. And kids walked to school. By themselves.

Two important events happened in 1938. My parents built their own cottage on Lake Muskoka north of Toronto. Or instructed a contractor to build it. And I was born. They did that themselves. Fortunately, by the time I came along they had abandoned their fascination with ancient family names. Two and a half years older than I, my older brother was saddled to his perpetual discomfort with the name of Ashe, short for Asahel. Imagine explaining that everywhere you go. I was named William, but known as Bill, for which I have been forever grateful. Two other brothers followed, Rolph in 1942 and Tim in 1944. Rolph was named for a surname in my mother's family, but Tim was named for an imaginary character in a game that Ashe and I invented and played for years called the Timothy Game.

Perhaps Ashe and I insisted on naming Tim because we were so dismayed by Rolph's name. In 1942, ages four and seven, we were



playing outside, waiting impatiently for my father to return from the hospital with news of our new sibling. In those days, one didn't know the gender in advance. When my father arrived we were delighted to learn we had a new brother, but shocked to learn that he was to be named Rolph. Rolph?! Ashe said he should be named Parrot. I insisted on Miss Harris. Why shouldn't he be named for my kindergarten teacher? Needless to say my parents didn't budge and he is still called Rolph.

My mother, Carroll Davis, named after another surname, was, I imagine, with her jet black hair, freckles, and crinkly smile, a strikingly attractive woman in her day. How would I know? She was my mother. From a family of two doctors, her mother being one of the first female medical students in Toronto, my mother had an honours degree in Philosophy and an MA in Psychology from the University of Toronto. Her specialty was

child psychology. She was a devotee of William Blatz, the renowned child psychologist. There is speculation that she was more than a devotee, but I am getting ahead of myself.

My father, Bruce, was the only child of the eldest of the Davis clan of Newmarket, Ontario. His family had made a considerable fortune in the leather tanning business, a business that none of the children, my father or his cousins, who included Murray and Donald Davis who would found the Crest Theatre in Toronto, were allowed to enter. Why? No explanation has been given. Were there too many of them? Did they know that leather tanning had seen its best days? In retrospect it is hard to imagine the actors Murray and Donald Davis as managers of a tannery, but the twelve-year-old Donald was quite upset when he heard the news. "This is a great shock to me, Murray," my mother quoted him as saying. The family sold the tannery in 1952 and, as far as I know, it

never made another dime. Whether my father was glad to be out of it or not I never knew. His real passion was history, a passion he passed on to my brother Ashe. Our house was full of books of history and politics and on Christmas morning my father could end up with twelve large volumes piled in front of him.

Surprising as it may seem, to my father's family history was not considered a suitable profession. So when my father wanted to marry a middle-class woman from a family of doctors, permission would only be given if he chose a different profession. Or at least so the family story goes. In any event he married my mother and became a lawyer. Neither decision worked out well.

Years later my mother would wonder how a marriage that had been so good for the first ten years could have gone so bad. But yes, during World War II, while the world was going to hell in a handbasket, Bruce and

Carroll Davis and their growing family were doing just fine. We spent our summers at the new cottage in Muskoka on a lake that was serenely quiet, all the powerboats being up on blocks for the 'duration.' Bruce, who in time became very overweight like all the elder Davises, was fit and trim and a rising officer in the Canadian Army and, fortunately, a year too old to be sent overseas.

Our winter home was in Toronto. At least now it is in Toronto. At the time it was Forest Hill Village, an adjacent but politically distinct community then thought to be a suburb of Toronto, where my father was reeve. When we visited my grandparents, on my mother's side in Richmond Hill or Newmarket on my father's side, we would travel through the country to reach these towns north of Toronto, towns which are now bedroom communities for the city. Our house on Old Forest Hill Road was, in fact, almost at the edge of the city. The vacant lots across

from us gradually filled up after the war, but for many years they provided excellent playgrounds. The house itself was a handsome affair with a spacious backyard. One day before going off to school the yard was invaded by strange men. When we returned there was a jungle gym, a sandbox, a swing set, and a playhouse with a slide. Was this before or after we had destroyed all my mother's attempts to grow flowers in the backyard? I don't remember. But what was my mother thinking trying to grow flowers in the outfield of a baseball diamond?

If we weren't destroying the flowerbeds outside, we were playing war games inside. Like all boys at the time we had a collection of toy soldiers. But best of all were bombing raids. Ashe and I shared a double bunk in the large bedroom over the garage. We would build cities with playing cards and then bomb them from the upper bunk. Of course it never occurred to us that we were

emulating the slaughter of innocent human beings. We were well indoctrinated. Germans and Japs weren't real people and Asians in particular didn't place as high a value on human life as we did. My mother told me that. But I never took to some of the things my friends did, like putting firecrackers in the mouths of frogs and lighting them. Now that was cruel. My mother told me that as well.

School. At age two and a half I started at the Institute of Child Study, a nursery school founded in 1925 by noted psychologist William Blatz and where my mother worked from time to time. The school eventually added a number of primary grades, and years later my mother would be the principal. Everything about this renovated house on St. George Street seemed normal at the time, but when I went back years later I was surprised to find the doorknobs were at my knees. It was a place for children. Part of a

longitudinal research study, we were known as Blatz Babies and did surveys and tests for many years afterwards. My mother wrote a book called *Room to Grow*, endeavouring to distill some of the results. As far as I can recall the central theme of Blatz's work — and my mother's — involved finding the right balance between discipline and freedom in child rearing. Ironically if one were to place my mother's personal application of the technique on a graph there would be a steady reduction in the degree of structure imposed on her four children, Ashe's world being the most structured while Tim's, the youngest, was pretty much free-form. Did it make a difference to how we each developed? Cognitive scientists still debate the subject.

At any rate I must have done quite well in nursery school, as I was moved up to kindergarten at Windy Ridge, also a Blatz institution, when I was four, and from there into Grade 1 at West Prep in Forest Hill when I

was just five. I've always bragged about how I skipped a year of nursery school. And I guess I was pretty good in Grade 1 because at Christmas I was moved into Grade 2. I still remember the day we were handed the Dick and Jane readers of which there were three levels and were told to have a look at the pictures. We were going to learn to read. Heck, I knew all three books by heart. Ashe had taught me to read long before.

When I became a long, lanky teenager it was hard to believe that I had once boasted that I was the fattest boy in kindergarten. With a round face and blond curls I must have been pretty cute. But soon I started to grow, and grow, and grow, until by fifteen I was well over six feet tall. Perhaps that should have helped ameliorate my discomfort at being two years younger than other boys in school. But in sports at least, my age handicap was exacerbated by being almost unable to control these long legs that had



suddenly appeared, like a colt trying to stand for the first time. But somewhere in my teenage years I made an amazing discovery: with boards on my feet, on snow or water, my body somehow worked. I was coordinated, even athletic. Skiing became a lifelong passion, even when it conflicted with career or marriage.

Childhood academic success comes with another price. When you are in Grade 10, how do you avoid the shower room after sports? When you have no pubic hair and everyone else in class does? Or how do you explain that you don't shave yet? You are just a kid in a class of young men. Well, they don't skip students anymore. Maybe that's a good thing.

But I sometimes had trouble with bullies. As I have said, we would walk to school by ourselves. There were two possible routes to West Prep from our house, the north way along Ridge Hill Drive or the south way,

along Whitmore Avenue. Before long Steve Borns and his friends on Ridge Hill terrified me so much I had to go the south way. But George Sterling was always a danger that way so finally I ended up going a much longer way around, along Wembley Road, occasionally protected by two girls (one of whom eventually married Ray Stancer who appears later in this story). But the worst day of all was one Saturday morning when Ashe and I were going along Whitmore to the local library as we often did on Saturday morning. Not only was George Sterling hanging out with a friend on the street that day, but they had *guns*. I mean, Jesus Christ, guns! And they started waving them at us. We tried to hurry by without looking too frightened. But then they started shooting! We ran for all we were worth and didn't stop until we were sitting exhausted in the library.

It was 1946. We had never heard of cap guns.

Summers in Muskoka were free of such terrors. The Davis family had been cottaging since the early 1900s on Lake Muskoka at St. Elmo, a peninsula jutting out into the lake near the mouth of the Muskoka River. Family and servants in tow, they used to travel to Gravenhurst by train, take a steamer to an anchor spot near the cottage, and then travel by small craft to the cottage itself. Before long, they built a steamer dock on the point so that the steamer could actually land, which it did on a regular basis, bringing mail and supplies. My great grandfather's cottage was built at the head of the point near the dock. In the twenties, three other Davis cottages were built, one by my grandfather, one by a great aunt, and another by Murray and Donald's father (Uncle E.J.). And finally, my parents built their cottage around the corner of the point from the other Davis houses, my mother stubbornly insisting that there had to be a road to her cottage.

Ashe and I were inseparable in the early years. Our structured day in Muskoka would begin by tiptoeing from our bedroom at the end of the cottage to the outside door near our sleeping parents' bedroom, walking along the outside path to the kitchen door and into the kitchen where the housekeeper, Bea, would give us breakfast. We might stop to water a tree on the way. After breakfast we headed to our rock houses to play. Our rock houses were stretches of bare granite beside the lane that led to the cottage. Mine was a sloping two level affair while Ashe's, separated from mine by twenty yards of fairly open bush, was flatter and quite broad. As I write this both are overgrown and barely visible, but in the forties they provided inspiration for a range of imaginative games, the most successful being the Timothy Game. In this game I played John, a grown-up boy of sixteen who was in the Mounties, while Ashe played the quintuplets, all five of them. They

were much younger than John, but Timothy was the lead quintuplet and quite smart. Jonathan was number five and quite stupid. To this day I can't take anyone seriously with the name of Jonathan; I keep hearing Ashe's rendition of a mentally challenged boy with a lisp. We created and acted out endless stories built around these central characters. Soon it would be time to return to the cottage for lunch, summoned often by a large cowbell. Mother would join us for lunch, my father also if he were not in the city or away in the army. After lunch it was time for our Rest. We weren't required to sleep, but we were expected to lie down in our bedroom and be quiet for an hour or so. I still don't know if the reason for this had to do with our upbringing or with giving my parents an uninterrupted hour in bed, it still being the "ten good years." But once we got through that we were rewarded by the best part of the day. Time to go to the Beach. The lake front for

our cottage was rocky and not very suitable for small children, but Uncleej (E.J. Davis Jr.) had a small sandy beach by his boat-house and we would head over there most afternoons, a ten minute walk through the woods or a short ride by boat. We swam and played water and sand games until it was time to return home for drinks — ginger ale for us — before dinner. I don't remember what we did in the evening, possibly because we were sent off to bed so early there wasn't much of an evening. I do remember that Ashe, being older, got to stay up and listen to *Alfer Lanky* on the radio, the story of a Lancaster bomber. It wasn't until I was an adult I realized the title was *L for Lanky*.

For reasons Ashe and I understood at the time but now I can't fathom, Ashe and I felt we had to keep the Timothy Game secret. Perhaps we felt young boys should be doing more masculine things: playing ball or hunting squirrels. For several summers when my

mother would ask what we had been doing we would find some way to avoid a direct answer until finally we could equivocate no longer. We told her the story of the game. I don't know what we expected. To be laughed at or mocked in some way for not being 'real' boys? Anyway she responded as if what we had been doing all these years was perfectly normal. What a relief.

The pattern of the days changed somewhat when Rolph and Tim, known in the household as "the babies," stopped being babies and began to join in. The games became less imaginative, but more sophisticated. We played car racing and horse racing by flicking the toys with our fingers up and down the long hall. I know this doesn't sound very sophisticated, but each of us had a stable and kept detailed records. Every race was a claiming, or an allowance, or a stakes race, and we kept track of earnings. We bought, sold, and claimed horses. To the

bemusement of my mother, when I returned from Britain in 1965 at the age of twenty-seven, the first thing Rolph and Tim and I did was get out our old horses, get down on our knees, and restart the races.

We had different games in the city. Besides playing baseball in the backyard and destroying the flower beds or bombing Germans from our upper bunk, we invented a game we often thought later we could have marketed and made our fortunes called Flick Hockey. We found a way to emulate a real hockey game using pictures and cards of hockey players, a marble, and goals made of blocks. Of course there was no way to keep this game secret from our parents — it could be pretty noisy — but we never shared it with anyone outside the immediate family. As “the babies” got older they joined in, but I don’t think we ever told anyone at school about it much less encouraged them to play. We had friends we would play traditional



games with, chess or baseball, but flick hockey and horse racing were private.

My life changed dramatically in 1952 when we moved from the city to the country, a twenty-seven-acre estate named Memory Acres that my father inherited from his father. A mile and a quarter west of King City and a half-mile east of the new highway just completed, now known as the 400 but then as the Barrie Highway, Memory Acres was the site of the original Davis leather tannery before it moved to Newmarket in the early 1900s. Not that I had a lot of friends in Toronto, but I had even fewer in this farming community. Oddly enough one of the few I did have, Rod Woolham, was the son of the manager of the Davis leather tannery now losing money outside the family.

Country life had its compensations. I was able to buy two horses from my earnings as a radio actor and I cut some of the narrowest ski trails in the world through the wooded

hill on the west side of the property, so narrow that I broke my leg on one of them one year. But mostly I waited to be sixteen.

Lots of boys, and girls too I suppose, want to be sixteen. There could many reasons for this: to be more grown up, to smoke in the house, to have sex. But I wanted to be sixteen so that I could go to the Track. In 1954 children were not allowed at a horse racing track even in the company of an adult. By age fifteen, partly I suppose as a result of having horses of my own, I had a passion for horse racing. I studied form charts and made imaginary bets. I would sit in school with a racing form under my exercise book pining for the day I could actually go to the Track. Strangely, the minimum bet in 1954 was the same as it is now, two dollars; who knows what that bet would be worth in today's dollars. The day I could go finally came. Rod and I took a bus to Toronto and a streetcar to the old half-mile Dufferin Park Track at the

corner of Bloor and Dufferin, and my days as a punter began. Some of my happiest days in the next few years were sitting in the open upper deck of the old Woodbine Racetrack on Queen Street.

The babies, no longer babies, followed in my tracks, as it were. While Ashe never took to horse racing, Rolph and Tim both did. After the new Woodbine track opened outside the city, I would take Tim to the track. Since he was only eleven or twelve at the time and forbidden entry, I would park him outside an entrance gate where he could see the races. Between races I would go down to where he was and he would pass his bet through the gate to me and I would place it for him. Occasionally we would get strange looks from the guards, but what could they do?

Over the years my interest in horse racing has waned and it pretty much vanished when I went to Britain in 1961. Not so for my

brothers Rolph and Tim. The two of them get together every year wherever they happen to be to watch the Breeders' Cup. And Rolph is now an owner himself with a stable of real horses at Woodbine.

So how did I become an actor?

# **What's in Your Basement?**

or A History of Canadian Theatre, Part One

I don't know what was in your basement, but in mine, when I was ten, was a summer theatre company, one of the few professional theatre companies in Canada at the time. They didn't perform in the basement, but they rehearsed in our house in Toronto for several weeks before heading to cottage country to perform for cottagers and tourists.

My cousins, Murray and Donald Davis, a half generation older than I, formed a

summer stock company, The Straw Hat Players, in 1948. Composed largely of university students and directed, more or less, by the University of Toronto's professional director, Robert Gill, the company played in Gravenhurst and Port Carling, resort towns that bookend Lake Muskoka a hundred miles or so north of Toronto. Limited by contractual agreements with a theatre in Woodstock and with U of T, Gill was not able to be the official director or to travel to Muskoka with the company. Nonetheless, he conducted the majority of the rehearsals in the basement of our Toronto home. It took some time for the neighbours to understand the shouting and screaming coming from our house did not indicate a dysfunctional family or necessitate calls to the police. In the 1940s actors acted full out all the time. The concept of starting slowly and allowing one's characterization to grow was still in the future.

A word needs to be said about theatre in Toronto in the early post-war years. With Toronto now boasting a number of thriving theatres, contemporary readers may be surprised, astonished, to know that there was almost no professional theatre in the city. The stock companies of the twenties had succumbed to the joint pressures of the Great Depression and Hollywood. In the late forties the Royal Alexandra Theatre served as a prestigious roadhouse for touring productions, but only occasionally were professional productions mounted in Toronto. One of the centrepieces for theatre in the city was the four play season, directed by Robert Gill, at Hart House Theatre in the University of Toronto. The actors were all university students — not even drama students as there was no drama department at the university — who were studying other subjects and doing theatre on an extracurricular basis. And yet theatregoers in the city at that time

subscribed to the season and discussed the plays as if they were attending the latest offering from a major theatre company. Mind you, these were no ordinary university students. Many were returning veterans from World War II, often on special post-war programs and more mature than your average student. Because of this influx the student body was a double or triple cohort as we would now say; or in sport terms, it was a very deep draft. Also, the extracurricular program run by the very professional and talented Robert Gill was not only effective in itself, but its existence attracted talented actors to the university. Some of those actors included Charmion King, Donald and Murray Davis, Eric House, Ted Follows, Araby Lockhart, Lloyd Bochner, Kate Reid, Don Harron, and William Hutt.

Of course at age ten I had no idea that the birth of Canadian theatre as we now know it was happening in the very basement of our



house. Talk about being in the right place at the right time. The actors in our basement, and in our living room, and on our phone, included many who would go on to forge substantial careers.

The first Straw Hat season, 1948, went by in a blur as Ashe and I were sent off to summer camp and learned of it only through letters from my mother saying things like, *The Drunkard* was sold out, whatever that meant. But the next year my cousins asked my mother who asked me if I would like to act in one of their plays. If it meant I didn't have to go back to summer camp, why not?

The play in question was a thriller called *Portrait in Black*. As I recall, my mother in the play, Charmion King, was in some kind of triangle with two men, played by my cousins, Donald and Murray. Murray's character tried to kill Donald's when he was driving, but missed because Donald's character reached for the emergency brake. Doesn't

that date the play? A gun went off sometime during the play and so scared my youngest brother, Tim, whom my mother had brought to see me act, that she had to spend the rest of the evening in the parking lot calming him down while he kept insisting that he was “never going to *Portrait in Black* again!” He would have been five at the time. I’m not sure if he has been to the theatre since. Certainly, he was never tempted to follow in my footsteps.

Why did they cast me in this play? They needed a young boy, but why me? It’s a funny thing, but in all the years that followed I never thought to ask. I was handy. After all, I only had to go downstairs to get to rehearsal and I had excellent marks in school for oral reading, a subject I am sure no longer exists. But I don’t know if they knew that. A mystery, but one that changed my life.

I don’t recall being nervous about any of this. I think I was too young to appreciate

that I could embarrass myself in front of an audience or die in a car crash on the treacherous road to Port Carling driven at competitive speeds by the young actors in the company. I was much more comfortable acting in a play for the first time than trying to figure out how to hoist a sail at camp. I did get nervous once. I was sitting backstage waiting for my first entrance when a member of the company came by and asked if I was nervous. I was probably reading a comic or something. Assuring her that, no, I wasn't nervous at all, she proceeded to explain that nervousness was a good thing, that an actor *should* be nervous. By the time I went on stage I was in a near panic because I wasn't nervous.

I must have acquitted myself satisfactorily in *Portrait in Black* as I was asked to appear in one play a season for the next several years. The next year I had a small role in *Goodbye Again*, but the year after I played

the large role of Ronnie Winslow in Terence Rattigan's *The Winslow Boy*, and the year after, Taplow in Rattigan's *The Browning Version*.

Of course, like all Canadian boys of a certain age, I still really wanted to be a professional hockey player. But if that wasn't going to work out maybe I could be an actor. What to do? Perhaps I should take acting classes. So, back in Toronto, I signed on to take classes from Josephine Barrington, who had taught my cousins. She herself was a graduate of the Central School of Speech and Drama in London and performed in community theatre as well as some of the rare professional productions in the city. She had a studio in her home a few miles from our house in north Toronto.

My mother drove me there for my first class. It never occurred to her or to me that she should ever drive me there again. Nor did she ever drive me to school. Nor to the

CBC when I started working there a year or two later. What's with the present generation? They don't know how to take a bus? Or ride a bike? It was quite a trek to Josephine's studio, either two buses or a half-hour bike ride, but after that first class I happily went on my own. I think I remember more about the bike trips than I do about the classes.

I remember little of what Josephine taught. Some of the classes were private and some were with one or two others. I remember quite a bit of talk about the diaphragm, which I also remember having to unlearn when I studied with Iris Warren years later. But as well as her classes, Josephine presented plays every Christmas at Hart House Theatre: Josephine Barrington's *Juveniles*. I played the lead in *Aladdin* one year and the lead in *The Snow Queen* the next. My 'costar' in *The Snow Queen* was Michele Landsberg, later to become a noted journalist, Officer of

the Order of Canada, and wife of Stephen Lewis who will appear later in this story.

It was Josephine who suggested that I try my hand at auditioning for CBC Radio.

# A Lost World

or Canadian Radio Drama, 1949–1952

In 1950 CBC Radio was the centre of the universe, or so it seemed at the time. Housed in a four-storey walkup on Jarvis Street in Toronto, a building formerly owned by Havergal School for Girls, radio drama was the sine qua non for a professional actor in Toronto. And there was a ton of it. There were two major anthology dramas each week: *Ford Theatre* on Friday nights and *CBC Stage* on Sunday nights. There were regular series, school broadcasts, and

children's programs. And there was the pièce de résistance, *CBC Wednesday Night*, which produced drama as well as music. As a boy I remember listening to the full Shakespeare history cycle on *CBC Wednesday Night*.

Just up the street from the CBC Radio building was the Celebrity Club, Toronto's answer to Sardi's; across the road was Lorne Greene's acting school (yes, that Lorne Greene) and the offices of ACRA. Perhaps you have heard of ACTRA, the Alliance of Canadian Television and Radio actors? In 1950 it was simply ACRA, the Association of Canadian Radio Actors. Down the street from the radio building was the hooker capital of the city. Was it Shaw who once said the only difference between an actor and a prostitute was the price?

The building itself was at once welcoming and intimidating. Anyone used to entering a modern CBC building would be astonished to realize that in 1950 one could simply walk



into the building through any door, wave at the receptionist if so inclined, and go wherever one liked. Security? What's that? There was a story, perhaps apocryphal, of men entering the building in broad daylight and walking out with a grand piano. Getting into the building was one thing, but seeing a producer quite another. The producers, who might now be known as directors, all had offices flanking a wall on an upper floor of the building. In front of each office was the desk of the production assistant, the keeper of the gate. The PAs protected their producers with their lives. No wonder the actors would prowl the halls hoping for a chance meeting, "Anything for me this week?"

It was tough for newcomers, but for regulars life was simpler. Casting was often done like this. I'm walking down the hall when producer Norman Bowman sees me and calls out, "OK for Sunday, Bill?" Without pausing, I call back to confirm. Casting complete. No

audition. No call to the agent. No agent. Of course, this practice encouraged a good deal of loitering. Actor Murray Westgate, who would rise to fame later as the Esso Man on *Hockey Night in Canada* on television, ate all three meals in the cafeteria. Lots of casting opportunities that way.

There were two worlds of actors in Toronto at this time: the Hart House Theatre world and the CBC Radio world that included John Drainie, Bud Knapp, Tommy Tweed, Lorne Greene, John Bethune, Aileen Seaton, Jack Mather, Murray Westgate, Ruth Springford, Maxine Miller, and Lister Sinclair, among others. These worlds overlapped only rarely, when a Hart House actor would get a gig on CBC or a radio actor would do a stage play. Of course many of the Hart House actors were still students who did summer stock. The central core of radio actors, small though the core was, actually made a good living as actors. They lived middle-class lives,

had houses and families, and in some ways were more secure than most actors in Canada since. Only if they drifted out on to the fire escape at the back of the building would they sense a looming danger. A large, ugly, yellow building was slowly rising out of the parking lot. CBC Television.

Some of the radio actors went on to successful careers on television and stage. Stage became an opportunity with the opening of the Crest Theatre and the Stratford Festival, both in the early fifties. But some radio actors were less fortunate. Radio was their medium and as the medium declined so did their careers. King of radio drama was John Drainie. If Andrew Allan was the producer god, Drainie was the actor god. Blessed with a marvellous voice and limited by a physical handicap, radio was his forte although in later years he gave rare but exceptional stage performances, notably in *Inherit the Wind* at the Crest. But his radio work was dominating

and enthralling. For all that he brought great truth to his roles, modern actors would find his work method remarkably technical. His scripts were covered with hieroglyphics — meaningful only to him — that guided his vocal inflection through his performance. Spontaneity was not a key ingredient of radio drama in that period. Television was not kind to John Drainie; his career declined and he died at the young age of fifty. Others also saw their careers abate, for instance, Ruth Springford, John Bethune, and the king of accents, Jack Mather.

For others, dare I say it, television was a bonanza. Many years later when working in Scotland, I was invited to dinner at my girlfriend's house and we were to watch this wonderful new television show. When that urban sophisticate, that voice of the news that got us through the war, rode up on a horse, I just about fell out of my chair. Lorne

Greene as Ben Cartwright was a sight to behold.

As a child actor with big ears and little understanding, I would overhear conversations about the coming of television. I don't recall a single actor saying, 'I can't wait, it will be wonderful.' The tone was always anxiety, or at best cautious apprehension. As for this particular actor, it would be more than fifteen years before I made my first appearance on television.

I'm not sure how it came about, but in 1950 I found myself, aged twelve, at my first audition, a reading in the office of one of the leading radio drama producers of the time, Esse Ljungh, an intimidating Scandinavian, who was now supervising producer of drama for the CBC in Toronto. He was casting a mental health drama called *Life with the Robinsons*. What is a mental health drama, you ask. The Robinsons were a fairly typical Canadian family with two children. Each

week in this half hour commercial-free program some family problem would be dramatised. At the conclusion of the program, a noted psychologist would analyze the issues and suggest approaches the family could take to the problem. The shows were written and narrated by playwright and screenwriter Ted Allan, who would work with me many years later at Festival Lennoxville.

At this audition I was asked to read from a script I had not seen, a normal practice for auditions at this time. Mr. Ljungh told me the other young boy role in the series was going to be played by Warren Wilson, now well known for his contributions to the music department at the CBC, but then a young actor who was, Esse proudly announced, a member of the union. I did not let on I had no idea what union he was speaking of. However, he asked me to read and since I read rather well he was somewhat pleased. I suspect in those days I also read as though I

were reading and not as though I were speaking. His instruction to me was to put the script down and simply say the lines without looking at the text. After I did that he seemed satisfied and I got the role.

The role in question was Mickey Robinson, the older of the Robinson's two children. My younger sister on the show was played by the older Maxine Miller who worked with me many years later when we were both playing septuagenarians on a television series called *Robson Arms*. We had a big argument at the time as she insisted that she had played the older sibling in the radio play. What can I say? She was wrong. I do remember though that she and the other adult members of the cast were very helpful to me, showing me around, helping me with annotating my script, and, most important to a young boy, showing me where the cafeteria was.

It's important to understand that all radio drama at the time was live. As I recall, the

cast would meet the producer in the studio at 2:30 in the afternoon and we would go live to air at 8 the same evening. The first order of business would be a reading of the script, to get a feel for the piece and so the script assistant could get a timing, time being a critical factor when broadcasting live. Although to me, it seemed the purpose of the first read was for the actors to make as many jokes as they could. After the read and some cuts and work at the table, we would rehearse 'on mike.' The producer (director) would retreat to the control booth overlooking the studio and give his instructions over a PA system while we worked out our positions at the microphones and rehearsed the scenes, practising turning our pages soundlessly, an important skill for actors of the time. The sound effects person would create live sound effects, another challenging skill that time has rendered redundant. Once all the pieces had been worked on we would break for



dinner. Following the dinner break, there would be a dress/technical rehearsal in which the live music would be incorporated, in the case of *Life with the Robinsons* performed on an electric organ, followed by adjustments to the timing, and then the live performance itself.

Once again it didn't occur to me, aged twelve, to be nervous. My main concern on the first day was finding the cafeteria and ordering all the food that I really liked, free of any parental advice. Nowadays, it seems that child actors always have a parent tagging along. Not only was it inappropriate for my mother to be there, I never saw any parents other than Roger Newman's mother — more on that later. I had a large helping of pancakes and a chocolate milkshake. When I returned to the studio after the meal, the reality of the task ahead finally struck home and the butterflies in my stomach churned the pancakes and milkshake unmercifully for the

next two hours. Fortunately, I had a strong stomach and the performance went ahead without a hitch. Thereafter, I took more care in my choice of diet before a performance.

Had my mother known of my dietary excess her anxiety during the first broadcast would have been even greater than it was. It was bad enough that she had to listen to the first live broadcast of her young son, but the first appearance of her son on the show was heart-stopping. In the story a line was delivered to young Mickey and he did not reply until asked again. In that moment of Mickey's silence my mother was sure that I must be on the floor trying to gather my fallen script or recover from some similar catastrophe. Her breathing returned when Mickey started speaking.

It was ironic that my first radio work was a mental health series since my mother was a child psychologist. I assume the connection was purely serendipitous. She was never a

stage mother. She never pushed my career nor discouraged it. She allowed my life to happen and I am forever grateful for that.

Not like Roger Newman's mother. Roger Newman was the leading child actor on CBC at the time and played some truly major roles on some of the major dramas. And to my twelve-year-old judgement at the time, he was very good. One day we were doing a *CBC Stage* drama. These were hour-long plays rehearsed over two days, starting on Saturday and performing Sunday evening. Roger and I were playing small roles, unusual for him, not for me, and the lead role was being played by another child actor. These shows were not done in the CBC building but in a local theatre, though there was no live audience. As we started to break for lunch on Saturday there was a huge commotion in the foyer. Moments later someone grabbed me and pushed me protectively into a small room. Roger's mother was on a tirade. And

she was dangerous. Why was her son not playing the lead? She charged up and down the theatre as people rushed to protect the young actor she might have killed had she got to him. Shut up in my hideaway I'm not sure how it resolved, but eventually she was taken away and Roger's role was recast.

As far as I know, Roger never worked for the CBC again.

For two or three years I was quite busy doing roles mostly on secondary dramas and school broadcasts. Oh yes, school broadcasts. Every Wednesday morning there would be a fifteen-minute drama tailored to a school audience even though it was broadcast on the full network. Quaint though it seems now, in those days the CBC was thought of as a public service. Once my performance in a school broadcast conflicted with an exam I was to take in high school. I was in Grade 10 at the time. The principal kindly arranged for me to take the exam in his office after the

broadcast provided I took a taxi directly from the studio to school and entered the school through the front door, an entrance normally reserved for grown-ups.

*Cuckoo Clock House*, a Sunday afternoon show for children, was my bread-and-butter gig if such could be said for a twelve-year-old actor. As I have described, the producer, Norman Bowman, frequently did his casting by a call down the hall. A lifelong conflict began one fateful day. I was walking through the front lounge of the radio building on a Wednesday, likely doing a school broadcast, when Norman spotted me and called out as usual, "OK for Sunday, Bill?" Instead of responding with my usual cheerful affirmation I did the unforgivable. I hesitated. A friend of the family had invited me to ski with him in Collingwood on Sunday, a rare opportunity and one I had been looking forward to. "I'll have to check and get back to you," I replied. In the end I cancelled the skiing and did the

broadcast but, whether as a consequence of my hesitation or pure coincidence, it would be one of my last performances on *Cuckoo Clock House*.

Only once did I do one of the major radio dramas, which required two studios, one for the actors and sound effects, and another, separated by a glass wall from the first, for the full orchestra. The producer, in his raised control booth, visible to both studios, directed the production like a conductor, cueing the orchestra, the actors, the sound technicians, as well as the board operator who was in the control room with him, ensuring that the hour finished exactly on time, to the second. It is small wonder that producers were thought of as demigods.

I returned to CBC Radio many years later, in 1977, as a producer of radio drama. What a change was there. Of course, radio drama had lost its preeminent position both as an entertainment and as a source of

employment for actors. To say it was a shadow of its old self might be an exaggeration. But the main difference was the manner of production. Radio drama was no longer live. It was recorded in pieces and edited together like a film. Sound effects were usually recorded rather than manmade and the final work would be mixed together on various tracks in a post-production process not even imagined in 1950.

By 1952, my days as a child actor were coming to an end. My family moved to the country, limiting my access to the CBC and other venues in the city. I didn't make a successful transition to television at the time, perhaps hindered by being the tallest child actor around. And soon my voice changed, the end of the road for a boy actor.

## **To Live in Interesting Times**

What a stroke of luck. Imagine being close to the American theatre in the fifties, living in Britain in the first half of the sixties, as well as visiting London in 1957, and being in Canada in the late sixties and early seventies. For all three countries, these were classical eras and I was fortunate to be present for all of them. While there have been interesting individual playwrights in all three countries since, Edward Albee and David Mamet in the United States, Michael Frayn and David Hare in England, and a scattering of



Canadian writers, how do they compare to the giants of earlier eras? Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Inge on Broadway in the fifties, to say nothing of the great musicals, *West Side Story* and *My Fair Lady*; Harold Pinter, John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Robert Bolt, and Samuel Beckett in Britain; Michael Cook, George Ryga, and James Reaney in Canada. What unites these giants aside from their talent? I was there.

Imagine a different sequence. Suppose I had been in England in the fifties. Yes, there was Terence Rattigan and Christopher Fry. But they were continuing a tradition that had become stale. It took the angry working-class writers and the Theatre of the Absurd to kick-start the British theatre. Suppose I had been in the United States in the early sixties. I could have seen a lot of stale musicals and the odd play by Edward Albee. Or in Canada during either of these periods I would see little but representations from other

countries. In cultural terms Canada was still a colony. Lip service was paid to plays by Lister Sinclair, John Gray, or Mavor Moore, but we didn't really believe we could create serious art in our own country.

I didn't see original productions of *Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar Named Desire*, or *Death of a Salesman*, but living in Ontario, I was aware of these theatrical events. And we all saw the film of *Streetcar* when it came out. We wondered how an actor like Marlon Brando could get away with mumbling all his lines or why Arthur Miller chose to tell the salesman story backwards. But the energy and life of this time was palpable. I did see the original production of Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth* with Paul Newman and Geraldine Page. And the original production of *West Side Story*. It's funny how vital and original that musical seemed at the time and how cliché and stiff it seems to me now.

I visited London in 1957, returned there for theatre school in 1961, and remained in Britain until 1965. I didn't realize what a historic time this was for the British theatre. I assumed British theatre was always like this. *Look Back in Anger* opened in 1956 and was still running in 1957. The play may be flawed, but it was a dynamo and its effect on the theatre world electric. I was present as the audience split over *The Caretaker*; half fell asleep and half were riveted. We regularly trekked out to Stratford East to see Joan Littlewood's work. We puzzled over *Waiting for Godot* and my moribund tear ducts came alive again at *A Man for All Seasons*. It wasn't just the writers who were giants. The older generation of actors was still going — Michael Redgrave, Laurence Olivier, and Alec Guinness — but a whole new generation was making an impact: David Warner, Albert Finney, Maggie Smith, Joan Plowright, and Ian Holm. And then the directors: Peter

Hall, Tony Richardson, Michael Elliott, John Dexter. What a time to be a young Canadian director in Britain.

While Canada in the late sixties and early seventies couldn't boast a single writer to match the Brits, it was still an exciting time to be in Ontario and Quebec. Money was pouring into the arts through the Canada Council and a variety of other funding sources. The young baby boomers were stretching their limbs and starting theatre companies. New works were coming from mature writers Ryga, Reaney, and Cook, and younger writers George Walker, Judith Thompson, and Sharon Pollock were getting performed and seen. And the collective began, led by Paul Thompson at Theatre Passe Muraille. Theatres were springing up: Tarragon, Factory, Free in Toronto, Centaur in Montreal, regional theatres across the country, and my theatre, Festival Lennoxville in Quebec.

Yet the promise of all three great eras, America in the fifties, Britain in the sixties, and Canada in the seventies, seems never to have been fulfilled. Why? Certainly the money in film and television lured much of the talent away from the theatre. Will Robert Bolt be remembered more for the stage play, *A Man for All Seasons*, or for the film, *Lawrence of Arabia*? Yet all great theatre eras seem to be shortlived. Elizabethan theatre had paled long before the Puritans closed the theatres. Restoration drama. Then what? Almost another hundred years before Sheridan and Goldsmith and then little until Ibsen another hundred years later. What can I say? For the first part of my creative life at least, I lived in interesting times.

# **Who's at Your Cottage?**

or A History of Canadian Theatre, Part Two

Not only did the Straw Hat Players of the late forties rehearse in our basement before the season started, they hung about our cottage after the season opened. E.J. Davis, Murray and Donald's father, used to invite the company to his cottage on Sundays. As the only road into St. Elmo stopped at our cottage, they had to park their cars at our place and trek through the woods to get there. Somehow it seemed they spent more time at our cottage than his. Perhaps our house was

more relaxed and the alcohol more free-flowing.

And so began a tradition of theatre people hanging out at our cottage, a tradition that continued even after Murray and Donald transferred their energies in the early fifties from summer stock to their newly formed theatre in Toronto, The Crest. After the Stratford Festival opened in 1953, other noted artists visited, William Hutt for instance, Frances Hyland, and the Stratford designer, Tanya Moiseiwitsch.

Of course, as well as hanging out on the fringes of this social life, I went to see all the plays. Theatre was magic for me then. On the way home after a performance Ashe and I would sit in the back seat of the car, astonished that my parents in the front would criticize the production we had just seen. What was there to complain about? It was all wonderful!

And the actors were wonderful also. A highlight of each summer was the annual corn roast held on our swimming rock in August. We would pick corn at a local farm, build a fire on the rock, and cook the corn in a huge pot. The whole Straw Hat company would be there and some of their friends. But sometimes a young kid gets in the way. After one of these shindigs, the actors stayed and stayed on into the night. There came talk of a midnight swim. Sounds great, I thought — I can even lend cousin Murray a bathing suit. How was I to know it was supposed to be a nude swim? All these naked actors and Murray and me in bathing suits.

What did I absorb about theatre by being around all this activity? We helped the producer with the poster run. We heard Eric House say he couldn't stay with Straw Hat because Stratford offered him so much money. Even though we also heard Donald say he had raised salaries, to thirty dollars a



week I believe. I met the directors they brought over from Britain: John Blatchley, Pierre Levebre, and Peter Potter.

I have a vivid memory of waiting for Nathan Cohen's radio review of the opening of the second season at Stratford. All the critics had raved about the first season and we were primed to hear even greater enthusiasm for the second. We gathered around the radio at the cottage in anticipation — people did that in the days before television. Cohen's review began like this, "There are two stars still shining at Stratford. . . ." The first was the design of the theatre. The second may have been Shakespeare. He went on to slam pretty well everything else. Even though I had no direct involvement with Stratford, I feel shell-shocked to this day.

Meantime, the tradition of my acting in one play a summer with the Straw Hat Players continued, the final two being *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by the British

director and teacher John Blatchley, and *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, a melodrama directed by Robertson Davies. The first rehearsal of *Dream* revealed a number of changes that were happening in the theatre at the time. Blatchley began with what seemed to a boy of fourteen to be an endless talk about Shakespeare and the play, its themes and place in Shakespeare's development. Directors did not normally talk about the play in summer stock; they got on with it. Of course, now I would love to be able to go back and hear his talk. Conflicting approaches to the work emerged during the first read of the play. While some of the actors continued with the old-school method of acting full out at every opportunity, others, George McCowan in particular, read in a flat monotone, waiting I presume for inspiration to move him later.

George McCowan should have been Canada's first truly major director. Expert in

almost everything he touched, he could drive the Port Carling road at breakneck speed without ever hitting a bump, parallel park a canoe, and excel academically. A friend once asked him to write his French exam for him. George was a little hesitant as he didn't take French, but in the end, agreed. He read over the texts the night before the exam, went in the next day, forged the signature, and wrote the exam. All would have been well except that he got such a high mark that suspicions were aroused and he was soon outed. Suspended from university for a year, he went to teach at Pickering College, a prestigious boys' school north of Toronto. He was weak in only one area of activity. He was not a very good actor. So what did he do? He decided to be an actor. Within a few years, though, he turned to directing, doing a wonderful production of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* at the Crest, as well as work at Stratford. But soon television took him and he ended a too-

brief career directing episodic television and drinking himself to death.

I could sense my career as a boy actor coming to an end at the first rehearsal for *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, directed by the soft spoken, gentlemanly Robertson Davies, long before his rise to fame as the author of *Fifth Business*. When he called for the young boy — I forget the character's name — he gamely hid his distress as I stood up, and up, and up. Murray had not warned him that I might be a shade taller than he would have preferred. But he remained kindly to me throughout, even when I sang flat in the company song. We would work together again years later when we presented his play *A Jig for the Gypsy* in Lennoxville.

Despite all this summer activity these were the dark years of my life in the theatre. After the move to King City — an ambitious moniker for a hamlet with two general stores, a bank, a couple of churches, and a

gas station — my father commuted to his law office in Toronto, and I suspect he had the road pretty much to himself. Meanwhile Ashe and I travelled to the Aurora District High School each day, an hour on the bus in each direction. A fish out of water? A square peg trying to fit into a round hole? Whatever, my three years in King/Aurora were disappointing, to put it kindly.

Schools in Ontario were still municipally rather than provincially funded in those days. We went from the well-supported and high-end Forest Hill education system to a rural high school. My younger brothers even went to a one room elementary school, where, lucky for them, they had an exceptional teacher. Our high school teachers were not exceptional but, in fairness, they had the serious challenges of large classes, mixed abilities, and variably motivated students. Artistic pursuits and philosophical discussions were rare, though there was a good

band. Cadets and football moulded the male tribe. I hated cadets, and being two years younger than my classmates I was too light for football. NHL hockey was a common interest, though I was on my own on the school bus defending Maurice Richard against the legion of Gordie Howe fans.

Not only was the school an artistic wasteland, but I was isolated from the city, always dependent on a driver. We did a couple of one-act plays with the Latin teacher — yes, we took Latin — and I was always asked to read in Shakespeare class, but that was about the sum of my theatrical efforts during those three bleak winters.

Not that drama was entirely lacking. One day our history teacher asked the class about the Reformation. This was the same teacher who had whacked me on the head earlier in the year when the textbook I had ordered had not yet arrived. (I understand schools now provide textbooks.) Attempting to show

up our ignorance of the Reformation he said to the class:

“If you had been living in the fifteenth century, you would all have been Catholics. Right?”

(Pause)

“Anyone here who wouldn’t have been Catholic in the fifteenth century?”

To be honest, I didn’t remember when the Reformation was, but I still didn’t think I would have been Catholic. I timidly raised my hand.

“What? You wouldn’t have been Catholic in the fifteenth century?”

“I don’t think so, sir.”

“Come up here. Stand here.”

He demanded I stand beside his desk at the front of the room.

“You know all Christians in the fifteenth century were Catholic?”

Lying, I said, “Yes, sir.”

“And you wouldn’t have been Catholic?”

“No, sir.”

Astonished, he replied, “Aren’t you a Christian?”

“What do you mean by a Christian, sir?”

Well, that did it. He began to splutter and foam at the mouth.

“Well . . . well . . . well, someone who follows the teachings of Christ.”

“I guess you had better count me out.”

I returned to my seat.

Well, talk about letting the cat among the pigeons. Many of the female students took pity on me and tried, unsuccessfully, to save my soul. “Don’t you believe in God?” they would ask. I didn’t really know whether I was an agnostic or an atheist in those days, but I did know I wasn’t a Christian. Our English teacher had made it clear that the opposite of a Christian was a pagan, but I didn’t think I was that either. But whatever I was, I was an even stranger presence in the school than I had been before.



But suppose I had told my half crazed history teacher that I was a Christian. Would anyone ask where my Christian belief came from? Yet from the point of view of science or reason, wouldn't that be a better question? Surely nonbelief is the default. A religious belief, or myth dare I say, is an add-on, something one learns from one's elders. I did learn one similar myth as a child and was devastated when I found there really was no Santa Claus. But the myth of a personal god never really took with me. After all, where is the evidence?

Or maybe, unlike Mulder, I just don't want to believe.

We mocked our history teacher and others of his generation. What fools they were! In the arrogance of our childhood it never occurred to us to ask why they were like this. Why was the history teacher marginally insane? The rumour was that he had a plate in his head from the war, but that only added to

our sense of his ridiculousness. What he may have been through in that war was not only beyond our comprehension, it wasn't even something to be wondered about. No one suffered in the war movies or radio plays, which made war seem more like a football game. We never wondered about the women either. Why was Mrs. Cameron, the French teacher, so abrasive and erratic? It never occurred to us to ask what happened to Mr. Cameron. The war years were a secret held close to the chest by those who had been there, a gulf between them and us. Had they been more forthcoming about their experiences, would their descendants have been more reluctant to lead us into war after war?

I was to catapult out of Aurora High School on the strength of a lie. I was told, and believed, two lies that changed my life. One might even have saved my life.

I was not much of a student at Aurora High School though I did accidentally stand

sixth one year. "Tends to let work slide" was a charitable criticism on many report cards. I did what I had to do, but that was about it. Grades were very different in the fifties than they are now. A first class mark was 75 and over. A B was 66 to 75. If one had an average of 66%, one didn't have to write the final exam. I was pretty good at getting 67%. Occasionally I would misjudge and have to write a final.

But I knew this would all have to change when I got to Grade 13, a grade that no longer exists in Ontario and never did exist in the rest of the country. Grade 13 had roughly double the volume of work of the earlier years. One needed nine courses to pass. And the entire mark was based on one departmental exam, while the marks one received during the year from one's own teachers mattered not at all. I loved this system. It was fair, it was clear, and the teachers were now on my side. They were my coaches, not

my judges. Of course, that's all changed now. My history teacher, the one who whacked me on the head because I didn't have my textbook and taunted me for not being a Christian, gave me a 66 at Christmas. I scored 95 on the departmental exam. The chemistry teacher gave me the course syllabus. What a novel idea. Tell the student what he needs to know. I worked through the syllabus and scored another high first. The geometry teacher, and principal, who had belittled my proposed reforms when I ran for Head Boy and got forty votes to my opponent's 350, had surmised I would be lucky to pass. Another first.

So what was the lie? Grade 13 is really hard.

Many students take it in two years and most never make it through at all. If you hope to pass in one year you will have to work very hard. Well, I took this to heart. I knew I could goof around in the earlier

grades, but when I got to Grade 13 I would need to be disciplined and keep up with my work. And so I did. When we got our first marks back at Christmas I held my breath hoping that I had passed most of my courses. My jaw nearly fell off my face as the marks came in. The marks, except for history, were amazing. Not only was I passing, I was in scholarship range. Keep it up and I would win scholarships to university. I did and I did.

Now if someone had told me Grade 13 was pretty easy . . .

What was the second lie?

It takes only three days to quit smoking. Well, if you believe that you will believe lots of weird things, like aliens abducting humans for example. More on that later.

At any rate the three years of isolation in the wilds of rural Ontario would soon come to an end. There was light on the hill and I was approaching it. I could see it, fear it, and

long for it. And in the fall of 1958, I entered it, the University of Toronto. I didn't realize it as I entered the door of the Sir Daniel Wilson Residence, but I would soon enough. I was home.

How did I know I was home? Besides the fact the university was home to Hart House Theatre and Robert Gill, who had directed me as a child and was still the resident director? One day as I was walking through the small foyer of our residence house, a voice called out from the common room, "Do you believe in God?" Surprised, I turned and hesitantly admitted that I didn't. "Well, come on in!" The voice was that of second-year student John Woods, who would later be a philosophy professor at U of T and president of the University of Lethbridge. Soon I was in the company of older students whose brilliance and curiosity inspired me for life.

It is astonishing for me to discover that now university residence is limited to first or

sometimes second year students. Exposure to senior students in a residence setting was one of the highlights of my educational life.

My life had turned a corner. I was in an intellectual and artistic home.



## PART TWO



## **U of T and Summer Stock:**

### Getting Started

The Sir Daniel Wilson Residence at University College, one of the four arts colleges in 1955 making up the University of Toronto, was a modern yellow brick building on St. George Street at what was then the western edge of the campus, and was to be my home for the next four years. Prior to its opening in 1954, university college men lived in two residential houses. Of course, men and women were not in the same residences. After all, they had different needs and rules.

The men needed maid service and were free to come and go at all hours. The women made their own beds in Whitney Hall and had an 11 p.m. curfew on weeknights. No one seemed to find these arrangements strange at the time.

The college clung to other traditions perhaps not fully appreciated by the students. Dinner at Sir Dan was intended to be a formal affair with a high table, the saying of grace, and waiter service. The students all arrived at 6:15 wearing the prescribed academic gowns and ties and entered the hall together. But what actually is a tie? Does a shoelace around the neck count as a tie? We followed the letter of that rule far more than the spirit. And sad to say, the quality of the food seldom matched the pretension of the occasion. It was not unusual to finish dinner, return to the house, ditch the gown and tie, and head across the road to the local greasy spoon for an edible meal. This was in the days before

McDonald's and Burger King, when you could still buy a decent meal at a low price in a family run local restaurant. Paradoxically the local greasy spoon was named McDonald's.

The students from the old 5 Wilcox residence had all moved into Jeanneret House, one of the six houses of the Sir Daniel Wilson Residence. They brought with them a sense of community and an intellectual curiosity that I was fortunate to share. Each student had a small private room. It was the common room on the ground floor that provided a focus for the house. I think I learned almost as much in the common room as I did in the college next door. If you had to watch television there was one in the basement. No one did, except during the World Series.

I remember our don, Ian MacDonald (who later became president of York University, which did not then exist), saying that if he were starting a university the first thing he

would do is provide a library. The second thing would be a common room. And only after that would he add classrooms and teachers. Of course, we young men talked about sex a lot, but we also discussed philosophy, religion, politics, and science. Senior students mixed with freshmen. It was a lively time.

Many years later, in the heyday of *The X-Files*, I did speaking tours of North American universities. I was astonished and distressed to see how universities and university life had changed. For one thing, no one studied what we studied: English, philosophy, history, mathematics, science. I would ask students what subjects they were taking. Communications, women's studies, air conditioning — subjects that didn't exist in our day. One business school I spoke at even had a course in golf. Apparently the golf course is where business is really done nowadays. No wonder I stayed in the arts. The last time I

played golf I shot 120 — for nine holes. Recently at a convention in London, the lovely PA who was assisting me mentioned that she had two university degrees. Wow, she didn't seem like the academic type, so I asked her what her degrees were. Public relations and cultural management. Good for her. She will probably find work in the new economy, but her university life must have been very different from mine. We couldn't care less about preparing for a job market; we were there to learn, to think, to be "better people." It's not for me to say whether universities have improved over the intervening decades, but they certainly have changed. Does anyone still say, "They were the best years of my life"?

The common room, that focus of my student world, seems to have disappeared altogether. And residences are generally limited to first or sometimes first and second year students. But my education came from the

senior students I lived with. Well, I guess the job training is better now.

The Christians in Jeanneret house had the hardest time. At least, the serious ones. We were, after all, a group of high-minded intellectuals with no room for faith. As I had discovered in Aurora High School, agnostics and atheists were a rare and suspect breed in Ontario in the mid fifties. It would be a long time before Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett made nonbelief respectable. We became a support group for our questioning minds. Christians were wimps. Heck, they didn't even smoke.

Imagine my shock to discover that John Woods — who would one day be president of Lethbridge University, our lead atheist, the one who would sing anti-Christian songs in the middle of the night on Bloor Street, who had more arguments for the nonexistence of God than I had ever imagined — returned to the Church. At a lovely dinner with John

Woods and his charming wife Carol in 2008, he told us he had returned to the Catholic Church. Carol had taken instruction so their marriage could be accepted. And he no longer smoked. On that, we agreed.

But, truth to tell, I did not register at the University of Toronto for its common rooms, and not primarily to study philosophy and psychology, which I did. I went to the University of Toronto to become an actor. That may seem odd now. In Canada now there are acting schools everywhere one looks. Anyone who can speak English or French, and even some who can't, can get into an acting school somewhere in Canada. But in 1955 there were no acting schools in Canada. None. Some people became actors just by finding a way to do it, the John Drainies and Christopher Plummers; some went to foreign lands, usually England; and others, many of us, came to the University of Toronto to work with Robert Gill at Hart

House Theatre. My generation included Donald Sutherland, Fred Euringer, Jackie Burroughs, John and Marielaine Douglas, Meg Hogarth, and directors Leon Major and Kurt Reis.

Having worked for Gill in my cousins' summer stock company I was sure I had an in. No sooner were auditions announced for the first two plays but I was there, ready to go. Gill did four plays a year and I fully expected to be in all four. Well, well, shrink that head of yours, Bill. Not only did I learn that no one did more than two plays with him a year, but I was not cast in either of the first two.

What was I to do? I suppose I could get an education, but that didn't seem like full-time work. After a time I did land the small role of the valet in Sartre's *No Exit*, which Kurt Reis was directing for the University College Players' Guild. As it happened *No Exit*, exited before it began. I don't recall why it was



cancelled. Perhaps a play about two lesbians trapped in hell was considered inappropriate for the Women's Union Theatre, the small attic theatre that was home for the UC Players.

Kurt Reis, then spelled with a C, was not to be denied, however. In January the university would hold a one-act play festival. The UC Players' entry for that year was a Tennessee Williams one act called *The Purification*. Kurt cast me in the showy role of Rosalio. Also in the play was a dynamic young actor who would later play the leads in my first directorial efforts, Ray Stancer. One can't help wondering. Had there been a National Theatre School in the fifties would Ray Stancer now be a world famous actor instead of a Toronto lawyer? He was an impressive talent. At any rate, my university theatre career had finally begun.

And, finally, Robert Gill cast me as Horatio in *Hamlet*, his final production of the year.

The production was a touch wooden and I'm not sure I helped bring it to life. I believe the *Globe and Mail* drama critic, Herbert Whitaker, described me as a "piping Horatio." People were beginning to wonder if Gill had lost his touch. But perhaps he had just lost that wonderful cohort of talented and determined actors from the post-war years. I was to do only one more play with Gill, Ferdinand in *The Tempest* the following year.

A solitary bachelor, constantly nervous with a perpetual shake and an ever present cigarette, Gill continued to be magnetic even as his talent retreated. I had known him when he was a major force in Toronto theatre, but now the sun was setting on a disappointing career. He died a few years later at the age of sixty-four, alone in his apartment, not discovered till some days after his death.

But if the production of *Hamlet* did nothing else, it introduced me to Catherine Cragg, who would eventually be my first wife. More than a foot shorter than I, Catherine was a second-year student playing a small role. Having been two years ahead of my class and several inches taller than I knew how to control, I was always impressed when an attractive woman found me desirable. They certainly had shown very little interest in high school. Catherine and I would be an item for the next four years.

One great advantage to academic life at U of T in the fifties was that we didn't have to work very hard. Or to be fair, we didn't have to work very hard until February or March. During the year there were essays of course, but no mid-term exams. Some of my brilliant colleagues in Jeanneret House boasted that they didn't "crack a book" until February. And then they went on to stand first in applied mathematics. We were able to get by by

going to lectures (sometimes), doing our essays, talking and listening and reading, but not really studying until spring. For me this meant an active life on campus, as actor, director, scene designer and builder, debater, and campus politician. And still able to do fairly well academically.

By 1956, my cousins had given up the Straw Hat Players, their summer theatre in Ontario cottage country, to focus their attention on the Crest Theatre, their resident professional theatre in Toronto. For reasons still unclear, the Crest has seldom been given its due credit as a major influence in the development of theatre in Canada, or Toronto at least. It operated from 1954 to 1966 with a full season of professional productions of a great range of plays. One comment from critic Nathan Cohen was that they never developed a unique purpose or style, a criticism which could be levelled at most of our current regional theatres. In some ways

ambition and hopes were higher in the fifties than they are now. At any rate, like regional theatres now, the Crest tried and did provide a broad range of dramatic fare. As the only professional theatre in the city, it took that to be its mandate.

The theatre building itself put the company at a disadvantage from the start. A converted cinema, the house was long and narrow. Audiences now are used to being much closer to the stage. By today's standards the audience numbers they needed were large indeed. The theatre seated 800 and the company needed 400 a night to break even, a number that would thrill many theatre managers in Canada now. Location was a further problem. Situated in a residential area far from downtown, not only were there no good restaurants nearby, but that area of the city was "dry." In "Toronto the Good" in the fifties, alcohol was hard to come by and in this area of the city, impossible. Anywhere in

Toronto in the fifties would be a challenging location. When we were playing at Hart House in downtown Toronto, getting a drink after the performance was only slightly easier than at the Crest. We had to rush to the Chez Paris and order food. Only then were we allowed a drink after 11 p.m. The only place worse in my theatre travels was Dundee, Scotland. In Dundee in the early sixties the pubs closed at 9 p.m. We had to drink at lunchtime. I recently finished reading Christopher Plummer's wonderful memoir, *In Spite of Myself*. He seemed to drink endlessly after performances. Things must have been different in Montreal and New York.

What a different business model the Crest was. When it began it was a stock company: not just in the sense that it presented a season of plays, but it was a private company owned by its stockholders. Subsidy for the arts was still something only communist governments did. Like any private company the

Crest hoped to make a profit. It never did. The deep pockets of the Davis family, derived from their tanning business in Newmarket, propped it up several times. When subsidies finally did become available in the sixties, its history as a family business limited its eligibility. I was in England when the project finally unravelled in the early sixties with none of the accolades it deserved. While Donald continued to have a terrific career as an actor, Murray never recovered. He did some voice teaching for me at the National Theatre School, but by and large he retired to his farm near Collingwood, Ontario.

But here I was, finally getting down to studying for my first year final exams at U of T and wondering what I would do for the long summer, much longer than a high school summer. My colleagues all seemed to have plans to make tons of money somewhere or develop their skills in some interesting internship, though that was not yet a

term in regular use. My cousins could no longer provide me with a play or two to do, and the undergraduates who were now running a summer company in Muskoka had not invited me to join them.

My father, bless him, said that I didn't need to have a job. He suggested I could develop a reading list and spend my summer quite productively. Yet it seemed *de rigueur* to have a job. And so, following my love for horse racing, I answered an ad and was hired by the newly opened Woodbine race track. The job turned out to be in the bowels of the building. I don't think I ever saw a horse. At any rate I was fired after a few weeks, my first, but not last, experience of being terminated. How do you tell people you have been fired? How do you go home in the middle of the day — I was living at the family home in King at the time — and explain that you are a failure? True, they fired half the staff that day and probably only hired us to



help get the new track open, but at age eighteen it was my first rejection since Jerry Campbell (female) stopped sitting with me on the school bus. And what was I to do now? Well, as it happened, rescue was at hand.

Ontario in the fifties was a hotbed of summer theatres. A new company was trying to revive Muskoka; Michael Sadlier was running the Peterborough Summer Theatre. There were companies or attempts at companies in Lindsay, Jackson's Point, Vineland, and, of course, Stratford. With the exception of Stratford they were all stock companies, putting on a season of plays normally for a week each for tourists and locals. A wonderful training ground for actors, directors, designers, and technicians, these companies were Canada's answer to the British rep system, both, sadly, long gone.

In 1956 John Pratt, formerly a performer with my cousins and later the mayor of

Dorval, Quebec, aimed to open a theatre on Centre Island. Well, it had something going for it. There was an abandoned cinema they could use and it was located in the large metropolis of Toronto. Well, sort of. The fact that you could only get to Centre Island by ferry was thought to be a pleasant summer outing for the hoped-for audience. I suppose it was for some, but driving to the harbour, walking a good distance, waiting for the ferry, and then walking a good distance at the other end may not have appealed to all theatregoers. The valiant attempt lasted only one summer.

My foray into the working world having been cut short, I jumped at their offer to be an apprentice in the new company. And so, moving back into my room at the Sir Daniel Wilson Residence for the summer, I began the regular treks to Centre Island to work under the mentorship of designer/builder Russ Waller. Many of the major actors in

Toronto worked in the company: Austin Willis, Kate Reid, Jack Creley. Andrew Allan directed some of the productions. Then in the twilight of his illustrious career, not that he was old, only that the world was passing him by, the great radio producer, Allan gave me my first but not last view of a director belittling an actor, embarrassing him in front of the company for no apparent reason other than the failure of his own career. "Are we going to do that again tomorrow night?" he would ask with withering sarcasm. John Clark, the victim in this case, was as far as I could see a talented young actor who was very kind to me and had done nothing to deserve such abuse. On the other side of the ledger I have nothing but praise and appreciation for Russ Waller. While I had been around theatre from an early age I really knew nothing about how it worked, how a play got on the stage. Russ taught me to build and paint scenery, to create and read a

ground plan, and to set up and strike a set, all skills that I would continue to use for the next few years.

Returning to university in the fall of 1956, once again I was not cast in either of the first two Robert Gill productions at Hart House. Was rejection becoming a way of life? I was able to continue my working relationship with Russ Waller who designed and built the set for the first Gill production that year, *Dark of the Moon*, and I began my relationship with Donald Sutherland as we both worked crew on the show and rattled the thunder sheet together. Academically, I enrolled in my philosophy major and joined a small group of University College philosophy students who would study together for the next three years. Among our number was the future leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada, a charming and thoughtful young man, Ed Broadbent. Ed was one of those

people who seemed to be genuinely interested in you.

But I was not to be denied as an actor in the fall of 1956. Kurt Reis cast me as the lead in Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*, a University College production that would play in Hart House Theatre when it was not being used for a Gill production. My role was challenging, that of a young dissolute doctor who is attracted to the uptight minister's daughter, wonderfully played in this case by Aileen Taylor who would later act in the first play I directed and work with me at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal. By the end of the play her character has become dissolute and mine respectable.

It would be so interesting if one could go back in time and see oneself in such an early work, or even to understand what one thought one was doing as an actor. Was I any good in this? I have no idea. I remember I thought I was pretty terrific when I came

offstage and felt the tension through all the muscles in my back. LAMDA (the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art) would later disabuse me of the notion that tension and good acting went together. In the play, my character, John, kisses three different women: the uptight spinster, Alma, a hot Spanish woman, Rosa, and his new young love, Lizzie. I am puzzled when I look back on this production for I dreaded these kissing scenes. From my current vantage point as an oversexed senior, I would give anything to go back and kiss those three attractive young women night after night. What was I thinking? The character clearly enjoyed these experiences. I was playing the character. Shouldn't I have enjoyed them also?

Recently I read William Shatner's memoir, *Up Till Now*, and he talks about his first sex scene in a movie and his terrible fear that he would get an erection. If it were me, I would be afraid I wouldn't get an erection. I mean,

wouldn't it be embarrassing to be rolling about with some lovely naked woman and to be seen not having any response at all? Alas, since I was not an actor during my romantic lead years I never had to deal with that issue.

The Method, the degree to which an actor identifies with a character or merely represents a character, was a heated topic in the fifties. Many of us thought that if Marlon Brando's inaudibility was a sign of the Method maybe we were better with John Gielgud's verse speaking. I don't know if I had really taken a position on this subject at the time, so when Nadine Ragus, who clearly had a position on the subject, playing the hot blooded Rosa thrust her tongue inside my mouth in a fervent French kiss, I didn't know how to react. The audience couldn't see our tongues. What was the point? But give me the chance to replay that scene now . . .

Was I afraid that if I enjoyed the kissing I would be disloyal to Cathy, my girlfriend at

the time? I know I hated it when she had to kiss someone on stage. Was I afraid I would be abusing the actors in a personal way if I enjoyed a sexual contact with them? Nadine's active tongue would seem to have absolved me of that guilt. Or was I just shy?

As they say, youth is wasted on the young.

But my career was soon to take an unexpected turn, leaving the kissing issue and other personal acting issues behind. David Stein, later known as the writer David Lewis Stein, had undertaken to direct a one-act play for the UC Players' Guild that would be entered in the same one-act play festival where we had done *Purification* the year before. David had worked with Kurt Reis on some of his productions and wanted to try his hand on his own, but feeling a need for someone with more acting experience he asked me to work with him to which I readily agreed. Directing was new to me and I was anxious to give it a shot.



Well, it's not strictly true that directing was new to me. At age twelve or fourteen I used to roll up my sleeves and act like a director when my younger cousins and I would present little plays to our uncles and aunts. We called ourselves the Ragged Shirt Players in counterpoint to our grown-up cousins, the Straw Hat Players.

Needing a play of a certain length I recommended *The Browning Version* by Terence Rattigan, a play in which I had played the young Taplow years before with the Straw Hat Players. Central to the play are the crotchety headmaster, Crocker-Harris, and his younger wife who is getting it on with a younger teacher. We had the good sense and good fortune to cast Ray Stancer and Aileen Taylor as the two leads. Casting Aileen may have been a bit of a cheat. I'm not sure she was actually registered as a student though she spent a lot of time on campus and could often be seen in the Arbor Room, the canteen

at Hart House, having coffee with Peter Gzowski, who was then editor of *The Varsity*. But, whatever, I learned an important lesson about directing. If you get the best actors at least half your work is done.

For whatever reasons David lost interest in the project as it went along and I became the sole director. I took to directing as a dog to a bone. I loved being in control; I loved the intellectual challenge and I discovered I had a good spatial sense. It was easy for me to create stage movement that was both natural and varied. The production was an unqualified success. Robert Gill said it was the best directed undergraduate production he had seen. Well, with that accolade what was I to do but become a director?

Gill did finally cast me one last time, in the final production of my second year, *The Tempest*, in which I played Ferdinand opposite Cathy's Miranda. Ferdinand is not an easy role and I'm not sure I did anything

with it other than convince myself and others that my decision to switch to directing might be a rather good idea. The surprising performance, to me at least, was Donald Sutherland's excellent performance as Stephano, surprising because so far as I was concerned he hadn't been much good in anything else I had seen him do. A raw talent, people would say. I agreed to the raw part. One day during tech rehearsal we were sitting together in the house and Donald said, "I know I can act." I was struck by his assurance since it would not be Donald Sutherland whom most of us would have predicted to become a successful actor. Ray Stancer, now the Toronto lawyer, more likely. But I have seen this self-assurance about acting a few times since, when a young person knows they will be a successful actor whatever anyone else may think. Brian Cox, perhaps. R.H. Thompson. Diane D'Aquila. I auditioned both Robert and Diane for the National Theatre School. I

figured I might as well accept them. They were going to be actors whatever I did.

Yet Sutherland's self-assurance at the time was belied by a conversation I had with him recently. Apparently he was not decided on his future; in fact he had dumped the question entirely in the lap of critic Herbert Whitaker. If Herbie gave him a good review he would be an actor, otherwise not. Well, the rest is history.

Campus life was to involve me in other ways throughout my four years. In 1957 I was asked to debate the proposition "Resolved that Faubus was right." Orval Faubus was the governor of Arkansas and stood on the front steps of a Little Rock High School to prevent African Americans from entering in accordance with the new civil rights laws. I think the debating society had been turned down by every potential debater in the college before they got to me. No one wanted to defend Faubus. I guess they had no trouble

getting people to take the opposition side, but no one would take the government position as the “pro” side in a debate. Well, why not? Attacking the proposition was just too easy so I agreed to defend the proposition. Debates at the college were set up like a mock parliament with those supporting the motion sitting on one side, both the debaters and the audience, and those opposing the motion sitting on the other. When I entered the hall it was packed. Everyone was sitting on the opposition side, no one, that is, no one, on our side, only the other poor sod who had also agreed to defend Faubus. I presented what I thought was a rather intelligent argument, that we had to define “right” from Faubus’s point of view, not our own, and went on to present a picture of life from that point of view and show that in those terms Faubus was “right.” After the official debate the floor was open to speakers from the audience, the audience crammed into one side of

the hall. Well, Stephen Lewis got up — yes, *that* Stephen Lewis, who later became leader on the Ontario New Democratic Party and Canada's ambassador to the United Nations. Eloquent as always, he proceeded to lambast me and my arguments and defend civil rights in general and African-Americans in particular.

In a strange way this debate prepared me for my future role on *The X-Files*. Confronted with the task of getting inside the head of a villain, or at the least a person whose views one finds abhorrent, what does one do? Somehow one has to see the world as they do; after all villains don't think they are villains. They believe in what they do. In this case, the debater, but later, the actor, has to construct a world view whereby their abhorrent actions seem logical and right. I used to have a lot of fun in later years explaining to fans that they completely misunderstood *The X-Files*. Didn't they see that Mulder was the

bad guy and my character was the hero? Stephen may have been blind to the irony of my argument, but that may be just as well. He has been a passionate defender of the downtrodden and the world is the better for it.

After *The Tempest* there was nothing for it but to study for final exams and finish all those half completed essays and wonder what I was going to do in the coming summer. To my surprise and pleasure I was invited to be the stage manager of yet another iteration of summer theatre in Port Carling, Muskoka. James (Jimmy) Hozack and L.C. Tobias had decided to give it a go. I guess Tobias had some money and Jimmy certainly had the experience. Jimmy Hozack was the delightfully ironic but greatly overweight business manager of Hart House Theatre. He worked closely with Robert Gill and Eleanor Beecroft who ran the box office. But more to the point he had been Business Manager of

the Straw Hats with my cousins for a number of years and was often credited with developing the audience. Jimmy's poster run for Straw Hat was legendary. Every week he would set out with the posters for the next production and take a couple of days to do what might have been done in a few hours. Gregarious, personal, and funny, Jimmy would stop and chat with all the merchants. The goodwill he created had a lot to do with the success of the company. He and Tobias might well succeed where the producers the previous summer had not.

And they might have succeeded had they been more frugal. They offered me sixty dollars a week, a pretty big step up from the twenty-five I made the year before. I was thrilled to make sixty bucks a week at that time, but I would have done it for less. I don't know what they paid the actors and directors, but I'm guessing it was more than



the market would bear as, in the end, they only did the one season.

The job of stage manager in summer stock at that time bears little relationship to what a stage manager does in a modern theatre. It was my job to build the scenery, a skill I had learned from working with Russ and likely the reason I was offered the job in the first place. But it was also my job to hang and focus the lights and operate the lighting board during performances. It was also my responsibility during performance to operate what we laughingly called the sound system and to manually operate the front curtain. Props and prompting, important in weekly stock, were generally handled by an ASM (Assistant Stage Manager) who had been in the rehearsals. I had not, at least not until the tech rehearsal.

The company performed in the Port Carling Town Hall, the same building that the Straw Hat Players had used for so many

years. The upper floor of the building was a long room with a flat floor and a stage with a curtain at one end. There was almost no wing space and certainly no control booth at the back as is now standard in most theatres. All technical operations were performed from the wings stage left. The lower floor was a large empty space that could be used for building and painting with two dressing rooms, one for men and one for women, on each side of the stairs that led up to the stage. There was no air conditioning, only a large fan that was far too loud to operate during the performance. The theatre itself was at street level which provided one advantage: in the case of a power failure a vehicle could be brought up to the back of the house and the headlights would illuminate the stage.

The resident director for the season was to be Leon Major. A brilliant, talented, intense, chain-smoking young man, Leon was the

first of what I liked to think of as the Big Three of undergraduate directors who went through University of Toronto at that time, the other two being Kurt Reis, still spelled with a C, and me. Kurt and Leon, both senior to me, were intense rivals, apparently despised each other, and had a low regard for each other's work. Leon went on to a very successful career, directing at Stratford, founding the Neptune Theatre in Halifax, being the Artistic Director of Toronto Arts Productions, now CentreStage, before becoming a highly regarded opera director in the United States. Kurt Reis went on to found his own acting studio and to act in film and television. William B. Davis became the Smoking Man.

The problem for me in the summer of 1957 was that I knew nothing about lighting, or even about electricity. I didn't know an ohm from a watt. Before I could undertake the job I needed a crash course in both electricity

and theatre lighting. Leon regularly worked with Wally Russell as his technical director and Wally agreed to bring me up to speed. By the time we moved to Port Carling I more or less had the skills that I would need for the summer.

Once again we were doing weekly stock, performing one play at night while rehearsing the next one during the day. The schedule was efficient and Leon was a master of it. On Tuesday, the first day of rehearsal, he would give the cast his cuts; there were always cuts, and he would block the play in one day. On Wednesday, they would work Act One, Thursday, Act Two, Friday, Act Three, a run-through on Saturday, and a tech and dress on Monday, opening Monday night. And none of this rehearsing from 10 until 6 as is common now. The rehearsal day would end by 3 p.m. so the cast had time for a swim and to learn lines. This was pretty much the schedule in weekly rep in Britain

when I began directing there a few years later.

From Leon I learned how a director can use a half inch ground plan and a bunch of sugar cubes to plan his production. If you are going to block a play in less than five hours you had better be well prepared. Leon would initial each sugar cube to represent each character and then work through the play moving the cubes to represent the physical movement of each character, noting each movement in his script, so that he could more or less dictate the moves at the first rehearsal. It's a useful technique, one that I adopted for several years. The director can work through many possible patterns in his study without wasting valuable rehearsal time. Of course, every once in a while, early in the blocking rehearsal, an actor might say, "Gee, I don't think I should go to the window on that line, I think I should go to the door." And she'll be right. After that one has to

improvise like the dickens. After directing thirty or forty productions, I found I didn't need the detailed prep; I had a repertoire in my head and could be more elastic in rehearsal.

An actor's time, both in rehearsal and outside rehearsal, had to be used to maximum efficiency in weekly rep, a requirement, alas, that seems quaint in today's theatre. Directors now are apt to spend days muddling through different blocking ideas. Amelia Hall, who was the director of Canada's longest running weekly stock company, the Canadian Repertory Theatre, writes in her memoir, *My Life Before Stratford*, how important it was to schedule the actor's rehearsal time and to keep strictly to that schedule. She was shocked once when she showed up for a rehearsal in another company at the appointed time and had to wait a whole hour! Only an hour? That would be timely in today's theatre. Of course, actors

now are so used to film when the actor's time is the least important consideration that we have become used to waiting not just for an hour, but many hours, sometimes even days.

Leon was a formidable note giver. He would perch on the stage, clipboard in hand, cigarette dangling from his mouth, ash everywhere, and tear off each page of delivered notes, crumpling the paper and tossing it over his shoulder. I am embarrassed to say I mimicked this technique sometime later. I guess I always tended to copy my heroes. In public school, the alpha male, Gar McGuinness, always walked with his head down. So, of course, I started to walk with my head down. If Leon threw his delivered notes over his shoulder, I guessed I should do the same.

In those days, directors normally designed their own lighting and Leon was no exception. It was my job to execute his design on a lighting board that not only predated

computers, it predated electronics. The large resistance dimmers were operated with cumbersome manual handles that could be linked together to create groupings of circuits. My long lanky limbs were often needed, legs included, to reach from one end of the board to the other. In between light cues, or sometimes at the same time, one would do sound cues, some manual and some recorded.

I'm astonished now to watch a technical rehearsal and see how a sound cue is a computer file triggered by a flick of the finger. In 1957, playing a recorded cue was more complicated. The cue, whether music or sound, would be somewhere on a 78 rpm disc. The specific point on the record would be marked with chalk. Before the cue was to be played, the operator, me, would set the needle of the record player on the cue point. One would then hold the record still and turn on the turntable so that it revolved underneath the



record without the record itself turning. At the precise moment when the cue was required the operator would release the record so that it would begin playing at correct speed and volume with no start-up sound.

This technique failed me only once. We were doing an old chestnut called *The Ghost Train*. The play, for me, was an elaborate dance as I moved from sound cues to the lighting board and back again, often using knees and feet to operate the board while simultaneously releasing a record. The climax of the play on which everything depended was the arrival of the ghost train itself as it lurched by, an effect created by light and sound. Especially sound. On the first night, everything was going swimmingly, not a cue missed. As we came to the climax I set up the record of the train; at the precise moment when the cue was required I released the record, and: Nothing! Not a sound. I have seldom been more embarrassed for

actors on a stage. What were they to do? Well, troupers that they were they pretended they had heard a train. I wanted to hide in the tiniest hole I could find but, no, I had to go on stage as I was also an actor in the piece who appeared after the train had gone through. I couldn't look my colleagues in the face. I was mortified.

The next day we fixed the amplifier and there were no further problems. But it was hard to hold my head up for quite a while.

Arch McDonald, a successful radio actor, and his partner, Celia Sutton, a costume designer, ran a summer lodge for show business people just outside Port Carling. Among the regular clientele were the great Canadian dancers Lois Smith and David and Laurence Adams. It was quite a grand place, it seemed to me, and these successful artists would lounge in front of the fireplace every night listening to Frank Sinatra records. Boring. We only listened to classical music.

Some of us from the Port Carling summer theatre company had room and board for the season at the Lodge, the men sharing small digs tucked under the verandah while the women shared real bedrooms inside the house. My roommate was the gay designer Wilf Pegg who always slept in the nude. Why was I not sharing with Cathy who was also in the company as an actor and ASM? Well, you might ask. Cathy had a room upstairs with one of the other actresses from the company. Unmarried men and women simply didn't live together in those days nor share bedrooms, publicly at least.

Still it was a great learning time for me and by the end of the summer, returning to university, I had no idea I would actually be running the company the next year.

## **New Frontiers**

1957. Spring. A young man's fancy turns to thoughts of . . . London, England. And some love along the way.

While New York was interesting, for a young Canadian theatre artist London, England, was Mecca in the late fifties. I was determined to go and in the spring of 1957 I somehow managed to arrange a two week trip. I have no idea how I found either the time or the money. I had all that studying to do for my summer theatre gig as a stage manager/electrician. Did I pay for the trip

myself from my earnings as a child actor, which were quite modest by today's standards — I was a radio actor, after all — or did my father foot the bill? However it was arranged, I was to fly there for two weeks and stay in a furnished flat in South Kensington, in the same building as Canadian actor Eric House, who was acting in *The Balcony* by Jean Genet.

But first there was Sherry. Sherry Grauer, now an established painter and sculptor, was the daughter of Dal Grauer, the head of BC Hydro. She lived in Vancouver and was my mother's goddaughter, if an atheist can have a goddaughter. She came to visit my mother in King in the spring of 1957. My goodness, she and I got on well. We talked and held hands and snuggled in the recreation room, nothing much more than that, but clearly we were both taken with each other. We figured out that if I travelled to London from Boston I could visit her on the way in Cambridge,

Massachusetts, where she was a student at Wellesley College, which was then, and still is, a college for women only.

My visit to Cambridge was quite lovely, and quite chaste. While we did roll around on the grass as I recall, and she did seem to like to cuddle, she confessed that she thought mingling tongues to be rather gross, though she used a more contemporary expression. A far cry from Nadine Ragus as Rosa Gonzales. In this situation I would have been a much more willing participant, but that was not to be. Nevertheless we had a great time talking about music and philosophy and travelling downtown in Boston wondering why we couldn't find Pak Street, our ears not having adjusted to the Boston accent before we finally discovered there is an *R* in Pak Street. Leaving her when I departed for London was quite emotional, not knowing when we would see each other again, and, for me,

wondering what all this meant for my relationship with Cathy.

Ahead of me though was a long propeller flight from Boston to London, with a stop at Shannon Airport in Ireland. In the fifties when one announced that one was going to London the reply invariably was “Oh, how nice, are you going by boat or are you flying?” — the implied suggestion being that boat was much the superior way. When was the last time you heard that question? The flight may have been long, but it was civilized. There was decent food and enough room in economy even for my long gangly legs. At Shannon Airport we were treated to complimentary Irish coffee, in other words, coffee laced with Irish whiskey. When I finally arrived, jet-lagged and exhausted, at my cousin Barbara Chilcott’s flat in London, Eric House was waiting. He cheerfully announced that if we hurried we could see the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace.

Unable to deny my thoughtful host, we spent the next hour hiking to the palace and standing watching parades of costumed people until I finally let slip, "I hate militarism." True enough, but probably not the right thing to say at the time and for years Eric never let me forget it. Eventually, we got to my new digs and I was able to begin my recovery and prepare for a whirlwind tour of London theatre.

And what a time it was to touch down in London. It was less than a year since John Osborne had, according to Alan Sillitoe, "not just contributed to British theatre but set off a landmine and blew most of it up . . ." with his play *Look Back in Anger*, which was still playing. Jean Genet's surrealist play set in a brothel, *The Balcony*, was playing at the Arts Theatre Club, so structured to avoid the still active British censor. And coincidentally, J.B. Priestley's play *The Glass Cage*, written for and performed by my cousins Murray



and Donald Davis and Barbara Chilcott, was playing at the Piccadilly, a large theatre just off Piccadilly Circus. Unfortunately a little too far off to catch much passing trade and the play had only a short run.

Of course one did the normal tourist things, going to St. Paul's and the Tower, the galleries, and the amazing new Royal Festival Hall. But what was most astonishing to a young theatre person from Toronto was the long list of thirty or forty plays all being presented in the city at the same time. Heck, one could just decide of a Wednesday, say, I'd like to go to see a play tonight, and have one's pick of comedies, dramas, musicals, or classics. In Toronto one was lucky if there was one professional production to be seen, never mind a choice.

I must have been a very obvious tourist, much as I tried not to be. I couldn't walk through Piccadilly Circus or Trafalgar Square without an enterprising photographer taking

my picture and trying to sell it to me. And London taxis everywhere. Rather than figure out the city's complex geography, I would just hop in a cab and ask to be taken to whatever theatre I had chosen for that night. My constant worry with this system was that one day the driver would simply take me across the road and wonder why I hadn't walked. Oh, did I mention that I was, and still am, a constant worrier? Restaurants were a puzzle. One would walk into a restaurant and be told to sit anywhere, but all the tables were occupied, and, no, not by Banquo's ghost, but by real live diners. It seemed the idea that one would have a table to oneself was a North American indulgence that a crowded city still recovering from a brutal war could not afford. Forget about a good cup of coffee or a hamburger. Get used to plain cooking and miniscule portions of meat. But I loved it all. I was at the centre of the world. Curiously, when I returned to

London three years later to study at LAMDA, not one photographer tried to sell me my picture, not even on my first day. What were the signs, I wonder, that revealed my transition from tourist to student?

The evenings I spent with Eric back at our digs after the theatre were an unexpected bonus on this trip. We had long discussions about theatre and life. He was really old at the time. Well, thirty-five seemed pretty old to both of us. He asked me about my love life, though he didn't share information about his, which, I gathered from my mother who had been his confidante, was quite, well, complicated. When I told him about Cathy and Sherry, he asked me who I preferred. I told him Sherry, but of course I married Cathy. For a smart guy I'm not always the brightest light in my own universe.

When it was time to return to Canada I dressed as usual in my sports jacket, tie, and flannels and prepared for the long flight

back. How I was seen in Boston and London gave a good indication of the importance of my native Canada on the international scene. In Boston people said, "Oh, going home to England, are you?" In London they said, "Oh, going home to America, are you?" To Americans I seemed English and to the English I seemed American. Still, near invisibility was to have its advantages. When I returned to England to study and then to work no visa was necessary. I was a "British subject" and entitled to study, work, and even vote in the Motherland.

## **Moving Ahead**

I suppose one needs to explain that in those days, one's academic life was constructed in years, not in credits. In third year one took third year courses, and most of those were prescribed by the major that one had selected. If one failed second year one didn't move into third year. The current system of student-selected credits was far in the future. As a result, our small group of philosophy students which included Ed Broadbent and me, as well as a young woman whose name I don't recall who always topped the class,

continued together for this year and the next. And results were still posted as a standing. Ed and I were generally tied for first among the second tier with only the unnamed woman being in the first tier.

As I entered third year there were to be two major changes in my life: I was now a director, not an actor, and I became much more involved in campus politics. I was elected by my housemates to be president of Jeanneret House and was therefore a member of the Sir Daniel Wilson Residence Council, neither position particularly taxing. More challenging was being asked to take a leading role in designing a constitution for the merger of the University College Literary and Athletic Society with the University College Women's Union. Strange as it may seem now, while the college was completely coeducational, it had two separate governing bodies for student activities, one male and one female. It was our job to develop a new

constitution for the merged organization and present it to the student body for approval. It all happened, the new governance body retaining the name University College Literary and Athletic Society, and that spring I was elected to be the first president of the new organization for the academic year to follow, a source of some satisfaction after my humiliating defeat when I ran for Head Boy at Aurora High School.

I was also to become at least marginally involved in real politics. Stimulated by Stephen Lewis and Gerry Caplan in particular, my good friend Bill Tepperman and I became increasingly interested in the CCF, the political party of the left that later became the New Democratic Party of Canada. Not that we did a lot, but we went to some rallies and helped to get out the vote on election day in March 1957, though we were both too young to vote ourselves, the voting age being twenty-one at the time. We had the good fortune to meet

M.J. Coldwell, one of the great leaders of the movement, at Stephen's family's home, and the misfortune to be at their home that day in March 1958 when Progressive Conservative leader John Diefenbaker swept the country. Stephen's father, David Lewis, who would later become leader of the federal New Democrats, turned to his son Stephen and said in all sincerity, "Not in my lifetime, but in yours." As it happens it's not looking good for Stephen's lifetime either.

Fortunately, for me at any rate, my theatre career was looking a good deal more promising than my life in the world of real politics. I directed one more one-act play for the tiny Women's Union Theatre, *The Creditor* by Strindberg, which was also presented in the festival of one acts at Hart House. Fred Euringer bemoans in his memoir, *A Fly on the Curtain*, that my production, rather than his, was awarded first prize by Amelia Hall, the adjudicator. My memory, since



confirmed, is that the festival was noncompetitive at that time. Still, Millie must have liked it. Fred goes on to describe the bizarre private adjudication that took place in Donald Sutherland's very bohemian apartment.

I tried my hand at production management and set design for the UC Follies, the annual musical revue presented by University College in Hart House Theatre. But more important was my first opportunity to direct a full length play. Each year University College and St. Michael's College combined forces to rent space in Hart House and present a major production. The previous year it had been Kurt Reis's production of *Summer and Smoke* with me as an actor; this year I was invited to direct. We chose the showy, emotional, domestic drama *A Hatful of Rain* by Michael Gazzo, which I had seen in London the previous spring. Originally created through a series of actors' improvisations, the play, while somewhat

melodramatic, is highly actable. Following my first lesson in directing, I once again chose the best actors, in this case Ray Stancer again, Maureen Fox, and Colin Hamilton. The three of them did a great job and we all got excellent reviews. Ray and Maureen would go on to play Willy and Linda in Gill's production of *Death of a Salesman* the following year. From there, to the great disappointment of us all, Ray went on to law school. Colin went to Los Angeles and so far as I know has made a living as an actor if not as a star. I don't know what happened to Maureen, who was just as talented.

As you read this you might ask, "Where are the women?" You would have a point. During this period there were almost no female directors, certainly none at U of T. What were women's ambitions at the time? What were men's expectations of women's ambitions? I remember being at a party with Cathy when one enterprising young man

decided to conduct a survey. He asked each of the women why they were attending university. It's hard to believe now, but at the time no one thought it a strange question. And, of course, it didn't occur to anyone to ask the men the same question. If you can believe this, a common answer was they wanted to be educated so they would be more interesting for their educated husbands. How embarrassing is that?

Cathy and I had been what would now be called 'dating' for nearly two years. And how did we do that? Cathy lived at home with her widowed mother and brother and I lived in a men's residence. Sometimes Cathy would be home alone and we could make out in the living room, all the while listening for the front door to open. Making out consisted of little more than rolling about with our tops off, but still one didn't want to suddenly look up and find her mother in the doorway. My residence presented other opportunities and

challenges. Quite simply, we were not permitted female visitors. Quite simply, we had them anyway. The drill went something like this: since the only entrance was through the front door of the house and since one then had to walk past the door to the common room, the resident would enter the house with his female companion, leave her for a moment in the vestibule while he closed the door to the common room, to the envious stares of the less fortunate young men who had only each other's company for the evening, and then lead one's companion to one's room and close the door. Leaving was easier as one could go down the back stairs and out the fire door. Of course once in the bedroom with the door closed pretty much anything could happen, provided one wasn't too noisy. Some of the older students likely went 'all the way,' others 'saved themselves for marriage.' Eventually Cathy and I lost our

virginities but, my, we took a long time getting there.

It seemed that many of my friends and housemates were getting married or engaged at least. Cathy and I got along very well, but it was a decidedly calm relationship. If she was passionate about me she kept it well hidden, and me, well I questioned the whole notion of romantic love. It's odd to say, but it seemed that I either had to break up with her or propose to her. I couldn't think of a good reason to break up with her so I proposed. And she accepted. We agreed to marry the next year after she had graduated and shortly before I would. Goodness knows what my mother thought of all this. I don't think she ever thought Cathy was the right woman for me, but when she said, "I think you should just live with her," given the era, one thought she was being rhetorical. Unh-unh. She was serious, but not practical. Even

if my mother could have handled it, Cathy's family could not. Times have changed.

It did however become acceptable to have intercourse if one were engaged, to just jump the gun a bit, as it were. I don't know if I knew that when I proposed, but I was glad to discover it after. Later, when the marriage was struggling and I went to the great William Blatz for counselling, he said that he didn't think I would have married her if I hadn't slept with her before the wedding. I still wonder if I heard that right. The Sixties were a great divide in sexual relationships and we were clearly still on the other side. Blatz also said if we divorced I would have a permanent scar. Well, perhaps I do, alongside the scars from my other two divorces, to say nothing of the bruises from the relationships that broke up without my having been married. Scarred and bruised, that's me.

But in the winter of 1958, still innocent of the coming indignities, I had a phone call

from a student at Victoria College, Karl Jafary. I don't recall if I had met Karl before that call but he had a proposition to suggest and could we meet to discuss. We did, and born of that discussion was a summer theatre company that we ran together for the next four years. I never asked Karl why he came to me with his proposal. Perhaps in the arrogance of youth it never occurred to me that there could be any other choice. In any event, his proposal was that he and I take over the summer theatre in Port Carling, where I had been stage manager the year before, and a child actor many years before that. Karl had some management experience and by now I had technical experience; we would run the operation together, but supervise our own areas of expertise, such as they were. I would also get to direct at least three productions and would act if necessary. Sounded like a plan to me and so we began what would become the Revived Straw Hat

Players, my cousins graciously allowing us to use the name.

Launching a theatre company is similar in many ways to what I can only imagine giving birth must be like. It's really easy to start the process; the process, once started, is long, painful, and challenging; the rewards are never really appreciated because the result takes so much work; and years later it is easy to forget it was so hard and do it all over again. It wasn't until 1972 that I was to do it again, in Lennoxville, Quebec, but I vowed after that, never again. Somehow in 1991 I imagined that starting a theatre school would be easier than starting a theatre company. It wasn't.

How did we solve all the obstacles between us and opening night? I don't know, but somehow we did, all the while writing essays and studying for exams, and in my case writing a new constitution for the student governing body. We adopted a pretty simple



business model. We looked at all the numbers for past seasons in Port Carling and budgeted to the lowest revenue year, which happened to be the year before Hozack and Tobias. Gill helped us with planning and showed us how to begin the season with small cast plays, grow to larger plays in mid-season, and shrink again at the end. As usual we would be doing eight or nine plays in weekly rep. Somehow we obtained the lease for the theatre, the Port Carling Town Hall, raised some capital with help from my father, and formed a company, Davis-Jaffary Productions Inc., with further help from my father. Since I was too young at age twenty to be the director of a company in Ontario in 1958, the "Davis" in the name had to be my father rather than I. Since Karl was two years older than I, his name was legal.

Selling program advertising space was to be a major source of financing. Karl made a first attempt to sell space on a trip to Port

Carling in the winter. Have I mentioned that Port Carling is a summer tourist town? Karl found most of the businesses closed; the merchants were all curling. Undeterred, Karl and I made a trip together in the spring, confident that in a day or so we could make the necessary sales. What a disappointing day. Either no one was home or no one was buying. Discouraged for the future of our unborn company we were driving out of town late in the afternoon when we saw the sign for an insurance agent, Frances J. Day. What the heck, let's give it a shot. Mr. Day was a charming older man who invited us into his office and faster than you can say "Straw Hat Players," bought a full page in our program. By the time we got back to the car we were in hysterics. This lovely man had saved our season. For years we only had to say the words "Frances J. Day" to each other and we would break into hysterical laughter and tears of relief.

For the season we were able to assemble a terrific group of young actors and some very good directors. In the company were Judy McLeod, Fred Euringer, Mary (later Mia) Anderson, John Saxton, Julianna Gianelli, John Douglas, and William Brydon, with a guest performance from Donald Sutherland in *Harvey*. My cousin Donald Davis directed the opening play, *Castle in the Air*, and his brother Murray directed *Born Yesterday* and *Papa Is All*, which I acted in. I directed *The Voice of the Turtle*, *Miranda*, and *Every Bed Is Narrow*. Amelia Hall directed *Harvey*.

Largely drawn from the undergraduate acting pool, they were a unique and talented group. John Douglas, struggling to maintain his upper-class lifestyle on our meagre salaries, pouring himself the weakest Scotches that could still retain the name and not be called water, became a writer and Executive Producer of radio drama for CBC. John Saxton was a wonderful actor, but too tall, at

least for me. I am, or was, six foot three and was always used to looking down at people. John was six foot four. How could I direct someone I had to look up to? I had no experience of looking up at someone and as soon as I bent my head back to look up I lost all authority. "Sure, John, whatever you say, yes, do that, by all means." John Saxton turned his talents more to writing before dying at the young age of fifty-six. Judy McLeod was our beautiful ingenue playing leads in *Voice of the Turtle* and *Born Yesterday*, but, so far as I know, never pursued the career for which she was uniquely suited. Fred Euringer — stern, Germanic, and a little intimidating — had played many leads for Gill at Hart House, and after a short career with Stratford and Canadian Players went on to head the Drama Department at Queen's University in Kingston. Cathy was also in the company in a combined production and acting position.

Once again we were able to obtain accommodation for most of the company in Eden Lodge, Celia Sutton's refuge for artists on Lake Rosseau. Regrettably there was a developing tension between the poor, young, and working artists — our group — and the more affluent vacationing artists; the arrangement was not repeated the following year. And still, true to the time, Cathy and I had accommodations two floors apart though since I did not have a roommate this time visits were easier to arrange. Well, somewhat easier. Our hosts did not approve of that sort of thing.

Birthing a theatre company is fraught with problems and, like a parent, years later I have forgotten most of them. But our first performance at Britannia Hotel was truly memorable. Karl had a family connection to the Huntsville area and a contact with a luxury hotel on Lake of Bays. He was able to organize that we would play there every second

Monday night. Sounds pretty simple and the plan certainly helped our bottom line. But think of it. We closed a play on Saturday night. We opened the next one on Tuesday. And in between we went to Britannia Hotel, over an hour away, set up and performed and struck the play that would open on Tuesday. Our schedule was something like this: Saturday night strike play one; Sunday, set up and light play two; Monday, tech rehearse play two, strike key elements, load in truck, drive to Britannia, set up and brief tech, perform, strike, drink in the bar, drive back; Tuesday, begin rehearsal for play three and open play two in Port Carling.

Our first venture at the Britannia Hotel was my first production of that first season, *The Voice of the Turtle* by John Van Druten, with Fred Euringer and Judy McLeod. The single set has a living room filling the main stage and two smaller rooms at each side. We resolved the problem of the additional

rooms at Britannia by small platforms at the front of the stage, one on each side. It was a scramble to get everything as ready as possible, but once the show began the nightmare unfolded. While some of the technical glitches were apparent only to the actors — misplaced props, phones that didn't ring, once an actor entered one of the small rooms at the side, flicked on the light switch and the light for the opposite room came on — it was no longer possible to hide our lack of preparedness. And when the two actors entered the other side room and the platform collapsed, well, what can I say? Fred and Judy were troupers and made the best of it. But clearly the night is etched in Fred's memory as he writes of it in his memoir. During my career as a director only one night's technical cock-ups exceeded the torment of this one: the opening night of *Two for the Seesaw* in Chesterfield, UK, with Donald Sutherland and Jackie Burroughs. Fortunately, no real

damage was done and we continued our regular performances at Britannia for the next four summers.

Would such a company be possible now? I doubt it. For one thing, our idea of a small cast play was five actors though occasionally we did a three-hander and once we did a two-hander. But a cast of eight or ten would not be unusual. Recent seasons at the Vancouver Playhouse often feature at least two solo performances, a couple of two-handers, and maybe a huge cast of four, not counting the one musical a year. For another, the talented actors we were able to employ would not now be undergraduates at a liberal arts university. For better or worse, they would be students in professional acting schools or making lots of money as juvenile actors on television and film. And then there is Equity.

Canadian Actors' Equity Association is the actors' union, an organization I strongly support, and yet . . . operating under current



rules, our fledgling company would not have been possible. As I have said, we structured our costs to meet the lowest likely revenue. Had we paid people what they deserved we would have lasted only one season, as our predecessors had, and been considerably in debt ourselves at the end of it. Equity in Canada was in its infancy at this time and as our seasons progressed we had more and more issues with them, but so far as I recall we were ignored at the beginning. We had no other unions to deal with. Karl and I were as likely to be driving the truck or building the sets as anyone else. We distributed the likely revenue equitably. Everyone except apprentices received the same salary.

Critical to theatre companies of the time was the Acting ASM, who also acted. The job allowed the company to have a larger cast — small parts have to be filled somehow — and the job was a great opportunity for a young actor to learn by watching other actors as

well as discovering how the production side works. For the budding stage manager, the job allowed the person to really feel what it's like to be the actor on stage. It was a win-win situation for everyone. Now forbidden by Equity rules, its loss is a greater handicap than modern performers realize.

Low tuition fees were also in our favour. While some of our company had just graduated, others would be returning to university in the fall, Karl and I included. I don't believe being in our company cost anyone money. I think they were all paid enough to survive, as long as the drinks were very, very thin, but no one could save for their next year's fees. But in the fifties, university tuition was quite modest, as it should be. I should admit that most of our company came from middle-class backgrounds and had some family support. The exception to the rule was Bill Brydon, who drove a cab for a living when he wasn't acting in plays. Bill was a terrific

talent and went on to a good career in New York. And Ray Stancer reminded me recently that he turned us down; he needed to earn real money in his summer vacations from university.

And, believe it or not, we made a small profit. We repaid my father's loan with a little left over. And I'm sure we could have gone on making a little money each year if our ambitions hadn't grown with our success.

## **New Challenges**

Flushed with our success, or survival at least, we made plans to expand for our next season. But first we had to continue with our sideline activity, getting an education. And then there were the sidelines to the sideline: being president of the University College student council, serving on a small committee planning a new Student Union building, a major production to direct, and getting married in January. And this was the year I was kidnapped.

Once again University College combined with St. Michael's College to present a full length play in Hart House Theatre. No one seemed to find it odd that the most secular college was working with the most religious college. And once again I was invited to direct. Looking for a play that would take advantage of the large number of interested and talented women, we settled on *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman. The play is set in a boarding school for girls run by two single women who are accused by one of the students of being lesbians. In the temper of the times such an accusation proves catastrophic, forces the school to close, and one of the teachers to believe that deep down perhaps she did love her colleague 'in that way.' She finds the shame so overwhelming that she kills herself. Based on a true story, I don't recall anyone in 1959 feeling that the play was dated or melodramatic.

This was my seventh production as a director, and I was still just twenty. The accomplished actors I had been able to cast and turn loose in previous productions had either graduated or were working with Gill in his productions. I had to find less experienced but hopefully talented performers that I could mould into a coherent whole. Eventually we found a strong cast that included Jan Hughes as one of the teachers and Nancy Keeling (later Nancy Helwig) as the wild child. But most interesting to me was a young woman with a dark mysterious quality who had caught my eye the year before when we did *A Hatful of Rain*. Sylvia, the daughter of a noted Catholic philosopher, was to be a producer of the show, but she was also ideal for the role of the other teacher. I cast her in the part and my life into danger.

Planning this production coincided with planning my marriage to Cathy, to say nothing of planning a Student Union building

and an expanded theatre company. The wedding, a relatively small event, was scheduled for January, to be followed by a short honeymoon in Montreal. Time was limited; Cathy, having graduated, was now working for a publishing company, and I was soon to start rehearsals for *The Children's Hour*.

In January, shortly after my twenty-first birthday, we wed. I have to say this about one's own weddings. They really are fun. I had a wonderful time on all three of my wedding days. It's the days, months, and years that follow that are the difficulty. For the honeymoon we flew from Malton Airport — we would call it Pearson or Toronto International now — to Montreal and stayed at the Ritz-Carlton on Sherbrooke Street. As I recall, it seemed to take forever to get from the Montreal airport to the hotel, the area highways not yet having been built. Maybe I just couldn't wait to have legal, legitimate sex. But I would have to wait even longer. Tired

and probably nervous, Cathy asked if we could wait until morning to consummate our marriage. We got along well for the three days but, left alone and not part of some other activity, we really didn't have a lot to talk about, something I recall about my second honeymoon as well.

When we returned from Montreal we settled into our new apartment, well, rather old apartment actually, but new to us, off Danforth. I had never lived off campus before and while other commuters told me how lucky I was to be so close, just one streetcar ride away, it was not the same as being right in the middle of things. My father had given us a new 1959 Volkswagen Beetle as a wedding present, which Cathy used to get to work. Domestic life was peaceful enough but we had to get used to the novel idea of our working lives being completely separate. One less thing to share and gossip about.



I don't know when I decided I was in love with Sylvia. I imagine it was during rehearsals for *The Children's Hour* which followed all too closely after marrying Cathy. Still, there was nothing to be done about it but suffer poetic longing; not only was I married but Sylvia was Catholic, very Catholic, and the Church would never recognize a divorce if it came to that. If the timing had been slightly different, would I have called off the wedding? Would Sylvia and I have married? Who knows?

Whatever the personal vibrations, we did manage a pretty good production of the Hellman play. On the day after opening, I came downstairs, anxious as usual about reviews. Cathy had been up and gone to work but she left the *Globe and Mail* open for me on the dining room table, a picture of me beside the notice. Herbert Whittaker, Toronto's lead reviewer, gave me a rave; he had seen me grow up as a child actor, but for him I had found

my place. In his eyes as well as mine I was a theatre director. Just turned twenty-one, my place in the universe was confirmed. How much of Herbie's enthusiasm had to do with my apparent skill as a director or his lack of enthusiasm for my acting, I don't know to this day. He was a kind, oblique man, and reading between his lines was a constant concern for theatre professionals at the time. What could never be doubted was his devotion to theatre in Canada and the people in it.

Karl and I had decided we wanted to expand our Revived Straw Hat Players. Driving the desire as much as anything was the need to get out of weekly rep, to give ourselves at least two weeks' rehearsal for each play. Since the market in Port Carling clearly would not support a two-week run, the only way to get two weeks' rehearsal was to have a second location and a second company so that each company could play one week in

each place, rehearsing their next play all the while. And so we began negotiations with Michael Sadlier to take over the Peterborough Summer Theatre. A television producer, Sadlier, the first husband of Canadian actress Kate Reid, was a pleasant, sophisticated man. He had been running the theatre for some years, quite successfully we believed, but now seemed ready to give it up. Why we never knew, possibly because Kate had given him up. He was very cooperative and offered to do several things for us as well as sign a contract with us. Unfortunately, he never did any of them until Karl wrote him a scathing letter months later and we at least got the contract we needed.

Much more helpful was the editor of the *Peterborough Examiner*, the minor Canadian author Robertson Davies. I say minor, as *Fifth Business* was still well in the future; as his wife Brenda would say, Rob didn't really blossom until he was sixty, giving hope

to late bloomers the world over. I first met Rob when he directed *Ten Nights in the Barroom* for the original Straw Hat Players when I was in my teens. A kindly man, I remember his only comment to me when he finally figured out who was singing flat during a full company song, "Are you comfortable in that tenor part?" While we were never able to persuade Rob to direct for us, Brenda did an excellent job in his stead, and Rob helped us integrate into the Peterborough community.

Through Rob we were able to make contact with a local women's association, yes, they still had those in 1959. They were a volunteer organization that would turn out to be quite helpful to us. The chairperson took an interest in me personally and promised to introduce me to some of the 'young marrieds' in the town. 'Young marrieds? Good God, is that what I am?' Few of those introductions actually happened, which is just as well as I

didn't remain a 'young married' for very long.

Meantime, I was grappling with issues of logic and philosophy, writing essays, chairing the student council, and planning a Student Union building. I had a call one afternoon asking me to come over to *The Varsity* offices, *The Varsity* being the university newspaper. Imagining a lovely article about me in the next issue, I approached *The Varsity* building at the appointed time, only to be grabbed by two burly young men who dragged me into a waiting car and spirited me out of town. What the hell is going on? I'm being kidnapped!

I was taken to a farmhouse in the country, locked in a living room, and told I would remain there until their demands were met. Who knows what their demands were, of that I have no recollection. I'm pleased to report that I wasn't tortured. It seems that an undergraduate organization was capturing

some key campus figures in pursuit of some goal, or perhaps just publicity. Given free rein of the farmhouse, I was treated well and allowed a phone call or two to explain where I was, but still, they held me for a couple of days before returning me to the city. University pranks usually consisted of taking down the goal posts after a football game, or water fights in residence, or panty raids on the women's residences, but kidnapping was new territory. It wasn't the brutality of the occasion or even the restraint that was challenging for me, it was two days of enforced idleness. I'm a busy person. I have things to do. I can't just sit around and do nothing for two days. Finally I gave in to the experience. I remember it with a certain fondness and did not pursue charges against my jailers as I imagine I could have.

But soon it was back to the real world, finish the year, pass the exams and put together season 2 of the Revived Straw Hat Players.

Now we would have two companies who would alternate between Peterborough, playing in the same school auditorium that Sadlier's company had used, and Port Carling, still in the Town Hall. The company in Port Carling would play each Monday night at Britannia and we began a search for a Monday location for the company when it was in Peterborough, finally settling on the small town of Cobourg. Now we needed two of nearly everything, acting company, technical staff, front-of-house staff, scenery, lights, residences for the company, etc. And we needed a way to transport the companies and the sets between the different locations. Here we made a decision that would come back to haunt us. We bought a used five-ton truck which we affectionately named Behemoth. I still owned the 1949 Mercury that I had originally bought with three other residents of Jeanneret House and over time took advantage of their various financial

hardships to buy each of them out. Now that Cathy and I had the Volkswagen I donated the Merc to be the company car, a decision that sounded much better than it turned out to be.

Partly because of the numbers required and partly because we were becoming more ambitious, we needed to widen our search for actors and directors beyond the University of Toronto campus. Over the next three summers our acting companies included Gordon Pinsent, Nancy Kerr, Eleanor Beecroft, Colin Hamilton, Judy Sinclair, David Renton, Ted Follows, Dawn Greenhalgh, Nancy Helwig, Beverly Mackay, Timothy Findley, Fred Euringer, Mia Anderson, Jamie Mainprize, and Jackie Burroughs. Directors included Peter Dearing, Ron Hartman, Brenda Davies, Fred Euringer, George McCowan, and Hugh Webster, as well as me. As experienced professional actors came in to audition it usually took them a few



moments to realize that this young kid inviting them in was actually the Artistic Director and not simply the casting assistant.

Helping us in Peterborough was David Helwig, the slim, wiry intellect who would later marry Nancy Keeling and become a successful writer. I was in awe of his exam writing technique. Once I was sitting near him in one of the large examination halls where we were assembled to write final exams. I imagine on this occasion I was writing a philosophy exam and he would have been writing an English exam. No sooner had I read the questions — usually there were five for a two-and-a-half-hour exam — than I began scribbling frantically hoping to impress my professor with my wide grasp of the subject. Occasionally I would look over at David. He was doing nothing. Looking off into space perhaps, making a note or two. Finally he would write for a few minutes and then repeat the process. What was he doing

in those long idle moments? Thinking. What a novel idea during an exam. For two and a half hours I wrote incessantly while David actually took time, a lot of time, to think. He consistently topped his class in Honours English. For the next two summers we were fortunate to have him apply his remarkable brain to an array of problems, including housing and publicity.

Not only did we need to find living arrangements in Peterborough, but we had to find new ones in Port Carling; it seems we had outstayed our welcome at Eden Lodge. Karl located a house in Peterborough where many of the company stayed. In Port Carling some of us found a small cottage on the water near the centre of town. Hard to believe if one goes to Port Carling now, as the area is built up with commercial enterprises. But it was great to be on the water; we could swim in our brief breaks, or sometimes swim just to wake up after working late into the night

building scenery or lighting or whatever. In Peterborough I shared a bedroom in the company house with Cathy who, now ensconced in the real working world, would come to Peterborough on weekends.

Just in case you are imagining this company through a modern lens, let me disabuse you of certain images such as a staff, offices, workshops, dressing rooms, vehicles that could be relied on to run when they were needed, and other desirable accoutrements of a professional theatre. Of course, there were places where these things were done, where the books were kept, the actors got dressed, and the sets got built, but all was makeshift. With the exception of the actors, everyone else played many parts; I might direct one play, stage-manage another, design and focus lights, build sets for another, etc., etc. I don't think I ever drove Behemoth but I did most everything else except front of house at one time or another. Oh

yes, and I played the lead in *The Mousetrap*. Well, who else could play it, the character arrives on skis.

But of all the things we should have had and didn't have, likely the most important was air conditioning. Not until our final season in Peterborough, when we converted the upper floor of the Empress Hotel in Peterborough into a theatre, did we have air conditioning. And summers in southern Ontario could be hot. It was not unusual for the temperature in the Port Carling Town Hall to reach ninety degrees Fahrenheit. The only way we could moderate the temperature at all was to open all the doors and windows and run a large fan, but the fan, being noisy, had to be turned off during the actual performance. And opening the doors would sometimes attract bats which would swoop over the shrieking terrified audience. Our Business Manager, Peter Hicks, became quite accomplished at hitting and killing bats

with a broom, always to a generous round of applause.

The weather had to be just right for us to have a successful season. If it was too sunny and hot people stayed at their cottages. If it was too cold and rainy people stayed in the city. We needed Goldilocks weather; it had to be just right, not too hot, not too cold — and just a little cloudy.

Yet we survived all that. Travel was our Achilles' heel. In hindsight we should have spent the extra money and rented a truck and a car, rather than using Behemoth and my old Mercury, Gwendolyn by name. It was still acceptable in the fifties to give one's cars women's names. Behemoth was indeed large enough to load the full set of one play and transport it to the other location where it was unloaded and the set for the other play loaded and brought to the first location. Problem was, Behemoth frequently broke down. Trust me, there was no time in our

schedule for breakdowns, no time to shop around for an inexpensive repair, and if another truck had to be rented in the middle of the night, well, so be it. As for the car which was used for poster runs and business trips as well as transporting actors from one location to another, the Mercury didn't do much better. I was in the middle of rehearsal one afternoon in Peterborough when one of our assistants who had been doing a poster run came into the rehearsal hall and handed me the gear shift. He thought it was the funniest thing that had ever happened. I didn't.

Keeping to a 1959 lens, remember that we had no cell phones, internet, or email. The only way the location in Port Carling could communicate with the one in Peterborough or vice versa was by long distance telephone, which was expensive. And with unreliable transportation communication was doubly important. We dealt with this by a series of codes posted beside the telephone in each

theatre. One forgets how archaic the telephone system of the time must seem to a modern reader. It was not possible to direct dial any long distance call. All calls other than local calls had to be placed with a real live operator. There were two types of calls one could make, station-to-station or person-to-person. There was only a charge if the call was actually completed. In a station-to-station call the charge began as soon as the call was answered at the other end. But in a person-to-person call the operator would ask for the person designated by the caller. If that person did not come to the phone there would be no charge. We made all our calls person-to-person and they were never completed. For instance a person-to-person call for John Driver meant 'Has the truck left yet?' The answer might be, 'He's around somewhere but I can't find him,' i.e., they are still loading the truck, or 'He left an hour ago,' meaning the truck was on its way.

We had similar codes for informing the other theatre how large the house was or other matters of interest. I doubt if we fooled the operators, but they indulged us and we were not charged for the calls.

But I had another more serious problem to deal with. Not only was it unwise of me to marry at so young an age, it was becoming increasingly clear to me that Cathy was not the right woman. It might have been easier for me if I could have faulted Cathy about something, anything. But she was a really good person, intelligent, warm-hearted, and peaceful. We weren't incompatible. The issues were mine, not hers; I just wasn't ready to be married. But I feel badly for Cathy, as she *was* ready to be married. Worse, I didn't know how to get out of it nor was I completely certain that I should. Still haunted by Sylvia and becoming increasingly attracted to yet another leading lady, Nancy Kerr, I just stopped tending the relationship, hoping



perhaps that it would go away. It was easy enough to hide behind my busy schedule, but Cathy wasn't fooled and one day she just up and went back to the city with emotional support from David Helwig who writes about the incident in his memoir, *The Names of Things*. It would take a few more months for the marriage to fully unravel, but the stitching was coming undone.

Had my confidence in marriage been affected by my parents' marriage? I don't recall the year, but one fateful evening while I was at university I returned unannounced to the family home in King to find my parents in an intense emotional scene. Now, in my family an intense emotional scene did not involve yelling and throwing things. In fact, at first glance nothing was amiss. They were both sitting in their usual places, my mother on the couch and my father in his armchair. However it soon became apparent that they both had consumed even more alcohol than

usual and the topic of discussion was their marriage and the wreck it had become. Whether a result of their discretion or my myopia, I had no idea their marriage was in trouble. In truth, I am not sure I had ever given the matter much thought.

But I was to give it a lot of thought on that long night, for once I was in the house they each took a turn, a long turn, to unburden all their frustrations on me. I was to learn many things that night: that the marriage had been a shell for years kept together for the sake of the children; that my father thought my mother had had an affair with Blatz years before while he was away in the army; that my father had not been involved with "any wenches," that my father still loved my mother but she did not love him, that my mother loved the first ten years of the marriage but that it had gone to pieces after the war, that my father had become such a severe alcoholic she feared for a house fire

from his chain smoking, that my father had been asked to leave his law firm for drinking, that my mother had been having an affair with a good friend of the family but the man's wife had put a stop to it, and that my mother wanted a divorce but my father wouldn't give her one or any money if she left.

Almost as surprising as my parents' pain was my innocence of that pain. How could I not have known or at least suspected? Was I just so engrossed in my own life and career that I had paid no attention to the people closest to me? Or were their performances as normal husband and wife so perfect as to defy detection? Whatever the past, the future was changed irrevocably both in their relationship to each other and to me. Although my father and I soon retreated behind a comfortable superficiality, my mother and I were to be much more candid with each other for the rest of her life.

But what were they to do? If all this had happened forty years later I expect my mother would have divorced my father, taken fifty percent of the assets and lived comfortably in Toronto, possibly keeping the summer cottage in Muskoka. But family law was less mature in the late fifties and my father could indeed say that if she left she could take little with her. I don't believe he said this to be cruel; he loved her so much he would do whatever he could to keep her. At my suggestion, or so I like to remember it, a compromise was reached. My mother would rent an apartment in the city — she was working at the Institute of Child Study — and spend three or four nights a week there, returning to King on the weekends. Was the compromise sufficient? It solved many problems, a degree of independence for my mother while allowing her to keep her place in King, which she loved, and a continuity and public face for my father. It is hard to imagine how my

father would have coped if he had been left completely alone.

## **What's Next?**

Something strange happened in the fall of 1959. I was an out-of-work theatre director. Having graduated the previous spring and been immediately immersed in the summer season, I was now for the first time in my life confronted with no set plan. When the season closed I returned to the flat that I shared now rather hesitantly with Cathy and looked for work. Fortunately it wasn't long in coming. I was asked to direct two productions at the university, this time with pay. I acted in one play at the Crest and did the lighting

design for another. Combined with my father's generosity — he gave each of us a small allowance for two years after graduation to help us get started — I had enough income to make ends meet and enough artistic challenges to keep growing.

First up was a production of *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller for University College and St. Michael's College. Once again the large number of female roles influenced the choice of play and indeed we found a strong female cast including Nancy Keeling (Helwig) as Mary Warren, Kathleen Kelly as Rebecca Nurse, and to my personal risk yet again, Sylvia as Elizabeth Proctor. Casting the men was more challenging. We decided to bend the rules a bit and cast a graduate, James Mainprize, as Danforth, but we still couldn't find a Proctor, the central male role. Somehow we stumbled on Ken Pogue, a powerful young actor in the city, who had been working with some bizarre European director who

was developing a new form of theatre, which to this day no one has heard of. Eager to join us, Ken was perfect for the role and did a terrific job.

The acting technique known as the Method, or at least Lee Strasberg's version of it, confounded by a now outdated sense of Freudian psychology, had so glorified the personal emotional release of the actor that the ability and willingness of an actor to cry on stage has become the sine qua non of the actor's toolkit. Not so for Ken Pogue. Years after we did *The Crucible* I directed him as Jamie in *A Long Day's Journey into Night* at the Neptune Theatre in Halifax. Decades after that I bumped into a very sozzled Ken Pogue at an agency party where Ken was still fuming about another actor in that production from decades earlier. "He cried at the wrong time!" he kept shouting. And so he likely did, rendering it impossible for Ken to play his role truthfully.



Over the fairly long rehearsal period in the fall of 1959, all pretense between Sylvia and me dropped away. We were in love, or so we believed. My flirtation with Nancy Kerr in the summer had not been enough to shake me out of the marriage, but my feelings for Sylvia certainly were. And so, one night I moved out and drove Gwendolyn to the family home in King, leaving Cathy the Volkswagen. My mother expressed remarkably little surprise at my arrival in King. Never one to interfere in my life, she was, nonetheless, a careful observer. Of course, Sylvia and I knew our relationship was a non-starter and I imagine we were drawn together more intensely by the very forces that held us apart. It is likely no accident that *West Side Story* was my favourite musical at the time.

How *does* one deal with the tension between romantic and married love? We pretend they are the same thing, but we know they are not. We imagine that romantic love

will flow into married love and never resurface. But we know it does. And not with the original partner. I remember as a teenager reading the comic strip, *Mary Worth*, when she gives wise counsel to a young couple, "Marriage is a year of joy and a lifetime of contentment." But what if one wants more than a lifetime of contentment? Perhaps I dreaded that outcome as much as my parents' tortuous relationship. At any rate, I left the marriage and rented a furnished apartment in the north end of the city until Cathy and I could sort out our separation, after which I rented an unfurnished, more centrally located apartment.

Meanwhile we continued rehearsing and finally opening what we believed was a dynamic production of *The Crucible* and possibly my best work yet. So excited were we about what we had achieved that Sylvia and I stayed up all night to get the *Globe and Mail* review in the morning. We parked outside

her residence at St. Joseph's College, making out in the car, more or less, and waiting for morning. Need I remind you that the residences of the time were all separated by gender and visitors of the opposite sex were not allowed, particularly in the Catholic residence? Herbert Whittaker had raved about my last two productions; he would have trouble finding the superlatives for this one. Wrong. To our astonishment he didn't much like it. He found my production overwrought, possibly even melodramatic. Whether he was right or not I still don't know, but now, when least expected, I had my first taste of harsh criticism. Rereading his review now I discover that he actually liked some of my work on the play, but in my typical fashion I remembered only the negatives. *The Varsity* gave us a rave, but until researching this book I had forgotten that altogether.

Until Nathan Cohen burst on the scene as the critic for the *Toronto Star*, Herbert Whitaker was the only major drama critic in the city. Rose MacDonald wrote for *The Telegram*, but it was to Herbie that the profession turned and on whom we relied. Balding, with large horn rimmed glasses, Herbie was a slim, modest man. A bachelor, possibly a well hidden homosexual, he didn't drive; out of town theatre companies had to provide his transportation. As a director and designer himself there was always an apparent conflict of interest. But I believe he was more compromised by what he felt to be his higher calling, the promotion and growth of theatre in Canada. He often tailored his reviews to that end and we were left wondering what he really thought. He had watched me start out as a boy actor and turn to directing as a young man. He thought that was where I should be. I know that because he told me so years later; he would have been even more

surprised than I by my later fame as a television actor. Maybe my first two university productions weren't so great as all that, but he wanted to encourage me down this path. Now, by the time I did *The Crucible* and was firmly established as a director it was time to start guiding my career. I mean, who really knows? It was always a guessing game. What did Herbie mean? With Nathan Cohen there was no such ambiguity. He hated everything. Well, almost. Fortunately, Cohen didn't review *The Crucible* or I might have given up the theatre right then.

But there was little opportunity to lick my wounds. It was time to prepare the next university production, an original musical, *Katy Cruel* by David Helwig with music by Michael Rasminsky. Mike was a talented musician who went on to a successful career in medicine. During auditions, Mike would give each candidate an ear test; he would play a few notes and they would be expected to sing

them afterward. To my horror, he kept threatening to give me the test. Ever since my discomfort with 'that tenor part' in *Ten Nights in a Barroom* I knew that singing on key was a challenge for me. Interestingly, when I met Mike some thirty odd years later while I was playing in *Copenhagen* at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal he had no recollection of the ear test issue, clearly a light-hearted banter for him but a deep-seated threat to me.

With *West Side Story* and *Threepenny Opera* fresh in our minds, many of us thought that musical theatre had turned a corner, that the serious, dramatic musical would replace the light Broadway and West End musicals of the period. It was in this hoped-for new tradition that we thought *Katy Cruel* would fit. Based on a folk song, *Katy Cruel* was the story of a vagabond woman whose arrival in a traditional East Coast fishing village wreaks havoc on the

community. According to *The Varsity*, “. . . under the direction of Bill Davis . . . [the company] brought to the stage a thing of great beauty, brilliance of production and, in short, a work of art.” The major dailies were positive as well.

Alas, the serious musical has never really emerged. Yes, in the nineties came the big blockbuster musicals with dramatic stories, but they are more in the tradition of nineteenth century melodrama than the human drama of *West Side Story* or the social comment of *Oh, What a Lovely War!* In any event, I did not proceed much farther along this path. My next musical would be a British pantomime.

Probably out of sympathy, my cousin Murray offered me the small role of one of the ancient firemen in Pinero's play *The Schoolmistress*, at the Crest. Originally Murray was to direct it himself but for some reason he passed the main duties on to Jean Roberts,

who had been a production manager and would later head CBC Television Drama. She and her partner, Marigold Charlesworth, had been running the Red Barn summer theatre in Jacksons Point, Ontario, on Lake Simcoe. On the first day, before the rehearsal began, cast members kept coming up to Jean and asking her if she was nervous, it being one of her first productions as director. And she kept admitting that she was. I was astonished. It had never occurred to me to be nervous on the first day of rehearsals. Opening night, yes, but on the first day? But even if I had been nervous I certainly would never have admitted it. But perhaps, at least at that time, a male director had to be the alpha, but a female could have a different relationship with the cast. We had all read Moss Hart's book, *Act One*, in which he argued that a director should never admit to a mistake. Of course, that's a mistake in itself, but the odd thing is, it didn't seem so at the time.



My part was so small I was not often in rehearsal, but one day Murray was giving notes and talked about the difference between farce and burlesque, a speech I wish had been heard by many other directors whose work I have seen. In burlesque, Murray said, the actor is commenting on the character while in farce the actor is working from the truth of the character and extending it. In short, one is artificial and one is real. I repeated that mantra many times in the years following. His other excellent note was that pace is the illusion of speed, not speed itself. We have all seen plays that go so fast that we have no idea what is going on. The result is boring and to the audience slow. It may be that the production has to be a bit slower so that it pulls the audience along and feels much faster. I have never been a fan of the Italian rehearsal, where actors run lines at double time. Saying lines without thinking is a pitfall actors need to avoid, not seek out. A

play speeding along on automatic pilot is not what an audience pays good money to see.

The other fireman in *The Schoolmistress* was Bill Frederick, an accomplished working actor. While Bill would later establish himself as a documentary producer under the name Bill Whitehead, he is perhaps better known for his role as the life partner of the novelist Timothy Findley. Tiff, as Findley was nicknamed, started life as an actor, and a good one, but between his alcoholism and his raging homosexuality — he even grabbed my privates one night at a party — his early life was challenging, erratic, and likely dangerous. To the amazement of us all, one day he married Janet Reid, a talented actress noted for her promiscuity. The marriage lasted about a day. I remember Tiff saying some time later, “If everyone knew it was such a bad idea, why didn’t someone say something?” But two things changed Tiff’s life dramatically: writing and Bill Whitehead.

Bill put aside his own career to manage Tiff's; Tiff became an award-winning novelist and respected man of letters until he died in his early seventies. Without Bill, who knows what would have become of Timothy Findley.

It was during the run of *The Schoolmistress* that the wheels were put in motion for my divorce from Cathy. Meantime, my relationship with Sylvia was gathering momentum and we began to face its harsh realities. Since I had been married and since the Catholic Church did not recognize divorce, the only way we could ever marry was through a curious loophole known as the Pauline Privilege. If I were to become a Catholic my first marriage could be annulled on the grounds that I was not in a 'state of grace' at that time. I guess it's a tribute to the power of love that a person who had found acceptance at university on the basis of his nonbelief would actually consider converting

to Catholicism. Of course, Catholics all over Quebec and France now simply live together without marrying, but that was not an option in 1960, particularly when the Catholic woman is the daughter of an internationally known Catholic philosopher.

But perhaps someone who could find arguments to defend Orval Faubus and the Smoking Man on *The X-Files* could also develop an argument to defend the Catholic religion, and so I began to 'take instruction' from a priest who Sylvia recommended. I'm not sure I had more than one meeting with the kindly gentleman before I found excuses not to continue for the time being. There are various ways to avoid the clutches of organized religion. Mine turned out to be to move to England.

I had one more theatrical assignment before the next Straw Hat season. I had been designing the lights for all the productions I directed and even when reviews might be

mixed for my directing, they were universally favourable for my lighting. So one day I persuaded my cousin Murray to let me design the lights for a production at the Crest. Murray was happy to give me a shot provided no fee was expected. To my great pleasure the play I designed was *The Seagull* by Chekhov. It was directed by the British director Roysten Morley with a spectacular cast: Charmion King as Arkadina, Bill Job as Treplev, Powys Thomas as Sorin, Mervyn Blake as Dorn, and a young actress out of Carnegie Tech, Martha Buhs, as Nina. Martha soon changed her name to Martha Henry and went on to become the grand doyenne of the Canadian theatre.

There are plays I was involved with during this period that I have no memory of, even plays that I directed, but my recall of this production is vivid to this day. Was it as good a production as I remember? I think so. When Mervyn “Butch” Blake as Dorn

brought Trigorin down to the front of the stage at the end of the play and gave the famous line, "The truth is, Konstantin has shot himself," the effect was breathtaking. There were wonderful opportunities for lights, and writing in the *Star*, or was it the *Telegram*, Mavor Moore complimented me on my "Rembrandtesque lighting."

An interesting lesson for a young director. The first rehearsal I attended was a late run-through. I thought it was terrific and I was especially affected by the final scene between Treplev and Nina. It was strong, emotional, and deeply moving, to me at least. Not apparently to Roysten Morley, the director. He was incensed. How could they wreck his production like that? He went on and on expressing his deep disappointment, not at this point to the actors — I don't know what he said to the actors — but to anyone in the vicinity who would listen. I was astonished. I would have been thrilled to have actors bring

such truth and life to a scene in one of my productions. Why was he so upset?

Only years later did a glimmer of light penetrate this strange event. I was an assistant director at the National Theatre of Great Britain, assigned to Michael Elliott's production of *Miss Julie* with Maggie Smith and Albert Finney. Once again there was an amazing rehearsal, an electric scene between Maggie and Albie. And once again the director was somehow unsatisfied. Michael's approach was different: he didn't stomp about in the foyer; he took a slow puff on his cheroot, sat down with his actors, and talked for *two days*. These two directors were not looking for good acting. They expected good acting. They were looking for acting that expressed the truth of the play as they understood it. It was the director's job to guide the actors to that truth. It was not their job to help them be good actors. That was the actor's job.

Looking back years later on that scene in *The Seagull* I can only guess what the issue might have been. I have directed the play since, at Bishops' University — with Christine Fleming (now Shipton), later head of drama programming for CanWest, as Nina — and debated the play with colleagues for years. The ultimate question seems to be, is the story upbeat or downbeat? Is Nina beginning a road to recovery, beginning to see her goals as modest but genuine, or is she on a downward spiral, gradually losing her mind? My guess is that Roysten wanted the former and Martha was playing the latter. And that while I was deeply moved by Nina's plight in the rehearsal I saw, Treplev would not likely proceed to kill himself. He needs to see that she has "found her path" and he has not. And so, wonderful though that performance was, the play did not 'work.'

Each moment in a good play has to lead inexorably to the next. The connection can be



obscure, indirect, and unexpected, but it has to be there. If not, the story becomes arbitrary, a manipulation of the audience by the writer. If there is no coherence in the preceding action the actor in a stage play, at any rate, cannot respond with truth. This is not to say the result might not be successful with the audience. I still hear people say, “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man” was their favourite *X-Files* episode, a work of arbitrary manipulation if there ever was one. But then, perhaps I viewed that episode through an old-fashioned twentieth-century lens, looking for logic where none was intended.

It was all very well to spend my first year after graduation hanging about the university campus doing undergraduate productions and summer stock in the summer, but where was I actually going with my life and career? The idea of actually going to drama school was gradually seeping into my consciousness. The great English directors all

seemed to come out of Oxford or Cambridge; why would I go to theatre school? Still, Nancy Kerr kept talking about her experience at LAMDA and she seemed to have some notions about the rights and wrongs of acting that I was not aware of. Truth to tell, I really didn't know a lot about acting. When I had done it, it was more by instinct than technique. And Murray had studied privately with Iris Warren who was the voice teacher at LAMDA; he raved about her. LAMDA had a one year program for advanced students, specializing in the classics. Maybe that would be a good way for me, as a young director, to learn more about acting and the actor's process to help me be a better director. At this stage in my life I had no intention of being an actor. Of course, my real motivation might have been to escape the mess I had made of my personal life.

And so an audition was arranged in the apartment of Leonard Crainford, LAMDA's

Canadian agent, and, serendipitously, someone we had been talking to about working for our summer company. I did my two pieces for him and we talked about my goals. He assumed I didn't expect "the top marks in acting" but seemed happy to recommend me. With my application, I wrote a cover letter to the Principal, Michael MacOwan, telling him about myself and that I had been involved in the theatre for ten years. When he read that and then noticed that I was only twenty-one he wrote back saying, "I'm afraid I laughed a little." I still don't see what was funny about that.

But there was still one more season of Straw Hat to do before embarking for England and before that there was another quick trip to New York. There is always theatre to see in New York, but the additional attraction was that Sylvia had returned to her home in the suburb of Yonkers after finishing her school year. So we hung about the big

city for a few days, though naturally she returned to the family home each night. I was staying in a hotel on the edge of Central Park and one night around midnight after seeing Sylvia home I decided to go for a walk in the park. I mean, why not? It was a nice night. The next day I told Sylvia about my pleasant walk in Central Park the previous night. Her reaction: "You did what?! You went where?" How was I to know, naive Canadian boy that I was, that Central Park in 1959 was no place to venture unarmed in the middle of the night? I had a nice walk.

Here's a sign of the times. I remember being in Sylvia's apartment, which she shared with two friends. For some reason the conversation turned to the French Riviera and the fact that, astonishingly, some women wore bikinis on the beach in France. To the surprise of her friends, Sylvia said if she were there she might even wear one herself. I

remember thinking she looked pretty hot in her black one piece. A bikini. Imagine.

As for the Straw Hat Players, by our third season we were no longer simply a group of undergraduates doing theatre in the summer. We had become a professional company and while still skewed to the young, we began to hire more seasoned performers and directors. Of course with the two companies we needed more performers than in our first year and it seemed that the pool of undergraduates was less strong now — or were we just more ambitious? At any rate our 1960 company included several performers who went on to establish stellar careers: Gordon Pinsent, Nancy Kerr, David White who became David Renton, and Jackie Burroughs, to name four. Professional directors included Alan Nunn, Ron Hartman, and Peter Dearing.

My first directing assignment of the season was *The Glass Menagerie*, the Tennessee

Williams classic poetic drama about a Southern family fallen on hard times. Eleanor Beecroft played Amanda, the domineering mother whose sole aim in life is to find a husband for her shy, handicapped daughter. Eleanor's day job was box office manager at Hart House, but she frequently trod the boards and she provided us with some needed maturity. Kathleen Kelly from the university played the retiring daughter, Laura; Robert Graham, the brother and narrator, Tom; and a talented young actor from Newfoundland via Winnipeg, Gordon Pinsent, played the Gentleman Caller. Gordon was a delight to work with, responding well to being coached to an interpretation perhaps different from what he had originally imagined. All the performances were strong, but the famous gentleman caller scene was the feature element, thanks largely to Gordon's truthful playing of a man who is almost entirely artificial.

Travel continued to be a major issue. By this, our third season, we now had two separate production centres with four or five productions being mounted in each location. A play would open in one location, play a week, and then move to the second location. At the end of the week's run in the second location that same company would open their next play, run for a week, and then move back to the first location. And so the acting companies would move every two weeks, while the business and production teams would remain in one location for the season. Simple in principle, there always seemed to be exceptions requiring late, even all night, trips back and forth between Port Carling and Peterborough, a drive of roughly two hours. We used to clock our times, but the Volkswagens that Karl and I each drove were no match for Jamie Mainprize's Citroën whose record time was never challenged. Young as we were, night vision was never a

problem, but staying awake while driving was. We all had different techniques. Nick Ayre, a stage manager, said that he could stay awake as long as he kept eating, his girth a testament to his technique. Driving without a shoe on the right foot was supposed to allow the vibration of the engine to pass through to the driver. Getting out and walking around the car every few miles was the last resort. And always, smoke, smoke, smoke.

Sylvia was around for some of the summer. I don't recall whether she had any official position, except possibly as the consort of the Artistic Director. I remember her being at the Peterborough cottage and swimming in her sexy black one piece. Alas, no bikinis in those days. Meantime, our relationship was heating up and yet being forced into some kind of resolution since I would be leaving for England in the fall. By this time I had given up on the notion of converting to



Catholicism. But the challenge of keeping the season going left little time for personal reflection or discussion.

The season ended, and everyone had returned to their regular homes. One or two of us were still in Port Carling cleaning up the last bits and pieces when I had a phone message to call Sylvia who was now back in New York. I don't remember how I got the message; the company phones had been disconnected. But somehow I found myself in the phone booth beside the town hall — its theatre life having been disbanded for the season — and soon I was listening to Sylvia telling me that her period was late, that she was sick in the mornings, that she was pretty sure she was pregnant. Worse news would have been hard to imagine. Of course we hadn't used contraceptives. She was Catholic. We had been very careful about timing, but there had been one night when I felt the timing would be a bit risky, but Sylvia had

said she thought it would be fine. Not to blame her at all — I was fully complicit — but if I were Erica on the CBC show *Being Erica* I would go back in time and relive that night. What could we do? Marriage was truly not an option; I was divorced and she was Catholic. Would I have wanted to marry if we could have? Maybe. Would I want to marry and have a child at that stage in my life? I don't think so. Abortion was also not an option. Catholic, remember? And still illegal. Many discussions followed, the best thought being that perhaps she could come to England and have the baby there and put it up for adoption. And with that cloud hanging over me, I headed off to London to start a new life. More or less.

## **The Worst Line — Ever**

An actor's job is to bring little black marks to life. Unless it is a secret *X-Files* script, in which case the little marks are in red so they can't be photocopied. But whatever the colour, the marks represent words written by a dramatist. When the words are beautifully written by a great playwright the words seem to fly unbidden from the actor. It is as if the scene is playing itself and the actor is merely a conduit. But what if the words are bad? What if they lack motivation, relevance, and truth? What does an actor do then?

Dame Edith Evans had one solution. If you don't understand a line, say it loud. You know what? This works, on stage at least. Faced with a lousy line actors are tempted to mumble their way through it, but this tactic only serves to telegraph their embarrassment to the audience. Speaking the line with authority and volume assures the audience that you know what you are saying even if they don't. Instead of the actor looking stupid the audience member feels stupid.

Every actor has had to deal with some truly awful lines, lines where asking for motivation draws the classical quip, "Your paycheck." Recently I was playing a character in a movie who has been chained up in a basement all his life by his brother because when released he kills people. One night he is unwittingly released by a group of teenagers. After killing as many of them as possible he is shot by his brother. As he lies dying he looks his brother in the eye and says,

“I love you.” These words did not fly unbidden from this actor.

The worst line I have ever had to deliver was not written down, but nevertheless had to be said at the right time in the right place. To understand the context one has to imagine another time, another century. But no, this was not a piece of period theatre, but an actual event in Ontario, Canada, in 1960. Yet the customs and mores of that time are passing strange to a modern audience.

For instance, I had recently married and soon came to wish I hadn't. So why had I married? Well, because in 1959, in middle-class Toronto, sexual relations outside of marriage or the promise of marriage were very hard to come by, no pun intended. And living together was unheard of. And so relationships that nowadays would have a limited lifespan often turned into marriages in 1960. But not only was marriage a too necessary choice, it was a much more binding

choice than it is today. Divorce was even harder to come by than premarital sex. No mere waiting through a period of separation, no claims of incompatibility. There had to be *adultery*. But since adultery is almost impossible to prove there actually had to be faked adultery in order to prove that there had been adultery. I hope you are following this. But if you think divorce was hard to get in Ontario, it was ten times worse in Quebec. Divorce had to be approved by the Senate. Do I need to remind you again this is not a period drama? This is the story of my life.

Here is the story. My mother had a friend who was trying to get a Quebec divorce and I was trying to get an Ontario divorce. My mother had the bright idea that we could be 'co-respondents' for each other, co-respondent being the term for the participant in the alleged adultery. Despite the fact that Marjorie, my mother's friend, was ten or fifteen years older than I, she was an attractive

woman and illicit sex with an older woman didn't seem such a bad idea to a randy twenty-one-year-old. Alas, it soon became clear that sex, illicit or otherwise, was not on the agenda, but only the appearance of illicit sex.

To satisfy the divorce courts an elaborate drama had to be played out. At the time I was playing the ancient fireman in *The Schoolmistress*, a farce by Arthur Wing Pinero, at the Crest Theatre. Trust me, there was more truth in my performance of an eighty-year-old man in a farce than there was in the drama to follow. After the performance, following the instructions I had been given, I went to my mother's apartment. When I arrived, Marjorie, my co-respondent, was there. And so was my mother, another friend, and a bottle of champagne. After a short visit my mother and her friend left and Marjorie and I were alone in the apartment. With the champagne.

Following instructions again, we closed all the curtains in the apartment and turned down the lights. We poured ourselves some champagne, sat in the semi dark, and talked. After a time, still following our instructions, we changed into night clothes. I don't know about your adulterous affairs but putting on pyjamas seemed odd to me. Still, we changed and messed up the bed, poured some more champagne, and continued our conversation.

At this point a detective was supposed to bang on the door. But how was he to get to the door? Of course, he was supposed to break into the building and surprise us. But this being a modern apartment building with a locked front door and a buzzer system it was deemed advisable to bypass this step. And so, after a time, the buzzer in the apartment buzzed. I pressed the button, released the front door, and returned to the bedroom as if nothing had happened. We waited in the dark.



Finally, there was a knock on the door. If you were in flagrante with your mistress, would you open the door? However, following this script written by lawyers and detectives, I did open the door. In the hall was a detective in a suit and another man with a large camera. And now I had to say the line that to this day sticks in my throat to think of it.

“Is my wife with you?”

If, in real life, that's what you would have said in that situation, you understand this script much better than I. Bad dramatic writing manipulates a script for audience impact without regard for truth. Well, this line did everything required of it for its audience in court. It made clear that I was doing something illicit and that I was afraid my wife would find out. That no one in that circumstance would actually say that didn't matter.

But to continue the story. At this point the detective (hired by Marjorie and me but ostensibly employed by our spouses, since their lawyers would savage us with the evidence) entered the apartment. The photographer took pictures of us, in pyjamas no less, and of the messed up bed, and of the half-empty champagne bottle. The detective informed me, that on seeing this state of affairs — no pun intended — he would have to report to my wife. The business of the evening thus being concluded, the detective, the photographer, Marjorie, and I sat down and finished the champagne.



## PART THREE

## LAMDA

Truth to tell, I hadn't planned on starting a new life when I went to England. My intention was to spend a year at theatre school in London, return to Canada on the Easter break to prepare the next Straw Hat season, and then move back to Canada in the summer. Karl and I had arranged that he would look after the beginning of the next summer season, we would overlap in the middle, and I would be in charge for the last part of the season.

London in 1960. A joke going around England at the time involved explaining British politics to an American tourist. “We have a Labour Party, which you could call ‘socialist.’ And we have a Conservative Party, which you would call ‘socialist.’” Today the joke might go something like this: “In Britain we have a Tory Party, which you would call ‘conservative,’ and a Labour Party, which you would call ‘conservative.’” In the years between World War II and Margaret Thatcher, England may have been a fairly poor country in relative terms, but as well as being culturally vibrant, it was remarkably egalitarian. Despite a top income tax rate of 96%, the wealthy continued to work and to live well, while a sense of reasonable economic equality contributed to a collective sense of community. Money was appreciated but not flaunted. When I asked my future father-in-law why he didn’t drive a high-end automobile, which he could afford, he replied

that it wouldn't look good to the staff of the department store that he owned.

Education was heavily subsidized. Most students accepted to the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, for instance, were able to get grants from their county that covered both tuition and living costs. Working-class kids like Albert Finney and Harold Pinter were able to go to the best drama schools. Theatres and concert halls always had cheap seats that most could afford — 'in the gods,' maybe, but accessible to most of the population. Of course all this has changed. Britain now has one of the lowest income tax rates in the world, high tuition costs, and the greatest inequality in the developed world. Thanks, Margaret. And then David Cameron tripled tuition fees and savaged the remainder of the welfare state.

There were highly organized services for finding living accommodation and inexpensive transit to get to them. The

accommodations themselves were very modest by current standards. Many people, and certainly most students, lived in rooms or bedsits, single rooms with tiny kitchen facilities and shared bathrooms. The rooms and bedsits were usually in large city houses that had been broken up into small units. Everything was rented; there was no such thing as a condominium. Fortunately, I had a slight leg up. Not only did I have my father's allowance for one more year, but I had a grant from the recently formed Canada Council for the Arts. I was able to obtain a small flat close to the school in Earl's Court. A walkup over a law office, it had a small kitchen and eating area, a bathroom, and a living/bedroom. I don't think it ever occurred to me or any of my fellow students to notice that we didn't have televisions or even radios.

The school itself was in a large house at the corner of Earl's Court Road and Cromwell

Road, a corner that was being widened when I was there, a process that took the entire year to complete. In quaint English fashion, the address was Tower House, Cromwell Road. No number. The main floor held two studios, one for scene work and a larger one for movement. The second floor had more classrooms or studios and a green room or lounge, while the top floor was given over to offices and the elocution side of the business where the real money was made. In the basement were change and locker rooms. Two blocks away was a small proscenium theatre, which was later converted into an exciting, modern theatre with a convertible arena-style stage not unlike Stratford, Ontario, though much smaller and more intimate. A few years later I was fortunate to direct two productions in the new theatre.

The premises may have been modest, but the faculty was stellar. In 1960 the school was a couple of years past its prime, but



strong nevertheless. Past its prime because the truly great teachers were doing less of what they were truly great at and the Principal, Michael MacOwan, had more off days than on. Norman Ayrton was a brilliant movement teacher, but, unfortunately, preferred to direct, and while he may have been an able *metteur en scène* he was not a very inspiring teaching director. The great Iris Warren was still the amazing voice teacher she had been for some years, but now delegated more and more of her classes to her young assistant, Kristin Linklater. Eventually, when released from the shadow of Iris, Kristin would become the gold standard in voice instruction in North America, but for now she would do the legwork all week and Iris would come in on Fridays and do miracles. But for jewels in the faculty it would be hard to beat Bertram Joseph and Ronald Fuller, misfits both except in a drama school.

Bertram Joseph, on the faculty of Bristol University at the time, made a lifelong study of how Elizabethan actors acted. Since no descriptions of Elizabethan acting have survived, if there ever were any, his work had to be entirely inferential. For instance he would find records of how the rhetoricians spoke, sometimes saying things like “unlike the actors,” whereby he put together a pretty good idea of what an actor of the time did. Ronald Fuller, looking for all the world like the classical cliché of an old professor, had made a study of what it was like to live in certain historical periods, especially Elizabethan. Not perhaps of great academic interest, his work brought the Elizabethan world to life for young actors. And finally, there was the amazing Brian Way who taught improvisation. Another misfit — Brian had been jailed during the war as a conscientious objector — he is well known for his innovative work in theatre for children, but less well known for

his contribution to actor training through improvisation.

One hears about theatre schools where, on the first day, the Director tells the nervous first year students to look to the left and look to the right and then says, 'Only one of you will be here at the end of the program.' Well, here we were, a large group of new and senior students, listening to Michael MacOwan who seemed even more nervous than us. And what did he say to us? I remember it to this day. "If you weren't talented you wouldn't be here." "Relax . . . be happy." "You don't have to prove yourself," and other words to that effect. Our collective sigh of relief filled the room and informed the rest of our time at the school.

Theatre schools differ in many ways, but one of the most significant hinges on this elementary principle: are the students to be made to feel comfortable and encouraged to grow, or are they to be challenged, broken

down, and rebuilt? Perhaps inspired by that initial first day at LAMDA I have always espoused the former and been suspicious of the latter. There was a time at my own school in Vancouver, Canada, the William Davis Centre for Actors' Study, when we seemed to be a reclamation centre, putting together unfortunate former students from another academy in the city, whose personal confidence had been battered and mutilated by teachers working from that other philosophy.

A word needs to be said about Iris Warren and her work and how, in my view, it has been distorted in the decades following, mixed as it has become with some now quite suspect Reichian and Freudian psychology. If ever there was such a thing as an alpha female, Iris was it. A giant of a person, large in body and spirit, she commanded any room she was in. At the time, what she was teaching was revolutionary. The voice was not a

muscular 'instrument' to be strengthened and manipulated but a natural function to be unblocked and freed, becoming in its natural state both strong and emotionally expressive. Centering the breath and the voice so that the emotions and the voice originate together and flow with a minimum of restriction would allow actors to be expressive, clear, and natural. In her view other voice teachers stressed physical gymnastics and in the process disconnected the voice from natural human feeling.

And mostly she was right. Of course, actors no longer needed to fill three-thousand seat theatres as they did in the nineteenth century. Volume was less an issue now and with realism being the dominant dramatic form, natural expression was more highly valued. If one listens to recordings of Sarah Bernhardt or Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the great classical actors of an earlier era, natural speaking was not then in vogue, to say the

least. So whether Iris's work was a revolution in human function or a revolution in artistic intention is, I guess, moot. She was the right person with the right idea at the right time.

Iris died of a heart attack in her fifties. She was not able to supervise her legacy, which has been enthusiastically carried on by Kristin Linklater, of course, but also by David Smukler and Lloy Coutts in Toronto; Dale Genge, Gayle Murphy, and Trish Allen in Vancouver; as well as many others working throughout North America. Different aspects of Iris's work have been stressed by different teachers, but the most worrying aspect is the concept of 'release.' While 'release work' has become a staple of voice work in North America, I don't recall Iris ever using the term. But in North America the term is applied to the notion that the student needs to release their repressed inner self, repressed by the physical armour of the body that has developed as a protective

mechanism from childhood. This 'release' will often be highly emotional, accompanied by crying and great personal distress, but without this release the voice will remain caged and limited. Or so goes the theory. There are a host of intellectual difficulties with this concept. For one, is there really such a thing as an 'inner self' or is this an outdated Freudian idea that is neither true nor useful? Second, are the barriers to the release of the voice truly a kind of locked character armour, an idea of the mostly discredited Wilhelm Reich, or are they far more likely to be physical tensions built up by misuse, needing to be freed, yes, but not holding the mysterious emotional connotations the Reichians would have us believe? And finally, when the 'release' occurs, is it truly a connection to the repressed emotional life of the student or is it just as likely to be a response to the suggestive ideas of the teacher leading to, yes, an emotional outburst, but

one that is not what it seems? Any emotional outburst will result in a strong vocal connection leading everyone to think there has been a 'breakthrough,' but somehow those breakthroughs seldom seem to lead to long-term change. But the truly worrying part is that often the student will believe that they have encountered some hidden truth about their life, some repressed suffering, when in fact they have merely responded to suggestive elements in the here and now. This process is not unlike the hysteria that developed around the idea of repressed memory of sexual abuse, which imprisoned hundreds of innocent people and tormented the lives of the so-called victims.

But in fact, Iris herself did none of this. I do recall breakthroughs in her classes as people found a connection to their voices, a connection they could often replicate. But the release work was not so much emotional as technical, finding how to relax the tongue



for instance, or the throat. And yes, we did emotional work to connect ourselves to the voice. But what emotion did she use? Laughter. Walking through the halls of a school where she was teaching one often heard unrestrained laughter. Walking through the halls of a school where her adherents are teaching one often hears unrestrained crying and hysteria. I suggest something has gone wrong.

In general, and for me in particular, LAMDA was a happy place in 1960. For all he was erratic, Michael was a caring father figure and Iris a sympathetic matriarch overseeing a household of diverse, often eccentric talents. Norman, in addition to his other activities, administered the school calmly and efficiently. For all its drawbacks, a lack of heat and soundproofing for instance, the converted house contributed to a sense of family. And the school attracted its share of talented students. Donald Sutherland had

come and gone before I got there, but Janet Suzman was in her second year and would go on to play major Shakespearean roles at Stratford, England. Talented Canadians in the regular program included David Calderisi who would later work for me in rep and back in Canada, Ken Kramer who went on to found and run the Globe Theatre in Regina, and Carolyn Jones whose relationship with me would turn out to be even more intimate. The talented Susan Williamson would work with me later in Dundee, Scotland, and eventually settle in Canada married to Henry Woolf. Also in our one-year program was Dan MacDonald who would play Petruchio for me at Theatre New Brunswick many years later and would be President of two of Canada's performer unions.

Shakespeare came at us from every direction. Michael Mac introduced us to iambic pentameter while doing scene and text work. I say "introduced us" for while I had learned

about meter in high school I had, until that time, no idea why it was there or how Shakespeare used it. Why iambic? Because it's the rhythm of life, whether it's human footsteps, horses' hooves, or a human heart-beat. It's also the rhythm of the English language, or at least the English language as spoken by the English. Or the Scots or the Welsh, but not necessarily the North Americans. A common error in North America, thankfully gradually dying out, is to believe that Shakespeare needs to be spoken in an English accent. The truth is, what we now think of as an English accent is a nineteenth century development and is no more like an Elizabethan accent than North American speech. The closest extant dialect to Elizabethan might well be in Newfoundland. But, and it's a big but, the English do tend to speak syllabically giving differentiated stress to each syllable, while North Americans tend to stress all syllables equally. In order to

profit from the meter North American actors don't have to speak with English pronunciation, but they do have to differentiate syllables in a way that may not feel natural. Only then can they set the rhythm of a line and ring the changes in meter that drive the emotion and pulse of a speech.

But what is poetry anyway? It's not beautiful sound, though sometimes it is, but compression of meaning. A Shakespeare speech is so packed with meaning any paraphrase should be two or three times longer than the original speech. Bertram Joseph, armed with his knowledge of how Shakespearean actors acted, showed us how to deal with the many figures of speech, always seeing them in actor's terms. How do I recognize a figure, why do I need it, and most importantly, how do I speak it so that all its elements are clear?

Meanwhile Brian Way was showing us another path to truthful acting in his improvisation class. Improvisation for Brian was

not theatre sports and the like, nor was it telling funny stories; it was completely actor centred. Sometimes the entire class would participate in the improvisation, but when only part of the class was working, the observers were not allowed to react or draw attention to themselves as an audience. However funny the scene might be, the observers were not allowed to laugh. The actors were aiming to find the truth and life of the imagined situation; they were not to try to create story. They were to be free of obligations to the audience, allowing themselves to live spontaneously in the imagined situation. They were also free of judgement. While Brian would sometimes ask a group to discuss how the scene felt, he himself would never pass judgement, never say this was good or that was bad. In fact for weeks he wouldn't say anything at all, other than what was necessary to begin the next improvisations. And then one day he would do a Brian Way

— he would talk about the work, about acting, and about life, and he was brilliant.

Meantime, I was settling into my new flat, making new friends, finding my way around London on the underground — no taxis on this budget — and going to the theatre. At the end of my year in London I had 130 programs, mostly from plays, but concerts, ballets, and operas as well.

Casting a shadow over this exciting new world was Sylvia's pregnancy. We had discussed her coming to England to have the baby and put it up for adoption. Someone had given me the name of a doctor who might be sympathetic to our situation and he suggested I come to his surgery and we could discuss. His surgery? My notion of surgery was an operation in a highly restricted area of a hospital. What an odd place to have a discussion. However, it turned out that in Britain a surgery was when a doctor saw patients in his office. Doctors didn't schedule

appointments as they do in Canada; patients simply came to the office during the surgery hours and waited their turn. And so after a considerable wait I finally had a conversation with the doctor who did indeed say that possibly the baby could be born in London and put up for adoption. A sidebar of our discussion centred on national health or medicare as we would now call it. He was the first doctor I had ever heard support the idea of a national health service. Medicare was still in the future in Canada, and my uncle who was a doctor was adamantly opposed to it, as were most doctors in the country. How refreshing to hear a doctor say how much he liked the system as he could prescribe whatever treatment was necessary and know that his patient could receive it.

I was torn. Of course I was concerned for Sylvia and her situation, but on the other hand a whole new life was opening up for me. No one cared that I had been divorced;

no one cared about my checkered past; it was truly a “brave new world.” How would I introduce a pregnant girlfriend into this world? Remember, the stigma attached to unwed pregnancy was far greater than now. And to complicate matters further I was becoming involved with someone else. Sometimes I think my first name should have been ‘Wriggle’ instead of ‘William.’ I was in a situation I needed to wriggle out of it so wriggle I did. I didn’t tell Sylvia not to come, but I managed to invite her in such a lukewarm way that she decided not to come. A blot on my character to be sure, but by no means the last.

Sylvia did survive, of course. When her family found out that she was pregnant, they did not moralize with her, as we had both feared, but were supportive and helpful. She gave the baby up for adoption with the help of her brother in the United States. She and I remained friendly, if guarded, and I visited



her when I returned to Canada at Easter and again months later, but as a relationship it was no longer 'operative,' to use the political term. No, the operative relationship was now Carolyn Jones, a Canadian in her first year of the regular program at LAMDA.

Carolyn and I had become an item, and often as not she would spend the night at my flat rather than her room in South Kensington. No reflection on Carolyn, but I think my desire for my own bed goes back to those months of sharing a single bed with Carolyn. I still remember the sheer joy of being able to spread out in the bed on those mornings when she was up before me. Ever since, sleeping with someone has always seemed an overrated activity. Not sex, mind, I never thought that was overrated.

We went to parties of which there seemed to be many. Not only were sexual relations between staff and students not frowned upon, they were public. It was not

uncommon for a faculty member at a party to be seen on the dance floor in a full French kiss with a student. We didn't think this odd at the time. What I did find odd was the gay men who might also be seen in a full French kiss. Some of them, like Bill Gaskill, were the new hot directors and writers of the British theatre. The English didn't seem to find this odd, just hick Canadians like me. Homosexuals in Canada were still fingering the doorknob on the inside of the closet; here they had kicked it open. It was the beginning of the Sixties.

The rehearsal class was the core of the training in most theatre schools at the time; classes in voice, movement, improvisation, and other technical areas would be in the morning, and the afternoon would be given to the rehearsal of a play or portion of a play. Dedicated to the classics as our program was, we rehearsed three Shakespeares, one

Chekhov, one Restoration Comedy, and a verse play by Christopher Fry.

Our second rehearsal class was *Much Ado About Nothing* directed by Hugh Cruttwell, who would later go on to be principal of RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art). I was cast as Balthazar who has to sing. When I protested that I couldn't sing, couldn't carry a tune, both Kristin and the singing teacher, John Dalby, insisted that I could. I just had to get out of my own way and let my natural instincts function. I wasn't tone deaf they insisted, it is just that for lack of confidence. I tried to think my way on to a note instead of allowing the vocal response to happen naturally. Of course, they were right in their analysis. There was nothing wrong with my ear, but ever since my difficulty with 'that tenor part' in *Ten Nights in a Barroom* I had avoided singing almost as much as dancing. And yet I had sung in the school choir before my voice broke. In any event Dalby worked

with me very patiently until, my goodness, I could actually sing on key. Or at least I could when alone in a classroom with just the singing teacher and when standing right beside the piano. I even managed fairly well at our final rehearsal before we moved into the theatre to present the play to the other students.

Only the other students in the school were invited, but of course they were the most terrifying audience of all. Any group of strangers would be far less intimidating. When we came to my song I could barely hear the piano; it was actually at the back of the theatre so the audience could hear it better than I. Well, I may have come within an octave of the right notes, but I doubt I was much closer. And soon what little sound the piano was making was drowned by the laughter of the students. Finally the song finished to an embarrassing round of applause. Don Pedro compliments Balthazar to which

he replies modestly, "And an ill singer, my lord." At that point the audience fell off their chairs. To this day I avoid singing at all costs, even the national anthem.

Another rehearsal class was Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* directed by the acclaimed actress Catherine Lacey. Once the piece was blocked, she said very little to us, but listened to every moment with penetrating intensity. While the character of Vershinin suited me well with his passion for philosophizing, his bad marriage, and his love for an unattainable woman, I suspect I was somewhat mannered and a bit stiff if I were to go back and see the work now. Still, we were pleased with the emotional life we were able to create and taken aback when Norman's end of show criticism began with "Why did you wear your hearts on your sleeve?" I've seen several student productions of *The Three Sisters* since and seen a lot of hearts on a lot of sleeves. It would be

another few years before I had a better idea of how Chekhov should be played.

Following *The Three Sisters* we finally got to work with Michael Warre. Another misfit, Michael was a superb teaching director. He had been a rising star at the Old Vic, but had been shunted aside. "Be careful of alcohol," he said, "or you could end up teaching at a drama school." However he got to LAMDA, we were lucky to get him. He directed us in an obscure Restoration comedy by Thomas Otway called *A Soldier's Fortune*. I played the ninety-year-old Sir Davey Dunce who has locked up his young wife so no other men can get to her, a common theme in Restoration comedy. Well, I thought I was pretty hot stuff. I put on my old man's voice and staggered about the stage for about two weeks when Michael told me to throw it all away. Just do what the character does and forget about how he looks and sounds. 'You have to be kidding,' I thought. After all, the

character was nearly seventy years older than I. But to my amazement I found that when I did all the things the character did, locking up and protecting his young wife, I became old. I didn't have to act old. If you do what an old person does you will be old — a lesson that has stayed with me to this day.

Meanwhile I would sit in class and watch Michael MacOwan rehearse Shakespeare scenes. One day he was on form. Each time a scene was presented he found the exact thing to fix it — to bring the scene truly to life. At one point he noticed my watching and, knowing that I was a director, came over and explained to me that I should not do with professional actors what he was doing here with students. Students want to learn new ways of working, whereas professional actors have developed a way of working over the years and challenging their methods can be threatening. I nodded wisely, but was not to

remain so wise when I got to the Chesterfield Rep the next year.

A short, nervous man, smoking feverishly as we all did, Michael's eyes were not windows to his soul, they were wide open doors. His talent was also his curse. He couldn't hide his emotions; the best he could do was soften them with drink. But when he was, in his term, "on form," his emotional clarity was inspiring. And while I had met his wife and gone to his home once, I don't think his wife ever came to the school. I remember his regretting one time that he was not paying her enough attention. I don't recall whether this was around the time that he felt he needed to explain that he was not in love with a woman we had been discussing, he "was in love with someone else." By the way he phrased it, I assumed he was not referring to his wife.

Michael introduced us to John Vivyan, a writer whose work on Shakespeare seems to



have faded to black. How does this happen? How can work of such insight and scope be discarded by the artistic and academic communities? Vivyan's central thesis was that Shakespeare has a consistent ethic that runs through all his plays; he even showed how the structure of Shakespeare's argument or story developed through the five acts turning the play to tragedy or comedy. My, what would Robert McKee or Linda Seger say about that, these screenplay experts on dramatic story who insist that all drama is three acts, even Shakespeare? But to oversimplify Vivyan's argument, each play was either a comedy, when the protagonist would eventually do something positive, a tragedy when they would do something negative, or a mercy play where the protagonist who had done something negative would redeem himself and be forgiven — *The Winter's Tale*, for instance. The tragic action generally involves resorting to violence in the pursuit of the

protagonist's goal. Macbeth kills Duncan; Brutus kills Caesar. Most of the plays, leaving aside the histories, follow one of these patterns. The interesting apparent exception is *Hamlet*. We are often told *Hamlet* is a play about a man who can't make up his mind. Olivier himself makes this point. If so, then Vivyan's thesis is in difficulty. In no other play is indecision given such moral force. Sure, Henry VI and Richard II are challenged by indecision, but these are not thought of as tragic flaws. But I guess the argument is that when put in a position where action is required, it is tragic if you cannot take action, if you are Chamberlain instead of Churchill. But there is another way to look at *Hamlet*, and that is that the tragedy is that he does — finally — make up his mind. He does kill Claudius and like all other Shakespeare tragedies he comes to a bad end for so doing. Looked at in this way, *Hamlet* is a play about what a character does before he commits the

tragic act; *Macbeth* is mainly about what happens after the tragic act, while *Julius Caesar*, placing the act in the middle, shows the arc from each side.

We ended the year doing Christopher Fry's *The Firstborn*. We were thrilled when the famous author himself came to talk to us. We had been puzzled by many things in the play. Surely he would have the answers. Well, no, actually. Every time we asked him something he would say something like 'maybe,' or 'perhaps,' or 'it could be.' Clearly the characters had risen unbidden in his imagination and he was as innocent of their motives as we were.

In retrospect many things are remarkable about this seminal year in my artistic life. I was exposed to an amazing array of talent, both inside the school and out. Some principles have stayed with me for decades: the natural voice, the search for reality and spontaneity, the use of verse in the service of

the actor, the playing of actions as a means to develop character, and likely others buried deep in my subconscious. But when one looks back on those schools now, particularly after spending some time years later auditing programs in New York, there seems to be one curious omission. We were never taught how to act. There were no classes in acting. A North American scene study class is structured in such a way as to demonstrate principles and methods of acting on a regular basis. A scene is presented to the class and analyzed by the instructor. Students might even take notes. We did nothing of the kind at LAMDA. All we did was act and if we ran into difficulty we were coached; we were helped to work through our unique needs and problems. We were not taught general principles of acting. If our character was not required for a particular rehearsal, we worked on our own; we didn't sit and watch other students being coached. Yes, voice and

movement teachers would come into rehearsal from time to time to assist in the application of their work to the playing of character, but still there were no lessons as such. The work was largely individual. Which system is better? Well, looked at in one way, can you imagine a hockey camp where two players take a turn on the ice while the other players sit and watch, after which the coach gives a lecture on the merits of the two players on the ice? Some of the difference between LAMDA and, say, the HB Studio in New York was pedagogical, but some was likely financial. The American schools had to find a way to interest larger classes in shorter time spans.

But before completing my year I had two further things to attend to. I had to find something to do in the coming autumn and I had to do another season of summer stock in Ontario. I had really thought that whatever I did in the fall would be in Canada, but, what

the heck, while I was here in England why not see if anyone would like to hire me. In 1961 I needed no visas or other papers to work in England. My Canadian passport was sufficient; I was a British subject. I could even vote. The British rep system was in full force at this time and it would be for another decade or so before Margaret Thatcher would wreak havoc on the entire British way of life. And so with help from Carolyn who could type far better than I — ah, the days of one's female partner typing for one have long passed — we wrote forty letters, one to every rep company in the country. I got ten replies, four interviews, and one job. In September I would join the Civic Theatre Company in Chesterfield as Associate Director. And during the Easter break from LAMDA I returned to Canada to prepare, although I didn't know it at the time, what would turn out to be our last season of the Straw Hat Players.

## **The Last Season**

Why the last season? It could have been because both Karl and I were becoming increasingly occupied in other areas, me in England and Karl in law school. Karl went on to have a successful law practice and become a Toronto City Councillor, and as we all know I went on to smoke cigarettes for a living. But in 1961 we were still committed to the Straw Hat Players. Other factors would conspire against the future of the company.

Oddly, Karl has no recollection of one incident which I vividly remember, or so I

believe; perhaps I imagined it. Shortly after my return from England, Karl and I were sitting in the coffee shop across from the theatre in Port Carling. It was a lovely summer day and Karl was giving me an upbeat assessment of the season so far when, surprisingly, the bank manager spied us and sat down to join us. Small town folk tend to be friendly, but shouldn't the bank manager be in the bank on a business day? After a few pleasantries he asked, "What plans do you have for your overdraft?" We were both stunned. I have no idea how we answered since neither of us had any idea that we had an overdraft. It appeared that our Business Manager had fallen behind in his bookkeeping and had not informed Karl that we were about \$5,000 in the hole (about \$35,000 in today's dollars).

Karl may not remember this incident, but he does remember that we had to lean on personal resources, my father in my case, to



get us out of this difficulty. And perhaps that led to his decision at the end of the season to leave the company, although he gave me another reason at the time, a reason that still scratches my thin skin when I think of it. As I have said Karl was away for the second half of the season. He was back in time to see our final play in Peterborough, my production of *The Fourposter* with Nancy Kerr and Timothy Findley. Despite some obstacles we had in mounting the production, wet paint on the floor on opening night and Tiff's problems with lines, I was very proud of the show by the time Karl saw it at the end of the run. A few days later we met to discuss the future and confirm his plan to leave the company. Why? As he put it, he was tired of productions not living up to his expectations. And I had so thought he would have loved that production. Of course I never let on that I was upset or even surprised by his reaction and we continued our plans for me to become the

sole producer. Karl insists now, probably rightly, that his difficulty was not my production of that play in particular, which was likely fine, but the continued compromises required of a company such as ours at that time, relying as we were on box office alone. Subsidy for the arts in Canada was still a few years in the future.

Speaking of lines, I will make a vain plea at this point for the return of the prompter. At some point in the sixties and seventies, the stage manager abandoned his/her traditional place in the wings stage left, or as the English still call it 'prompt side,' and moved to a booth at the back of the auditorium. Earlier, many lighting boards, along with their operators, had moved to the back of the theatre, a sensible move as it is a significant advantage for the lighting operator to have a good view of the stage. But soon after, the stage manager joined the board operator at the back. Was that a good idea? I remain to be

convinced. How can you “manage the stage” when you are nowhere near it? Surely the move has added to costs, particularly in small theatres, where additional onstage personnel are required when their work could have been handled by an onstage stage manager. Further, we have restricted that staff from ever appearing on stage themselves — all with the noble purpose of professionalizing our work? But what has been the result? Theatres can no longer afford actors. We have wonderful lights and sound and scenery, but no actors. Five is a big cast. The Straw Hats did plays with ten or twelve characters, the Canadian Repertory Theatre in Ottawa in the forties and fifties did plays with up to thirty in the cast. We have hamstrung our writers and put our actors out of work. Maybe it’s time to rethink some of our policies.

But to return to the prompter. Of course, all actors should know their lines by opening

night. But we all know that sometimes they don't, sometimes rehearsal conditions have been so sparse that the actor really hasn't had a fair opportunity to prepare, sometimes a wonderful actor just has difficulty learning lines, and sometimes a perfectly well-prepared actor has a momentary brain fuck. In days gone by a well placed prompt from the wings, often unnoticed by the audience, insured that the play would continue smoothly. What happens now when an actor 'dries'? Panic! Panic through the whole building; even actors in the dressing room, hearing the moment over the program sound system, freeze, praying for a solution. The terror for the actor himself is almost duplicated by the other actors on stage wondering how in hell they are going to get out of this. And yet none of this is necessary. If the stage manager were still in the wings, she could prompt, or an assistant could be in the wings and prompt. Yes, the audience might hear

the prompt, but often they wouldn't notice even though a good prompt was always clear and loud enough that the actor could pick it up without difficulty.

I can't imagine how Tiff would have got through the opening night of *The Fourposter* without a prompter. In this case the prompter happened to be me for reasons I don't recall. Tiff suffered both from a short rehearsal period and a general difficulty with lines. But a prompter saved the day and soon the play ran smoothly.

There is an additional advantage in having a prompter. Not only is it important that actors know their lines, it is important that they are not worried about their lines. If you are on stage constantly wondering and worrying whether your lines will be there when you need them, you are not immersing yourself in the imagined situation, you are not doing your real job of acting the character in the situation. A prompter in the wings can put

your mind at ease, allowing you to focus on the important work. And, strangely, in so doing you are more likely to remember your lines.

As a result of my late arrival in the season, I directed only one other play that summer, *Picnic* by William Inge. Quite a beautiful play, *Picnic* deals with the frustrations and constrictions of small town life, frustrations that may be universal. Unfortunately the film of the play turned the theme on its head with a truly sentimental Hollywood ending. I've directed the play twice since, once in Dundee and once at the William Davis Centre. For *Straw Hat* I was fortunate to have in the cast my childhood idol, Ted Follows, and his wife Dawn Greenhalgh (perhaps better known now as the parents of Megan Follows of *Anne of Green Gables*). Years later they would play husband and wife for me in the political radio drama *24 Sussex Drive*. They gave strong performances and the

production was one of the highlights of my time with Straw Hat.

Despite its somewhat makeshift quality, a low roof and a homemade stage, the experiment of playing in the Empress Hotel in Peterborough worked quite well. Finally we had air conditioning in at least one of our theatres. There was the little matter of our overdraft, but by and large we had a thriving enterprise if not a thriving business. In four summers we had presented forty-two plays, eleven of which I directed and two I acted in. And I was just twenty-three.

How does a director in Canada duplicate that experience now? And I was only just beginning; British rep was next.

# British Rep

Chesterfield

I had the good fortune to spend roughly three seasons directing in British rep. What is British rep, you ask. First of all, it is not, nor never was, 'rep.' How it got to be so named I have often wondered, but never discovered. The correct name for the rep theatres would be 'stock.' A repertory company, such as the National Theatre of Great Britain, or Stratford, Ontario, has a repertory of plays available at all times, presenting them in some alternating schedule. A stock



company has only one play available at a time which is presented from its stock of scenery and actors. So British rep is really British stock. But now it is neither; it is but a shadow of its former self. When I graduated from LAMDA there were at least forty rep theatres in the country. Each theatre presented a series of plays throughout most of the year, in some cases for the full fifty-two weeks of the year. The theatre companies themselves ranged from weekly rep with a new production every week, to the rare company that did a new play every month. Some prestigious companies were fortnightly like the Glasgow Citizens Theatre, some three-weekly like the Sheffield Rep, but many were weekly, mounting a new play every week just as we had done in our first years in summer stock. By and large, actors were not jobbed in; they came for the season or at least part of the season. Many did not maintain a home in London; when booked for a season they

gave up their London flats and moved to the new location. An itinerant life, maybe, but regular employment that many actors would envy today.

When I left Britain in 1965, rep theatres were flourishing. When I returned in the 1990s, they were gone. In spirit if not in name. The British actor David Bickerstaff invited me to Scotland for an *X-Files* convention in 2000. He had worked in the modern Dundee Rep, the theatre that I ran in 1963. But unlike my era, he did not move to Dundee for a year; he jobbed in for a few weeks. The theatre does not run a continuous season, but mounts a few productions of its own and brings in outside productions and touring shows during the rest of the year.

But in 1962, with the British rep system in full bloom, I arrived in September, along with a company of English actors, none of whom I knew, in the Midlands town of Chesterfield, Derbyshire, to begin my stint as

Associate Director of the Civic Theatre. I am grateful to the flamboyant director of the theatre, Anthony Cornish, for taking a chance on me. After all, he had never seen my work, only read my résumé and met me in an interview, and I was, after all, just twenty-three. And here I was about to direct roughly half the productions in his fall season. At that time, the company divided its year into two seasons, a fall season from September to January and a shorter spring season in March and April. In the intervening period, the venue hosted community theatre and touring shows, a season I was subsequently hired to manage. The long-range plan was that I would return to Canada after the spring season, run the Straw Hat Players again, and return to Chesterfield for the next fall season. Of course none of this happened.

The theatre itself, renovated in its present form in 1904, was a large gilt-trimmed

traditional proscenium theatre with both a fly gallery and a balcony with seats that ran down the side of the house. Showing its Victorian roots, it was at once too large for a rep theatre, but better equipped than most with a proper prompt corner on stage left. The fall season was weekly and included some pretty standard British comedies and thrillers; a nice American play, *His and Hers*, which I directed (and, as was often the case, fell in love with the leading lady); one Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, in which I played Don John; and a pantomime at Christmas, *Robinson Crusoe*, in which I played the Cannibal King.

But as usual one of the first orders of business was to find a place to live. Like the actors, I was now an itinerant homeless person travelling with only a few personal belongings. Whatever else I owned was stored in the family home in Canada. Digs, as they are known in Britain, certainly weren't fancy, but

then neither was the weekly paycheck — well, even that wasn't a check but cash in a small brown envelope. I settled on a small flat over a podiatrist's office. It had a bedroom and a tiny living room stuffed with a faded couch and chair and an electric grill for heat. What it lacked was an en suite. Well, a toilet, actually. Not only was the toilet shared, it was outside. And it was your basic two-hole. To get to it one had to pass through the doctor's waiting room. Even this I could have managed. The real crunch came later in the season after I had made a few friends of the opposite gender. My podiatrist landlord was concerned that his patients would be offended by a woman passing through the waiting room and going up to my flat. Middle-class morality was quite stern in 1962. I was not to have female guests. For a while I took to smuggling them in and out. Fortunately, after Christmas my

wage was increased and I was able to get a flat with its own entrance and bathroom.

I must have done pretty well; my contract was extended to include the spring season, and when Tony decided not to stay for the next season, he proposed that I take over the theatre.

My start though was not propitious. The lead in my first production was an old rep actor — well, he might have been forty — who had been working in rep all his adult life. He got by with a lot of tricks he had mastered over the years. Early in rehearsal I heard myself saying to him that he seemed to be ‘acting,’ that he was letting his mannerisms get in the way of finding the truth of the scene. Well, Bill, were you not listening when Michael MacOwan told you not to challenge the work method of experienced actors, that what you can say to students is different from what you can say to professionals? At that moment I lost the confidence of that

actor for the season and he continued to trot out his repertoire of facial gestures to the delight of the audience, I have to admit. I was right about his acting, but then I was not his acting teacher but his director. I had to learn new ways to lead actors to truth. Michael Elliott with Maggie Smith was an object lesson. Directing her in *Miss Julie* at the National Theatre, he never said to her, 'You are mugging, you are relying on your tricks, you are hiding behind your mannerisms.' He said those things to me, but not to her. With her he just patiently took away each trick until she had to face the truth. Of course, he had three months to rehearse. I had one week.

On the personal side I was messing up my life once again. When I returned to England after the summer, Carolyn and I were still an item. But, as I have said, I have a weakness for leading ladies and when Irene Inescort played the lead in *His and Hers* I was in trouble again. She was my first experience

with an 'older woman.' She was thirty-two. But she was not what we would now think of as thirty-two. She didn't jog and go to the gym. She smoked a ton, read a lot, and hardly ever slept. Dark, somewhat mysterious, intelligent, she looked terrific in the fishnet tights of the Principal Boy. She was also a very good actress. Her talent demanded better from the profession than she got. Perhaps she stayed in rep too long. It was easy for some actors in that time to go from season to season in rep and never present themselves to the London theatre scene or the world of film and television. At any rate, we became friends and would often walk home together, sometimes stopping for a drink at my flat. One night I took matters in hand and kissed her good night. Her reaction? "Well, finally!" I've always been a touch reticent.

The final production of the fall season was the pantomime, *Robinson Crusoe*. What is a



pantomime, you ask. What is a pantomime, I asked. I thought pantomime meant a play without words. How wrong can you be? The British pantomime has a long history that continues to this day. There are very set traditions that audiences expect. The hidden racism, sexism, and imperialism are lovingly overlooked. The central character, a youth, is always played by a woman, known as Principal Boy. Among other requirements for the role are great legs in fishnet tights. Principal Girl is also played by a woman, appealing to our lesbian fantasies perhaps. The evil king always appears from stage left and Goodness from stage right. The central older female character, the Dame, is always played by a man. A highlight is the kitchen scene where the Dame and his/her sidekick make a mess of cooking something. Near the end of the show is the traditional singalong, a necessary interlude as the actors all need to change into their fanciest frocks for the "Walk Down,"

which as far as I could tell was only a curtain call in fancy dress.

Anyway, in the midst of all this, while playing the Cannibal King, I fell in love with the Principal Boy with her great legs and sexual experience, and Carolyn, who was also in the production, was unfortunately cast aside though I'm glad to say we are friends to this day. I got what was coming to me, however. Did I mention that Irene was married? They had long been separated; it seemed a strange relationship; he was involved in some odd cult if I remember correctly. It wasn't long after the fall season ended that Irene wrote me my "Dear John" letter. She was going back to her husband and this strange world he lived in.

Another curious tradition of the British theatre, or of the Chesterfield theatre at any rate, was that the director or the manager, dressed in a dinner jacket (or tux as Americans would say), would stand at the exit of the

theatre and say "Good night" to each and every individual patron. This became my duty when I became the manager. I can still feel the pain in my cheeks from the forced smile one needed to maintain for twenty minutes or so as the audience filed out. But my mask must have failed me on the night after I got the letter from Irene. "You look like you lost your best friend," one of the patrons said to me on leaving. Yes, I guess I had.

Still life had to go on. I had my new flat, more modern and brighter, with its own indoor toilet. Now that the company had disbanded for the winter and I was managing the theatre I began to make more friends in the community itself. At the time I had no idea that women found men in suits attractive, and men in dinner jackets even more so. And I was wearing one every night. Once again my new flat was a walkup with an interior staircase. This time the ground floor flat was occupied by a young couple. From

time to time I would run into the wife and we would chat for a few minutes. A true working-class couple, they had never been to London, a mere fifty miles away. The husband's main preoccupation seemed to be pigeons, but she had wider interests. Nothing new in that I suppose, but she seemed to appreciate that she could talk to me about things she couldn't talk to her husband about. One day when I mentioned that I was going to a nearby city to see a play she asked to come along; her husband was doing something else that night. Fair and soft-figured, she was young and quite pretty and one thing led to another. By the time we got home things had become quite steamy between us. Her husband being still out she came up to my flat. Why did we not lock the door at the bottom of the interior staircase? Were we innocent of what we were about to do? Did we really think we were going to drink tea? Soon enough we were in the

bedroom. Soon enough our clothes were off, and soon enough we were in the bed. And soon enough there was a knock at the door downstairs. Frozen in place, we heard the door open, her husband call up, and his footsteps on the stairs. In seconds he was at the bedroom door where we were naked in the bed together. We pleaded with him to let us get dressed and we would talk in the living room. The discussion was brief. Soon enough he was punching me before dragging his wife downstairs. God knows what he did to her.

In the midst of all this I had a curious telegram from Canada. When I opened it there were only three words: "Where are you?" So how did this person know where to send it if they didn't know where I was? It was from my mother, ironic as ever. In the days before email and Facebook and texting we were supposed to write letters, but it was awfully easy to procrastinate. For me, at any rate. I don't suppose I had communicated with my

mother for months. That may seem strange nowadays when it seems most twenty-four-year-olds are still living with their mothers. To rectify the situation I placed a rare and challenging transatlantic phone call. When my mother answered I remember being shocked by her Canadian accent. My assimilation into British society must have been going well. There was no alarm; she just wanted to know how I was doing.

One of the events in the theatre that winter was a one-act play festival, which I was asked to adjudicate. There were two evenings of three plays each, the usual collection of well meaning but not inspiring amateur presentations about which I had to struggle to say something positive. The sixth and final item on the second night was Act Five from *A Merchant of Venice*. Given the work up to that point, I dreaded what would happen with Shakespeare. I was sure it would be awful. What would I say? The curtain went up

— yes, this theatre had a curtain, perhaps I forgot to mention that — to reveal a cast of children between the ages of twelve and fifteen. Now I was really fearful. No sooner was the first line spoken when my fear abated. By the time a few more lines of crystal clear Shakespearean verse were rendered I was in awe. The children were amazing. It was one of the clearest, most touching presentations of Shakespeare I have ever seen. Later I was to meet the high school teacher responsible for this miracle. What a talent. What a shame her work was not seen more widely.

Yet if we think about it, should we be surprised by such an event? It is thought by some critics and directors, me for one, that one of the reasons for Shakespeare's soaring greatness was that he lived in two worlds at once, the medieval and the modern, the preliterate and the literate, the nonlinear and the lineal. To the medieval and preliterate mind the universe is of a piece, interconnected and

whole. The killing of a king, for instance, shatters the entire system so that, as in *Macbeth*, for example, the horses eat each other. To the modern print-altered mind — if we are to believe Marshall McLuhan — the universe is made up of discrete events that influence each other but can be considered separately. Man was released, for better or worse, from his environment. Man's power to understand, manipulate, and study the world was hugely advanced. Shakespeare understood both these worlds; he lived on the cusp of change. He could mine the rich medieval world for its imagery and symbolism and simultaneously reveal it through a modern objective lens. So what does all this have to do with children playing Shakespeare? Is it possible that if children are given the tools, as these children clearly were, their understanding of Shakespeare might actually be greater than that of a modern adult, in that they themselves are on the cusp of change



from primitive, for want of a better word, to modern? Might they have an instinct for the material that we adults have to grapple with intellectually? Might it also be that while their language instinct is open and pliable they can adapt to Shakespeare's language with a facility denied to their elders, just as they could learn a foreign language with a part of the brain closed to an adult? Is one of the reasons British actors are more successful with Shakespeare than their North American colleagues the fact that they have more exposure to Shakespeare in their formative years?

All of this is interesting speculation, but we had a season to prepare. Tony had decided that instead of doing weekly rep in the spring season, we would mount a true repertory season. We would present five plays, alternating them through the season. The potential advantages were twofold: towards the end of the season we could do more performances

of successful shows and, hopefully, we could find more rehearsal time for each play, the continuing challenge for stock companies of the time. One huge disadvantage would only become apparent later. No potboilers for me in this season. I was to direct William Gibson's *Two for the Seesaw* and Arnold Wesker's *Roots*.

Tony and I headed to London to audition actors for parts that had not yet been cast. I had arranged for one pretty good Canadian actor to play in *Two for the Seesaw*, Donald Sutherland. Coming in to see us for the other role was another Canadian and one of my favourite actresses from Toronto, Jackie Burroughs. We had cast Jackie in summer stock based on seeing her one and only previous play, a Trinity College production at Hart House directed by Herbert Whittaker, when she really didn't know if she wanted to be an actress or not. She had lost interest in acting yet again and was working in a low-rent

restaurant in Soho when Sutherland saw her and suggested she talk to us about Chesterfield. We cast her in the season and she went on to a marvellous career, largely in Canada, winning tons of awards as a film and television star. Jackie was perfect casting for both *Two for the Seesaw* and the Joan Plowright character in *Roots*. When I walked her downstairs after her audition she gave me this very friendly hug and kiss, well, more than friendly actually. Only later did I realize it was a 'promise.' Jackie was a short, slim, red-haired pixie, full of energy and generous to a fault. Later she was to get heavily involved in the Sixties, marry one of the Lovin' Spoonfuls, and, in the words of one CBC director, "never got out." Be that as it may she was to play the lead for me years later in my first major radio drama, George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*.

With a cast like that, how could you lose? There was one major flaw in Tony's plan for

a repertory season. Normally a theatre has at least one 'dark' night, a day that can be used for set up and technical rehearsal for the next play. In Tony's new scheme the first play opened normally at the beginning of the week but the second play, my *Two for the Seesaw*, opened on Thursday of the first week even though the first play had played on Wednesday. In other words, there was one day to strike the set of the first play, set up the set for my play, light it, and run technical and dress rehearsal. Someone was dreaming in Technicolor. Perhaps they thought *Two for the Seesaw* was a simple show; it had only two characters and one set. I guess they hadn't read the news story describing how the touring production that came to Toronto had a crew of forty. The fact is, the play has tons of prop changes, to say nothing of sound and light cues. Perhaps I was remiss in not warning Tony of the challenges. In any event the play did open, sort

of. Opening night was a catalogue of disasters, missing props, missing sound cues. The proverbial rug was truly pulled from these wonderful actors.

What made things worse for the two stranded actors was the way we had rehearsed the play. Unlike many productions in rep we did not impose a structure of action and gesture. With the luxury of a little extra rehearsal time we explored the underlying interplay between the characters and allowed the action to take its own shape. What one actor did or said prompted the next response which led to the next. Of course all acting should be like this, but seldom is. So often, two pre-planned performances are presented side by side. I often used to say a play is what goes on between the characters. Donald and Jackie responded well to this approach. Adding to the sense of realism, we rehearsed much of the time in my apartment (that was how we got the extra rehearsal time). The

strength of this method is the life and vitality brought to the stage. The danger is, if one step is missing, the whole fabric can crumble. And, more or less, that's what happened on opening night. A missing prop or a missing phone cue and the actor has no prepared performance to fall back on. S/he is left vulnerable and struggling. The result was truly a disappointment and no fault of the performers.

And yet, on the next performance two days later, the coin flipped. Most of the technical requirements were in place and the performance soared. It was a night in the theatre to remember. We were not watching two actors giving wonderful performances; we were watching two people going through the joys and torments of their lives. This was theatre as I had always dreamed it could be. As it happened, Geoffrey Ost, the Director of the Sheffield Rep, the prestigious theatre company an hour north of Chesterfield, attended

this performance. An old pro, he said it was the best night in the theatre that he could remember. He also said I should apply for his job which he was leaving at the end of the current season.

Years later, as we looked back on this production, Donald spoke of how important it was to him and how it was the first time in his career he actually cried, that the emotion welled up unbidden, brought on by the action of the play itself.

As I recall Donald was supposed to be in my next production as well, but left the season early, his film career beginning to gestate. But whether his departure was a response to an actual film offer or pressure from his wife, I'm not sure. At that time Donald was married to Lois Hardwick, an odd match, and not just because she was half his height. She had stayed in London when Donald came to Chesterfield, but one day, to Donald's dismay it appeared, on that famous

tech day I think, she showed up at the theatre unannounced. Why Donald's dismay? It seemed Lois had not been pleased with Donald's decision to come to Chesterfield in the first place. What was odd about that to me was that he explained this by saying she thought he ought to be getting on with his career. Foolish me, I thought doing this play, rehearsing it the way we had, developing his acting, would be part of "getting on with his career." Of course at the time I had no idea that his career would involve becoming a movie star.

But it raises the whole question of how one measures success. Another thing Donald said once has continued to perplex me. He didn't respect Michael MacOwan, the Principal of LAMDA, because he was a "failure." Two things worry me about that statement. First, I would have thought, still think, that being Principal of the best drama school in London did not qualify as failure. But perhaps it's



true as Shaw says, "Those who can't do, teach." But second, if one is not going to respect anyone who could be deemed a failure, there may be precious few people left to talk to. But there is no denying that Donald's single-minded pursuit of his goal has borne fruit, whether prompted by Lois or not. Of course it's also possible that Lois showed up unexpectedly because she was afraid Donald was sleeping with Jackie. He might have been. I never did ask. They hung about together a lot. But after he left, she was sleeping with me.

Meantime we had the production of *Roots* to rehearse and mount. Once again, Jackie did a terrific job in the lead role. Once again the technical side failed me, but this time the failure was artistic and I was complicit. The play has three sets, a challenge for a rep company. The designer proposed a very clever plan of nesting each set inside the other so that rather than having to change the

scenery completely, we could simply remove the internal set during each intermission. The only flaw in this plan is that the final set, what would be the front room of this working class family home, would be the largest. And this decision may have cost me the job at Sheffield Rep.

Sheffield, a much larger city than Chesterfield, had a wonderful theatre, smaller, more intimate, and more modern than the Civic. The larger city and smaller theatre allowed for runs of three weeks instead of one and correspondingly more rehearsal time. The theatre had the money and prestige to bring in major actors from time to time. It was a dream job and I was the current director's chosen candidate. I had hoped Geoffrey Ost would have been as thrilled with *Roots* as he was with *Two for the Seesaw*. Alas, no. In particular he was critical of the large room in the last act. Who knows whether his lukewarm response to *Roots* was the main factor;

what is certain is that I interviewed for the position, but in the end they engaged an established English director/actor. My first, but far from my last, professional setback.

Setback number two was only weeks away. As I have said, Tony planned this to be his last season at Chesterfield and had proposed to the Board that I take over from him. While the Board had not made a final decision, it seemed prudent that I pave the way for my succession. To this end, I needed to divest myself of the Straw Hat Players, which I was scheduled to run that summer. With some reluctance I was able to turn the company over to Marshall Bruce and Peter Wylde, who had been an actor in our company, and commit myself to a career in Britain. Just as this transfer was being completed I received my second "Dear John" letter of the year, this one of a professional rather than personal nature. It was a long letter from Tony saying that he and the actress Linda Polan had

decided to marry — something of a surprise in itself since I was sure he was gay — and as a consequence he needed a steady job and would not therefore be leaving his position in Chesterfield after all.

When I was a child, our housekeeper had commented that I always wanted the largest soft drink, the largest chocolate bar. Why wasn't I satisfied with what was good enough? Here was a case in point. In retrospect, Tony's position was reasonable. I don't think he had any idea what I had given up. He needed the job and he was quite prepared for me to continue as his associate director. Had I been a kinder, less self-centred person I might have accepted his personal appeal to understand the situation from his point of view. But to my youthful testosterone, his change of heart was a betrayal. I sacrificed my theatre company for his and now he wants to keep his company? There followed an unpleasant conflict in which we both vied

for the job. The result? Neither of us got the job.

I'm happy to report that we both landed on our feet. I went to Dundee the next season and he went on to head radio drama for the BBC in the Midlands. He and Linda also went on to have a son; more than that I don't know. I always had a soft spot for Linda, a very popular character actress, for, among other things, saying that my Don John in *Much Ado* was the best performance in the production. I guess for a director I wasn't too bad an actor.

## Dundee

The truth is, until it went up in smoke, Dundee offered me more creative opportunities than Chesterfield could. The Dundee Rep now proudly announces that it produces six of its own productions a year. When I went there in 1962, it produced twenty-six a year, a new production every two weeks for the entire year. At that time, the theatre was run by its general manager, as opposed to a director or an actor. In this case it was the marvelously sensitive Jack Henderson, a kindly bearded patriarch who truly loved the

theatre and the people who worked in it. On the strength of an interview in Edinburgh he hired me to be Resident Director and, beginning in the summer, to direct eight of the nine productions that would take us to Christmas; he reserved *Hamlet* for himself. He could not commit to the following year as he was unsure of his own future.

Situated on the east coast of Scotland at the frontier of the Scottish Highlands, Dundee was another world. When I first arrived there I stayed in a house belonging to the theatre electrician. One day when I was going home he said there would be some messages outside the door and would I put them inside for him. When I suggested that I could bring them to the theatre when I came back later he looked at me as if I had lost my marbles. How was I to know that in Dundee “messages” means groceries? Eventually I found a charming two-bedroom flat in the upper storey of a house in Broughty Ferry

about four miles east of the city. As the days grew shorter, and they grow very short in this northern city, the flat's charm abated somewhat. Why was my bed so cold? Pretty simple, really. It was damp. And the temperature in the room was below freezing. Nothing like snuggling up to two slabs of ice. I bought an electric blanket. By the time winter truly set in my morning routine went something like this: alarm goes, switch on the electric blanket, leap out of bed and switch on the two electric heaters in the room, run to the bathroom and plug in the heater in the bathroom, run down the hall lighting a match and light the fire in the kitchen that had been set the night before, run back to the bedroom and jump back in bed and wait for twenty minutes. Heating in the theatre was no better and we often rehearsed wearing five or six layers of clothes.

A more makeshift theatre than Chesterfield, the Dundee theatre, upstairs off a side



street, was also smaller and more intimate than Chesterfield. Rather plain and beige, in some ways it felt more like an auditorium than a theatre, a problem we would address in a few months time. I shared a humble office with Jack next to the smoke-filled Green Room with its overstuffed furniture and large central table. The intimate theatre bar off the foyer would be where I would meet my second wife.

Best of all for me at the time, the theatre was fortnightly. We had two weeks rehearsal. What a luxury. I developed a rehearsal structure that worked pretty well. For roughly a day and half, maybe even two days, we would read the play and clarify the action of scenes, then we would rough block the play very quickly, in a day or a day and a half. We would then work through the play twice, once with the actors still on book if they wished, and once with the actors off book. If there was time we would do a fast third work

through to tighten, followed by a run-through or two and then tech and dress. Actors would sometimes complain that they wanted more run-throughs. They were not mollified when I assured them they would have lots of run-throughs after we opened.

Slowly I was developing an artistic philosophy, one that would take clearer shape in the new year. I wanted the work to be real, but what did that actually mean? Of course it meant, as we have all read, that the actor should identify with the character and not merely represent the character. But what does that mean? For starters, it means that each moment in a scene needs to lead to the next moment, what one character says or does causes, affects, influences what the next character says or does. Sometimes this quest can mean spending a lot of time rehearsing the beginning of a scene. If the opening beats aren't right then the rest of the scene can't follow truthfully. A run-through missing key

moments can be worse than a waste of time, forcing the actors to fabricate a performance that lacks a proper foundation. Sometimes an actor can have difficulty with a line, and a lot of time can be spent trying to figure out how to get it right when it turns out that the problem is not with the line itself, but with the whole scene leading up to that point. The error in the trajectory of the scene only becomes manifest when the actor has to say this particular line. For a director to focus on these issues was relatively new in the British theatre in the fifties and early sixties. Claire Bloom complains in her memoir, *Limelight and After*, that her theatre directors in the fifties seemed only concerned with creating the picture. It was not until she worked with Tony Richardson on a film that she found a director who engaged with the actor in her process.

My first production at Dundee was a French farce, *Rollo*. In the cast was an actor I

knew from LAMDA, Jonathan Elsom. Also in the cast was a South African who would play a significant role in my life and in the Canadian theatre: Maurice Podbrey. A round bear of a man, Maurice was one of those positive, gregarious people one loves to have in an acting company. Trained at the Rose Bruford College in London, he had been a member of the Brian Rix company in London, which was known for its Whitehall Theatre farces. He was a stalwart member of our company for the full year that I was there; I gave him his first directing opportunities and years later invited him to be my assistant at the National Theatre School in Montreal. From there he founded the Centaur Theatre in Montreal and operated this major regional theatre for the next twenty-five years. I guess that theatre would never have existed if he and I had not met in Scotland in 1962.

Little did Maurice and I know what was to come the morning we embarked on a day's

skiing in November. Little did we know about skiing in Scotland when we set out that day. Silly me, I thought when one went skiing one drove one's car to the area, parked in the lot, got on the lift, and started skiing. When one got hungry one went in for lunch. Very few of these things happened in Glenshee in November 1962. There were two ski lifts in Glenshee then, a chairlift that was indeed near the parking lot and a T-bar on the other side of the valley just a short forty-minute climb from the parking lot. As it happened there was no snow on the T-bar side so we were, for that day at any rate, spared the climb to the bottom of the lift. We were able to walk from the parking lot to the chairlift and ride up the chairlift. Only one problem. There was no snow beside the lift. Skiing in Scotland is predicated on the wind blowing the snow into deep gullies in the bare hills (the trees long ago removed to build ships). Which way the wind blows

determines which gully fills with snow. There was indeed a gully filled with snow, dotted with keen skiers, about half a mile away. Undeterred, we hiked along the ridge from the top of the lift to where they were skiing. Since there wasn't enough snow to get to the bottom of the lift from there, we needed to climb for each ski run. Not a huge problem, we were young and energetic. The bigger problem was that, being young and energetic, we worked up an appetite pretty quickly and we were nowhere near a restaurant. We decided to persist as long as we could before heading down to the bottom and getting something to eat. Perhaps it should have worried us that some of the locals could be seen perched on rocks eating from a lunch they had brought with them. No bother, we would get food at the bottom at the end of the day. Well, the end of the day came and we worked our way down skiing on patches of snow — and patches of heather. Starving,

we hopped out of our skis and piled into the base lodge. Food? Oh no, we don't serve food here. Didn't you bring any?

Hungry enough to eat the heather we were walking on, we rushed to our car and raced down the mountain road, frantically looking for some place somewhere that might serve food. Every likely place was closed or deserted. Finally — *finally* — we spied a parking lot full of cars beside a small single-storied building. I don't remember if there was a sign in front; we rushed in hoping against hope. And yes, afternoon tea. All you can eat for five bob. Possibly the best meal of my life.

Truth to tell though, there wasn't much time for skiing. The actors had Sunday off each week — one of the actors boasted that they had had sun every Sunday since he had been there; it turned out that he meant he had seen the sun at least once on each Sunday — but as director I was involved in the lighting, which we did on the Sunday

before opening. Just one free day a fortnight for me. Not that I minded. I was doing what I wanted to do: direct plays, lots of them. And I was on a mission, to change the style of production from nice representations to a dynamic reality. And over the year I was there we had some success with that, and some failure.

We had a pretty amazing company of actors. In addition to Maurice and Jonathan, when I arrived were Pamela Greenall, Brian Stanion (*The Tomorrow People*), Anne Way (*Masterpiece Theatre*), and Hannah Gordon (*Upstairs, Downstairs*). We added, largely from my contacts in LAMDA, Susan Williamson, David Calderisi, Clive Graham, and Dan MacDonald. Oh yes, and there was a fifteen-year-old apprentice to whom we gradually gave larger and larger acting roles, Brian Cox. A more working-class kid than Brian would be hard to find; it's a testament



to his acting skills that he now plays so many upper-class Brits.

Susan Williamson had an interesting way of dealing with her director. If you gave her a move she didn't like she wouldn't argue. She would just do it badly. Eventually you were forced to let her do the move she wanted. I am reminded of Douglas Rain's advice to young actors when he headed the National Theatre School of Canada. Apocryphal perhaps, but the story goes that he dropped in on a rehearsal class where a student was arguing with the director. "No, no," he is reported to have said to the student, "That is not the correct way to handle this situation. When you get a direction you don't like," he counselled, "simply say, 'Thank you.' And then do what you were going to do in the first place."

I confess to quite a crush on Hannah Gordon who played most of the ingenue roles in the season, including Ophelia. Short,

youthfully pretty, recently graduated from the Scottish Academy of Dramatic Art, she went on to a very successful career in British television and theatre. She was really too young for me at the wizened age of twenty-four; I don't think we ever did more than hold hands. Truth is I was no match for the dark-haired beauty, Veronica Caird, daughter of a local business owner and member of the theatre's board. Invited to Sunday lunch after a brief conversation in the theatre bar with Veronica and her parents, the die was cast. From time to time Jack would caution me to be wary of her pursuit, but to no avail. We were married a year later.

As usual we did a mix of challenging plays and light comedies during the summer and fall. We continued to explore ways to bring a greater sense of reality to the work. We were young, ambitious, and youthfully arrogant but one day it all broke down. We had just opened the American comedy *The Gazebo*,

and we were about to start rehearsals for a dreadful British comedy, *The Amorous Prawn*, a play that seemed to turn all decency and morality on its head all in the interest of a few laughs.

Meantime, Veronica was about to leave for Zermatt, Switzerland, for the winter. She and I were an item by now and I was good friends with her parents as well. While playing a lot of bridge, I learned drinking habits that have stayed with me to this day. Drink gin, a light drink, before dinner, and Scotch, a heavier drink, after dinner. (We didn't drink wine then; now that wine is part of the mix as well it does add up to quite a lot of alcohol.) To see her off, I drove to Edinburgh, a two-hour drive (there was no road bridge across the River Tay in 1962), after the opening performance of *The Gazebo*, and joined her and her parents at a hotel near the airport. We saw Veronica off at the airport at the crack of dawn; sleepless and emotionally exhausted I

drove back to Dundee in time for the 10 a.m. rehearsal.

There was only one problem. I was the only one there. The stage manager finally showed up about 10:30. Even the always punctual Hannah Gordon didn't arrive until 11. As for the less dependable Clive Graham and David Calderisi, I think we finally dragged them in about noon. It seems there had been a very successful opening night party in my absence. And I guess their interest in doing *The Amorous Prawn* was no greater than mine. (Jack had chosen the play — it had had a very successful London run.) My whole life had fallen apart. My girlfriend had left for six months and my acting company was in tatters. I don't remember what I said to the company once they were all there, but I'm sure it wasn't pretty. I sent them all home and said we would start rehearsals the following Monday, lines learned and on time.

And we did. It was a very snappy production, one of the best of the season.

Some time in the fall Jack Henderson announced he would not continue as director of the theatre after Christmas. Where had I seen this movie before? A pattern was developing in my career. First at Chesterfield, now at Dundee, it would happen three more times. Within a few months of my arrival the person who hired me would announce their departure. I really don't think it was me; I think it was serendipity. But it would have profound implications for my future, sometimes good, sometimes not so. Once again my future was in doubt. Not only was I really enjoying the work, but for the first time in several years I was living in ski country. Despite my first experience of Scottish skiing, I was looking forward to the season when the winter snows would fall somewhere near a ski lift. I didn't know then that they would fall and fall. Not only would we have to climb

to the bottom of the lift, we would have to climb from half a mile down the road. And I was looking forward to Veronica's return in the spring.

What now? Once again I would apply for the top job. This time the job stayed open. Jack did leave and joined the contract department of the BBC. Why would you do that when you could run a major rep company? Jack had five young children and wanted the job security, an almost laughable concept now, but quite realistic then. And so I did indeed take over. The theatre would now be run by its Artistic Director rather than its manager, or so I thought.

I had ambitious plans. The Board was on-side for a major upgrade of the interior design of the theatre; supervised by a local architect, the theatre was redesigned in reds and blacks, a bold look that made the auditorium feel more like a theatre. But more important for my personal goals, we expanded

the artistic philosophy I had worked towards in the fall. I wanted to create a true ensemble with shared goals, dynamic interplay on stage, and artistic growth for each actor in a resident company. We made a good start before external forces interfered. I instituted classes before rehearsals, in movement, voice, and improvisation. I invited Kristin Linklater — before she conquered North America — to work with the company for a week. The improv classes were designed to get the actors really talking to each other and working off each other. Under the pressures of the season not all the class work survived, but the intention of the work did. Most of the company remained with us. Pamela and Brian left. Irene — yes that Irene — joined us early in the winter.

Our first production, *A Man for All Seasons*, was a highlight for me. I wonder if it was as good as I remember. Maybe. Clive Graham played Sir Thomas More with great

dignity, supported by Susan Williamson and Hannah Gordon as mother and daughter. Maurice Podbrey was the Common Man and young Brian Cox made a strong presence in a smaller role. Roper was played by Jeremy Clyde, who would go on to fame and fortune as half of *Chad and Jeremy*. Possibly most interesting of all, though, was David Calderisi as Cromwell, a part Bolt, the author, himself described as thankless. Cromwell is the villain of the piece, but on the first day of rehearsal as I was giving some character ideas and described him as such, David stopped me. I wanted David, who was aquiline and athletic, to use those qualities to create a clear and dangerous presence. David resisted. He didn't want to play a villain. He had been reading Machiavelli — as had Cromwell — and wanted to play him as a positive force, to really get behind his point of view. The result was dynamic and thrilling. Instead of a play about a hero destroyed by evil forces, it



became a conflict of world views and power. The climactic scene of the play is the trial of More prosecuted by Cromwell. Clive and David played the scene with such commitment, such determination to win, I never knew from night to night who would be the victor. Of course, More's head would fall every night, but who would win the audience sympathy? An object lesson. Play to win. Whether hero or villain.

Mulder, watch out. Here comes the Smoking Man.

Now that the theatre would be run by a director rather than a manager, I needed to engage someone to be the manager. And here I managed to make two mistakes in one. At the time in Canada, the term Artistic Director clearly denoted the person at the helm of a theatre, the person to whom everyone else reports, including a general manager. Even in Canada now, that delineation is no longer clear and we have titles like CEO or

Managing Producer or Artistic Managing Director. Anxious to have the artistic title, prestigious in my mind at least, I gave myself the title of Artistic Director. I was happy that the new manager would call himself — yes, him, I don't think any women applied — Manager. Busy as I was both overseeing the renovations and mounting our opening production, *A Man for All Seasons*, I did not pay close attention to the preparing of the theatre program. I was somewhat taken aback when I did see it and saw that while indeed I did have top billing, our new manager was now General Manager and in type as prominent as mine. I didn't think too much of it at the time. Perhaps I should have.

My other error was choice. I engaged David S., let's just call him that. A red-haired red-faced charmer, I had first met David when we both applied to direct the theatre at Carlyle. He got that job. Perhaps I should

have paid closer attention as to why, several months later, he was again job hunting. But his résumé was good, our meeting productive and congenial, and so began a series of poor appointments I would make over the next several years, possibly affecting my future in a number of ways. My appointments weren't all bad; I did make some good ones. Indeed it is surprising how much David S. looked like Christopher Banks, my general manager for three years at Lennoxville and one of my better appointments, as a more honest and loyal colleague would be hard to find.

But there was little time to 'watch my back'; I had a season to be getting on with and goals to achieve. I gave Maurice his first directing assignment, the farce *Simple Spymen*, which he handled well, his work with Brian Rix in London standing him in good stead. We followed that with *The Rainmaker*, with Sutherland originally cast in the

Burt Lancaster role. Sutherland's size and innocence would have been wonderful in the part, but unfortunately yet another film opportunity intervened. David Calderisi stepped in and did a workmanlike job in the part for which he was not a natural.

We followed *Rainmaker* with my wonderful production of *Uncle Vanya*. Maurice played Vanya, exploiting his bear-like charm; Clive was Astrov, exploiting his pride and good looks; Susan Williamson was a wonderful Sonya; and Calderisi was a splendidly pompous, self-centred egotist as Soliony. Well, I thought the production was wonderful. We truly revealed the underlying pain of the characters, captured the mood, the rhythm, and music of the piece. The audience was a touch restless; the review was mixed. At the time one could only put this reaction down to the lack of sophistication of the audience. We knew we had hit a home run. Hmm.

Many months later I saw the National Theatre production of *Uncle Vanya* at the Old Vic. I had seen their first iteration of this production on the arena stage at Chichester. The cast included Laurence Olivier as Astrov, Michael Redgrave as Vanya, and Joan Plowright as Sonya. What I remember most about the Chichester production were the tears flowing down Redgrave's face during Sonya's final speech. He was in shadow and facing upstage; probably only a sliver of the audience could see him, yet he was giving himself totally to the moment and to the other actor. But it was the remount at the Old Vic that finally clarified Norman Ayrton's comment to us at LAMDA about wearing our hearts on our sleeves in *The Three Sisters*. What an arrogant young man I must have been. As I watched these A-list actors race through the first scene, I smugly commented to myself that they certainly don't get this scene, not going at that speed. Oh, a

moment. Oh, maybe they did get it. But then they were charging off into the next scene. Well, they might have got the first scene, but they are lost in this one. Oh, maybe not. Another moment. And so it went, each scene carrying us along, revealing itself briefly, and on to the next until by the end of the play the entire audience was in tears, including me. What did I learn? If you telegraph to the audience that something sad is about to happen they will protect themselves. If you want them to be moved you have to surprise them. If you play the problem, as we would later learn to say, you will bore them. If you play the actions that are fighting the problem, you will draw them in.

We followed *Uncle Vanya* with some pretty good productions: *Pygmalion*, *Picnic* — Maurice was wonderful as the lonely bachelor — *The Rehearsal*, and we had an exciting production of *The Caretaker* with David Calderisi and Dan MacDonald underway

when everything came tumbling down, literally.

But first some background. Which may or may not be relevant. A few days earlier I was in my office, the dingy backstage affair that formerly I had shared with Jack, when the secretary, Buntz, appeared at the door. Buntz was the middle-aged woman who had been Jack's secretary and whose Dundee accent had been almost unintelligible to me at first. This shy, almost retiring, woman had the unexpected hobby of target-shooting and had won many awards for her marksmanship. Her office was at the front of the theatre next to the manager's while mine was backstage. Fiercely loyal, yet terribly concerned to be respectful of her position, she appeared uncharacteristically awkward as she stood in my door. I invited her in. What she had to tell me was clearly difficult and she apologized for not speaking to me sooner. In short, she had two things to tell me

about David S. Through lunches and private meetings it appeared that he was promoting himself with the chairman of the Board at my expense. At the same time he was neglecting the job he was supposed to be doing; she had numerous examples, including finding long overdue bills at the bottom of a drawer. Torn between conflicting loyalties she had finally decided that her overall loyalty was to me.

Now what? I was not prepared for a political battle and clearly I had been blindsided. What were the issues, I wondered, that had been presented to the Chairman in David S.'s favour? Attendance was good, reviews were good, but still it could be argued that the season was not sufficiently popular. Had I overreached with Chekhov, Shaw, and Anouilh? Was I pursuing goals the Board did not share? I phoned the chairman, George Geddes, not a man I had ever been relaxed



with, and arranged a meeting for late afternoon the coming Saturday.

Saturday came. We had an excellent rehearsal of *The Caretaker* in the morning, then broke for lunch before the matinee of *The Rehearsal* in the afternoon. I was scheduled to meet Geddes at 5 p.m. Some of us went for lunch at the Chrome Rail as we often did on a Saturday when we were feeling flush, payday being Friday. After lunch I started the drive back to the theatre, but the roads were blocked. One of the actresses saw my car and, tears streaming down her face, called out, "The theatre is on fire!" And so it was. Smoke and fire engines were everywhere. I ditched my car and forced my way through the crowd of onlookers. The theatre was ablaze, beyond hope of saving, my dreams for now — up in smoke.

Fortunately no one was hurt, the company being on lunch, and being Saturday the building underneath was unoccupied. When

the smoke settled the building was completely destroyed, save for the pictures of the acting company which were somehow, ironically and heroically, still standing in the wreckage of the foyer.

Needless to say, my meeting with the Chairman did not happen. Had I been blindsided again or was the fire purely coincidental? How it started was never determined. Would David S. have gone so far as to burn down the theatre to forward his ambitions or perhaps to protect himself? Certainly Buntz had given me considerable evidence of his basic incompetence. Is this conspiracy thinking? After all, coincidences do happen. Or am I not being paranoid enough? He burned the theatre down just to get me.

At heart, I really think it was just bad luck. But one can't help wondering. The aftermath certainly played out in David S.'s favour. Although we were able to get a temporary location for a few weeks in a local movie theatre,

the Board cancelled the production of *The Caretaker*, deeming it insufficiently commercial. We did go ahead with a rather dull production of a rather dull play that was current at the time, *The Aspern Papers*, which Maurice directed. After that we mounted two productions in a tent in a local park. We planned an outdoor production of *Macbeth* on the facade of Glamis Castle itself. A theatrical extravaganza, we had lined up local cavalry and pipe bands, a tent in case it rained, and Calderisi to play the Thane. But just before firm commitments had to be made, the Board cancelled the project. And then they cancelled me.

In its wisdom, the Board decided they needed someone with “more experience” and guess who that turned out to be. Any details I gave them now suggesting David S.’s lack of competence would only be seen as sour grapes. My dreams for a new kind of theatre were, quite literally, in ashes.

In the arrogance of youth had I been too ambitious? Had I tried to create a theatre appropriate perhaps for a large urban centre, but not really what was wanted in a small provincial town? Were we just not good enough? Or in my enthusiasm to create theatre had I blindly ignored politics? Whatever the reasons, the loss of the theatre was a huge setback, both to my prospects and my confidence. What was I to do? Where was I to live? Not only had I lost a terrific creative opportunity, I had lost the opportunity to work in the only town in Britain with a theatre and access to skiing. Now that really hurt. And Veronica lived in Dundee. The situation was truly bleak.

Nothing for it, back to London.

## London

While I wasn't finished with British rep, London would be my base for the next two years and a few months. Once again a place to live had to be found, a task complicated by lack of funds on the one hand and marriage on the other. Veronica and I were to be married in December.

Ever since that first fateful lunch a trajectory had been laid down leading eventually to a wedding. True, Veronica went off to Zermatt for six months while I was in Dundee, but I visited, along with her parents I have to

add, at Christmas. Typhoid struck the resort soon after and Veronica was sent home in quarantine to be visited only by those with typhoid vaccinations, which I soon acquired. For the life of me I cannot recall when we finally had sex though I confess I do remember that while Veronica was in Zermatt an attractive, upper middle class, blonde woman, Allison, would come by my apartment from time to time. Right up until two weeks before her wedding. I sometimes wonder how that marriage worked out.

For Veronica and me I located a tiny flat on the fifth floor of an old house in Notting Hill Gate. Red, everything about the flat seemed to be red, but at least the bedspread was white. A cozy hideaway, it had a tiny living room with a double bed at one end, the usual electric fire, and a bathtub in the kitchen. The shared bathroom was down a half flight of stairs, but at least it was indoors. Nothing like five flights of stairs to keep one

in good shape in those days before one went to a gym. Going for a run would have been equally weird in 1963. The parks that are now full of joggers were then full of lovers, many young people having nowhere else to go.

Veronica still lived with her parents in Monifieth, a few miles east of Dundee. Her parents, Bill and Wilna, shared a large well maintained house with their two children — Roderick was younger than Veronica and often away at school — and four dogs, or was it five? Bill owned and managed a large department store in Dundee, but as I have mentioned elsewhere would not flaunt his success by driving an expensive car, though his Sunbeam Rapier was tons of fun to drive. I spent many happy hours in their warm, inviting home — Sunday lunches of roast mutton in the renovated kitchen, walks on the beach along the Tay, endless games of bridge, tea in the afternoon, gin early

evening, Scotch after dinner — and all of us smoking except Bill, who had to quit because of circulation issues. Trim and distinguished, Bill returned to smoking a few years later, which probably contributed to his premature death. Wilna, who never did quit smoking, was also severely overweight, both factors likely influencing her early demise as well.

Now that I was in London and Veronica still in Scotland, the overnight train from London to Dundee became a regular part of my life. I'm still haunted by the sound of trains at night, the rolling of the wheels, the creaking of the cars, and the long forlorn whistle. British trains were divided into tiny compartments, each with an upper and lower berth, and toilet down the hall. Traveling alone, the only certainty about one's companion would be his gender. I shared one trip with a small wizened Scot, well into his bottle that he had brought with him. We got to talking, with some difficulty, both the



accent and the inebriation creating challenges for me. When it got around to my being in the theatre, his eyes lit up, “Now that *Hamlet*, tha’s a good play, eh?” Since it had become clear by now that his education level was limited I was surprised he’d even heard of *Hamlet*. “Wha’s it about?” he demanded to know. I considered giving him a short summary but, what the heck, we have a long train ride, I’ll tell him the story. So I started at the beginning with the sentinels on the wall waiting for Horatio. He was riveted. When I was about halfway through, possibly around the play within a play, he asked me to stop. He had “tae piss.” “Dinna forget where y’are,” he demanded. As soon as he returned I continued to the end of the play. I told him only the plot, no character description, no exploration of theme, certainly no poetry, and he was spellbound. We forget how good Shakespeare’s plots are; we’ve come to know them so well. But does my companion’s

reaction tell us something about Shakespeare's audiences? Here is a person, quite possibly illiterate or nearly so, lacking any overlays to understanding that sophisticated education might give him, completely taken by the simple, direct story. That's as close as I have ever come to imagining how an audience in the pit at the Globe might have appreciated a Shakespeare play in his time.

Being back in London had its compensations; there was some remarkable theatre to be seen: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* with Uta Hagen and Arthur Hill; Michel Saint-Denis' production of *The Cherry Orchard* with Peggy Ashcroft, John Gielgud, Roy Dotrice, Dorothy Tutin, and the young Judi Dench as Anya; Anna Massey in *The Miracle Worker*; and Joan Littlewood's original creation of *Oh, What a Lovely War!*

All very well, but what about making a living? Getting a day job didn't occur to me.

Not yet anyway. Fortunately Michael MacOwan at LAMDA came to my rescue, and though I didn't know it at the time, I would begin a whole new career. I returned to LAMDA now as an instructor. I did some scenes with first year students; I don't think Michael was too thrilled with that. I hadn't yet learned the best way to work with beginning students. He seemed happier with my rehearsal class which followed and it appeared he would have more work for me after the Christmas break. The clouds were lifting, my marriage was approaching, and I was more or less earning a living in what was more or less my chosen profession.

If my first wedding was a good time, my second was a real blast. Veronica and I had a real church wedding, morning coat and all. My parents came over from Canada and Maurice Podbrey came up from London to be my best man. Veronica gave the minister strict instructions; she was not going to say

“love, honour, and obey.” I think she changed it to “love, honour, and respect,” but on the day, the minister dried. He knew he wasn’t supposed to say “obey,” but he had no idea what he should say. Finally, he gave up and said “obey.” What could Veronica do? Her “Don’t push me, Daddy” had already echoed through the church before her entrance. Could she risk another embarrassment? She had to agree to obey me. It hardly mattered. She was never inclined to obey anyone, nor was I ever inclined to ask her to. The future problems in our marriage were of a different nature. The reception that followed was terrific, my speech was a hit, and soon we headed off for our honeymoon in St. Moritz, Switzerland. Was it here that the trouble started? Instead of spending our wedding night in a lovely Swiss hotel, we spent it in an airport waiting room, one leg of our flight having been postponed. Once we finally got to our destination, skiing and sex

kept us pretty happy for the two weeks, even if conversation at meals was a bit halting.

Once back in England in our tiny Notting Hill flat, another setback. No, Michael MacOwan didn't have any work for me this term, had I been counting on it? Since Veronica had not yet found work in her publishing field, she donned her new fur coat — a wedding present — and we both signed on at the Labour Exchange. A somewhat humbling experience, but at least in those more enlightened times we were not expected to look for any old job, but only to pursue work in our own field. The Toronto actor Louis Negin is reported to have listed his occupation as “shepherd.” Darned if he could get much work herding sheep in downtown Toronto. Truth to tell, we weren't on the dole all that long. Veronica soon found work with a prominent women's magazine and freelance opportunities started to roll in for me.

The next two years are something of a blurr. I did do more work at LAMDA, first a rehearsal class of *Romeo and Juliet* in their exciting new theatre and then a production of *Two Stars for Comfort* by John Mortimer, which Mortimer himself came to — his daughter was in it — and told me he thought my production better than the recent West End production, something I should have remembered when I fell under the spell of the director of that production, Michael Elliott, at the National Theatre a year later. I started to teach at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, at that time a second tier drama school whose principal felt I was an upgrade to his faculty. Later I would direct a production of Chekhov's *Ivanov* for him. I was an assistant director of *The Easter Man*, a play by Evan Hunter that started in Birmingham and transferred to the West End for a too brief run. The cast featured a young Ian McShane. One night during rehearsals he

and his wife/girlfriend invited me to crash with them rather than travel home. I was startled to discover that crashing with them meant sharing their bed. But, alas, that's all it meant. I guess in the early sixties we were all chums together.

Other directing assignments came my way. I began a year-long relationship with the Colchester Repertory Theatre, a fortnightly company within an hour's commute from London. I directed many productions there including *Look Back in Anger*, *The Corn Is Green*, *The Reluctant Debutante*, *The Fourposter*, and *Macbeth* with David Calderisi. And I finally directed a pantomime, *Aladdin*, with Bernard Hopkins as Aladdin. I don't remember why the role wasn't played by a woman in this case. A baby-faced ingenue, Bernard went on to become a stalwart member of Canada's Stratford Festival company. As I have said, pantomime is full of strange traditions, one of which turned out to be that

one should never say the last line of the piece until opening night — “don’t ring down the curtain until you have rung it up.” Right up until the final dress rehearsal, Bernard would not say the last two lines. A pretty crummy tradition in my opinion; on opening night he totally flubbed the final speech.

Prior to the pantomime I directed a production of *Treasure Island*, also at Colchester. David Forder, the theatre’s director, gave me the playscript that had been used at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry where he used to work. I’m not sure if we had trouble getting scripts or if he wanted me to see this highly annotated text. It was full of music cues; it seemed the whole production had been one long music cue. I wasn’t having any of that and pared the music down to selected moments that could enhance the action. Who was this director who drowned his production in music? A young chap named



Trevor Nunn. Ever hear of the all-music drama *Les Miz*?

And then there was the haunting presence of Michel Saint-Denis. And the mystery of how some mortals become gods. Saint-Denis was a French director and teacher who made a name for himself in France in the thirties and was invited to establish training schools in England, becoming director of the Old Vic Theatre and School after the war, where he directed an iconic production of *Oedipus Rex* with Laurence Olivier. He left the Old Vic in 1951 to head the Centre Dramatique de l'Est but returned in 1961 to work with Peter Hall at the Royal Shakespeare Company, where he directed the previously mentioned production of *The Cherry Orchard*. With a cast like that how could one lose? While the production was praised in the press, it was perhaps better not to ask the cast their impressions of their director. The usually positive Judi Dench was treated as his whipping boy

and even John Gielgud is reported to have said that Saint-Denis was “too set.”

Nothing would shake the mystique surrounding Saint-Denis, however. And if the Brits were in awe of him, imagine how the colonials in Canada fawned over him. He became a consultant to various companies and schools, but notably to the Canadians who founded the National Theatre School of Canada. Was it a good thing to have a consultant who made his reputation in the thirties in France advise on the founding of a school in Canada in the sixties? The man was such an icon no one has ever asked the question so far as I know.

At any rate I was to fall into his sphere for the first time — Canada’s National Theatre School would come later — when I was engaged along with three other ‘young Turks’ to direct in the studio of the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford in the fall of 1964. Peter Hall’s company, now playing in both

Stratford and London, was challenging Oliver's recently established National Theatre for cultural supremacy in Britain. In keeping with Hall's artistic ambition, at the end of each season, after all the plays had opened, Saint-Denis would run something called "the flare-up," a series of workshops, rehearsal productions, and related activities designed to enrich the company, particularly those who might not have been fully challenged during the regular season. Among other things I did an experimental improvisation exercise we called "pop drama" — this in the days of pop art — where the actors riffed on randomly selected news stories I would give them, and I directed the second act of *The Three Sisters*. John Barton ran the program this year in the absence of Saint-Denis who had other commitments. Nonetheless, the great man did arrive in time to view our work and share his wisdom. In a French accent, of course. One story goes that when

giving a criticism he told the actress she did not have the *réalité*. When the person beside him said, “Michel, it’s reality,” he is said to have replied, “I know.” So maybe it’s the accent that gives one iconic status? Telling an actor she is not real would not otherwise seem very insightful. But perhaps I am just bitter for reasons that will become clear later.

In the meantime it was a real treat to get to know the young John Barton. John was the company’s dramaturge and had been largely responsible for the conflation of five Shakespeare plays into Peter Hall’s dynamic three part *Wars of the Roses*. His skill with Shakespeare’s language was such that he could write linking passages with no one aware of the difference. Where did Shakespeare stop and Barton begin? No one could tell.

After “the flare-up” I went back to doing alternating productions at Colchester. While

Colchester paid a living wage for the two weeks of rehearsal, they didn't pay me for the two weeks between productions. Of course, they should have; that's when I did my prep for the next production. So, for the first time since my brief stint in the bowels of Woodbine Race Track, I needed to find some other work, some day job. I soon found myself selling advertising space for a buying guide to be placed in all the rooms of a new hotel. To this day I am not sure the book was ever placed in the hotel. I'm not even sure the hotel was ever built. I know I never received the promised second and third year commissions. Never imagining I would be any good as a salesperson, I took it on as an acting exercise. I convinced myself the product was a marvellous opportunity for any merchant and lived truthfully in these imagined circumstances. And darned if I wasn't good. Soon I was making more money when I was out of work than when I was in work. When I

finally had an offer of full-time employment as a director and had to give up the sales job, the business owner offered me a huge increase and a car if I would please stay. I refused. It took thirty seconds. But I refused.

## **The National Theatre of Great Britain**

It is 1964. I am living in London eking out a living as a professional theatre director. I've settled into a fairly comfortable routine directing every second play at the Colchester Rep and directing occasional student productions at London drama schools. I get a call, or a letter, I don't recall which, from the National Theatre of Great Britain, the most prestigious theatre in the country. Would I come for an interview for the position of

Assistant Director? I am twenty-six and ambitious. Of course.

It turns out there will be three interviews: the first with the General Manager, the second with Associate Director, John Dexter, and the third and final interview with Sir Laurence Olivier himself. The first of these went very well. General managers usually have people skills and this lovely man was no exception. We had a pleasant conversation and I was assured of interview number two. John Dexter, a long story himself, was brilliant but full of himself. All I had to do in interview two was listen to John Dexter talk. And then came interview three.

I still recall sitting in the reception area waiting for my interview with the great man himself. The scheduled time for my appointment passed, and passed, and passed. After what seemed like an hour, though was likely less, a pale-faced individual emerged from what I assumed was the meeting room and



staggered towards the exit. My god, I thought, this is going to be a test indeed.

After a few moments, I was summoned inside to be met by two people in addition to Sir Laurence himself. I was invited to sit. There may have been, must have been, a few polite opening remarks. But all I remember is silence. And Sir leaning forward and staring at me. What should I do? Stare back? Finally, I figured I should talk. But about what? In the end I babbled for two or three minutes, whereupon Sir said, "Thank you very much," and I was dismissed. What a disaster! My predecessor had been in the room for an hour and I lasted no more than five minutes.

A week later, they phoned and offered me the job.

The National Theatre, now the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain, opened in 1963, domiciled in both the Old Vic Theatre and the Chichester Festival Theatre, the

arena style theatre modelled after Stratford, Ontario. In the 1970s the company would finally move into its own home on the South Bank. Laurence Olivier was the general director, John Dexter and Michael Elliott were associate directors; assistant directors such as me were quite a bit farther down the depth chart. The acting company included Albert Finney, Maggie Smith, Derek Jacobi, Michael Redgrave, Joan Plowright, Robert Stephens, and Frank Finlay. There were two separate companies, one in Chichester and one in London, the A and B companies. One could always remember which was which. Olivier was in the B company. I was to be in the A company.

We had a slight wrinkle as I was opening a play at the Guildhall School during the first week of rehearsals for the Chichester season. I had been assigned as assistant director of a double bill of *Miss Julie* and *Black Comedy*. Michael Elliott was directing *Miss Julie* with

Albert Finney and Maggie Smith, and *Black Comedy* was to be directed by John Dexter with Derek Jacobi as well as Albie and Maggie. Management assured me starting a week late would not be a problem, but during that week I had an angry phone call from John Dexter. "Where are you?" When I explained, he barked that no one had told him. Not a propitious beginning. Was that why my sole duty on the production turned out to be to check sight lines at one rehearsal? (Although I was also responsible for rehearsing the understudies, one of whom was the young Ronald Pickup.) Dexter was short and dark with a menacing air, but his bark turned out to be worse than the proverbial bite and he was quite friendly when I finally did get to rehearsals. He just didn't have anything for me to do. On the other side of the bill, the stage manager for *Miss Julie* assured me I wasn't missing anything: they were just talking, and talking, and talking.

Despite being relegated to observer status on *Black Comedy*, the experience was instructive. Peter Shaffer had written a warm humorous play about light and dark, seeing and not seeing. The play opens in darkness with the characters on stage apparently going about their normal lives — we know this from what we hear them saying — when suddenly the lights blaze on and the characters are seemingly plunged in darkness by a power failure. A nice conceit that sets in motion a light comedy with something to say. Dexter's blocking of the first half of this one-act play was brilliant — if only it were a Feydeau farce. Problem was, it's not. Halfway through the play the Maggie Smith character enters, and the play moves (or should I say, moved) into more profound territory. But the powers that be were flummoxed. Maggie Smith, the great comic actress comes on, and the play isn't funny anymore. What to do? We young types — who included my old

girlfriend, Carolyn Jones, who was a junior member of the company — sat at the back of the theatre and watched while John Dexter, Peter Shaffer, and Kenneth Tynan (the great critic and now dramaturge of the company) sat in the front row trying to make the second half of the play as funny as the first half. It was quite a pathetic sight. It didn't occur to any of them that the problem might be the first half of the play, that maybe the first half didn't blend with the second half because it should never have been directed as a farce in the first place. But no one asked us.

My experience with *Miss Julie* couldn't have been more different. The stage manager was indeed correct; they were still sitting around a table talking by the time I joined them. *Miss Julie*, by the great Swedish dramatist August Strindberg, is a play about class, privilege, power, and ambition. Miss Julie herself is in a double prison, being both a

woman and upper class. The play takes place in the kitchen of the estate on Midsummer's Eve in nineteenth century Sweden and centres on the dynamic between the aristocrat, Miss Julie (Maggie Smith), and the servant, the ironically better educated Jean (Albert Finney). Why so much talk at rehearsal? Why didn't they get on with it? After a time it became clear that the director, Michael Elliott, had an intense vision of the play surpassed only by his intense vision of theatre in general, what it could and should be. There were to be no tricks, shortcuts, generalities, or handsome performances in this production. We were searching for truth, clarity, and immediacy. And unlike Dexter, Michael would take me into his confidence.

Two particular rehearsals stand out in my memory. At one of the first rehearsals after I joined them, Michael began as usual talking about the play and related ideas. I'm a director and I could feel Albie and Maggie

becoming energized, anxious, and ready to begin rehearsing. If it were me I would have had them on their feet; clearly they were ready. But Michael went on talking — and talking. Gradually Albie and Maggie slumped back in their chairs and engaged in the discussion. ‘What kind of director is this,’ I thought. He doesn’t know when his actors are ready to begin? Only later did I realize he didn’t care whether his actors were ready to begin; it was not his job to get a professional actor in the mood to work — they are professionals, they can do that on their own. It is his job to get them ready to work in the right way with the right understanding of the work they are to undertake.

Of course, they did finally get on their feet and rehearse the play. One day the rehearsal was electric, sparks flew between them. Had I been the director I would have been thrilled. What was Michael’s response? As I described earlier he took a slow puff on his

cheroot, nodded his head, sat down with them at the table, and talked for two days. Britain may have had a class system in 1965, but it was a pale shadow of Sweden's class system of the nineteenth century; the actors needed to understand, to feel, to embody the chains of that time so that on this Midsummer's Eve they could rattle those chains, challenge that prison, and fail. Again, good acting was taken for granted. The work is to do the right acting.

Speaking of good acting, Finney was in such good form at one rehearsal I was sure he was improvising; his work was so fresh, so spontaneous. I kept checking the script. He was word perfect. Michael was leading Maggie to some of her best work ever. He would never let her rely on a trick. He took away all her mannerisms, all her props, leading her unerringly to the heart and tragic pain of the character.



In the middle of the play, the stage is invaded by a mob of peasants whose state of uninhibited release, permitted by the once a year tradition of Midsummer's Eve, echoes and reveals the primal lust being released in the next room by Julie and Jean. The scene is brief, but powerful, dramatic, and chaotic. Michael gave the performers an inspiring talk and then turned the scene over to his choreographer Litz Pisk and me. Not that being a sounding board for Michael wasn't illuminating, but finally I had something to do.

Was the play the success it should have been? Not entirely. It played in a double bill with *Black Comedy* and followed that piece, which in its original form might have set up *Miss Julie* nicely, but metamorphosed as it now was into a slapstick farce, the two plays were quite mismatched and certainly presented in the wrong order. Yet, a year later Michael wrote to me — I was by then in Canada — to tell me that when the double bill moved

to the Old Vic in London *Miss Julie* had come together beautifully.

It is small wonder that Finney had to make a leap of imagination to grasp Strindberg's experience of class structure. One day after the company had moved to Chichester for the summer he invited Veronica and me to dinner at the house he had rented a few miles south of town. Rather than give us directions he suggested we follow his car in ours. His car was a chauffeur driven Rolls-Royce — his insurance would not allow him to drive himself, not that he was a bad driver, he was too valuable an asset — while our car was a thirteen-year-old Aston Martin DB2 that might or might not last the short trip. When we arrived the four of us had drinks in the living room — he had his current lady friend with him — before moving to the dining room table, which was set for six. Before I could make a fool of myself by asking if there were more guests coming, the four of

us were joined at the table by the chauffeur and the cook. The son of a bookie, Albie had not let his money betray his class.

One day I was watching a dress run-through of another play in the repertoire, *Armstrong's Last Goodnight*, in which Albie was playing the lead. Although not a full dress rehearsal, it was pretty close to it; I was startled when Albie stopped the rehearsal before a long speech of his and said to the director, "I don't know how to get into this." What happened next, I don't recall. But what has stuck with me to this day is there is no point chattering on with a long speech if you don't know what gets you into it. I often tell students to rehearse the start of a monologue — no point rehearsing the rest of it if you don't have the beginning working.

Before we moved to Chichester for the summer the manager asked me to make sure I saw a performance of *Royal Hunt of the Sun* in the London theatre, as I would be

assisting Desmond O'Donovan when he directed the remount of John Dexter's production in the fall. Duly noted. Duly done. But what neither of us predicted was that in the fall Desmond would not be available — illness, I think, but I don't recall. So guess who is directing the remount of someone else's production? That he has seen once several months earlier? The good news was that Dexter would return after the first week of rehearsal; I had only to man the ship until then. So my job along with an equally bewildered stage manager was to block five new leads into the production. Rehearsals went something like this: "Does anyone remember where *X* was standing at this point?" "Oh, thanks, *Y* move over to there, and where was *Z* then?" "No one knows? Well, try there, let's see if that works, etc." Hardly the best way to introduce oneself to this prestigious company as the dynamic young director of the future.

Gradually though it was becoming apparent that assistant directors at the National were just that, assistants. They weren't seen as apprentice directors who would be given their own productions anytime soon. But another unexpected opportunity appeared. Finney asked me if I would assist him when he directed his first film. He was going to star in it so he needed a director to work with him. We both had seven months to go on our National contracts, but the project would begin at the end of that. Meanwhile we could location scout on weekends.

And so, while film was not a great ambition for me at the time, a working life stretched out in front of me, a longer horizon than most in my field. Veronica was well settled into her publishing job; we had a new garden flat in Hampstead, our aging Aston Martin was running as well as could be expected, and we had found a new water ski club. What's to complain?

And then the telephone rang.

## **A Fork in the Road**

The call was from Montreal. At the other end of the line was James de B. Domville, the Director General of the National Theatre School of Canada. Would I accept the position of Assistant Artistic Director of the English Acting Section? They would need me to start in two weeks, or maybe it was three, and could I give them an answer in three days. They would pay the costs of our move to Montreal and offered unheard of money, \$7,000 a year.

Ouch. What do we do now? For some reason I was home alone that fateful afternoon; Veronica was still at work. Why couldn't they have offered me the job to start in a year and a half? Why do I have to choose? So soon? Three days to decide the future course of my life? And Veronica's? Why did they think of me at all? I guess I had written to them a couple of years earlier when the Dundee job had gone up in smoke and I really had been at a loose end. I don't think they even replied.

A year or so earlier Veronica and I had joined the Bonnington's Water Ski Club north of London. As far back as my childhood and CBC Radio, skiing had always been a countervailing force competing for my attention with my professional aspirations. London, England, lacked two important ingredients for skiing: snow and hills. Our solution, as we were both keen to ski, was to ski on water. Bonnington's was more a social



club than a ski club, having only a tiny body of water too small for a slalom course and two outboard boats. They did, however, have a pair of trick skis and a jump. It was here that I first began to trick ski, though no one had any idea how any tricks should be done — or even what foot to put the single ski on. Still, somehow I got started in the event in which I now hold a couple of national records in my age division.

Bonnington's also had a jump, and unlike trick skiing, had one member who actually knew how to do it. For weeks, with more bravado than intention, I had been saying to Veronica and anyone else who would listen that I would like to try that. Well, be careful what you wish for. One day I was doing something up at the clubhouse and Veronica had gone on down to the site. When I joined her a bit later she was in conversation with a young man who turned out to be the experienced jumper. "Ah, Bill, I hear you want to

jump. Here's what you do. Hey Rob, bring the boat around, Bill's going to jump." Oh my God. Before I could protest, I was on the water wearing jump skis and approaching a wooden ramp that appeared before me like a giant wall. In seconds I was flying through the air and in another second my skis hit the water with a thump. I don't remember where I landed, but it wasn't on the skis. But on my third attempt I finally managed to land upright and ski away. I was now a "three-event skier" — slalom, tricks, and jump being the three competitive events in water skiing.

Some things should not be done under stress, however. Ski jumping is one. Walking downstairs can be another. The day after the fateful call from Montreal, our minds churning with indecision, I happened to be ski jumping at the Prince's Water Ski Club, just outside London, while Veronica was at work. At almost the same time, she fell down the stairs at her office and I crashed and

sprained my ankle. Somehow we both managed to hobble home and somehow managed to set up dinner for Michael Elliott whom we had previously invited.

Sitting around a card table we had set up in the living room, my leg propped up on something, Michael, a genuine mentor, tried to help us with our decision. We agreed that there might not be much to be gained from the further seven months I had on my contract at the National, and to my slight dismay he seemed to think he could deal with the remount of *Miss Julie* at the Old Vic without me. On the other side, if I had ambitions to be an important director, was it a good idea to lock myself into a teaching position? It did seem though that the National would likely release me from my contract and Finney, though he would be disappointed, could get along without me as well.

What finally tipped the balance? I had always planned to return to Canada;

remember my ambition was to be Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival in Ontario by the time I was twenty-nine, and here the National Theatre School was prepared to pay my way and give me a job. And what seemed like a lot of money at the time. But after all the professional pros and cons had been weighed and the result inconclusive, one fact remained. Montreal was a ski town, in the middle of some of the best skiing in Eastern North America. We made our decision.

But there were things to do and quickly. Olivier was generous and helpful, Finney was indeed let down but understanding. The toughest thing to do was sell our Aston Martin. By this time there was such a leak of oil into one cylinder that we had to put in a fresh spark plug every time we started the car. And by the time people were coming to look at it, all the doors had jammed and we could only get into the car through the hatch-back. Still, some dealer found a few pounds

for us and took it off our hands, and we were on our way to a new life in a new city in my old country, but a new one for Veronica. It would be another thirty-five years before I returned to Britain. And by then I would be an actor.



## PART FOUR

## **Canada Redux**

I had only been away five years, but what a change was there. The stuffy Protestant fifties were nowhere to be seen, in Catholic Quebec at least. Money for the arts was flowing from many different sources. I kept asking Jim Domville how things could be afforded. His reply? Canada has lots of money, not a refrain one ever heard in the fifties. In Toronto, the Crest had finally given way; the future was subsidized community-run arts organizations, not family businesses. In Montreal the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde,

performing in the new Place des Arts, was one of several flourishing French language theatre companies. Regional theatres were being established across the country: the Playhouse in Vancouver, the Citadel in Edmonton, the Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg, and the Neptune in Halifax. Money was flowing into opera companies and symphony orchestras. On the negative side, television was now trying to ape U.S. commercial television, and the great drama series that actually presented plays were gone. And radio drama was but a pale shadow of its former greatness.

And then there was Separatism. Canada is divided into ten provinces of varying sizes. One large province, Quebec, occupies a prominent geographic position just right of the centre of the country, although its politics have usually been to the left of the centre of the country. But its significant difference from the rest of Canada is that it is largely



French-speaking. One evening when I was still in England I heard Malcolm Muggeridge interview four or five well dressed articulate Quebecers who were making the case that they were a colonized people and deserved to have their own country. I knew little more than that when I arrived in Quebec. Gradually one came to see their point. When we first arrived in Montreal we stayed for a few days with my aunt Marge in Mount Royal, an English-speaking conclave on the north side of the hill that dominates the city and is affectionately called "the Mountain." She had lived in Montreal all her life, but spoke not a word of French, and while not meaning to be disparaging, referred to those that did as "the French people" in a tone that clearly suggested a class distinction. The English had always been the bosses in Quebec. When I learned to ski at Mont Tremblant in 1950, the owners were English; the French packed

the runs on snowshoes. A reckoning was at hand.

In the next few years that reckoning would come to a head. In 1967, the Parti Québécois was founded, devoted to establishing national sovereignty for Quebec. In July, during Montreal's Expo 67, the French president Charles de Gaulle uttered his famous cry from a balcony, "*Vive le Québec Libre!*" In 1970, a diplomat and a cabinet minister were kidnapped by members of the FLQ (*Front de libération du Québec*); the cabinet minister, Pierre Laporte, subsequently murdered after Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau had invoked the War Measures Act to suppress the movement. Many artists and performers were members of the FLQ, and, while likely not supporting violent action, supported the goal of an independent Quebec. Late the same night when the War Measures Act was passed, the FLQ was declared illegal. Early the next morning before that decision was

made public, the police knocked on the doors of many prominent artists and asked them if they were members of the FLQ. When they affirmed that, yes, they were, they were arrested. The legislation also made it illegal to publish or distribute the FLQ's manifesto. Needless to say, you could not find a federalist among the French students of the National Theatre School. Rebellious and idealistic, the French students took on the job of printing and distributing the manifesto. Despite two referenda on sovereignty in succeeding years, the separatists have not achieved their *prima facie* goal of an independent nation, but there is no denying the transformation of Quebec society their movement prompted. The English bosses are gone; French is the language of work; a generation of Franco-phone Quebecers has no memory of their hat-tipping ancestors of the forties and fifties.

French/English was only one axis of this turbulent time. Add to the mix the conflict of generations — ‘don’t trust anyone over thirty’ (luckily I was just twenty-seven) — the tension between druggies and straights, and an overwhelming distrust of authority, especially in schools, and you have a recipe to challenge the most experienced chef. And yet none of the chefs, nor their assistants, like me, grasped the scope of the changes happening in the generations younger than they. I may have thought I was coming home when I returned to Canada in the fall of 1965, but for all I understood of it I might as well have been landing on another planet.

Yet it didn’t look different. The Montreal Canadiens, my favourite team since I was ten years old, still dominated the National Hockey League, cars were as big and plushy as ever, and winter in Quebec was wonderfully relentless, cheering the skiers and frustrating everyone else.

# **The National Theatre School of Canada**

For some it was a dream come true. For me it was a job. Perhaps it was just as well that I was out of the country in the years when the School was being conceived, promoted, and initiated. Would it have been better had I known ahead of time that the institution — I use the term advisedly — had goals it could not possibly achieve, that it had a crushing bureaucratic structure that could only suppress creativity, that it had drawn its models from European dinosaurs instead of the lean

and flexible English schools I had come to know so well? Place this cumbersome institution in the turmoil of the times and what do you get?

In the late fifties a prestigious committee of Canadian theatre people was formed to begin the planning for a national theatre school. David Gardner, who once did my makeup when as a boy I played a monkey for the Straw Hat Players, was the Chair (was he unwittingly making a monkey of me again?) and the aforementioned Michel Saint-Denis was the Artistic Advisor. Mavor Moore, also a member of the committee, wrote at the time in his memoir, *Reinventing Myself*, "At long last our theatre has found a national voice that can be heard from coast to coast." The School was to be truly national in scope, combining and uniting the English and French cultures, ignoring the fact that French actors under the age of thirty had no interest in uniting with the English or that

young English actors were congenitally incapable of learning French. Nonetheless it was believed that not only would the school contribute to the creation of a uniquely Canadian theatre, it would contribute to the unity of the country. What were they smoking?

It was certainly a good idea to start a theatre school. Canadian actors needed training and the opportunity to train in their own country, and while some patchwork programs were being developed at some universities, the country lacked a real conservatory program where the training could be specific and not diluted by other educational imperatives. But the ambitions for the School overshot any realistic target. Of course, maybe high falutin' talk was the only way to get money. I guess if they had just said they wanted a school that would locate talented actors, train them to be better actors, and then send them out in the world, no one

would have been interested. But face it, isn't that what the first class London drama schools were doing?

I should declare my bias before I go too far. The National Theatre School fired me in 1970, or more delicately, 'did not renew my contract.' I've had many setbacks in my professional life, not to mention my personal life, but I'm not sure any have haunted me as much as this. Going into the job in 1965 I really believed I could make a terrific go of it. That it came to naught has been a mystery that challenged me on many levels both personally and professionally. One would hate to use a memoir to justify oneself as many have done, but as I look back on the School and my time there, I wonder . . . maybe it wasn't me . . . just maybe.

The National Theatre School/L'École nationale de théâtre began in the fall of 1960 in three rooms on Mountain Street in Montreal. Ironically the school may well have opened



on a mountain peak, only to slide inexorably down the side as size and compromise inevitably limited creativity and excitement. Early graduates included Martha Henry (formerly Martha Buhs referred to earlier), Heath Lamberts, Diana LeBlanc, Donnelly Rhodes, Kenneth Welsh, and John Juliani. By the time I arrived the School had expanded and was housed on the upper three floors of an office building at 407 St. Laurent, the street known affectionately as “The Main.” Farther up the street the school had obtained a lease on the ancient Monument-National theatre in the midst of the raucous entertainment section of the city.

Originally intended to be a bilingual school in keeping with Canada’s two official languages, by 1965 its best hope was to be “co-lingual,” a place where the two languages and cultures could live side by side and learn from one another. Even that simple aim flew in the face of the realities of the time. As it

was put to me, "If one culture believes it is dominated by the other, it is not going to want to be influenced by it." And so in many ways the school mirrored the "two solitudes" of the country, only in closer proximity than before. Originally the School was to be in Toronto, but there being so little French culture in Toronto the French students would have been in a cultural wasteland. Anyway, since to a woman all the French students were separatists can you imagine their agreeing to study in Toronto? No, the only possible location was Montreal, but unfortunately that left the English in a cultural wasteland only partially alleviated by moving the school to Stratford for a month in the summer, an experiment that was abandoned after a few years.

If the glorious goal of a uniquely Canadian culture was not to be forged in the crucible of a bilingual school, the structure required to pretend to do so limited the possibility of

achieving the more realistic goal — good training for good actors. In 1965 the School had three distinct sections: the French Acting Section, the English Acting Section, and a Production/Design Section. Andre Muller was director of the French Acting Section, Duncan Ross, director of the English Section, and David Peacock, head of the Production Section. Since the three sections needed to share staff, space, and budget, they could not be autonomous; all three reported to the Director General, James de B. Domville, sometimes by way of the secretive administrator, Jean Pol Britte, who reported only to Domville. A study in contrasts, Jim and Jean Pol created an impenetrable roadblock. Both workaholics, Jim was a messy, disorganized, chain-smoking arts executive with little artistic background, other than having been a producer of the wildly successful college review *My Fur Lady*. Still, he was gregarious, and helpful to Veronica and me settling into

a new city. Britte, on other hand, was reclusive and private, in the office an hour before the school opened with a desk so clean you could eat off it. Problem was, he was so private the finances of the school were a mystery to everyone else. If money were needed for a workshop or to bring in an instructor, it was available if Britte said it was and not if he didn't, the purported department heads not having access to the relevant numbers.

And so where Michael MacOwan could make the decisions needed to create a dynamic school in the image of his and his teachers' vision, Duncan Ross could not, as he formerly had at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School — one reason, possibly the main reason, why Duncan (known as Bill) quit after one year. Even such a simple question as length of a class had to be decided by the committee as a whole.

Domville — with the fancy titles Executive Director in English and *Director Général* in French — occupied a large prestigious office while the artistic directors had tiny cubicles. What did that say about the organization? And its values? I was never very clear about what Jim did; all that was certain was that he did a lot. He was at the office until late and always took work home with him. Curiously, when he left the School in 1968 we didn't replace him. Perhaps some of that work wasn't strictly necessary?

Duncan (Bill) Ross had been hired the previous spring to take over from Powys Thomas, the original director of the English Acting Program. Former head of the Bristol Old Vic School in England, Bill had been lured away from the University of Washington where he and his large family had settled when they left England. For me to be hired sight unseen as his assistant was a risk for both of us, I guess, but it worked out

amazingly well. Our personalities meshed well and our approaches to the work overlapped sufficiently. His hard-nosed British temperament — he had been in the services and he supported the Vietnam War — sometimes led him to dismiss an actor's emotion as self-indulgent when I, a sentimental Canadian, would find the work true. But we were in accord on most actor training issues.

A red-headed Brit who looked more like a soccer coach than an acting teacher, Bill was one of those brilliant Englishmen who had failed his “eleven plus,” that life-altering exam used in the English educational system at the time to separate the brains from the dross. According to this test Bill was the dross, despite having some of the highest possible marks in English. No one meeting him in 1965 would have thought him either dull or uneducated. Self-educated, he was a living rebuke to the eleven plus exam, which was thankfully abandoned some years later.

My first rehearsal class was Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, with the first year students. Susan King, now the established actress Susan Hogan, played Emily with a lovely truth that informs all her work to this day. No one taught her that. Others in that class included: Wayne Specht, still the Director of Axis Theatre in Vancouver; Luba Goy, famous for the *Royal Canadian Air Farce*; the playwright John Lazarus; and Bonnie Blair Brown who has had a major American career. Later in the year I did a Shaw exercise with the second year class, a group that included future successful actors Richard Donat, Deborah Kipp, Peggy Mahon, Carolyn Younger, and actor turned director, the late Neil Munro.

My first year at the school was a good year, and I don't recall ever second-guessing my decision to come to Montreal. I had a contract that stipulated thirty-seven and a half hours a week of work. Remember those

days? When one was expected to work hard at one's job, but then have a life as well? We skied every weekend, watched the Canadiens win the Stanley Cup, heck, even watched television once in a while.

Following a now well established pattern, first at Chesterfield, then at Dundee, the man I had been hired to work for decided — for reasons that I'm pretty sure had nothing to do with me — to leave, putting my future once again in limbo. Within a few months of my arrival Bill announced that he would leave at the end of the current academic year. Why had he decided to leave? Who would replace him?

When Bill left the University of Washington for Montreal, his future at NTS seemed uncertain in his own mind. He rented two adjoining apartments in downtown Montreal, one for him and his wife and the other for his many children. He did not resign from the university but simply took a



leave. My guess is that he was drawn to working again in a truly professional academy with serious and talented students, but frustrated by the limitations imposed on him by the structure of the school and an artistic mandate created by others. He was a proud man who needed to be his own boss, something the structure of the school did not allow. He was not a fan of the previous regime, the Powys Thomas/Saint-Denis method, if it could be called that. Powys was an inspirational teacher, but to Bill he was more inspiration than teacher. Perhaps he inspired students but he didn't teach them anything useful. When Bill sat in on one of Powys's classes, Powys's direction to one of the students was "think of the Welsh fire." What is an actor supposed to do with that? Finally, it didn't help that Bill hated Montreal and longed to get back to Seattle.

I, of course, had no doubt who should replace Bill. The other Bill. Me. It was time the

job was held by a Canadian — and, unlike Bill Ross, I still had some sympathy with the optimistic aims for a national Canadian school. True, I was only twenty-eight, but in those early days of Canadian theatre there really was no one else in the country with my experience as both a professional director and teacher. I was the logical candidate. In my mind. A considerable period of uncertainty followed. Domville thought I was a good candidate, but would be a better candidate if I served the three-year apprenticeship as assistant that my current contract specified. All very well, I thought, but who would I be working for during the next two years, and anyway even if it were someone I liked they might stay for fifteen. I would have happily worked for Bill Ross for another two years, but the prospect of someone unknown was worrying. Some of the names I heard bandied about did not inspire my confidence. While I had not known Duncan (Bill)

Ross before I came, I knew who he was and he had been highly recommended to me by David Forder from Colchester. Now I was facing a complete blank. Was it time to move on for me as well?

I guess there was a lot of soul searching in 'upper management,' but in the end Bill Ross announced to the English students that he had recommended that I take over. I was to be the Artistic Director beginning in the fall of 1966. While it now seemed unlikely that I would make my goal of being Artistic Director of Stratford by the time I was twenty-nine, Artistic Director of NTS at twenty-eight seemed a pretty close second. And Veronica and I got to stay in Montreal, ski in Vermont, and cheer for the Montreal Canadiens.

Veronica landed firmly on her feet in Montreal working with Peter Desbarats, first on his new magazine *Parallel* and later with him and Laurier LaPierre on a new current affairs program, eventually hosting her own

show in Ottawa. After a couple of years we could afford a lovely apartment at the corner of St. Marc and St. Catherine's, just a couple of blocks from the Montreal Forum, and a small A-frame near the ski area, Jay Peak, in Vermont. When the school moved to Stratford in the summer we were able to weekend in Muskoka and holiday there in the summer break. Once again life stretched out happily in front of us. Once again it would not last.

Directing opportunities arose in some of the new professional theatres across the country and NTS was supportive of the faculty maintaining professional credibility. The first of these was a production of *The American Dream* at the Red Barn Theatre, a summer stock company in Jackson's Point, north of Toronto. Malcolm Black, the new Artistic Director of the Vancouver Playhouse, saw the production and invited me to direct *Candida*, the opening play of his 1966 season. I had known Malcolm, a mild-mannered

Englishman, years before when he was General Manager of the Crest in Toronto and my summer stock partner Karl Jaffary was the House Manager. Karl described Malcolm's mysterious interruption of financial discussions. They would get to a certain point when regularly Malcolm would excuse himself and go to his office. Eventually, Karl figured out that Malcolm had never learned to multiply — another failing of the English educational system? One must remember that this was not only before computers, but before the simple calculator. How Malcolm coped in his office, Karl never knew. Perhaps he had a slide rule.

I headed off in September to direct Frances Hyland in *Candida*, the opening play of the Vancouver Playhouse 1966 season. Hutchison Shandro, who would figure in my life later and my cousin Donald's even later, was playing Marchbanks. One of the biggest stars of Canadian theatre at the time,

Frannie was one of the smartest and hardest-working actors I have ever encountered. What a contrast with, say, Judi Dench, whose biography I recently read. Whereas Dench would never read a play she was going to do prior to the first rehearsal, from the time Frannie knew she was going to do the play until the first rehearsal, she had read *Candida* every day. Keeping up with her was an artistic and intellectual challenge. The production was very successful and Malcolm tried very hard to persuade me to direct the third play of his season, *Peer Gynt*. Tempted though I was, taking on another outside production so soon might have compromised my work at the School. It would also have conflicted with the beginning of the ski season but, of course, that had nothing to do with my decision to turn down the offer.

But it was now my job to develop the English Acting Section of the National Theatre School, a task, in the arrogance of my youth,

I was confident I could do well. First off, I needed to replace me as Assistant to the Artistic Director and here I made a decision that, in the end, was perhaps a greater benefit to Canadian theatre as a whole than it was to the School itself. I brought my old colleague from Dundee, best man at my wedding, Maurice Podbrey, to Canada. Maurice would later go on to found the Centaur Theatre in Montreal, a thriving institution to this day. While Maurice was an asset to the School in many ways, it was some time before I realized that he was not the inspiration to the students that I had hoped for.

From a twenty-first century perspective the struggle to find good acting teachers may seem odd indeed. Now it seems one cannot turn around in this business without running into an acting teacher, and some of them, not all by any means, are very good. But making matters worse for the English Section of the school, whatever teaching talent there might

have been at the time was based in Toronto, or possibly Vancouver, but not in Montreal where there was no work for English-speaking actors, in theatre, television, or film. So why were we trying to run an English acting school in Montreal? Yes indeed. Why were we?

Still, we were able to invite directors from across Canada and Britain to come in for a few weeks at a time, including my old principal from LAMDA, Michael MacOwan. More limiting, at least in terms of developing a coherent vision, were the teachers who worked in both the French and English Sections of the school, and were, in effect, imposed on me. Louis Spritzer was the resident voice and singing teacher and Jeff Henry the movement teacher. And so, while the Warren/Linklater approach to voice was at the heart of my sense of actor training, I inherited two teachers with very different philosophies.



Not that Louis and Jeff were bad teachers. They were very good teachers, but not part of a coherent team, coming from different backgrounds, and as teachers in both sections of the school working in two very different contexts. Coherent creative teams are rare, but wonderful to behold when they exist. When such a team exists, communication is seamless, artistic goals and methods collectively understood, and high achievement possible. There is no need for expensive and cumbersome conferences at Stanley House, a retreat on the East Coast where the staff of NTS all repaired one year for a week of planning. The original planners of NTS may have thought such a team was possible, but given the dual language and culture of the institution, those visionaries were, unfortunately, mistaken.

By this time, the original advisor to the school, Michel Saint-Denis, had died, but from time to time his wife, Suria, would be

invited — not by me — to look in on the school and see if her husband's philosophy, whatever that was, was being carried out. I did read his book, but was no wiser after than I was before. No doubt, Saint-Denis personally was an inspirational figure; his wife was not. Somehow it seemed my work was being measured against the fleeting images of a ghost. Not only was it expected that Saint-Denis's undefined vision was to be followed but his iconic status remained unchallenged. The truth is, Saint-Denis did not run the famous Old Vic School in London just after the war as is so often alleged; George Devine did. Saint-Denis was the Director General of the larger institution, the Old Vic Centre, and under his leadership the whole edifice collapsed after just a few years. Yet here we were, destined to follow in his footsteps, muddy and dated though they were. Meantime we had in the school, at my invitation, a man who had indeed run a highly

successful acting school, but no one asked Michael MacOwan to comment on the School's founding principles.

But perhaps the question of training begs yet another question: what do we want the training to produce? Can we agree on what good acting is? Even here, the opinions of experts and lay people alike seem to find no focus; one person's caviar is another person's catfish. Sometimes, sometimes, there appears to be universal agreement that a great performance has been given, but total unanimity of opinion is rare indeed. But at least I know what I want to see in an actor's performance: a dynamic reality, a life that flows between the actors, where each actor influences the other, and the outcome always appears uncertain.

One of my favourite ways of assessing acting is to listen to talking from another room or the hallway. I shouldn't be able to tell whether the people I can't see are acting or

talking. Years later, when I was running the Vancouver Playhouse Acting School, I went by the closed door of the student locker room. Two of the students were engaged in the most fearful argument. I stood outside the door trying to decide whether to intervene when the door suddenly opened and two happy students emerged feeling really good about the rehearsal they had just had.

If the structure of the school were not challenge enough, remember this was the Sixties, when challenging authority was *de rigueur*. Students were confronting faculty in every school in the province; I believe there was one week when NTS was the only school open in Montreal. There was a huge uproar in the French Section, students demanding that their work be more reflective of Quebec and less of France. Eight graduating students in the French Section quit the program. While nothing so dramatic happened in the English Section, English traditions being

famously less dramatic than French, pressure for change was insistent, though what the change should be was seldom clear. And the line between the teacher generation whatever their chronological age and the student generation was far sharper than in my student days. Was it simply because the students did drugs and we didn't? Whatever the reasons, it was not an easy time to be director of a school, any school.

One staff member left the school to set up a utopian group in rural Quebec and took two of our best students with him. Fortunately, one of them, now known as Chapelle Jaffe, returned to the school and has had a distinguished career as an actor and administrator. Nothing was ever heard of the utopian theatre group.

Meantime, I continued to direct in theatre across the country as well as in Vermont where I directed *A Winter's Tale* for the Champlain Shakespeare Festival. I returned

to Vancouver in 1967 to direct another play with Frances Hyland, and then had a wonderful time in Halifax directing *The Subject Was Roses* at the Neptune with Ron Hastings, who would later become a stalwart in my company at Lennoxville. These outside gigs were a breath of fresh air for me. Was there something stifling about the School? Whatever the reason, I always returned to the School after these projects with a renewed sense of purpose and confidence.

The academic year 1969–1970 was a pivotal one for the School, for me, and for marriage number two. As I indicated earlier, when Jim Domville left the school, to glowing praise and ceremonial send off, we did not replace him. The School would be run by a triumvirate consisting of the directors of the two acting sections and David Peacock, the Director of the Production Section, who would chair the committee. There would be no Director General. I was delighted with the

plan; the artists would be running the school, as so they should. However well it worked, it didn't last; I should have been suspicious when David moved into Jim's large office. After a time he proposed to the Board (curiously all three of us never reported to the Board, only David) that he be made Director General, and they agreed.

David, another Englishman, for whom "the army never did me any harm," was, I imagine, an excellent stage manager. He might well have been a good teacher of stage management and related production techniques. We got on well, travelled across the country together each year on the audition tour, but I couldn't say we ever shared a sense of artistic purpose. The book *The Peter Principle* came out around that time, the central idea being that people keep getting promoted until they arrive at a job in which they are incompetent and there the promotions stop. So, almost by definition, most people are in jobs for which

they are not suited. David said he found this 'the most frightening book he had ever read.' Unfortunately, he did not let that observation affect his career path. Nor, I have to admit, did I.

If you dropped in on the Sixties from the twenty-first century you might think you were on another planet, and not just because there were no cell phones. The Sixties must have been one of the strangest eras in Western social history. It is not my role here to endeavour to explain it or even to describe it, but I am trying to come to terms with my role in it, how I dealt with it, and how it dealt with me. Separation of faculty and student, so jealously protected now in the twenty-first century, was challenged by students in all institutions. Students demanded a voice, a loud voice, in how their schools were run. The further removed faculty were from the students, the greater the dissension. I remember Fred Euringer, then running the



Drama Department at Queens, saying the location of the coffee was critical to a successful department; it needed to be located where faculty and students would mingle. And yet, at this very time, the National Theatre School was planning a new building, its current location on St. Denis, and the design called for the faculty to have separate quarters on a floor where no student would go unless invited. I insisted that if the School proceeded with this plan, it might not survive. In 1970, I was probably right. By 1972, I was wrong. And I'm still wrong as the school survives to this day. That historical moment flared out as fast as it flared up.

But while it was in flare-up phase, educators everywhere were challenged. Most of us, raised in the fifties when everyone 'knew their place,' struggled to find common ground with this strange generation of students, who demanded new original thinking, but had no agreement among themselves

about what that thinking should be. I was young enough to have one foot in their world, but too old to be one of them. I was almost thirty, after all. For me, it was an opportunity to examine the creative process itself, to experiment with ways to enhance a student's potential, to make the talented act or more talented, not simply more skillful. Among the experiments was a marathon encounter group — marathon encounter groups were all the rage at this time — conducted by the noted cognitive psychologist Albert Ellis. In retrospect, was this an appropriate activity for a first-year class at the National Theatre School? Well, the class did agree to it in advance and the work they did afterwards was astonishing. Efficacious or not, a national theatre school, established to serve all students in the country, may not be a place for experiment.

A glimpse of the times. Earlier that year, 1969, one of the first year students, Judith

Hodgson, whose family had a farm in the Eastern Townships south of Montreal, invited the class and some faculty to a party one weekend at her farm when her parents were not going to be there. Veronica and I drove up from our cabin in Vermont and walked into another world. I think Judith was the only one not completely fried on some kind of drug and with whom we were able to have a conversation. Maybe they weren't all stoned, maybe we just arrived too late, but we soon excused ourselves and left. We probably didn't need to excuse ourselves; I'm not sure we were even noticed.

Another glimpse. Three of the students invited me to a Janis Joplin concert at the Montreal Forum. Joplin, high on Southern Comfort, gradually stirred up the crowd, high on other things, and urged everyone sitting higher up to come down to the floor, maybe to dance, I don't remember. So we trekked down the stairs and attempted to

enter at one of the lower entrances only to be blocked by some of Montreal's finest. Others might have challenged them, but I wasn't going to. I turned my back and started out when one of the cops followed me and gave me a huge shove even though I was already leaving. Now I understood why they were called "pigs."

On this other planet, this 1969 planet, personal relations between staff and students were very different than they are today. So far as I know, no one worried whether a liaison between a student and staff member might affect his or her marks, not relevant in a theatre school anyway as there were no marks. Married people tried to keep liaisons secret as they do now, but single people felt no such inhibition. Students are people. Faculty are people. Why shouldn't they interact as people? Sex too was very different on this planet. It was an era of breaking down barriers. People slept around. A lot. But it was not

like now; sex was not a recreation as it seems to be now among the young, it was a serious connection with another person. Sex between staff and students was not only not surprising, it was expected. Or so I comfort myself by thinking.

Not that I had sex with that many students at the School, only two, one of whom became a very serious relationship that might have ended in marriage had our timing been better. Heck, even old-school teachers were getting it on with students. Years later, a woman told me how Michael MacOwan, when he was a guest instructor at the School and she was a student, would smuggle her into his apartment. I don't think David Peacock was having sex with students, only wishing he was. He made up for it, apparently, when as Theatre Officer for the Canada Council he is reported to have traded favours. Now that I don't approve of.

While the larger world was flying off in unpredictable directions, my personal world was in equal confusion. Everyone seemed to be demanding more of life. Something in my life felt incomplete. Was it? Who knows? Veronica was now working mostly in Ottawa, returning on weekends. We continued to do things together that we both enjoyed — ski, birdwatch, play bridge. But we didn't really talk to each other, share thoughts or ideas, and we both seemed to be looking for something more, feeling some quiet dissatisfaction.

I had always liked first year student Judith Hodgson; I had taught her in an evening class before she came to the School. She was attractive, with long blonde hair, a mild manner (quite unlike Veronica), young for me, but with a university degree. By the time we had worked together at the School for a few months we fell in love. Really. For a time we kept our relationship a secret from her

class, but at the conclusion of the encounter group, many secrets now revealed, Judith felt the time right to tell the class. In keeping with the era, they seemed delighted and toasted us. And some of her class remained friends with us for the next few years of our on again, off again relationship.

As breaks go, the break with Veronica was not a bad one. I may have suppressed some memories here, but she was absorbed with her new career in Ottawa and may well have looked forward to a new freedom herself. There were few assets to divide. Our one car, a used E-Type Jaguar, was more a liability than an asset, in the repair shop more often than on the road. We actually had quite a nice weekend together in Vermont after the split had been agreed to. Eventually, Veronica would marry my brother Tim's best friend, move to Colorado, and have two children, something we had been trying to have without success.

No, the real problem was my mother. We were in Muskoka, I believe, when I gave her the news, sitting across from one another in the living room in front of the fire, my mother reclining on her homemade bed/sofa and I on a chair opposite. I doubt that I was too hesitant; I fully expected her reaction to be similar to her reaction when Cathy and I separated: something like, 'Well, it's about time' or 'I never thought she was the right person for you.' To my surprise she was personally upset, reacting almost as if I had kicked her in the stomach. I had been remembering the early days of my relationship with Veronica, when she had first come to visit in Muskoka before we were married and my mother had been quite cool about Veronica and my relationship with her. I thought she would see that I had now come to agree with her insight of the time. But, no, in the intervening years she had more or less adopted Veronica, made her the daughter that she had never



had. And now I was turfing Veronica out of the family.

But at least my mother continued to talk to me and our close relationship survived. Not so my cousin Murray who, having also befriended Veronica, would not speak to me for years. He never relented; I was never forgiven. His reaction seemed unfair to me. After all, I had not spurned him when he broke up with his long-standing lover, Bill Job. Cousin Donald, on the other hand, always more relaxed and gregarious than his brother, seemed to make no such judgement and we continued to be friends and colleagues. And in a short time he and Hutchison Shandro, Judith's friend and teacher, my former assistant, became lovers, and we were all one happy family — for a while.

For all the personal turmoil, some of the work at the School was pretty good. I directed a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* involving the English acting students

from all three years. In a terrific set designed by Alan Barlow, the head of the Design Section, and created with 2,000 green garbage bags, the third year students played the lead roles, the second year students the supporting roles, and the first year students, vegetation. I know it sounds odd, but trust me, it worked. Influenced by Jan Kott's dark view of Shakespeare on the one hand, and the Elizabethan seven stages of love on the other, the arc of the lovers went from the stilted self-love of the early scenes, through the primal earthly love in the forest, to self-discovery, and finally to a deep unified connection to the universe. The set could be lit from the front to appear dark and menacing, or from the back to look benign, almost divine, following the emotional progression of the characters. The magic potion placed in the lovers' eyes only appeared magical; it actually took the characters to their natural place. The production succeeded both as a

realization of the play in terms more profound than the light comedy versions one often sees, but also in actor training terms that allowed each class to work with the elements appropriate to that stage of their development.

I was pleased with the reaction to the production, though surprised when it was being praised to a group of us and David Peacock replied, "I'm very proud of it." I couldn't help wondering what it was he had to do with it. Why had he not said something like, 'I thought Bill did a great job'? I was standing right there. I didn't understand at the time that I was being removed not only from his consciousness but also from the School.

In the dying days of my tenure, David Peacock assembled the first year class and me in the staff room and asked each student individually if they believed I was providing them with a coherent program. Of course, he was paving the way to firing me, but what a

terrible burden to place on both the students and me. I knew there were students in the class who supported me and my work — Judith, if no one else — and some that had concerns with some of the work, but David framed the question in such a way that a positive response was almost impossible. Why was he doing this? Why was he putting us all through this truly embarrassing ordeal? I can only conclude that he needed to be able to say to the Board of Governors that I did not have the confidence of the students.

He didn't ask me if I thought the acting program was coherent; he only asked the students. Some of the students struggled to say positive things, others were more circumspect. Why was my opinion not relevant? My answer would be similar to the students' answers. No, it was not a coherent program. How the hell could it be? If a coherent acting program is what was wanted, one had to give the artistic director the tools

to do it. It's not rocket science; it's pretty simple in retrospect. The English Acting Section needs to be its own school, located in Toronto, with access to English-speaking theatre and professional artists, free of compromise with the French Section and free of supervision by a "Director General." Needless, to say, forty years later, that has not happened.

It only remained for David to hand me a short letter a few days later informing me that my contract would not be renewed. I often heard him say that was the hardest thing he ever had to do.

Cry me a river.

## **Moving On**

The National Theatre School had been my life for five years. Now what? It's a little late to go back to England and work with Albert Finney. But then another opportunity presented itself. Or did it? I have never been sure.

My tenure at the school finished with the summer expedition to Stratford, Ontario, where Jean Gascon, the former head of the French Section of the school, was now the Artistic Director of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. Gregarious, as so

many Quebecers are, and knowing that I was looking for new opportunities, he and I had a meeting. Well, if you can call sitting on the stairs beside the bar a meeting. At any rate, we had a discussion. Certainly I was interested in working at Stratford. Five years earlier I had been an assistant director at Britain's National Theatre; I felt I was ready for more. Jean invited me to come and work at Stratford — I think. He suggested that I join the company and we would see how things worked out. He didn't say what I would do in the company while we were 'seeing how things worked out' nor what he expected to happen if things did work out. Was he just trying to help me, knowing I was soon to be unemployed, or did he have hopes that I could make a real contribution to his theatre? It was all rather murky.

I imagine it was up to me to follow up on this discussion though I was not even sure of that. Whatever was supposed to happen, it

didn't. I stayed in Montreal for the next year. That was as close as I ever got to working in Canada's major theatre company. Needless to say my ambition to be Artistic Director of Stratford by age twenty-nine did not come to fruition. Why did I stay in Montreal? From a career point of view, I imagine I should have pushed the Stratford possibility and failing that, should have moved to Toronto, the centre of English theatre in the country. Why didn't I? What can I say? My usual two failings. Women and skiing. Judith was going into second year at the School and I still had my ski cabin in Vermont, two hours from Montreal.

There were still a few directing gigs: *The Importance of Being Earnest* for the St. John's Players in Newfoundland, *The Death of Bessie Smith* for Maurice Podbrey's newly formed Centaur Theatre in Montreal with the wonderful Dana Ivey (*Legally Blonde 2*), and the aforementioned *A Long Day's*



*Journey into Night* at Neptune Theatre in Halifax with Ken Pogue.

Skiing challenged my directing career in another way that year. In those years, I loved to ski untracked snow and would go almost anywhere to find it. One day, well away from the official run, I am making some nice turns through the woods at Jay Peak when the tip of my ski digs into a snowdrift and I hurtle over the front of the ski, landing on my butt. When I try to stand I know I have done some damage: I can't put weight on my left leg. What do I do now? While not officially out of bounds, I am skiing alone in the woods where no other skiers or patrollers are likely to find me before spring. I simply have to get back to the main run. Fortunately, the run is not too far away and I find I can limp my way through the woods to the edge of the trail where skiers are whizzing by. Now what? Do I lie down and pretend I got hurt here so patrol will take me to the bottom on a

toboggan? That seems pretty dumb so, skiing on one leg, I make my way with some difficulty to the bottom of the mountain and get myself into the ski patrol office. I explain my symptoms to the patroller on duty and he declares I have likely strained my Achilles tendon and advises me not to ski too hard for the rest of the day. But if I want to get it properly checked out he suggests I could go around to the doctor's office on the other side of the mountain. And so I limp my way to my car, drive around to the other side, hobble into the doctor's office, and wait to see him. Finally, the doctor takes one look at my tendon and says, astonished, "How did you get here?" It seems I had snapped the tendon in two; the surgeon in Montreal who later repaired it said it was the worst break he had ever seen. And he was surgeon to the Montreal Canadiens hockey team.

Okay, so four weeks in a hip cast and another two in a lower leg cast. One slight

problem, I did this on a Saturday and I was due in Halifax on Monday to start rehearsing *A Long Day's Journey into Night*. The operation in Montreal was delayed — people kept having car accidents — but finally I was able to get on a plane Tuesday in time for a first rehearsal Tuesday evening. Unfortunately it didn't occur to Lynne Gorman, playing the mother, to spend any time on Monday or Tuesday working on her script, and even though we still had nearly four weeks to rehearse she never was able to learn her lines. A technique that works for Judi Dench doesn't work for everyone.

The injury presented another challenge when I went into rehearsal at Centaur right after the play in Halifax opened. I was still on crutches, but since the cast was on my left leg I was able to drive. One day it is snowing quite heavily when I leave home and more snow is forecast. I have the good sense to park in an indoor garage and hobble to

rehearsal rather than park on the street and risk my car being snowed in. We have a good rehearsal, but when I leave the theatre at the end of the day the city has ground to a halt. Three feet of snow everywhere. How, in god's name, do I get home? Still on my crutches I manage to get to the garage where the car is parked and it seems one lane of that street is more or less open. The attendants are helpful and push me out of the garage into the barely passable track. To get home I know I am going to need to go up a hill, but I am hopeful that the main street, University, will have at least one lane open. Wrong. Nothing on University except cross-country skiers. The image of having to ditch my car and climb through three feet of snow on crutches is coming frighteningly into focus. Ah, up ahead I see a car go up Guy Street. I, too, turn up Guy and manage, thanks to a touch of gravel at the top, to make it on to Dorchester. I am getting closer. But the side

street I need to take is full of snow and my street is one way the wrong way. Never mind the niceties. I turn into St. Marc, going the wrong way, still wondering how I will possibly get the car into the garage when — why would the gods look kindly on an atheist — the wind has blown the snow clear of the garage door. I press the button to open the door and let out a shriek as I drive the car into the dry garage. That night, nothing could be heard on the streets of Montreal but snowmobiles.

Even if I could get enough freelance directing jobs, it was very hard to make a living in Canada as a freelance director. The fees were simply too low, an issue we addressed a few years later when I was on Equity Council. I needed to find a job. There weren't many jobs out there for a director/teacher — I still didn't see myself as an actor, not that there were any jobs for actors in English in Montreal at that time. I did actually do one

brief acting gig for television, foreshadowing my future perhaps. I remember just two things about the interlude: in one scene I had to fire a gun from the back seat of a car and, in another, after sitting waiting for the take for what seemed like hours, I had to leap from the car and run for my life. But I had been sitting so long my leg totally cramped as soon as I started to run. I don't remember any offers after that.

I think I interviewed for the job of Artistic Director of the Manitoba Theatre Centre three times, but it was not to be. I applied to theatres and universities across North America, always a bit concerned about how a successful application might affect Judith and skiing. As it happened the most interesting offer came from Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec, just two hours southeast of Montreal and only an hour from my cabin at Jay Peak. The day I went to interview was one of those beautiful winter days with

crystal clear skies set off against clean white snowbanks. I was hooked before discussions began. Sweetening the offer was that not only would I have an interesting teaching position in the small theatre department, but they wanted someone, me, to start a professional theatre in their lovely new theatre. Who could say no?

## **Lennoxville**

Like a bee to a flower I have always been drawn to universities and university life. A world unto itself, a university campus, with its quiet streets and walkways, its trees, its classical architecture, is so often a haven removed from the rumble of modern life. Bishop's University was no exception. A tiny campus, really, a student population in the hundreds, Bishop's University was not so much an ivory tower as a sheltered bubble on the edge of a small provincial town. Two delightful anomalies about the university



served perhaps to mislead students about the realities of the larger world. One was that the university was completely English-speaking in a French-speaking province. The other, and the reason I was there, was that the building at the centre of the campus, much as a cathedral might have anchored a campus in earlier times, was the sparkling new Centennial Theatre. Built five years earlier in 1967 in honour of Canada's Centennial, the 550-seat theatre, with its well equipped flexible stage and small rehearsal space, was plunk in the middle of the campus. One might almost be led to believe theatre was at the centre of the civilized world.

Remembering those long ago discussions of the meaning of life from my undergraduate days, and more recently a wonderful evening in St. John's, Newfoundland, when the writer Michael Cook hosted a small group of academics and I again felt the thrill of mental challenge, I was excited to return

to a university, to be stimulated and challenged on a wide range of topics. Yes, well. It seems the faculty common room at Bishop's had more pressing concerns, such as the deficiencies of the current president, or the food in the cafeteria, or which faction was currently in favour. While life at the university would have many rewards, intellectual discourse did not turn out to be one of them.

Still, the small village life of Bishop's had its charms. I did not know then that humans have evolved to thrive in small villages or bands. Most elements of the community intermingled, without the usual separation into smaller groups. Football players acted in drama productions, drama students went to football games, and everyone, faculty and students, went to the G, the decaying Georgian Hotel with its bar that served beer in quart bottles as was the custom in Quebec. And being a backwater, Bishop's was still in

the Sixties when the rest of the world had moved on; these were a kinder, gentler Sixties, and some students took to mentoring me on the music and mores of the time.

We were still in the era when faculty and students were all people together. We drank together, partied together, and sometimes slept together. Some faculty, me for instance, seemed to get on better with students than others, but there was no moral nor official sanction regarding the interaction. I didn't give marks in my courses so it would be hard to charge favouritism. Stephen Mendel, an actor and a student at the time, became a lifelong friend. He told me many years later how one of the male teachers brought in to teach in the acting program tried very hard to sell him on the joys of homosexual sex. Stephen was not alarmed because he was a student at the time, but only because he himself is a raging heterosexual. For some years when I was still in Toronto we would have

occasional gatherings of what we affectionately called the Bishop's Mafia, a group of former students and faculty. In truth it's hard to imagine what faculty life at Bishop's must be like now. If students are removed from your allowed circle of friends, your circle must shrink to a pretty tiny dot, both the university and the community being so small.

Judith had another year to go at NTS and moved into an apartment in Montreal with fellow students R.H. Thompson and Hardee Lineham, but she came to Lennoxville on weekends and holidays. For the first few months I lived in an apartment in town, but later found a house for rent in the country near the small town of Sawyerville. About thirty minutes east of Lennoxville, the region was a different economic world. A local doctor had renovated an old farmhouse and divided it into two units, believing no one could pay the \$90 a month rent (\$900 in

2010 dollars) he wanted for the whole building. On my associate professor salary, \$90 was quite within my means. I took the whole house, thirteen rooms on 130 acres of land leased to local farmers. Of course, living alone, I did not really need thirteen rooms. After a time I found nine rooms an appropriate number for my needs, leaving four rooms mostly unused.

There were two strands to my engagement at Bishop's, one clear and one anything but. 1971 would be the first year of a new Drama Department, for the first time separating Drama from English. David Rittenhouse, a tall and forceful young man, was Chair of the Department and would deal with drama as literature and direct a production in the theatre. I would be responsible for developing the actor training component of the program and would also direct a production. Tom Lytle, the third member of the faculty, would direct another production. The murky

part of the assignment had to do with the vague notion that the university would like to have a professional company perform in the theatre during the summer months when the theatre was not being used by students. They really had no idea what that company might be or how it might happen, just that it would be nice if it did. And, of course, they didn't have any money to contribute to the venture. Still, David suggested I see what might be done though I would be on my own, if a theatre company did emerge, as he was going back to Oxford for the summer to finish his PhD.

So how does one start a theatre company? And what kind of company would be appropriate to both the theatre and my own ambitions? Not a summer stock theatre similar to the Straw Hat Players; there was already one of those playing down the road in North Hatley. No, something more ambitious was required. For one thing, the local community

was too small; we would need to draw an audience from at least as far away as Montreal, a two-hour drive away. And I wanted to stretch my wings. If Stratford didn't want me to be their Artistic Director, maybe I could create my own Stratford.

The first step was to test the community, to see what support might be out there. To that end, with David's help and others with contacts, we arranged a meeting of business, financial, and legal people from the wider community. While the first such meeting was inconclusive, there was enough interest to schedule a second meeting from which a Board of Directors was established, with Peter Turner, a local lawyer, as President. The second step, or it might have been the first step — I don't remember the sequence exactly — was to establish an artistic purpose or mission for the company. At the time, some might say, still, there was a gaping hole in the Canadian theatre firmament. Existing

Canadian plays were simply not being performed and, in my view, there were some good ones no one was able to see. Theatre companies would obligingly do a new Canadian play from time to time and new companies, in Toronto in particular, were being established to develop Canadian plays, but one production was about the best a Canadian play could hope for at the time. There was no place to see the repertoire. Our mission came to be the presentation of high quality productions of previously produced Canadian plays, to assist in establishing a Canadian repertoire. As we moved forward we realized that most of these plays needed further work. In the absence of the out-of-town tryout period that helped American plays be honed in preparation for Broadway, Canadian plays could benefit from the experience of a second production and perhaps find their way into a permanent Canadian repertoire.



Did we succeed? Is there now a Canadian repertoire? A few of the plays we nurtured have had a continuing life, but fair to say, most have not. Mind you, economics have squeezed the repertoire to the smallest of casts in recent years and some of the plays we did required a fair number of actors.

But how did we get from a Board and an idea to a full summer season of quality productions with some of the best actors and directors in the country, an audience prepared to visit for two or three days, and attention from the national press? With very great difficulty. I get tired just remembering those few months. That said, we had a lot of help. Thanks to the prestige of the university and the members of the Board, private foundation money was raised. And thanks to my old colleague and now Theatre Officer for the Canada Council, David Gardner, definitely not making a monkey of me this time, the Council broke from tradition and

awarded us an operating grant in our first season.

Many challenges remained. What would we call this theatre? Many fancy names were debated but a journalist advisor kept insisting we call ourselves by our geography, "Lennoxville." To us though, Lennoxville was a scrawny town with one traffic light, hardly a symbol for the major theatre company we hoped to be. But he assured us that the name would take on the lustre of the theatre rather than the reputation of the town. Think Glyn-debourne, Malvern, even Stratford. Of course he was right. The company was christened Festival Lennoxville, and no one associated the name with the town, which has since become a major home for the Hells Angels.

It's all very well to have a name, but how do you persuade A-list actors and directors to come to a theatre they have never heard of? Fortunately many had heard of me. That

was a start, but what would they be getting themselves into? Trying to figure us out, they asked all sorts of questions. One even asked the size of the costume department. How could they be sure this wasn't a fly-by-night operation with more ambition than resource, or that they would be supported by professionals of equal calibre? 'If she comes, I'll come.' Once we got a few on board it was easier to get others. Remarkably we ended up that first season with Frances Hyland and John Hirsch as directors as well as me, and Douglas Rain, Donald Davis, Roger Blay, Ted Follows, Ron Hastings, Nancy Beatty, Sandy Webster, Mia Anderson, and Claude Bede, among others, in the acting company.

Michael Eagan was our designer, as well as our cultural marker. Always ahead of his time, he wore his hair long before anyone else and he cut it very short years before the rest of the world followed. "Long's wrong," he informed us. He made excellent use of the

Centennial stage for several seasons. Production management was more problematic. I hired a person who had been production manager at Centaur, largely on the strength of Maurice Podbrey saying, "What would I have done without her?" A good person, but out of her depth in this job; in fairness, it was a very challenging job since we were a repertory company in its first season. But months later, Maurice asked me in astonishment, "Why did you hire her?," completely forgetting his earlier accolades. Or had I misheard him in the first place?

Upper management was equally challenging until later years, when first Thomas Bodanetsky took the position of General Manager, and later, Christopher Banks. Despite completely contrasting styles, both Thomas and Christopher were excellent general managers. A European by manner and tradition Thomas would say, "Thank you" at the end of every discussion, even heated ones,

though those were rare. With a clean desk and an organized mind, Thomas was in touch with every detail of the operation. He had help; he introduced me to an electronic gadget I had not yet seen. We now call it a calculator. I was still adding columns of figures on paper. Imagine if we had had a computer. Chris was the opposite extreme, lazy, and always finished in time for a beer after work. But lazy is not bad in a manager; Chris knew how to delegate and the operation ran just as smoothly under his management style.

No, the management problem lay elsewhere. Once we had a Board and a mission we needed an organizational structure. Following the pattern of most theatres in the country, I drew up a plan with an Artistic Director and Administrative Director at the top. Since I had been asked to create this theatre I put myself down as the Artistic Director. I had imagined that we would hire

someone like Thomas as the Administrative Director. And slow to learn as ever, somehow having lobotomized my Dundee experience, I had not made it clear that the Artistic Director would be number one on the flow chart and the Administrative Director number two. David Rittenhouse said that he wished to be the Administrative Director. What could I say? What about the PhD, the summer in Oxford? For the sake of this opportunity he would postpone the PhD; he never did finish it. It's not for me to say, of course, but I think that was a pity.

A popular teacher and strong academic, David's theatre background was limited. Educated at Harvard and Oxford, David had excellent academic credentials, had directed a number of undergraduate productions, but just what were his qualifications to be Administrative Director of a major theatre company? A talented man in the wrong job?

Hadn't I just seen this movie at the National Theatre School?

“Raise the stakes.” How often has one heard that refrain in an acting class? I used the phrase myself many times until one day when an acting student seemed unable to get untracked in a particular scene. His character in the scene was trying to persuade a doctor to put his dying wife on a list for a liver transplant, but because of her poor prognosis she was ineligible. I tried many things to help him come to grips with the emotional power of the scene, but nothing worked. Finally, I suggested he think of the doctor as a veterinarian, and imagine he was pleading with him to save the life of his dog. Well, the emotions flowed, fully and unbidden. “Lower the stakes” can prove as effective as the converse. If the stakes are too high our resistance may be too high as well. In an acting scene, and perhaps in life as well, we need to find a path with as few obstacles as possible.

It is lovely to see someone doing a job they are good at and want to do, and so disappointing to see someone grapple with something out of their reach.

Is that why I became an actor even though it was a career I did not seek? In the end, was that the path to which I was always more suited? I'm not sure I am ready to admit that yet. I still think I was, am, a very good director. The British director Peter Hall talks in his memoir of his constant fear of "being found out." I think he should relax. But me? One always wonders.

And so David Rittenhouse became the Administrative Director and Festival Lennoxville was often described as a theatre started by the two of us, though it was hard for me to see the equivalence. Fortunately I continued to have, or to assert, a free hand artistically, choosing the plays and artistic personnel. After a year or two we created the position of General Manager and engaged



Thomas Bodanetsky. Why would we need both a General Manager and an Administrative Director? Perhaps because the Administrative Director lacked the requisite experience to do the job. True, the Administrative Director had some responsibilities in relation to the Board and fund-raising not shared by the GM, but internally there was overlap and friction. I would have loved Thomas to have stayed in the organization, but his detail-oriented style could not deal with a largely redundant Administrative Director. His more relaxed successor, Christopher Banks, was more able to 'go with the flow,' however convoluted.

In 1972 the list of Canadian plays we had to choose from was really quite short; I could list them on one page. A contemporary Festival Lennoxville would have hundreds of plays to choose from. While our pioneering purpose was to say, 'Look, we have a repertoire of our own, by us about us,' a modern

version of such a theatre could collect and celebrate the very best of the copious Canadian work that has since been written. We could use some arrogant young thirty-year-old with more ambition than sense to launch the idea anew. It can't be in Lennoxville, though, as the Anglophone population has shrunk below the necessary critical mass. And it won't be me who is the Artistic Director. Too much sense, not enough arrogance. Not anymore.

In our opening 1972 season, Frances Hyland directed Mavor Moore's adaptation of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, known as *The Ottawa Man*, with Douglas Rain and Sandy Webster; I directed George Ryga's *Captives of the Faceless Drummer* with Donald Davis and Roger Blay; and John Hirsch directed Ann Henry's *Lulu Street* with Ted Follows and Nancy Beatty. *Captives* and *Lulu Street* were more successful with the press, but *Ottawa Man* was such a romp

it was popular with the audience. We achieved the high standard we had sought; how could we not with those actors and directors?

Getting audience in sufficient numbers would always be a struggle for the theatre, the English-speaking base being small and shrinking, the location not that accessible, and, truth to admit, "Canadian plays" not being a surefire draw. 1976 likely struck the death blow for the theatre though it struggled on for a few more years. The Parti Québécois was elected that year as government of the province of Quebec; René Lévesque came to power determined to take Quebec out of Canada. While that was not to happen, the trickle of anglophones out of Quebec and down the 401 to Toronto became a flood and with it many of Lennoxville's audience members, both actual and prospective. The faint hope of a major English-

speaking theatre in the heart of Quebec became a lost cause by 1980.

For all the tensions in the province and the country, Festival Lennoxville seemed to maintain good relations with even the most partisan separatists. Paradoxically, Quebecers seemed more at ease with the conflict than Canadians in the rest of the country. Canadian playwright George Ryga, who had considerable success with his first major play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, first at the Vancouver Playhouse and then at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, wrote a second play intended for production at the Vancouver Playhouse, *Captives of the Faceless Drummer*. Loosely based on the FLQ kidnapping of James Cross, the centre of the play is the claustrophobic room where a revolutionary kidnapper is holding his middle-class diplomat hostage. The centre is flanked by memory figures from the diplomat's life and a chorus whose purpose, other than to

be poetic, is not quite clear. With such echoes of the actual political crisis, the Vancouver Board got cold feet and cancelled the production. Not only did we in Lennoxville forge ahead with a production despite being in Quebec, the cauldron of the controversy, but we set the play in Quebec while Ryga had kept the situation generic. We set the play within an image of the FLQ flag and we cast a leading Quebec actor to play the rebel and had him speak in French to his cohort. We also reworked the chorus to take the sting out of its pretentious poetry. I should add that Ryga was not present for rehearsals and when we sent him the prompt script he was puzzled by what we had done. We worked together more closely on the second play of his that we did, *Sunrise on Sarah*, two years later.

Canada's leading theatre critic, Herbert Whittaker, had this to say about our production:

*The eclipse of the sun arrived one day late for the new festival of Canadian plays here, but it was in time to be applied as a favourable omen for the second production, William Davis's sensitive, poetic staging of George Ryga's beautiful Captives of the Faceless Drummer. . . . Captives of the Faceless Drummer, not only in being an important play, made more so by being played in this province for the first time, restores Lennoxville's claim to attention as a Canadian event of significance.*

Five years later, Michel Tremblay, a strong separatist, gave us permission to do the first English language production of his play in Quebec, *Forever Yours Marie-Lou*, which we were delighted to do with leading Quebec actors Monique Mercure, Gilles Renaud, and Sophie Clement.

George Ryga was a phenomenon. Unfortunately he was not a very good playwright. So excited were we at the time to have a writer dealing with issues of our time and place, and passionate about them at that, we were reluctant to see weaknesses in the work. When I directed *Grass and Wild Strawberries* with the students at Bishop's, Ryga's rock musical that captured the spirit of the time, I nearly came to blows with my old friend and colleague David Calderisi. So sure was I that he would love both the play and my production, I was humbled when the best he could say was he liked the theatre space. He then went on to speak of Ryga's "rub-bishy lines." As happened other times with Calderisi, he would prove to be right. When the glare of Ryga's fireworks subsides, what remains is pretentious, self-conscious, and what we would now call 'on the nose.' I recently played the Magistrate in a revival of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Not only does the

play creak, it is really impossible to say some of the lines truthfully. While we should be forever grateful for Ryga's contribution to our developing theatre culture, we should not confuse that contribution with good playwriting. There is a reason these plays have not been performed on the major international stages.

I was Artistic Director of Festival Lennoxville for six years, from 1972 to 1977. During that time we had some successful productions and some duds, the duddest of all being Herschel Hardin's *The Great Wave of Civilization*. Considered by some at the time to be the finest Canadian play ever written, it seemed de rigueur that we should do it. With its broad Brechtian canvas and its potential for imaginative staging, Paul Thompson was a natural choice for director. The founder of Theatre Passe Muraille and a director of successful collective creations, *The Farm Show* in particular, I hoped he



would bring his irreverent imagination to bear on this large canvas. Wrong. Contrary to his usual style, possibly intimidated by the presence of a live author, he gave it a reverential, lifeless production. Whatever people thought of Thompson's work I never thought he would be boring.

Meanwhile, back at the campus, I had another life to lead as Associate Professor of Drama at the university. In truth, for nine months of the year the two jobs ran in parallel, as the planning for the Festival continued throughout the year; the Festival was only an entity in its own right for three months in the summer. In the first year I was trying to start the Festival from my windowless office in the theatre without so much as a direct phone line, never mind a computer, or internet, or other trappings of the twenty-first century. Later, when the Festival was established and a general manager hired, year-round offices were found in the adjacent student union

building. But in the meantime I was teaching classes, lighting and directing productions, and catching up with the Sixties.

## **Romance in the Seventies**

If the seventies was a turbulent time in the worlds of Canadian theatre and politics, it turned out to be no less turbulent in the personal life of William B. Davis. I rolled into 1970 in the process of divorce number two and in my new relationship with Judith. By the end of the decade I would be living in Toronto with Francine; my daughter Melinda was born and Rebecca would follow shortly.

Was it the spirit of the Sixties? Was it the natural instincts of a male primate to seek

variety? Or was it simply deep flaws in my character? Whatever the reasons, I spent a good part of the decade hopping from nest to nest before settling into domestic life — for awhile. I truly loved Judith, but when I went to Newfoundland in 1971 to direct *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I found no difficulty responding to the attentions, or seeking out the attentions, of a few — well, four — interesting Islanders, one of whom enriched my life considerably. The problem arose when I discovered that I had contracted an STD and would not be able to hop into bed with Judith on my return. I had to tell her the truth. While not happy with the news, she didn't run away and accuse me of "cheating" as seems to be the current advice in such a situation; she actually helped me find an appropriate clinic. Short-term, the storm was weathered. Long-term? Hmm. What's good for the gander . . .

It turns out that the STD was a medical anomaly. Of course, I had to tell all four of the Islanders that they might be carriers, but all four assured me that they were disease-free. No, the STD must have come from God, a curse for my nonbelief. There is just no other explanation.

One of the Islanders, the daughter of one of Newfoundland's leading families, introduced me to a lifestyle of the time, the back to the land, free love, rejection of much of modern civilization. Dark, attractive, with a soft earthy Newfoundland voice, Leslie lived in a small primitive cottage filled with jars of natural foods. In her case, it was more back to the sea than back to the land, perched near the shore of the wild North Atlantic as she was. She introduced me to the music, if one can call it that, of John Cage and to the painter Christopher Pratt, who apparently described me as "undernourished." Her approach to love and sex was open and free of

jealousy; our relationship might have continued for some time if my other lovers had shared her attitudes. Alas, they did not. A mere telephone conversation with Leslie years later provoked a minor crisis with Francine. But that was later in the decade and, perhaps, times and mores had changed.

My education into the world of the Sixties continued with my move to Lennoxville; Bishop's students, who were still living in the Sixties in the early seventies, were happy to help bring me up to speed. When it came to music I was a good learner; when it came to drugs I was a flop. Judith and I tried hash a couple of times and yes, I inhaled, but I just felt mildly sick. From thereon I might occasionally take if a joint was being passed around, but often declined even that. I never did try harder drugs; perhaps I am too hooked on self-control.

I was, unless suffering from repressed memory, quite faithful to Judith during that

first year at Bishop's and then Festival Lennoxville in the summer, when Judith was a member of the company. No, the gander had had his turn. One day Judith started in on this really boring story about an evening at the apartment she shared with fellow students in Montreal. I kept changing the subject or going off on tangents, but she kept going back to describing the minute detail of this particular evening. Slow witted that I am, it only finally dawned on me that she was confessing to her own act of sexual variety. She couldn't start the story with, 'Hey, last night I fucked . . .' I don't remember how she started the story, maybe with what they had for dinner; I only remember having no idea what was coming. I can't say I was happy with the news, but it seemed clear that it was a one-time event. We weathered that little squall. Bigger storms were coming.

By the fall of 1972, the first season of Festival Lennoxville completed, followed by

a few short weeks in Muskoka with Judith, we returned to the house in Sawyerville to begin the new academic year at Bishop's. Judith had completed her time at NTS and was, at least for the moment, living with me. Sawyerville was not a good place from which to launch her acting career; apart from two summer theatre companies there was no work for an English-speaking actor within several hundred miles. Still, this was how we began the new academic year.

Bishop's decided that year to launch an experimental program called Dialogue. Curt Rose, a ski friend and professor of geography, was in charge of setting it up and he asked me to work with him. The object of the program was to provide the students with the opportunity to learn more about themselves and each other, typical aims of the era. To make it work we had to persuade the administration that there could be no marks in such a program; it had to operate on a strict



pass/fail system with fail only for those who didn't show up or do the work. Whether the students who enrolled were looking for a soft credit or a genuine exploration, there was no way to determine. But whatever their original motivation, a group of curious students did enroll and we pressed forward with the program. As part of this largely student-generated program, we agreed to a marathon encounter weekend at my house in Sawyerville — finally my thirteen rooms could be fully utilized — which I would conduct.

Despite having participated in two such encounter weekends with the noted psychologist Albert Ellis, one could argue that it was a little worrying to put someone of my limited training in charge of such a potentially explosive experience. But humility has never been my strong suit and we forged ahead. While in retrospect I wonder what long-term gains this work might have produced, there was no denying the weekend was an

exhilarating experience for most of the participants, particularly in this first year. When Curt joined us at the end of the weekend he was struck by the new spirit of the group; everyone was on a drug free high. It is almost unimaginable that this kind of work would be encouraged in a modern university. A top band at the time was called The Doors. Well, those doors are now closed. Is that a good thing? It's not for me to say, but I can't help a feeling of regret.

Doors opened for me that weekend as well. Judith said later she thought I was looking for some kind of release and I guess she was right. Whenever I entered that Ellis-structured world I could feel barriers fall away, a new contact with myself and others, a new kind of freedom. In a marathon weekend we started at 9 a.m. on Saturday and went continuously until 2 a.m. Sunday, starting again at 10 a.m. on Sunday until 5 p.m. It was not called a marathon for nothing, the idea being

that people's resistance lowers as fatigue sets in. Fortunately, we were all young; now I would likely fall asleep. Everyone camped at the house, large enough that people could have whatever privacy or not that they preferred. Well, one student and I preferred not to have too much privacy and my relationship with Sandra Ward began. Heaven forbid if the Human Rights Commission knew about this liaison between faculty and student. Fortunately there was no Human Rights Commission then. I am comforted by the fact that thirty-five years later Sandra and I are still friends; I don't live in fear that she will bring retroactive charges.

Judith had gone away for the weekend, but she returned Sunday evening expecting a full report. Once again we absorbed the bump in the road and continued on our way. But it was not to last. However right Judith was for me I was not ready to settle, and, in truth, living in Sawyerville was limiting for her. We

broke up, sort of. I began to see quite a lot of Sandra, whose company I always enjoyed. Young, perky, with a good sense of fun and humour, she always worried about her weight; there was an extra millimetre on her thighs if you looked really closely, which I liked to do. Coming from somewhat different backgrounds I never thought of her as a potential life companion, perhaps a mistake when, years later, I saw what an intelligent assured woman she had become. As she didn't ski we only spent occasional winter weekends together when I would take a weekend off from skiing and we would huddle in the winter wonderland of the Sawyerville house that could be surrounded by up to three feet of snow.

For the next year or two I pretty much rattled around my house alone. On frequent trips to plan upcoming seasons of Festival Lennoxville I began to see a lovely actress living in Toronto. Truth to tell, we had seen

each other once before when I was at LAMDA in 1961 and she was also studying in London. We had met in Toronto and agreed to meet when we were both in England. We went for a drink and it was soon clear that she planned for us to go to bed together. Awkward for me in a way, as I was keeping regular company with Carolyn at the time, but how could I refuse this tall, attractive blonde? As we headed down Earl's Court Road towards the apartment I noticed Carolyn and a friend up ahead going in the same direction. Remembering that Carolyn had spoken of going into the apartment to get something — she had a key — I started to walk very slowly, hoping she would have got what she was looking for and be gone by the time we got there. This was turning into a scene from a Woody Allen movie as I tried to walk more slowly and my new friend was impatient to get there. When we finally did enter the apartment, sure enough there was

Carolyn and her friend. After an embarrassing introduction they left, and we could get on with what we came to do. Readers of this memoir may get the impression that I was quite sexually experienced, but compared to my new partner I was a virgin. She asked me how many sexual partners I had had, and thinking carefully I could come up with about five at that time. She announced proudly that she had experienced fifteen different lovers. And we were the same age.

Things may have evened out a bit when we reconnected in 1973, but she was still a sexually charged woman. We discussed how we sometimes masturbated while driving, but she outdid me even there, apparently masturbating to orgasm while passing other cars on the 401. But our relationship came to an abrupt halt when I made a key life decision: I decided to propose to Judith.

It seems to be *de rigueur* for Canadians to walk in the outdoors when they need to

make a difficult decision, Pierre Trudeau's walk in the snow when he decided to continue as Canadian prime minister being the most famous. One autumn afternoon at the family property in King outside Toronto, I went for walk in the woods. Sitting on a bench that my grandfather had had built into the side of a hill, looking out over the now mostly bare deciduous trees, I decided that Judith really was the right person for me, that I was wrong to let the relationship go, and that I would ask her to marry me.

Since we were still friends she expressed no surprise when I phoned and suggested we go for dinner. She still expressed no surprise when I 'popped the question.' In fact, her response was decidedly enigmatic. Only later did she tell me that she felt as if I had slapped her in the face. Even I wasn't conceited enough to expect her immediately to fall at my feet in gratitude, but I didn't think a proposal would be seen as an aggressive

act. Still, once over her shock, she did allow that the idea was worth thinking about.

And so Judith did think about it, and think about it, and think about it some more, and several months later said, "No." Or did she? Here is what happened. That summer during the season at Lennoxville when she was once again an actor in the company, she became very close to one of the stage managers, whose name I seem to have lobotomized. We were still in an era where we tried not to be possessive, to understand that close relationships with others of the opposite gender were welcome, and where we were open about all aspects of our personal lives. And so as Judith grew closer to her new friend I was kept fully informed but, not to worry, it wasn't sexual and it didn't threaten her primary relationship with me. And then, one night she didn't get back to the house until very late, long after her show had finished. Fearing the worst, I couldn't sleep and



walked the back roads waiting for her to get home. When she did return she was surprised to find I was still up; we weren't supposed to be jealous or possessive. When I asked if she had slept with him, she admitted that she had.

What should be the next chapter to this story? Now I guess there would be a big fight. She 'cheated' on me, the situation is intolerable, she should pack her bags and leave my house. What was the outcome in 1974? After a short discussion we went to bed together. She admitted that sleeping with two men on the same night was quite a turn on. While I don't think I admitted it at the time, it was a turn on for me as well.

It is fascinating to speculate on the biological imperatives at play. Was she the adulterous chickadee, who having found a partner to help with the nest and the young, wanders afield to pick up some better genes in the hopes that the dimwitted cuckold will

raise a young that is not his? Was I attempting to be the alpha male, confident that my sperm would triumph over his and any progeny from the evening would be mine? Whatever the unconscious motives, Judith assured me ours was still the primary relationship and her new friend, lover, was not a threat, only an enriching experience for them both. We believed this stuff at the time.

The season came to an end, Judith and her stage manager said their sad farewells, and she and I headed to Muskoka for our annual holiday. After two or three days at the cottage, with Judith seeming in a daze, I finally said to her, "You don't want to be here, do you?" She admitted that she didn't, that she really wanted to be doing a road trip to Mexico with her stage manager. There was nothing for it. We put her things in the boat — there was still no road into our cottage — drove the boat to my parents' cottage where we kept the car, made some excuse to the

family why Judith was leaving, and I drove her into town and put her on the bus.

I never saw her again.

Needless to say, I took all this as “No,” that my proposal had been rejected. Wouldn’t you? A few months later Judith phoned me. She was back from Mexico and along with other casual conversation said she missed our talks together. By this time I was already involved with Francine and neither of us suggested actually meeting. I’ve wondered since if she were really saying, ‘I’ve had my fling — I realize what we had — let’s look at it again.’

Timing. A series of random events. Gone another way and my wonderful children would not exist. Perhaps I would have had different children. What would they have been like?

Single again, I rattled around the large cottage mostly on my own though I did invite houseguests from time to time. In the fall I returned to Toronto to the house in

Cabbagetown that Judith and I had rented from friends of hers, where we had planned to live together and where she would share the rent.

Why was I renting a house in Toronto in the first place? After three years of working full-time at Bishop's and planning and running Festival Lennoxville, I decided I couldn't do this anymore; something had to give. My first decision was to resign from the Festival and continue in the Drama Department at the university, possibly tempted by the letter from the Principal informing me that I had been awarded tenure. But before many steps were taken to replace me as Artistic Director I was prevailed upon to rethink my decision. Imagine if I had accepted tenure? Like my friend Curt Rose in the department of geography, I might have stayed another thirty years, earning a secure living working in an idyllic university setting. Of course I would not have been Cancer Man.

Would Cancer Man have been Cancer Man had another actor played that role in the pilot? Was my decision influenced by my hoped for marriage to Judith as there was really no future for her in Lennoxville? I don't remember. Or was it my continuing ambition that encouraged me to escape the loving embrace of the university into the cold realities of my profession? Whatever the process, the Festival designed a half-year position for me to continue as Artistic Director. It was up to me to find enough freelance work to make a full-time income.

To do that, and to plan future seasons successfully, I needed to base myself in Toronto, then as now the centre of English-speaking theatre in Canada. For the next three years I lived partly in Toronto, partly in Lennoxville, and partly in whatever Canadian city would hire me to direct a play, still not thinking of myself as an actor. A first order of business: how was I to pay the rent for the house

without Judith contributing her share? My mother came to my rescue, but perhaps not in the usual way parents rescue their children. When my mother retired from her job at the Institute of Child Study she gave up her Toronto apartment and settled into King full-time with my father, though it was a marriage now more in name than practice. But she needed a room in the city where she could meet her lover of twenty-five years at least once a week. Seemed odd to me as she was going on seventy, but certainly an easy economic solution. (I have a different view of sexual relations at seventy now.) All I had to do was be out of the house every Tuesday afternoon. And so this room in the house that was to have been Judith's became first my mother's hideaway until her lover's health failed, and later my infant daughter Melinda's bedroom though she much preferred her parents' room.

No story of my loves in the seventies would be complete without mention of Calla. After Judith left, Calla became my most devoted companion. We were inseparable; my love for her was uncomplicated and joyous. We woke every morning to fervent expressions of love. When she died the following summer I was devastated and cried as never before or since. A lovely black-and-white collie, she had been given to me by my brother Rolph and his wife, perhaps to ease my loneliness.

But I was not destined to stay lonely for long. I was hired to direct *A Doll's House* at the Globe Theatre in Regina, at that time being run by Ken and Sue Kramer whom I had known since my LAMDA days. In the company that included the dynamic Lally Cadeau, whom I had persuaded them to engage as Nora, was an American/Canadian actress whom I didn't know, Francine Baughman, who was playing the supporting role of Mrs. Linde. I met her for the first time

in the theatre's Green Room. She had long blonde hair and a great figure well revealed by a halter top. When introduced to me she walked over and stared at me from about six inches. What seemed like sudden intimacy turned out to be blindness for she was not wearing her contact lenses. Friendly and outgoing, she appeared to be keeping company with a young man in the cast of the play preceding *Doll's House*, in which she was also playing while rehearsing with me. It turned out she was married to the actor Duncan Regher who was living in Toronto.

As rehearsals progressed so did an attraction between us, an attraction that was finally accepted just after the play opened. As a director I had no reason to stay on in Regina after the opening though I did stretch it for a couple of days before climbing into my Volkswagen Rabbit and embarking on the two- or three-day drive back to Toronto. Interestingly, Sandra Ward — yes, that Sandra



— had been my travelling companion on the way out; she was going west for some reason I don't now remember.

Of course that might have been the end of it. Francine was married after all. But she did contact me after she returned; we went out for dinner and I gave her a key to my house should she have a mind to use it. Her relationship with Duncan seemed very odd to me: when he was performing at night she was expected to prepare him a meal at home after the performance; he didn't let her go alone to and from the subway. And yet they relished being a leading couple who went to all the film openings. Perhaps I offered her something more relaxed, more human. And so, one night I woke to find Francine hovering over me. She had left Duncan and had come to live with me. It could be argued it was a decision a touch too hasty on both our parts and yet we were to stay together for sixteen years for better or worse, certainly

better for the two wonderful children we produced.

When I left Bishop's and based myself in Toronto, I had to give up my Shangri-la in Sawyerville, and so each summer I rented a two-bedroom suite in the university residence. I still kept my ski cabin in Vermont while beginning to water ski competitively in Sherbrooke, the city adjacent to Lennoxville. In my last year at the Festival, Francine came with me and we shared the suite. Over time we developed a cute tradition — I don't remember how it started — she would give me some version of a duck as an opening night present. Unlike me, Francine was a person of extremes, and when that summer she presented me with two real ducks I might have questioned our suitability for each other. In case you haven't tried it, ducks make lousy pets. All they do if kept indoors is eat and poop — a lot. And quack. I don't remember how we got rid of them, but I think

Francine came to realize they were not a practical addition to our household. And we had begun to consider adding a child to the household.

At this point John Douglas returned to my life, a delightful man truly out of his time. John, who had been an actor in our summer theatre company in the fifties was now Executive Producer of Radio Drama for the CBC in Toronto. He was looking for a new full-time Director of Radio Drama, and after a short audition — he had me direct a half-hour drama for which I was smart enough to get Gordon Pinsent to play the lead — he offered the position to me. While more of a sideways career move, the job offered geographical and financial stability, a practical decision with a child on the way. And so Francine and I settled into family life in Toronto and my love life stabilized — for a time.

## **Toronto Redux**

And so I returned home. Toronto, well southern Ontario, has always seemed like home even though I haven't lived there for much of my adult life. Francine and I settled full time into the house I had originally rented with Judith. My mother's needs for her room in the house were fading as age was affecting both her and her consort. And before too long her room was occupied by Melinda, our first child. Well, that's not true exactly. The room contained her crib, playpen, and other paraphernalia of a young child's life. It

just never contained the child. Melinda at age nothing had the good sense to realize that her needs would be best served by being with her adults at all times. And her adults, influenced by books like *The Primal Scream* and dreading the sound of her crying, accepted her judgement. Melinda moved into our bed and before long I moved into her room, a state of affairs that lasted for several years.

Melinda was always remarkably clingy as an infant and toddler. Francine and a friend with a child the same age would sometimes shop together, and while Melinda clung to Francine's leg the other child would race off and disappear into the store. While some could happily set their child in another room, Melinda insisted on being at her parents' side at all times. New and indulgent parents that we were, we accommodated her as well as we could. There seemed no psychological difficulty; she was just different.

Years earlier at the National Theatre School we had pondered a related problem. When the now wonderful actress, Nicola Lipman, was a student, we, as faculty, struggled to understand why she did not connect in her work to the other actors. It took some time to root out her problem, just as it took a long time to root out Melinda's. They were both nearly blind. Nicki couldn't see the other actors, a problem easily solved with contact lenses. No wonder Melinda clung to her adults; she couldn't make head or tail of a threatening world. Eyeglasses are a wonderful thing.

We now began to use the cottage at Muskoka on a more regular basis. Some years earlier when Veronica and I were still together, my mother had suggested that we take over Saint's Rest as my grandfather had modestly named his now abandoned summer home. Decaying mansion that it was and is, I loved Saint's Rest and miss it to this day;

my brother Tim owns it now. It is a house built for another era, with deep covered verandahs to protect the well dressed occupants from the sun, folding windows around the sun room and dining room that haven't worked since World War II, a dark sheltered living room with a large stone fireplace, and upstairs bedrooms structured to divide the staff from the family. I think I would have liked the twenties, as long as I was one of the rich.

We bought a used ski boat, and before long Francine developed the arcane skill of driving a boat while nursing an infant and keeping one hand on the trick release so that she could release the ski rope if I fell doing a toe trick. (A toe trick is performed with the skier's foot in a bridle on the rope handle.) Soon we sold the A-frame at Jay Peak and bought a small bungalow near the Osler Bluff Ski Club in Collingwood and painted it in browns and reds to try to make it look like a

ski cabin, surrounded as we were by the up-scale ski houses of the wealthy members of the club. Osler Bluff is a private ski club on the Georgian Bay escarpment where what limited skiing available in Ontario is situated. Private clubs have gobbled up much of the choice terrain and at that time membership was both expensive and restricted, the nonrefundable initiation fee being something like \$50,000. Even though they didn't ski, my parents had been bullied by my uncle who did to join the club in its founding years in the early fifties for the princely initiation fee of \$100. Francine and I settled into a normal life, unusual for itinerant actors and directors; I worked regular hours with weekends off and normal vacations. Oh yes, and I got a regular paycheck.

The work itself, developing and producing drama for radio, while not a great career advancement — I mean, who was listening to radio drama in the late seventies? — was



pretty interesting, and I worked with some talented actors, writers, and musicians. With a sense of the absurd or not, as my first assignment John Douglas assigned me the full-length *Man and Superman* in stereo, which was new at the time. In case you are unfamiliar with this work of George Bernard Shaw, it includes a long philosophical debate in hell between the Devil and Don Juan, so that the entire work runs roughly five hours. When performed on stage the Hell sequence is usually omitted, but we did the full monty. I wonder how many people actually listened to the whole thing. But I had a great cast, with Neil Munro as Tanner, Jackie Burroughs as Ann, and Alan Scarfe as the Devil, and I began what became a long association with the talented composer John Mills-Cockell.

We developed a satirical political drama, *24 Sussex Drive*, about a fictional Canadian prime minister played by Ted Follows, the same Ted Follows that had rehearsed in our

basement so many years before. And from time to time one would have lunch with John Douglas in a style already losing favour at the time and now long forgotten. One would go to his regular restaurant, be greeted by his regular host, and sit at his regular table. Two or three martinis and many cigarettes would precede a leisurely meal, conversation on a wide range of subjects, a few of which would pertain to our work together, finally returning to the office two hours or more later clutching coffees to go. Regrettably this was not a sustainable lifestyle, and John died prematurely.

Before leaving us, he decided to leave the CBC and pursue his writing ambitions full time. In doing so, he set in motion a pattern all too familiar in my career. No sooner did I settle into a job, but my immediate superior decided to leave, placing me in occupational limbo (see Chesterfield, Dundee, National Theatre School). There were two stages to

the hiccup at CBC Radio. The first flowed seamlessly as I was appointed to John's position of Executive Producer when he left, responsible for the Sunday hour-long drama series still going from its heyday under Andrew Allan as *CBC Stage*. But I had only settled into this new position for a few months when the Head of Radio Drama, Ron Solloway, decided to throw his career to the wind and travel around the world. Ron had been a delight to work for, giving his producers both gentle guidance and lots of autonomy. What would happen now? Here we go again. The obvious internal candidate was guess who, me, and I duly put my name forward. In their wisdom, the CBC decided to go with an outside candidate, not a worry in itself as I was happy to stay in my current position. No, the worry came when one of our staff saw the newspaper report and showed me the picture of our new leader. My heart sank. While I had never met Susan

Rubes I knew of her from my theatre life — she had founded Young People's Theatre in Toronto — and while she had success bullying Boards of Governors and getting media attention, her reputation in the artistic community was dreadful. Hoping I had misread the fragments of gossip, I went to an actor I respected who had worked for her to ask his opinion. When he looked heavenward and rotated his index finger around his ear I wondered if I should resign then and there, but with a family to support it didn't seem like an option.

For a few months I tried as best I could to keep up with my responsibilities as Executive Producer, a job which I was enjoying in itself. But maybe that was a mistake, maybe I should have gone to Susan as soon as she arrived and said, 'Here I am, what do you want me to do?' so that she would feel she had full authority. Readers by now will be aware that I am not good at surrendering authority. I'd

like to say I gained respect for her as we worked together, but my first opinion, that she was the wrong person in the wrong job, only strengthened over time. If she had been a nice person with a little humility perhaps we could have managed. I imagine she charmed the heck out of everyone above her in the hierarchy; unfortunately she only buttered her bread on one side. My issues with her came to a head a few days before I was to leave on my annual cross-country trip to meet with the contributing producers to the series I was responsible for. Meetings were arranged, flights were booked, and Susan cancelled the trip. Did she need to rein in my autonomy, autonomy Solloway had easily granted? Was I not being sufficiently deferential? Whatever the reason, I felt I could not do my job as Executive Producer in those circumstances and, as was my right, resigned that position. An Executive Producer at CBC was like a department head, an

add-on position with a small additional stipend, separate from the main job of producer. Her response, which was not her right, was to fire me as producer. And while I successfully grieved her decision and won a cash settlement I was, nonetheless, out of a job. And in case you were wondering, there are no jobs for radio drama producers in Canada — or North America — except at the CBC.

Meantime, Judith's friends decided they wanted their house back, so with some help from my father who released some inheritance funds to his four sons, Francine and I became home owners, purchasing a three-bedroom townhouse just west of High Park. The funds provided the down payment — a cute custom that seems to have been abandoned in the modern sub-prime market — but there was still a hefty mortgage, taxes, and all those other bills that relentlessly cross a homeowner's desk. With the arrival of our first child, Francine had morphed

from an ambitious professional actress into an equally ambitious stay-at-home mother. No help on the financial front there, but, in fairness, I was happy she was so attentive to the baby. As a committed father also — a matter of some debate in the much later divorce — I did not want to leave town for extended periods, limiting our financial possibilities further. And thus began a trail that would meander its way to a starring role in a hit TV series.

Fans of *The X-Files* will know that despite rising to fame as the Cigarette Smoking Man, I did not, at that time, smoke. Sometimes they would rationalize this contradiction by noting, incorrectly, that I didn't inhale on the show. On the contrary, when director Kim Manners struggled to find the right phrase to explain to the actor playing my son how I smoked on the show, he finally said, "When Bill smokes, it's like . . . sex!" I loved smoking — ever since I was twelve years old puffing

on stolen cigarettes under the bridge in Forest Hill. Cigarettes were a symbol of adulthood; more, they were a necessary attribute of the alpha male. Any number of insecurities could be hidden behind a cloud of smoke as one lit up in front of a new cast on the first day of rehearsal. Whether impressing colleagues, displaying to a new female, or imagining oneself as the great long-suffering North American novelist, a cigarette was an essential prop. Remember that in the late seventies one could smoke almost anywhere, in restaurants, bars, rehearsals, lobbies, offices, planes — except during take-off and landing — oh, the agony of waiting for the plane to be airborne and for the seatbelt sign to be turned off so one could finally light up. But in 1979, at the age of forty, I gave it up.

How did I manage this? On the strength of a lie.

Like many of my era, I started smoking as a teenager. After all, both my parents



smoked. All their friends did. Movie stars did. Nine out of ten doctors smoked Camels, according to the ads. How could I be a grown-up if I didn't smoke? Ever reasonable, my mother made a rule. We could smoke when we earned our own money and could buy them for ourselves. She hadn't counted on my becoming a child actor and actually doing that, earning money. So when I pulled out a cigarette in the living room at age fourteen, the rule suddenly changed. We could smoke when we were sixteen. Of course when I was sixteen and was no longer earning money the rule changed back again. Still, we smoked. Everyone knew. We just didn't smoke in front of our parents.

At university my smoking increased. After all, only wimps and Christians didn't smoke. And when I started directing, well, smoking was *de rigueur*. And so it went, my consumption of cigarettes continuing to increase the older I got. Even when I started ski racing I

would put a cigarette in my wind-shirt at the top of the course so that I could light up at the bottom. By my late thirties I was smoking two and a half packs of Rothmans a day.

I had tried many times to quit or at least cut down. Veronica and I tried to quit when we were living in England. We had worked out that if we both quit we could afford to buy a car. We didn't make it to noon. Even much later when I dated Judith, a nonsmoker, I lacked the simple courtesy to smoke less. Smoking, after all, was the default. It was up to those who didn't to adjust.

But then someone, I don't remember who, or if I read it somewhere, told me that it only takes three days to break the addiction. As long as one doesn't smoke at all the addiction can be eliminated in three days. I'm glad they didn't also try to sell me swamp land in Florida. I've believed a lot of dumb things in my life. A retired doctor once told me that

the arthritis in my shoulder would improve if I just put a magnet on it regularly. My shoulder just got worse from the weight of the magnet. Anyway, I believed the smoking story.

How hard could it be to endure three days? If I could reduce my stress levels to close to zero for at least two days I figured I had a shot at making this work. And so, lying, I told my family I didn't want to inflict myself on them while I did this. The truth was I didn't want stress from them. And so one fall, before the ski season, I went alone to the ski cabin in Collingwood for a weekend, with no cigarettes.

That was the longest drive to Collingwood of my life. I had always smoked on the drive. I remember seeing the lights of Barrie and thinking, my god, I'm only halfway there. Still, I made it to the cabin. When I unpacked I found Francine had done a really smart thing. She had put a box of chocolate

Turtles in my bag. I devoured one instantly. I ate hundreds of them over the next few months.

The next afternoon I was killing time outside and put my hand in the pocket of my jacket that lived at the cabin. Inside was half a pack of cigarettes. I could have surrendered right then. But no, it's only three days, remember, and one is nearly over. Later that day, I went shopping for a woodstove, but I was so spaced out I couldn't concentrate. I could barely drive back to the cabin.

I returned home Sunday night. Two days gone. Only one to go. Somehow I got through the third day at work waiting for the magic moment when the addiction would lift and I would be a nonsmoker. Needless to say, the magic moment never came. There would be six months more of struggle and torture that only gradually lessened. But I wouldn't and didn't go back.

I didn't touch another cigarette for seventeen years when I would become famous for what I had worked so hard to stop. But I was never a smoker again. And in the meantime my older brother, Ashe, died of lung cancer.

Now if someone had told me that quitting would take six months . . .

And so now I was a nonsmoker who would become famous for smoking. Of course, I didn't know that then — I would have laughed out loud if someone had foretold such a future for me. I was a director out of a job. Not that I considered it, but my tenured position at Bishop's had long since been filled. Freelance directing gigs were not immediately presenting themselves. My teaching résumé was pretty good, maybe that was the way to go — for now at any rate. As I had been away from teaching for a few years, I applied to the Canada Council for a small grant to give me the time and means to look at the work of other acting teachers, both in

Toronto and New York. I sat in on classes given by a variety of teachers, the most interesting being Carol Rosenfeld, Rosemary Dunsmore, and Kurt Reis — yes, that Kurt Reis. A small decision though had a big impact on my future career. I thought it might be a good idea to actually take some of these classes, not merely audit them, to experience the teaching methods as a working actor in the class. It was almost twenty years since I had spoken a line of dialogue in a scene. Had I learned anything for myself after twenty years of telling other people what to do?

Yes, it seemed that I had. A buzz started going around that Davis was a pretty good actor — for a director/teacher at any rate. Gradually an economic life was piecing itself together. In addition to having a number of part-time teaching assignments, I thought, what the heck, let's see if an agent would take me on for acting. Two things I've always hated about acting: makeup and curtain

calls. I hate having junk on my face though I mind it less if someone else puts it there, and I find taking a bow in front of an audience duty-bound to applaud quite embarrassing. Who else expects to be applauded for their work? Certainly not the clever person who fixes my car, not even the clever doctor who fixed my cataracts. My first job on returning to acting was some kind of promotional film where I didn't need makeup and of course there would be no curtain call. Not so bad, this acting, after all. No one warned me that years later I would be in the makeup chair for several hours so that the Cigarette Smoking Man could not only be old and ill, but could smoke through a hole in his throat. Or that eventually I would return to the stage and have to endure those excruciating curtain calls. For now I was putting together enough acting and teaching to keep the family afloat. And soon that became easier when

Humber College offered me a full-time teaching position.

Once again I was in a position where I might have stayed for the rest of my working life. But Humber did not have the appeal of the university community or the charm of a small Quebec village. Humber was a dull concrete building northwest of Toronto in a what, subdivision, no, a mall, no — really it was nowhere at all. But I stayed there for three years until an acting opportunity conflicted, and Humber and I began the slow process of separating ourselves from each other, after which I once again needed a job.

Next stop: Vancouver.





## PART FIVE

## **Go West, Young Man**

I had been to British Columbia on Canada's West Coast a few times, directing at the Vancouver Playhouse twice, several trips on the National Theatre School audition tour, and more recently as part of my duties for CBC Radio Drama. With the ocean on the doorstep flowing inland through deep fjords, a ski hill larger than Osler Bluff right in the city, and Whistler, one of the great ski mountains of North America, a mere two hours away, Vancouver had seemed a spiritual home, the place where I ought to live. Imagine a snow

ski season that begins in November and goes until June and a water ski season that begins in March and goes to November. Apart from the challenge of what to do when, what skier could ask for more? So when the Vancouver Playhouse Acting School advertised for a director, I threw my hat in the ring.

I did, after all, need a job. At least I thought I did. In truth, I was putting some food on the table with freelance teaching and acting gigs in Toronto. My first feature film role was as the Ambulance Driver in David Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone*. Shot on the shores of Lake Ontario in temperatures hovering around thirty below zero Fahrenheit, I figured I had the best job on the set as I could retreat into my heated ambulance after every take. Having almost no idea what was going on on a film set, I said my one line with enthusiasm whenever I heard my cue. I was a touch surprised when the lead actor, Tom Skerritt, I think, replied, "Fuck off." I

guess he was off camera at the time. I still get fan mail from time to time praising a number of my film roles including *The Dead Zone*. Well, if they could find me in the film they have better eyes than I; as far as I could tell my role ended on the cutting room floor. But if I wasn't setting the film world on fire I was at least making a name as an acting teacher and doing a few stage roles in summer stock and small theatre in Toronto.

In 1975 the Playhouse Theatre Company in Vancouver created an acting school, a two-year program where students would have the opportunity to work in a professional theatre company while participating in an intensive training program of their own. The company would benefit from being able to present larger cast plays by using students in smaller roles, while the students would benefit from serving an apprenticeship on the mainstage. It seemed like a win-win situation, but turned out to be an idea better in principle

than practice. The aforementioned Powys Thomas — “think of the Welsh fire” — was the original Artistic Director of the School, giving way in a short time to David Latham, later director of theatre training for the Stratford Festival. Latham was leaving to take an appointment, in Australia I believe, and the position was coming open.

At the time the Playhouse School was thought to be, or had ambitions to be, one of the two leading acting schools in Canada, rivalling the National Theatre School on the other side of the continent. While the job did not pay well, it seemed it might be a boost to my flagging résumé to be, or to have been, the Artistic Director of both of Canada’s leading schools. With my father’s recent death, a small portion of the Davis leather fortune had flowed to me, allowing me some independent means to supplement the meagre offering from the Playhouse. After some considerable discussion with Francine on the

feasibility of moving our now family of four to Vancouver, we decided to accept the offer when it came. And so, in the fall of 1985, we hitched our secondhand boat to our second-hand car and drove across the country.

Unfortunately, Latham had decided to leave his position after he had auditioned the next class. As a result I inherited a class of twelve students chosen for someone else's vision, and they were saddled with me for two years. Of course, it was all expected to get on track in two years time when I would audition the next class. But of course it did not get on track. Why not? Well, the person who hired me, Walter Learning, the Artistic Director of the company, decided to leave. Are you getting bored with this movie? I am. When the top person leaves, everything is in flux, and particularly so with the Playhouse School. For months the very future of the school was in question. Finally, at the eleventh hour, under new Artistic Director Guy

Sprung, they decided to continue the school — but not with me.

It was never clear to me why Guy made that decision; we had seemed to have good professional relations for some time before he arrived in Vancouver. It may be that he was influenced by my reputation as an experimental teacher in the sixties with my emphasis at that time on creative development, for when we finally discussed his decision he referred to the students “rolfing” prior to a presentation. Good gracious. Rolfing was a psychotherapeutic technique in the sixties involving deep muscular massage with the intention of releasing repressed emotions. Even I never dreamed of using that technique with acting students. Even in the sixties. One of the teachers in the program, movement or voice, I’m not sure which, had encouraged patting each other’s backs as a warm-up. Likely this was the worrying exercise that Guy had observed. At any rate, he

made his decision; perhaps two alphas were one too many for him.

As it turns out his stay at the Playhouse was even briefer than mine. Following a tradition of doing things in 'the provinces' that you wouldn't do in Toronto, Guy's opening production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* required Titania and Oberon to sing their roles. Guy is reported to have had a heated discussion with the theatre publicist. Finally he burst out with, "That is the worst fucking press release I have ever read!" To which the apt reply was, "That was the worst fucking production I have ever seen."

Me bitter? Never.

By some irony, serendipitous no doubt, Scott Swan, under whose leadership Festival Lennoxville died, took over the school and within two years it too had passed into the annals of history.



## From the Ashes

What to do? As it happens my second, and last, year at the Playhouse School, included quite a rush of film work, as well as directing a production on the theatre's mainstage. The children were in school; we had a nice house; inertia dictated remaining in Vancouver. Once again I was back to freelance teaching and acting, hoping to keep the bills paid, the children in classes, and me on the ski slopes and lakes. And so I embarked on a challenging path that would lead not to *The X-Files* but to *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

The William Davis Centre for Actors' Study is now a fixture in the city of Vancouver, but in 1989 it was not even a gleam in my eye. In the bitter divorce from Francine she implied that I had sacrificed income for the family to pursue my personal dream of founding an acting school. I wonder what she thought my options were at age fifty-one with a degree in philosophy. Certainly it would have been easier to be a movie star or a professor of philosophy, but those jobs were not on offer. Nor indeed was the artistic directorship of the Stratford Festival or even the Manitoba Theatre Centre. No, if I wanted to make a living, to support a family, I had to roll up my sleeves and do it myself.

Out of work actors do this all the time, hang out a shingle, call themselves an acting teacher and supplement their erratic actor earnings by teaching classes. Unlike the competition I did have real credentials as an acting teacher, both in training and

experience, perhaps in talent and skill as well, but I will leave that to others to say. Like the famous British director Peter Hall, I often used to wonder if I would be found out. I think I was almost seventy when I finally said to myself, 'Dammit, I really am good at this.'

In the beginning I had no intention of starting a school; I just needed a few classes to supplement my income. And so, for one night a week, I rented studio space from a local theatre company and advertised for students. Meeting with some success I began to rent some other spaces and expand the offerings. It is remarkable that it was not so long ago that to teach a class in film acting one had to lug a large camera, a tripod, and a full-sized television set to each class. Where was the digital revolution when I needed it? Undaunted by such challenges and rewarded with some success I began saying mostly in

jest and often to the rolling eyes of the students, “When I get my own space . . .”

Of course getting one's own space really means starting one's own business. It's one thing to run a few classes in rented premises, but with one's own space one has overheads and all the other obligations of a real business. What did I know about that? Not much but I was to learn quickly. I had help. Local architect John Keith-King, husband of Sherry Grauer — yes, that Sherry Grauer — helped me locate the first space, three rooms over a picture framing business. In order to meet all the overheads we would need to rent the space sometimes to other performing arts groups. What should we call it? I wanted it to be a centre, a place where artists could convene and work and develop. Garry Davey, a graduate of the Playhouse School during my tenure and now an associate teacher with me suggested, “The William Davis Centre for Actors' Study.” To be honest, I was never

sure about attaching my name to the enterprise. In retrospect the decision worked out rather well.

And so in 1989 we officially opened the doors. Soon we had a small full-time program in addition to our part-time classes. Early graduates included successful actors, and acting teachers as it happens, William MacDonald, Nancy Sivak, and Sarah-Jane Redmond. But soon I was saying, still more or less in jest and still to the rolling eyes of the students, "When I get a larger space . . ." But I was not going to be given the opportunity to prevaricate; my hand was forced. The lovely picture framing business underneath us moved out and was replaced by an auto body paint shop. We had to get out of there quickly before the paint fumes suffocated us or lawsuits closed us.

In truth we were quite innocent when we acquired the first space. I think we called ourselves a studio rather than a school to

avoid stringent zoning regulations. The requirements for a school include all sorts of unlikely things such as handicap access, fire regulations, and parking spaces, eliminating ninety-five percent of otherwise suitable buildings. What were we to do?

I don't remember now how we found it, but at the corner of Hornby and Helmcken in downtown Vancouver was a modelling school that had been there since 1945. And it was closing down. If the premises continued to be used as a school it did not have to meet the current standards. At the time the area was a bit down-market, but it was a great deal better than some of our competitors in the Downtown Eastside. And as an added bonus it had a neon sign overlooking the street corner. Neon signs had long ago been banned in Vancouver, but existing ones were grandfathered. So I bought the air rights from the previous owner — well, actually she kept them and I paid her; if there had been

an actual transfer the sign would have been prohibited. And so finally, I had my name in lights. If no one else would do it, I would do it myself. In 1992, after extensive renovations and a course in accounting for the owner — me — we opened our new school and remained there for the next fifteen years.

We were hardly settled into the new space when the Davis refrain began again. “When we expand our space . . .” and the students rolled their eyes yet again. But indeed we did add another studio so that in our prime we had four active studios before the business began to contract for whatever reasons.

Being on a street corner was a help. The school became a hub, for actors, students, teachers, and occasionally the homeless who might spend the night on our doorstep. And after *The X-Files* became a hit, we were a focus for fan tourism as well. Always messy it seemed, under the egalitarian leadership of longtime administrator and my great good

friend Sharolyn Lee who used students as “gumbies” to do the grunt work in exchange for classes, the centre had a palpable energy and friendliness.

Organizationally the school evolved from a studio for part-time classes for working actors and beginners to a mix of a one year full-time program and part-time students, some of whom would share some of the full-time classes under a program we called IPOs (Independent Program of Study). Now, long after I sold it, it has become almost exclusively a one year full-time program and is part of a larger school in the city, VanArts. Still under the name William Davis Centre — though now a division of VanArts — the program is run by the dynamic and excellent acting teacher Chilton Crane.

I am often asked, what method did I teach? The only answer I could ever provide? My method. Yes, but what is that? Well, come to some of my classes, act in a play I



direct, watch me when I act in one. I know, that's no answer and I have often said I will write a book on acting and perhaps I will one day. But as far back as my time in Dundee I have had a vision of what acting should be. The vision has modified and clarified over the years circumscribed perhaps by awareness of the context within which actors normally work. After all, how fresh and spontaneous and immersed in the character can you be when you are instructed to hold your cigarette two millimetres from your left nostril to maximize the lighting effect? Still, the goal for me always involves a reality, a truth, a spontaneity, an interaction between the actors. One sees so often a lovely performance that would change not one iota if a bomb went off on the other side of the stage. Or where an actor says her lines because she remembers them, not because she has to say them at that moment because of what has gone on before, who she is, and what she

wants. I often used to say the life of a scene exists in the space between the actors not in the actors themselves.

All very well — who can disagree — but how do you accomplish these laudable goals? My own approach evolved from the multitude of teachers, directors, actors, and schools I had been exposed to. But LAMDA on the one hand and American traditions on the other have somehow fused into a central philosophy. But if there is one question an actor should ask when he starts work it would be this: why do I say what I say or do what I do? At this moment. Not two lines earlier or later but right now. This question will lead one to everything from the social history of the play, the physicality of the character, the precise meaning of the line, the background and thoughts of the character before entering the scene, to the relationships with the other characters, etc.

And if there is one word of advice I could give to an actor it is this: *Don't learn your lines!* No, I am not saying you should work like Marlon Brando in later years and have crib notes of your lines all over the set. Of course, you must *know* your lines. But if instead of memorizing them you constantly ask yourself, why do I say this, exactly this, at this precise moment, not only will you know your lines you will know many other things about the character and the scene. And when you struggle in rehearsal to remember a line you will remember it by thinking more closely about the scene and what is said to you. I remember an old-time film teacher saying to me he didn't like stage actors because they have "dead eyes." He was thinking, I imagine, of actors who try to remember their memorized lines by looking in their own head and not at the other actor. Not only is memorizing lines really boring, it

deprives the actor of the clarity of the question: why.

But who, besides me, could I get to teach both what I wanted and the way I wanted it taught? Garry Davey had been my student at the Playhouse — coincidentally the only student that I actually auditioned myself for that program. It was clear when he was a student that he had both a good eye and an ability to communicate. He became first my assistant, then my associate, and finally, me. When the demands of my acting career overwhelmed me, Garry became the Artistic Director of the School with Sharolyn Lee as the General Manager.

Of course, not all our choices for instructors worked out well. We hired a local teacher who operated her own studio and taught the Meisner technique. I have always been suspicious of techniques named after an individual, but I audited one of her classes — for which she was forty minutes late — liked

what I saw, and asked her to teach for us. I have already confessed to making poor choices in the past — add this to the list. For one thing it turned out that being forty minutes late was the rule not the exception — often far later than that for the start of a class. The Meisner technique itself, based as it is on projecting one's personal emotions into the imagined scene, is prone to self-indulgence, and our new teacher was a master at encouraging her students to express their personal pain even to the point of punching a hole in the wall of a classroom. Yet these classes were highly popular and good for our bottom line. Did the technique help the students act better in actual scenes? I remain to be convinced. But when we discovered that she was poaching our students for her own studio I pressed the delete button.

While there was never money to be made it seemed — there was no profit stream; I made a living by teaching a lot of classes — fame

was just around the corner. It began with a curious correspondence with a young woman in New Zealand. She wanted to come to our school. I mean, why not? Was she any good? Why our school? I'm not sure I ever did find out how Lucy Lawless heard of us and decided she wanted to study with us. At any rate we took a chance on this unknown person and accepted her into our full-time program. Well, guess what? She was terrific and has gone on to fame and fortune most notably as Xena, the Warrior Princess.

And meantime, I auditioned for a small role in a pilot for a television show about alien abductions.

## **The X-Files**

And so, at age fifty-five, I played a background character in a science fiction television pilot. At age fifty-six I was playing a recurring but minor character, and by age fifty-seven I was playing a featured character in a hit show. I was a celebrity, a star, recognized around the world.

I've always had a share of respect from colleagues and the public ever since I began running a theatre company at age twenty. As I fondly imagined my career developing I had hoped for an increasing degree of

respect and approval. Being a celebrity is something else altogether. How do you know you are a celebrity? One day early on in the life of the show I was recognized when I walked into an electronics store. Nothing too surprising in that. It was when I could see that the salesperson was shaking with nerves and declared that he had never been this close to a movie star before that I knew my life had changed.

Am I being remiss here? I am assuming you know what *The X-Files* was. But it's possible you are reading this memoir for the arcane detail of early Canadian theatre in the forties and fifties and you have never actually heard of *The X-Files*.

Created by Chris Carter in the early nineties, *The X-Files* was a television series centred on two FBI agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully (David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson), the former a believer in all things paranormal and the latter a skeptic. The X



files were cases buried deep in the archives of the FBI, cases that didn't seem to allow for normal explanations. Mulder's task was to investigate these strange cases. Initially Scully was supposed to spy on Mulder, but she became his ally. The show looked at many of the strange things some people believe and asked the question, 'What if that were really true?' As the show developed, most episodes fell into one of two categories affectionately known as monster of the week or mythology. Monster of the week shows were one-offs, possibly a ghost story, vampire tale, or story of someone with weird powers. The mythology became the overarching theme of the series, a story of a pending alien invasion and a conspiracy of collaborators.

Unlike most television series, *The X-Files* never had a bible, an in-depth treatment of the whole series outlining the characters and story lines. Basically the producers and

writers flew by the seat of their pants. For nine years they flew by the seat of their pants. Not only did they not have a plan, they never seemed to catch up; scripts appeared at the last minute if they appeared at all. Sometimes casting had to be done based on nothing more than a script for the teaser. The show ran so close to the wire that first AD Tom Braidwood — fans know him better as Frohike — joked that one day they would have to do a live feed on a Friday night. Terrifying to all connected to the show as that improvisation was, it allowed the writers and producers to respond to circumstance, to what was working and what was not, to the fans, and strangely, to Gillian's pregnancy in the second season. And so the mythology story emerged, unplanned and unbidden, and with it the gradual evolution of my character, the Cigarette Smoking Man, from the murky shadows to prominence.

The show became not just a hit, but a global phenomenon. Dubbed into dozens of languages, the names *X-Files*, Mulder, and Scully became part of the lexicon. Few shows before or since have captured such worldwide attention. It seems everyone had heard of *The X-Files* — even those who never watched television. As for me, people seeing me in the street would yell from their cars, “Hey, you got a smoke?”

But to start at the beginning, my beginning on the show. It is the spring of 1993. I am running my acting school, the William Davis Centre for Actors’ Study, and about to direct the end of year production of *Picnic*. I have had a few decent acting roles in the previous few years, but mostly I have been a teacher, acting primarily to supplement my income and stimulate my teaching. I remember waiting for our second audition in the show’s tiny offices with Ken Camroux, who actually got the three-line part that I auditioned for,

when Stephen Miller, a successful Canadian actor who was already cast, came out and patted us hopefuls on the head, wishing us good luck. Stevie was actually very good in the pilot episode, but that pretty well ended his career on *X-Files*, although he was to play a continuing role on *Millennium*, a later Chris Carter effort. Who knew that my career was about to begin? Or Chris Carter's for that matter, or anyone else's on the show.

The pilot episode, which was so successful the studio executives stood up and applauded when they saw the cut, was directed by Robert Mandel, who never did another episode. I'm sure there is a story there; I just don't know what it is. Fans often ask me what direction I was given, what I was told about the character, what his backstory was. Truth is, I wasn't told anything. Real truth? I don't think they had any idea themselves. A mysterious man smoking in the background was an interesting presence; I don't think

anyone had thought further than that. As for me, I guess I made up something to inform what I was doing, but I have no idea now what it was.

Actors complain frequently about all the waiting around we do on set. I know fans think we lead a glamorous life, but the truth is film acting, better called film waiting, can be tedious. But when you are hanging around to play a character who hangs around, the waiting can seem endless. Fans of the show may remember a terrific shot at the end of the pilot where CSM (Cigarette Smoking Man) walks down a long hallway between rows and rows of shelves. It was a difficult crane shot to set up and we waited several hours before I could actually do my walk. I say “we” because that was when I first became aware of how redundant some of the structures of film production can be. For me to walk down the hallway, four of us had to wait: me, the hair person, the makeup

person, and the costume person. Even though none of these items would change for the shot.

Still, as we all know the show was picked up and a season launched in the fall of 1993. But that had no apparent effect on me; I carried on running my school, teaching my classes, and auditioning for other roles. It wasn't until February that I heard from them again and then it was for a different role altogether — well, maybe it was a different role. The character in the episode “Young at Heart” was known only as CIA Agent, but apparently they wanted me to play the role in case they should decide he was the same person as the smoking guy in the pilot — though this character didn't smoke, in the episode at least. So I did this tiny little job still with no idea that my life was changing.

To be honest, it was a rather embarrassing piece of work. You will have to look at the episode with great care to find me, but you

will find me, unlike my role in *The Dead Zone*. I do appear in “Young at Heart,” briefly in the background, frantically waving my arms. Apparently I was hoping for some information from a dying man and the director thought that if I waved my arms this need would be communicated to the viewer. Well, let’s hope it was, as a more unlikely way to try to get information from an unconscious person would be hard to imagine. When you are doing small roles to augment your income you do what you are told.

But the Smoking Man did reappear in season 1 as the Smoking Man, first in the episode “Tooms,” and then again in the final episode of the season, “The Erlenmeyer Flask.” “Tooms” marked the introduction of Mitch Pileggi as FBI Assistant Director Skinner, the hard driving and, in this first episode, quite unpleasant senior director to Mulder and Scully. Me? I was standing around in the background, you know,

smoking. Who was I? What was I thinking? Who knows? Since I was primarily an acting teacher at the time I was probably thinking about how well, or not, I thought Gillian Anderson, David Duchovny, and Mitch Pileggi were acting. I won't comment on that other than to say I think we all improved greatly as the series progressed through the years.

But it is important in film acting that the characters be thinking something. If what they are thinking has something to do with the show so much the better, but it actually isn't necessary. Some years earlier I was playing a role in *Airwolf* and the director and producers were very excited as they had brought John Ireland in as a guest star for one episode. Born in Vancouver, Ireland had been a major film and television actor going back to the fifties and was once nominated for an Academy Award (for his role in *All the King's Men*). But by 1987 he was getting on;



he would have been seventy-three, just a year older than I am as I write this, and no sooner had he arrived on set than he clutched the script supervisor, exclaiming that she had to help him with his lines. He didn't have any more lines than the rest of us, but whatever ability he might once have had to remember lines had by now deserted him entirely. How we ever got through a scene is a mystery. He could remember nothing. I was certain the episode would be a disaster, but when I finally saw it he looked terrific. The rest of us may have looked odd, panicked as we were about whether our cue would come or not, but Ireland looked just fine, focussed and concentrated. Of course the object of his intense concentration had nothing to do with the scene at hand. Only we other actors knew he was thinking, "What the fuck is my next line?"

At any rate, I was thinking something as I hovered over Skinner's shoulder in "Tooms,"

and John Bartley lit the clouds of smoke around my face with a relish that did much to cement the character in the viewer's mind. Not only that, I actually spoke. One line: "Yes I do." Three or four episodes later in the season finale the final shot echoed the final shot of the pilot, as I walked down this mysterious corridor, put something mysterious in a drawer, and then walked out. Well, in truth, the shot didn't just mirror the shot from the pilot, it was the shot from the pilot. At least the walking part; they couldn't afford to hire a crane a second time so the scene was patched together. But it looks great and set up many questions for season 2.

Meantime, what was happening in the life of William B. Davis? Not much. I was fired by my agent and my marriage broke up.

## Breakups

Let's start with the agent. When I first moved to Vancouver in 1985 to take over the Vancouver Playhouse Acting School, I signed up with Bruce Ward of the Act Four agency. I was primarily an acting teacher at the time, although I had a flurry of success as an actor in 1987, including the previously mentioned series *Airwolf*, and other projects in the years following. One day in 1993 I was sitting in the office of my new school reading my mail and there was a letter from my agent. The letter informed me that they were

reorganizing the agency and they didn't think they could do anything for me. In other words, I was fired. I was shocked. I had stood by Bruce Ward through many changes in the agency; I had stayed with him when his assistant poached many of his clients and took them to another agency; I had been loyal and professional. And he sends me what was essentially a form letter. Nothing personal, no invitation for coffee, just moving on. Well, what can I say? He sent the letter after I had done the pilot for *The X-Files*. Sometimes people make bad decisions.

I was to discover that starting an acting school was as challenging as starting a theatre company, something I had done once, vowed to never do again, did a second time, and swore that would be the last time. It may be that starting a business in any field is going to be demanding and overwhelm other aspects of one's life. At any rate, months went by before I took any steps to

find a new agent. As you can see, my acting career was not high on my agenda. Finally, I contacted Richard Lucas, an agent in Vancouver whom I had long admired, and asked him if he would like to take me on. He respected my position in the professional community, but didn't really know what my prospects might be as an actor. Neither of us thought to notice that I had done the pilot for *The X-Files* and that might suggest some financial success down the road. Richard contacted local casting agents to get their take on me. They were all really positive, they really liked me, but as for roles? Well, only small ones. Still, Richard undertook to change their minds on that and the rest, as they say, is history.

Life on the home front was even more challenging. By this time Francine and I had been together for nearly sixteen years, Melinda was starting high school, and Rebecca was becoming increasingly serious

about dancing for which she had a clear talent. We lived in a lovely house in Deep Cove, a beautiful community overlooking the water, but too far from downtown to fit well with the demands on my working life. Francine, although a stay-at-home mother, always found the demands on her life as overwhelming as I found the demands on mine. Who knows, maybe if I had been prepared to completely give up my other love our marriage would have survived. But I confess, I did continue to ski. Not as much as I would have liked, nor as much as my friends, but I did keep skiing despite the conflicts.

It's hard to say what finally triggered the breakup, but two events stand out for me. Goodness knows what stands out for Francine. For the longest time Francine had pushed for us to go on a family cruise with her parents and sisters. I confess to always having been a little reluctant to spend valuable holiday time where no skiing was

available, but eventually I agreed. At first the plan was to find a cruise leaving from Vancouver, a major hub for tourist cruises and convenient for us. But no, if we did that, Francine's family would have to stay or at least visit our house — and it was a mess; Francine had no time to tidy it and she couldn't let her family see the home in that state.

No, we had to do a Caribbean cruise leaving from Florida, as far away from Vancouver as you can get and still be in North America — never mind that it was summer and the heat in the Caribbean would be stifling. Adding to the challenge, for some reason we had to fly to Florida from Seattle, a three-hour drive from Vancouver; we would spend the night in a hotel near the airport and fly out early in the morning. When I hurried home after my evening class to collect the family and drive to Seattle, they had not begun to pack. It would be another two

hours before we began the three-hour drive. Not to belabour the story, but by the time we finally set out on our holiday I was exhausted and, I confess, not a good companion. And while I love being on the water, I dislike shopping in general and shopping for souvenirs in particular. And shopping seemed to be a main feature of the holiday. Francine's sisters spent a whole day shopping at one of the ports, returning with only one T-shirt but having had a wonderful day. I spent the same day reading a book in the bar of the ship, but that decision was not popular.

A few weeks later as we are winding up our annual visit to Saint's Rest in Muskoka, I notice that Francine is packing up all the things we usually leave in the cottage for the next summer. Has a decision been made that we will never return? Finally, as we are going through the gate at the edge of the property, prompted by what I'm not sure, I blurt out



that we don't seem to have anything in common anymore. Francine's response? "Would it help if you skied less?" How much less is less? While to me it seemed as if I had almost given up the sport completely, to Francine it must have seemed that I was constantly neglecting her and the family for the sake of some idle pastime.

As things continued to deteriorate I sought out a marriage counsellor, though to be honest, I am not sure whether by this time I was really trying to restore the relationship or whether I wanted to justify leaving it. At any rate, the first meeting with the counsellor did a pretty good job of clarifying my desire to leave. I was astonished by the venom and resentment heaped on me by Francine at that session. Shell-shocked, I was. I have never been good at being falsely accused — even if there might be a kernel of truth in the accusations.

One day as a boy in idyllic Muskoka I asked my father if I could take out the boat. It was a windy day and we had agreed before he retired for a nap that it was too windy to hazard taking the boat out of our wind-exposed boathouse. But after a time it seemed to me that the wind had died down somewhat, so I knocked on my father's bedroom door and said the wind had let up, could I take the boat out now? He replied, somewhat sleepily, "I guess so." And so eagerly I headed down to the boathouse, untied the boat, and started out. Well, the wind was still pretty strong and I soon decided this was a mistake and with some difficulty managed to get the boat back into the boathouse. My father was standing on the dock in a fury that I had never seen before. In a blazing temper he accused me of deliberately disobeying him. He would not hear my protestations that I had understood him to agree to my taking out the boat. To this day I thought he

had said, "I guess so." I imagine he said, "I guess not," but I did not hear that unfamiliar expression. I heard, "I guess so." He never relented and my relationship with him suffered for years.

For months, years likely, resentments had accrued on both sides of the marriage, but I was astonished at the degree they had for Francine. Truth to tell, dialogue between us had stopped once the children were old enough to understand us. Francine was never apart from the children, even to the extent of sharing a "family bed" with them, a bed it was thought I should share as well. As I have said, I have never been good at sharing a bed with one person, never mind three. We often talked before we had children and when Melinda was an infant, but once there was a child in the house old enough to understand us, communication stopped. Demand breast-feeding even precluded the occasional

babysitter. By the time we sat down with a marriage counsellor we were worlds apart.

Francine had invested heavily in being a wife and mother, and perhaps if I had been less selfish I would have stayed with it, regardless. But I like freedom and autonomy. I love my children and hated to break up the family home, but finally I decided to put my own life first. The results were harsh: a hugely unpleasant divorce, no resolution of child custody, and partial estrangement from my children for many years.

For some time, contact with my children was limited to the occasional lunch, always with a definite time limit. And they only had to spend time with Dad; they didn't have to talk to him. Often they brought their homework. But one day they didn't get up to leave at the allotted time; they started to ask me questions, and a dialogue began that has, thankfully, continued to this day. We get on very well now, though separated

geographically. I'm proud of them both: Melinda, a cardiologist, and Rebecca, for whom higher education was a profit centre — she had so many scholarships — who ran a dance company in Philadelphia for years and is now moving into international relations.

## **The Cigarette Smoking Man**

Meantime, *X-Files* was cranking up its second season. While I did not share front billing with Mitch, my credit at the end had been upgraded from featuring to costarring. Of course you still had to pause your VCR — yes, VCR — if you wanted to actually read the credit. And in the first episode, “Little Green Men,” I had another line, this time to Mulder, “Your time is over.” I was still hanging around Skinner’s office, smoking, and it was still no clearer who I might be. My ranking was further puzzling when Skinner,

who appears to be speaking to Mulder, says, "Get out of here," and it turns out he is speaking to me. And I do. I leave, though taking my sweet time about it and lighting another cigarette before going. Perhaps even if I was a big cheese, Skinner had the right to order me out of his office. Needless to say, no one explained any of this to the mere actor. But John Bartley's lighting continued to draw attention to me and the mysterious smoking.

John got really carried away lighting my next appearance in the fourth episode of season 2, "Sleepless." In the final scene of the episode, my only scene, I am seated at the head of a long table, flanked by two flunkies, interrogating a new character in the series, Alex Krycek, played by Nicholas Lea. My face is so surrounded in smoke and shadow that my identity is barely revealed until the final shot as I butt yet another cigarette into a smouldering ashtray. It now seemed that

Krycek was actually working for me to undermine Mulder. But who am I? We have yet to find out.

I had never met Nick Lea prior to shooting this scene. Did I intimidate him? Who knows? But he could hardly remember a line. We had to do many takes before we finally got the scene, directed by Rob Bowman. Who is this guy, I thought. I can see that he is good-looking, but don't you have to have some skills to be hired as a lead actor on a series? Well, when I finally saw the episode it was clear that he has lots of skills. He gives a wonderful performance. Maybe he was so into the character that he was properly terrified of the Smoking Man.

Speaking of smoking, it was ironic that after going through my personal hell to quit smoking I was about to become the most famous smoker on television. When I shot the pilot I was given the choice of smoking real tobacco cigarettes or herbal ones.



Confident that I had beaten smoking and wishing to be a real actor I opted to smoke real cigarettes. And so I did for the pilot episode. And then again for my next episode. But when I found myself sitting at home anxiously hoping I would get another call for that *X-Files* show, I knew the risk was too great. From then on I smoked the foul-smelling herbal cigarettes.

I pity the cast and crew when I was on set. You could smell the cigarettes as soon as you came anywhere near the action. Herbal cigarettes are dreadful. While they smell a little like marijuana, the only good thing that can be said for them is that they are not addictive. No, to be honest, a second good thing is that they make a better prop than a real cigarette. They burn more reliably and consistently. But after every day of shooting I stank of the stuff and had to hit the shower as soon as possible. It wasn't until the third or fourth season that I realized that I was punishing

myself unnecessarily. I was doing a low budget feature in Montreal in which I had to smoke a cigar. The ingenious props person on the set had invented a clever rig that would light the cigar mechanically. So for each shot he would cut the cigar to the appropriate length — that was always an issue, making sure the cigarette was the right length to match the related shots — he would then hand me the lit cigar before the shot. Not till then did I realize that what was really overwhelming my clothes and hair, to say nothing of my lungs, was lighting the cigarettes before each take. Subsequently I demanded in my contract that the cigarette would always be mechanically lit by the props department. After that I could almost live with myself for a few hours after a day of shooting.

For all I hated the herbal cigarette, I still loved the act of smoking. Maybe it brought back all the arrogance of my youth, all those

feelings that I was a special young man. After all, one did start smoking at age fourteen in order to be more grown-up. That was in the days when almost all grown-ups smoked. Fans of the show will remember that as CSM I often held the cigarette between my thumb and forefinger, a characteristic that became a trademark of the character. Where did that come from? Years later I was sorting through some old family photographs and I came across a snapshot of my father holding a cigarette in exactly that way.

Meanwhile, my private life took a distinct turn for the better. True, the divorce was festering along, but I was now out of it and while I suppose I should have been scarred and desolate, I was enjoying being free and autonomous, being able to “come and go as I pleased.” Francine’s lawyer had attacked me with that phrase, confronting me with my wish to come and go as I pleased with the same relish as if she were accusing me of

wanting to rape all the children in my daughter's Grade 4 class. Yes, I have to admit it: I like to come and go as I please. Send me to hell.

I remember sitting in class one day — I don't know what I was supposed to be attending to — but I found myself thinking, if I were to arrange a marriage for me who would it be with? If I could stand outside myself and choose the right partner for me, who would it be? It took a nanosecond to decide it would be Barbara Ellison who happened to be in the class at the time. So one day, after my usual hesitation and shyness, I asked Barbara if she would like to go for a drink later. She seemed remarkably enthused about the idea. Well, we drank and we talked when suddenly she blurted out that she was in love with me and had been for some time. Well, this dating thing turned out to be easier than I thought and our

relationship began — and thrived for eighteen years.

The divorce and the separation from Francine were draining my financial resources. I had sold the large condo in Whistler that was no longer being used by the family. Francine and the children had stopped coming to Whistler some years earlier — dance classes on Saturdays you understand. I bought a tiny one-bedroom condo on Whistler Creekside so I could ski, a season pass, rented a basement apartment in Barbara's house, and happily began my new life. At the time I had no idea that *X-Files* would play any significant role in that new life.

## Virtual Reality

Two things would have to happen if *X-Files* were to become important to me. First of all, the series would have to be successful, and second, my role would have to grow. Neither of these possibilities were assured at this time or, it could be argued, even likely. It is sometimes said that if *The X-Files* were launched now it would never have survived. These days shows need to succeed instantly or they are summarily dropped. *X-Files* did not succeed instantly; it trucked along with modest numbers on the Fox Network, which

at the time was still in the shadow of the Big Three (CBS, NBC, ABC). Fox could tolerate a relatively small show with a cult audience and, indeed, it was that cult audience that drove the show forward and sustained it for two or three years before it became mainstream. In the early years it had a backwater time slot, Fridays at 9 p.m. Ironically the time slot worked in its favour as the show became popular with families watching it together. It also became popular with internet geeks who liked to get together to watch the show. And Friday night at nine was a good time for these young adults. The internet, which was just beginning to come into general use at the time, was a unique handmaid to the series. It was through the internet that the cult fans communicated, spread their enthusiasm, indulged in fan fiction, and generally bonded to the show and to each other.

But it may be the internet made an even greater contribution. Gradually, no, to be

truthful, suddenly in the early nineties, large numbers of people started reading pixels instead of print. Should this make a difference? I know the Canadian thinker Marshall McLuhan has fallen out of favour, but his famous dictum, “the medium is the message,” still resonates. McLuhan argued convincingly, to me at least, that the medium of information affects how we think about the world, regardless of the content of the medium. So the printing press ushered in the modern world, the separation in perception of the person from their environment, the ability to manipulate the environment technologically, and the development of the scientific method, among other things. It did this, not by the content that was printed, but by the very fact of absorbing content by means of print, a “hot” medium that is complete in itself, the perception of which does not need to be enhanced or filled in by the perceiver. We all know that reading



handwriting is another matter altogether, sometimes a guessing game at best. McLuhan argued that with the advent of television and the need for the viewer to literally connect the dots that were flashing across the screen in order to “see” an image, the viewer became an active participant in the process of perception where s/he had been passive in absorbing print. Remarkable changes in world views can be correlated to this period, though causation is more difficult to infer. But it might be argued that the relativism of postmodernism, or the view that your truth is your own, or even that students should run the schools, might all have been influenced by this change in the manner of perception. McLuhan was no longer with us when pixels on a screen began to replace the scanning dots of television, but perhaps further effects were emerging.

We speak often now of “the virtual world,” the world that exists on computers in reality

but in perception exists in our minds. We play virtual games, we have virtual sex, virtual friends. Now we are used to this world. But in the early nineties it was new, and the line between solid and soft, real and virtual, true and false, was becoming blurred. Somehow prior to the nineties, books gave us a sense of assurance; if it were published in solid print it must represent something solid. But in the nineties we were looking at pixels, and if you remember back then there was nothing solid about them; they were quite likely to suddenly disappear from your screen for no apparent reason. The time was ripe for a show that dealt with these uncertainties, this vanishing line between the real and the unreal. The time was ripe for *The X-Files*.

Reviewing those early seasons now, I am surprised by how slow-moving the episodes sometimes are, how sentimental — I don't want to say how boring, they are not that,

but they don't grab one's attention the way they once did. Was the success of the show simply a lucky chance, the right idea at the right time? Not to diminish Chris Carter's talent, but none of his other television ventures had similar success and the latest *X-Files* film was pretty much a disaster. What is also interesting is that the popularity of the show in the nineties was huge; it was a global phenomenon. But as time went on, while continuing to be successful television, its impact certainly receded. Some thought this was because of the move of production to L.A. after the fifth season; some thought it was because David Duchovny withdrew from the series; some — I like to think — thought it was because William B. Davis was not in the last two seasons. But maybe it was because times had moved on and the show no longer spoke to the zeitgeist.

Two themes resonate throughout all nine seasons of the show: paranormal activity and

conspiracy. While other shows dealt with the paranormal, *Touched by an Angel* for instance, *X-Files* was the only show that lived in the world of uncertainty about paranormal events, always posing the question — were they real or unreal? It was almost as if a seal of permeability built around the printed word had been breached and it was now open season on beliefs of all kinds. Lovely for the show perhaps, lovely for the career of William B. Davis, but was it — is it — lovely for the world?

My character rose to prominence in the series with the development of the conspiracy theory underlying many of the key elements of the show. Fans of the show will know that as the series developed the conspiracy became increasingly elaborate, involving Mulder's father, a syndicate, and John Neville's character, the Well-Manicured Man. During the nineties I would give talks to fans of the show and I would often

ask for a straw vote on how many believed there were aliens among us. Generally about half the hands would go up. Then I would ask how many believed in government conspiracies and every hand would go up. This would astonish me and I told them so. This was the Clinton/Lewinski era, and I suggested to them that if the president couldn't keep eleven private meetings with an intern secret, how did they expect he could achieve global secrecy about anything at all? Of course, my argument had no effect.

And so what did this pixel world portend, this world that the *X-Files* embodied, and what did it lead to? Causality, of course, is fiendishly difficult to determine. But how did the nineties and what followed differ from what came before? While Thatcherism and Reaganism began in the eighties, the principles of the free market, of individualism, of the deconstruction of the welfare state all accelerated dramatically in the nineties. Even

caring Canada under a Liberal government dramatically slashed its social programs in this decade. The collective gave way to the individual, and tough on you if you couldn't handle it. Believe it or not there were almost no homeless people before the nineties. But not only was the individual on his own economically, his was on his own epistemologically. It's up to you what you believe; science is relative or, just as likely, wrong. Develop your own belief system; the internet is there to help you. The word "theory," which should mean an underlying explanatory principle, now means a guess or just someone's idea, one that is likely wrong. So huge swaths of scientific evidence on such things as evolution and climate change are dismissed as merely theories. One can say they don't believe in climate change the way one might say they don't believe in Santa Claus. And as for conspiracy theory, intelligent people actually believe and argue that 9/11 was an

inside job. I have little truck with George W. Bush, but I don't believe even he would deliberately kill 3,000 innocent Americans.

## **Conspiracy and Compromise**

In the fall of 1994, the Cigarette Smoking Man was gaining some prominence. Whether it was because they needed some filler to replace Scully during Gillian's pregnancy, or because they decided they liked the character, or because the discussions in the producers' offices about whether Bill Davis can act were finally settled in my favour, I have no idea. But clearly CSM was taking a leading role in the conspiracy in the episode "Ascension," and in the episode "One Breath" I had my first major scene and first front billing.



“One Breath,” written by Glen Morgan and James Wong, introduced the nickname “Cancer Man,” a nickname that caught on with the fans, even more than Mulder’s later epithet, “Black-lunged son of a bitch.” But for me personally, I guess the episode was a test. Let’s give him a big scene and see what he does with it. Well, I guess I did fine with it as there were many more scenes to come. In the scene I am held at gunpoint by Mulder, but talk him down. It is a good scene if I say so myself, but I give some credit to the director, Bob Goodwin, who pushed me to be simple and direct. I imagine it was this episode that firmly established me with the fans.

Don’t give up your day job, Bill. That was episode 8. It would be episode 22 of season 2 before I appeared again.

“F. Emasculata” gave me another strong scene with Mulder. Once again shadowed by John Bartley’s evocative lighting, I dress down Mulder in Skinner’s office and begin to

make the case that will be the character's driving force. 'It is better to do what you can than what you should.' (Does this sound eerily like President Obama?) In this episode, it is better to suppress information about an epidemic than to risk panic by making the information public. More insidious compromises will be revealed as the series progresses.

In episode 25, "Anasazi," the finale of season 2, the conspiracy and my role in it begin to take shape. I have a terrific scene with Mulder's father, played by the Canadian actor Peter Donat. A nephew of Robert Donat, I had known of Peter since the fifties when he was a regular performer in the early days of CBC television. I had taught his brother at the National Theatre School in the late sixties. I was quite in awe of the opportunity to work with him. In the scene I have come to warn him that Mulder may learn of his involvement in the early days of the conspiracy

and he should deny everything should it come to light. As it happens, he decides to open up to Mulder, and Krycek finishes him off for me. I'm not sure what would have happened if Bill Mulder hadn't happened to go to the bathroom in the middle of his conversation with his son. Well, Krycek fumbled jobs later, as we shall see. He nearly blew this one, letting Bill Mulder tell his son more than he should have. Nonetheless, in the end, Bill Mulder was dead and David had one of his first crying scenes. Later in the episode Mulder discovers the skeletons of aliens in a buried box car, which I order burned while Mulder is inside. End of season 2.

I recall the scene with Peter Donat playing beautifully as we rehearsed it and shot my coverage. But, curiously, at some point, whether sent for or not, Chris Carter joined director Bob Goodwin at the monitor. After a while Bob gave Peter a different direction.

Team player that he is, Peter responded with a much more obvious, portentous, and less nuanced performance than he had been giving before. Chris gave Bob a thumbs-up and left. What can I say? Chris was making the big bucks. Something similar happened later with what should have been the inspired casting of John Neville as the Well-Manicured Man. One of the world's great actors, John could have been brilliant in the role, but again he was encouraged to give a rather heavy-handed and obvious performance. Both Peter and John were good — how could they not be — but in my humble opinion they could have been so much better.

I don't recall when I first had a crisis of conscience about being involved with *The X-Files*, but the first episode of season 3 could certainly have contributed to a feeling of unease. I am, after all, a skeptic and the show relentlessly challenged skeptical thinking, relentlessly presenting what we skeptics call

pseudoscience as real. It is not the obvious fictions in the show, the aliens and alien abductions, that are insidious. We know it's a story and we know that we are inhabiting an imagined world. It is the embedded assumptions that may be dangerous, that may encourage an anti-scientific habit of thought. "The Blessing Way," the first episode of season 3, opens with a voice-over narration by a Native American extolling the virtues of his traditions in general and, in particular, the greater reliability of memory over history. Unlike history, "Memory like fire is radiant and immutable," he declares over an image of fire. Anyone who has played the memory game in a circle, where a simple statement is whispered to each person in turn until the last person reports something quite different from the original statement, knows that memory is shaky indeed. Anyone who has struggled to light a campfire in the rain knows that fire is hardly immutable. Yet on

*The X-Files* we are expected to value these ancient traditions and to believe that modern medicine would have no chance of saving the ailing Mulder, but only an extended — and rather boring — healing ceremony could (and does) bring him back to life.

Later in the episode in trying to figure out how a computer chip might have been implanted in her neck, Scully is advised by a psychiatrist to try hypnotism to recover her suppressed memory. She succeeds in dredging up snatches of images until she abandons the session out of fear of what she might discover. Few contemporary notions in psychiatry have been as dangerous and as wrong as the notion of repressed memory. Innocent people were jailed for years on the strength of testimony from people whose ‘repressed memory’ revealed they had been sexually abused. Believing that the worst things that could have happened to one would be the things they could not

remember, that the memory would be repressed, a generation began to believe that they might have been sexually abused or worse. Fortunately, thanks to more recent research in the field, science and the public seem to have come around to the more obvious thought — that the more traumatic and vivid the event, the more likely it will be consciously remembered.

But in “The Blessing Way” these two notions, the efficacy of prayer and repressed memory, are simply embedded in the story. They are not presented as issues for debate; unlike the more admittedly paranormal events in the series, there is no Scully saying these things are ridiculous. There is no ambiguity; they are under the radar if you like. They support the story but they are not part of the story. Does this make them more likely to influence the viewer?

But it's the more obvious issues that concerned Richard Dawkins. Now famous for his

stance on atheism, Dawkins in the nineties was professor for Public Understanding of Science at Oxford, author of the influential book *The Selfish Gene*, and my hero. I think I have read every word of every book he has published. But here is what he had to say about *The X-Files* in the 1996 Dimbleby Lecture:

*How do we account for the current paranormal vogue in the popular media? Perhaps it has something to do with the millennium — in which case it's depressing to realize that the millennium is still three years away. Less portentously, it may be an attempt to cash in on the success of *The X-Files*. This is fiction and therefore defensible as pure entertainment.*

*A fair defence, you might think. But soap operas, cop series, and the like are justly criticised if, week after week, they ram home the same prejudice or bias.*



*Each week The X-Files poses a mystery and offers two rival kinds of explanation, the rational theory and the paranormal theory. And, week after week, the rational explanation loses. But it is only fiction, a bit of fun, why get so hot under the collar?*

*Imagine a crime series in which, every week, there is a white suspect and a black suspect. And every week, lo and behold, the black one turns out to have done it. Unpardonable, of course. And my point is that you could not defend it by saying: "But it's only fiction, only entertainment."*

*Let's not go back to a dark age of superstition and unreason, a world in which every time you lose your keys you suspect poltergeists, demons, or alien abduction.*

Here and at other times, Dawkins attacked *The X-Files* as promoting anti-scientific thought. And here I was, a rising star on the series, on the verge of a major breakthrough in my acting career. What was I to do? Swallow my conscience, like CSM himself, and serve the greater powers — in this case Twentieth Century Fox — and preserve my own self-interest? Or should I, like Mulder himself, champion the truth, abandon the show, and join Dawkins in lecturing against it? Well, we know what I did. But how did I explain it? How did I justify it?

There are two arguments that could be posed against Dawkins' position. Dawkins uses the analogy of the unacceptability of a crime show where the culprit is always black. Of course, he assumes, there would be moral outrage at such a program. But what about a show where each week a mystery is posed and each week there are two rival kinds of explanation, one posed by a man and one

posed by a woman? And the man is always right. Shouldn't there be moral outrage, from the feminists at least? Women love the show and the character of Scully in particular. Even though she is always wrong. Where is the moral outrage?

But more germane to Dawkins' argument is to turn his own argument for atheism back on him. Why does he prefer science to religion? Because of "evidence" he constantly, and in my view correctly, argues. But where is his evidence for the insidious effects of *The X-Files*? He presents none. He has none. My own straw polls of groups attending my talks on the show indicated no greater belief in the paranormal than would be found in the general population. Not very scientific, but it's a tad more evidence than Dawkins presents for his side of the argument.

And so, armed with these two comforting positions, I did not have to sell my soul à la CSM to stay on the show and go for the ride.

My conscience was clear. Dawkins was wrong, and I could happily continue to promote my own self-interest as a performer on the show. Well, perhaps.

The show constantly poses another question: do you compromise with reality or do you constantly challenge it? Mulder challenges, CSM compromises. I guess one could always argue that if I didn't act on the show someone else would. The show would go on whether I went with it or not. So I might as well go with it. This defence carried little weight at the Nuremberg trials. If I didn't kill Jews someone else would so I might as well fire away. And yet? And yet? How could an actor turn down such an opportunity just because he was a little squeamish about some of the ideas presented on the show?

What does one make of compromises in life? And are they only different in scale from the compromises of Chamberlain, or the Vichy government in France during World

War II, or CSM himself, whose compromise with the aliens is similar to Marshal Pétain's with Hitler? I know I should emit a fraction of the carbon that I do and yet I still drive a car (a Prius, admittedly), still fly if I have to, and still maintain three homes with the heat turned down as much as possible. Is it possible to be fully true to one's beliefs and still live a life on this planet?

In truth, going to *The X-Files* from running my own private acting school was like jumping from one compromise to another. For an acting school, private or public, to be financially viable requires a certain number of students. And yet how many of those students have a realistic chance of a career in the profession? And yet somehow one has to encourage enough people to train at your school to make the finances work. Does one have to encourage false hopes? Because of the rigid admission process and huge government subsidy, I didn't feel quite the same

conflict at the National Theatre School, though even there only a minority of graduates ended up as professional actors. But a private school has to actively beat the bushes for students. Can one do that with a clear conscience, knowing the perils of the profession? Do I differ from my character only in the scale of the compromise I am willing to undertake? Certainly I was never put in CSM's position. What would I have done? Indeed, what would you have done?

The finale of season 2 and the first two episodes of season 3 formed a three-part arc that firmly established the mythology theme of the series. It was now clear, to the extent that anything is clear on *The X-Files*, that CSM, along with Mulder's father and others, entered into some kind of arrangement with potential alien invaders as long ago as 1947. The dates might be a little shaky — CSM was probably only ten at the time. But the big surprise for me, the actor playing the

character, was to discover that I was not top dog after all. I had seemed to be such a powerful presence up to that point in the series, but now I was little more than a lackey reporting to a mysterious Syndicate led by the Well-Manicured Man (John Neville) and another figure, affectionately referred to later by the fans as the Fat Man, played by my good friend Don S. Williams.

In the opening episode of season 3, I am on the carpet, desperately lying and covering up my mistakes in a smoke-filled room filled with a cabal of men quite contemptuous of me. Not only did I not have the digital tape that was so wanted, but my henchmen blew their attempt to eliminate Krycek who had now sworn to get me. Ah well, let's play this character. In a later episode, "Apocrypha," my status seems to have fallen even further. Don S. Williams refers to me as their "associate in Washington" and John Neville dresses me down for being a few minutes late. Ah,

how the mighty have fallen. But I won't hit bottom until season 4 and "Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man."

The third part of the trilogy, "Paper Clip," was directed by Rob Bowman, now firmly established along with Kim Manners as a principal director in the series. Both men were instrumental in raising the standards of the show as it gradually began to attract a more mainstream viewership and correspondingly more attention to the principal actors. *X-Files* was becoming a hit.

At the same time the productions were becoming increasingly ambitious, with a corresponding strain on cast and crew. Some days shoots could be eighteen or twenty hours long. Because a twelve-hour turnaround was required for the U.S. actors — only ten for the Canadians, what can I say? — the week would begin with an early morning call on Monday, but each day would start later and later until by Friday the call might



be in the early afternoon and the shoot would finish early Saturday morning. What kind of a weekend starts with finishing work at 9 a.m. on Saturday and starting again at 7 a.m. on Monday? We in the trenches often derided David and Gillian for complaining about their jobs. After all, weren't they doing what every actor in the country dreamed of? But in fairness the strain on them was unusual even in the stressful world of television. For not only did the show work these very long hours, but unlike most series there were really only two leads and the bulk of the work fell to them. The rest of us had nice supporting roles, but we seldom worked a full day or even every day.

Did these working conditions contribute to the strained relations between David and Gillian? Probably. Or between each of them and the crew? Were their idiosyncratic personalities key to their success in their roles and at the same time destined to create

friction? In truth, I didn't see them together often, and most of what I know of their interaction with each other is from hearsay. But it is serious hearsay when a crew member doesn't return to the show because he can't handle the tension between David and Gillian. What I saw was an arrogance, a lack of professionalism, and an incivility quite foreign to my British theatre trained habits. I was used to actors who always arrived on time or early, who were always polite, though not necessarily friendly. David was notorious for being late for his call; eventually the ADs structured the calls to allow for his lateness. Gillian was famous for never being ready to come on set when she was called. As an actor I hated being in the makeup trailer at the same time as Gillian. She had to have her own music and it had to be so loud that any conversation in the trailer was impossible. How self-centred is that? Recently I had a small role in a film with Anne Hathaway.

How do you get a name like that anyway? At any rate, she did not seem to be affected by having the same name as Shakespeare's wife. But more to the point she is a really nice person with real people skills. I had been away from the set for a couple of weeks and when I returned she greeted me as a long lost friend, asking how I was and what I had been doing. In nine years with Gillian, she never once asked me how I was.

Gillian is certainly aloof, but it may be that she is more shy than arrogant, that she only seems arrogant. First AD Tom Braidwood says that she was "always a sweetheart." I didn't find that and I doubt that David did. But what is more interesting is how her personality informed her character. After all, can you really see Anne Hathaway, wonderful actress that she is, playing Scully? Did that combination of self-containment and occasional vulnerability give Scully the iron

and the appeal that made the character such a success?

David's social skills are not much better than Gillian's. Or maybe in this case it was me that was shy. David is a bright guy and sometimes quite forthcoming and interesting. But, moved by his own drumbeat as he is, one never knows when he will be in what kind of mood. Once again, that very independence of tone, that aloofness, even that arrogance, were likely qualities that informed his portrayal of Mulder. So it may be that the very attributes that led to their success as Mulder and Scully were qualities likely to make working together a challenge.

John Bartley was a major casualty of the long hours. For the first three years he was the DOP (Director of Photography) and made a huge contribution to the look and feel of the show. A lovely New Zealander, he was as short as First AD Tom Braidwood. For the longest time I thought they were

brothers. I sat with him on the set at the end of the third season. He just couldn't do it anymore. The long hours had denied him a life. Executive Producer Bob Goodwin did everything he could to woo him, sent him flowers and gifts — anything to keep him — but to no avail. John left the show after the third season. But he had done his work on me. The fans saw me as a craggy-faced villain shrouded in smoke.

## Celebrity

By the spring of 1995 *X-Files* must have become a genuine hit; *X-Files* conventions began. And would continue for several years. By this time *Star Trek* conventions were legendary, with troops of fans showing up in costume and makeup. Would *X-Files* become a similar phenomenon? I don't know if *X-File* conventions were ever as weird and wonderful as *Star Trek* ones, but their popularity astonished me. I remember waiting to go on stage for my first appearance at one of these events. I have never been shy about

speaking in public, not since I won prizes for public speaking when I was in high school — ironically I won my first prizes with a speech about flying saucers — but how is this audience going to react to me, a minor character on their favourite show and an evil one at that? Yet when I stepped on stage the large crowd erupted in cheers and applause. Oh my. This is different. What is this world I have entered? Is it possible? Am I now a ‘celebrity’?

The first conventions — or ‘cons’ as I have since learned to call them — were strictly *X-Files* conventions. Vast exhibition areas were set up with replicas from the show and merchandise to purchase. Our involvement was in two parts; we did a presentation on stage and later we sat together and signed autographed pictures. Who is we? Well, who it was not was David and Gillian. Gillian apparently attended one con that was hugely popular; I don’t think David ever did. No, it

was we secondary characters who were the celebrity guests: Mitch, Nick, the Lone Gunmen, Steven Williams, and sometimes guest stars from a particular season. For the stage appearances I developed a popular theme: CSM is the hero of the show and Mulder is the villain. No seriously, I could make that case. One of the Lone Gunmen, Dean Haglund, was also a stand-up comic; when we were at the same con we had a routine that had them falling off their seats. But the most surprising of the stage appearances to me was Steven Williams, the buff black actor who played X. He would come on stage, talk for a few moments, and then say, "Let's get comfortable." At that he would peel off his outer layer of clothing to screams of delight from the female attendees. I never stayed to see what happened next.

The autograph line was fast and furious and it was good to meet fans personally. But if you want to get through in time for dinner



don't do an autograph line with Nick Lea. He would write a book on each picture; it took forever to get through the line. But the most embarrassing incident for me was when a fan in Texas gave me his name for his autograph.

"Beo," he said.

"Beo?" I asked in puzzlement.

"Yes. Beo."

"How do you spell that?" I asked.

"B-I-L-L."

After *X-Files* conventions died out I didn't do any cons for awhile, but recently was encouraged to try some science fiction conventions. Unlike the *X-Files* cons they don't pay a fee, you make your money selling your signed pictures. I was a little unsure about stepping into this world; are we celebrities or peddlers? Would I make any money? Tom Braidwood — Frohike — told me of one convention he went to where the women seemed to be competing for how few clothes they could wear. Well, this couldn't be all bad. I

remember sitting behind the table at the first one of these I went to, wondering why anyone would pay good money for a picture of me with my signature on it. I was shocked when the first person who came up to me took out a huge roll of bills and happily forked over the cash. Well, the recession has slowed things down a little, but it's still a way to help the bank account from time to time. And if I'm honest I have to admit I have a good time when I go.

Being a celebrity and being an actor are two quite different things. I sometimes wonder how A-list actors ever have time to act, or work on their craft; they seem to be continuously busy appearing on talk shows, doing interviews, and dealing with scandals in the tabloids. Or doing the things that prompted the scandals in the first place. The actors I worked with in England many years earlier, while at the top of their profession, were not celebrities in the modern sense. Joan

Plowright was quoted as saying her husband could go to work on the tube and not be recognized. Her husband was Laurence Olivier. Mind you she might have been wrong about that. At the height of our success I was recognized almost everywhere, except in London. Only later did I realize the British were too polite to let on that they recognized you. Unlike some North Americans who would stare at me as if I had just escaped from the zoo. But now we have young people whose declared ambition is to be a celebrity. They don't want to do anything to earn that recognition; they just want to be famous.

I'm often asked what it was like to be famous. Did people bother you? Did they intrude on your private life? Well, being minor famous is actually a lot of fun. I met a lot of interesting people, went to a lot of great places, received some great gifts — and some stupid ones — and generally had a good time. Being really famous would be something else. I

can't imagine what it must have been like for David and Gillian, not able to move without attracting attention, people shooting a video of you eating in a restaurant. That one really pissed David off. But I understand the frustration. And yet there is a paradox. If you trade on being a celebrity you expose yourself to the good and the bad. If Tiger Woods had stuck to being the best golfer in the world and had refused to do appearances and endorsements, who would have cared about his private sex life? Actors don't have to enter the glass house and some don't. I remember an interesting comparison of two actors from a publicist in Montreal. My good friend Donald Sutherland was doing a role and refused to do any interviews while the film was being shot — I imagine so that his full attention could be on the work. Some time later Henry Fonda came to do a film in Montreal. Fonda asked the publicist if they could restrict interviews to just two or three

— a day. Paris Hilton is a celebrity. Is Judi Dench?

Being a celebrity on a science fiction show has its own challenges — oh yes, it's not a science fiction show; it's a "science probability" show, according to its creator, Chris Carter. Hmm. Really. Fans often assumed I chose to be in the show because I believed in the paranormal issues underlying the episodes. Two mistakes there. I didn't "choose" to be in the show; I got the part. So I got the work. And no, I didn't, don't, believe in the underlying paranormal concepts. Fans would often be astonished that no, I didn't believe in UFOs, in aliens among us, in alien abduction, ghosts, telepathy, or other psychic phenomena. Why not, they would demand. Well, it's not up to me to explain my disbelief — I can't prove they don't exist anymore than I can prove fairies and Santa Claus don't exist — it's up to you to demonstrate that they do. Well, we can, they would say. We have. I

didn't really have an answer for that as I didn't know what their proofs were. If I were going to continue this conversation I would need to find out.

By coincidence I was listening to CBC Radio one day — this was back in the last century before they dumbed it down and the government took away most of their funding — and heard an interview with the late Barry Beyerstein. Interviews could be quite extensive in the last century; I think this one was at least an hour. Barry Beyerstein turned out to be a psychology professor at SFU (Simon Fraser University) near Vancouver, but more importantly for my purposes he was a member of CSICOP and an experienced paranormal debunker. CSICOP stands, or stood — they have since changed their name — for Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. Some of the world's top scientists serve on their advisory panel. They do exactly what I wanted to find

out about; they look at paranormal claims and the evidence presented for them and subject them to scientific analysis. Sometimes in cases where something predictive is promoted, like fortune telling, dowsing for water, or telepathy, they will set up experiments in concert with the practitioner and test the results. The practitioner would agree that, yes, in these circumstances I can predict whatever it is. Of course, they always failed. Where experiments were not appropriate they would review the evidence with scientific detachment. One of their most famous reveals was to expose the myth of an alien landing in Roswell in 1947 — one of the key underlying “probables” of *The X-Files*.

Clearly Barry was someone I needed to talk to. I tracked him down through the radio station and he graciously invited me to lunch at SFU. One of the nicest people one could hope to meet, Barry was a soft-spoken, tall man, with slumped shoulders and light

thinning hair, and a willingness to look at all sides of a question. Never an ideologue, but a true skeptic, he would gently challenge any idea and look for verifiable evidence. He and I became friends. He gave me valuable literature on some of the issues in question and pointed me to sources with good information. I joined CSICOP, subscribed to their magazine, the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and in short order I became a celebrity skeptic, speaking to college and skeptic groups promoting science and challenging pseudoscience. I was even asked to host skeptical programs on the Discovery Channel.

Perhaps the most unlikely appearance during this whole period was when I was asked to moderate a debate between John Mack, the most visible advocate of the concept of alien abduction, and another man who took the position while there may be aliens among us, they are not actually abducting humans. These were considered intellectual positions



worthy of serious consideration. I was invited to moderate, not because of my known views on the subject, but simply because I was an actor on a television show that dealt with these issues. In that strange way viewers have of actors, the organizers of the debate assumed I would not only have an interest in the subject, but be curious to learn from 'experts' in the field.

John Mack was on the faculty of Harvard University and a Pulitzer Prize winner for an earlier work on perception. But for the last ten years he had been a passionate advocate of alien abduction and a spokesperson for the many abductees he had interviewed. "Pioneers on a hero's journey" was how he described them in his book *Abduction*. How does such a brilliant man come to believe such utter nonsense? Although, to be fair, he seemed equally surprised that I could be such a materialist. Mack's conviction hinged on two things, one since discredited and the

other easily explained by an actor. His principal tool for accessing information from an 'abductee' was hypnotic regression. Not only has this technique been seriously questioned, but in Mack's case the conditions for the procedure were hardly objective. He presented himself to a professed abductee as a collaborator, not an investigator, and clearly gave approval to all references to abduction. But he was equally impressed by the emotional truth presented by the participants; their experiences must be real since their emotions are so true. Well, actors would be seriously challenged if they could only evoke true emotions if they were in real situations. Can the actor playing Macbeth only feel guilt if he actually kills a king? What actors do is live truthfully in imagined situations. In fully imagined circumstances, true emotions emerge. And so, since the abductees fully imagined the circumstances of their

abduction, naturally the resulting emotions would be true.

Mind you, not all actors believe that imagining the circumstances is sufficient; one only has to recall the famous story of Dustin Hoffman and Laurence Olivier in *Marathon Man*. Apparently Hoffman had to appear in a shot out of breath from running, so for every take he would run around the studio and arrive literally out of breath. After a few takes Olivier turned to him and said, "Dear boy, why don't you try acting?"

What puzzled me most about Mack though was his apparent lack of awareness or concern about inconsistencies in the abductees' accounts. Mack seemed to have confidence that every detail the abductees reported of aliens and their treatment by their captors was real. And yet he casually mentioned in conversation that the abductees often reported seeing him on the spaceships. Knowing he had never been on a spaceship, he knew

they were wrong about that detail. In fact that was the only detail that could be verified one way or another. Shouldn't that have cast doubt on other details?

While it was somewhat embarrassing to moderate a debate between two positions with which I disagreed, the atmosphere on that occasion was positive and the discussion constructive. My celebrity status was to cause me much greater embarrassment more recently. A group in Vancouver calling themselves Necessary Voices had arranged a talk in the Vancouver Public Library with Paul William Roberts, who had written a book about the Iraq war that I much admired — the book, not the war. Outed at the event as the actor from *The X-Files*, the organizers asked me if I would host their next event, dealing with the terrorist attacks of September 11. Since, judging by that night's discussions, their views and mine seemed to cohere, and expecting the next event would be

similar, I agreed enthusiastically. As it happens the next event would be in a local church instead of the library and the speaker would be Barrie Zwicker, author of a book called *Towers of Deception*. When I arrived for the event I was astonished to discover that, unlike their previous event with thirty odd people in the library, there were hundreds of people clamouring to fill this large church, not a basement hall, but the church itself. Gosh, am I this famous? Alas, while my name may have helped with publicity, these people, clearly from the left, were devoted to a cause of which I was blissfully unaware. It turned out that Zwicker, while a reputable social critic in several areas, is an advocate of the theory that the U.S. government itself was responsible for the attacks on the twin towers. Do your research, Bill. Here I was committed to introducing the prime advocate of such an unlikely notion and by my very presence appearing to be

supportive. There are so many legitimate targets, why expend so much energy tilting at this windmill? What could I do? Feign interest, be polite and gracious, express my interest in reading his book, and suppress that queasy feeling in my stomach that was telling me that 'to mine ownself I was being untrue.' Even had I the courage to challenge the prevailing view in the hall I didn't have the information; the theory was too new for me.

Zwicker spent most of his talk bemoaning the fact that leading left thinker Noam Chomsky did not share his view. Of course that did not lead Zwicker to question it himself. Zwicker is a smart man — so was John Mack. With all their smarts maybe they should get together and argue that George Bush arranged for aliens to bring down the twin towers — coordinated of course by me, the Cigarette Smoking Man. It seems that the smarter a person is, the better they are at

defending an absurd idea arrived at emotionally.

Could the same charge be levelled at the Cigarette Smoking Man himself? There is no denying he was a smart man. Why had he embarked on such a seemingly destructive path? By the end of season 3 it is apparent that CSM is part of a global conspiracy, in league with aliens who are bent on colonizing the planet. As a young man and a colleague of Bill Mulder, Fox's father, he had made a decision that would determine his entire future and affect the lives of many others. While never completely clear, it seems that he had made a pact with the aliens so that some humans could survive the eventual alien invasion even though most humans would die or become slaves. Was this the thinking of Marshal Pétain, the leader of the Vichy government in France who collaborated with the occupying Germans in World War II? Confronted with two unpalatable

choices, occupation or destruction in war, did he look for a third alternative, an opportunity to salvage something from the impending disaster? Will more Pétains and CSMs emerge as climate change forces humans to make compromises that they had previously abhorred?

Regardless, a backstory for me, the actor playing CSM, was emerging. I had made a deal, a deal I likely believed was in the best interests of some people at least, those of my tribe if you like, a deal that set me on a course that demanded more and more of me, that led me into further compromises, until I had no moral compass left. Just as the Vichy government in France was forced by the increasing pressure of the occupying Germans to acts of terrible cruelty, so the pressure on CSM to greater ruthlessness was relentless. Sure, he could have opted out, as Bill Mulder did, but we saw what happened to him. I imagine CSM gradually narrowed his



horizons so that by the end he was moved by nothing other than the success of “The Project.”

## Big Time

Season 3 concluded with “Talitha Cumi,” still one of my favourite episodes. A story idea suggested by David Duchovny, the episode was inspired by Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the novel Christ returns to Earth and begins working miracles, but a Cardinal of the Church demands that he leave, as he is upsetting all the Church’s good work. In the episode, a shape-shifting alien using the name Jeremiah, wonderfully played by Roy Thinnes, always appearing human but capable of appearing in any human

guise, begins doing good works, healing humans who have been injured in a shooting incident. It appears that he is a rogue alien who has broken from his role in the pursuit of The Project and is going about on his own doing good deeds. Well, clearly, we can't have that. CSM and his cronies capture him and lock him up with the extra security a magical alien requires and I confront him in his cell with his misdeeds. He trumps me with the information that I am dying of lung cancer and for a moment we see the human frailty of CSM underneath the arrogant veneer. While not always clear to the viewer, CSM and the alien make a deal — I would release him if he cured me. Another compromise, whether in self-interest or in the interest of The Project, who is to say?

But the appeal of the episode for me was more than the debates in the cell; it was my first scene with Mulder's mother with whom CSM had once been intimate, leading to

conjecture from the fans that perhaps CSM was Mulder's father. In the scene I happen to boast that I was a better water skier than Bill Mulder, and better at other things too. . . .

Many years later I was contacted by a wealthy business man, Walter Sabo in New York City, who was planning a surprise anniversary present to his wife of several years. It turns out that he and his wife had fallen in love watching *The X-Files* in general and "Talitha Cumi" in particular. Would I come to New York for this event and perform the scene? What an odd idea, but why not? He was offering to pay first-class airfare for Barbara and me and to put us up in a first-class hotel and buy us some theatre tickets. But what form was this "performance" to take? By an odd coincidence we discovered that Roy Thinnes lives in upstate New York, and Walter undertook to find him and convince him to participate. And so it turned out that while Walter and his guests wine and

dined, Roy and I were hidden behind a curtain madly rehearsing the scene we had done so many years before. At the appointed time the curtain was pulled back and we came onto the small stage and presented the scene to the bewildered, astonished, and wildly appreciative wife and their guests. While, yes, I guess we were celebrities, I couldn't get it out my mind that perhaps we were more like the rude mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, fortunate that our "play was preferred" and we were chosen to perform for the Court.

For season 4, my billing improved yet again to "Also Starring" though the size of my role was no greater. The season heralded a greater emphasis on the mythology story, a renewed energy from David Duchovny, and a yet more beautiful Gillian Anderson. I'm not sure how she got progressively lovelier during the series, but it certainly wasn't my place to ask. By now the show had switched

from its cozy time slot of Fridays at 9 p.m. to the blockbuster time of Sunday at 9 p.m., the time change accompanied by more money for pretty much everything. Finally I had my own trailer, admittedly a baby trailer, three or four of which could have fit in Gillian's trailer, but a trailer nonetheless. In fairness, Gillian's trailer now had to accommodate a child and a nanny as well. Opening credits expanded as well, now lasting sometimes until the twelfth minute of a forty-four minute show.

Season 4 also saw the return to the show of Glen Morgan and James Wong, the writing partners who had been very involved with the first two seasons. They missed most of season 3, engaged as they were in trying to get a show of their own established, but with the failure of that project they returned to *The X-Files*. Did they watch season 3? Did they just not know the direction the show had taken, or did they deliberately want to

change that direction? Whatever the reasons, their first effort in season 4, "Home," while well written and well directed by Kim Manners, was so gruesome that some fans wondered whether to continue watching the series. In hindsight, with the popularity of horror shows in the last decade, "Home" seems rather tame, but at the time it was quite disturbing. They followed that up with "Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man," written by Glen Morgan and directed by James Wong. And what was I to make of that?

I had been told by one of the producers that an episode was being developed about my character. Needless to say I was thrilled and waited in anticipation to see the script, but, oh my, when the script came I was shocked. "Cancerman," as the script entitled my character instead of "Cigarette Smoking Man," bore almost no relation to the character I had been playing for over three years either in style, status, or life history. The

original title of the episode when I received it was “Memoirs of a Cigarette Smoking Man,” suggesting that the events in the story should be taken as real, or at least so it seemed to my modern mind. Perhaps I needed to approach the script with a more postmodern referential lens, but still some of the events of the script would be inescapable, not least that in this first version of the script I killed Frohike, the lead Lone Gunman. I suppose James Wong having originally created Frohike and cast Tom Braidwood in the role felt he had the freedom to kill him off if he chose. The episode begins with my training a long-range rifle on the door of the Lone Gunmen’s pad, behind which Frohike is telling the incriminating story of my life to Mulder and Scully, and was to end with my shooting him as he enters the street. Fortunately for Tom, the show, and the spin-off series, *The Lone Gunmen*, Chris Carter intervened and insisted Frohike not be killed. What the



relationship was like between Chris Carter and the Morgan/Wong team I have no idea, but I gather Chris went ballistic when he found that Wong had actually shot the footage of Frohike being killed. Chris ordered the film destroyed so there could be no danger of losing this favourite character.

Why was I shocked by the script? By the end of season 3 my character was a person of some distinction and authority involved in a complicated international conspiracy in league with a potential alien invasion; on a personal level we had learned that he was an excellent water skier and inferred that he was a pretty good lover as well — even Mrs. Mulder didn't deny that. In "Memoirs," which was changed to "Musings," we learn that he fired the shots that killed Kennedy and Martin Luther King — the Canadian actor Chris Owens played the younger me in the episode and we see him actually doing the shooting. But we also learn that my real

ambition is to write crime novels, that I have prevented the Buffalo Bills from ever winning the Super Bowl, and that I had a hand in the U.S. Olympic hockey team's famous victory on ice in 1980. I have a small staff whom I present with identical red ties for Christmas, and I'm childlike in my excitement when a story is published and driven to complain that life is like a box of chocolates à la Forest Gump when it's edited badly. When an alien crashes and the secret of its presence might be revealed, Deep Throat and I flip a coin to see who will kill it. Does this sound anything like the character that I had been playing up to then or would continue to play for another few years? At the time I would have been happy if Chris Carter had decided to pull the script altogether.

Chris insisted on a few changes. Frohike was not to be killed. This entailed adding a line at the end of the episode. The line was a reprise of a new line that was added to CSM's

novel, “I can kill you anytime I want, but not today.” So now I spend the whole episode readying the gun, eavesdropping on the conversation, waiting for Frohike to exit the building and then changing my mind at the last moment and sparing his life. Has something softened inside me as I listen to the story of my life? Perhaps. It did rather play that way even though the real reason had to do with plotting the series, nothing to do with my inner life. Morgan and Wong, evidently not pleased with this change, had me complain about my story being ruined by saying, “That’s not the ending I wrote.” True or not, why would I say that to the news agent? Or why would I complain to a homeless person that life is like a box of chocolates? There was some juggling of lines also around whether I should kill the alien. Deep Throat says that I should since I am a killer — and in the Morgan/Wong version I am — whereas I say I have never killed anyone, an

accurate statement in the Chris Carter story. The other change was to retitle the episode to “Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man” from “Memoirs of a Cigarette Smoking Man.” Those of us with a modern — as opposed to a postmodern — idea of reality comforted ourselves by saying the episode reflected Frohike’s idea of the character rather than the true story of the character.

As an actor I was presented with huge challenges in this episode. Not only was the episode inconsistent with the backstory that had served the show up until now, elements in the episode itself were inconsistent with each other. How do you say to someone who knows you have killed people that you have never killed anyone? Some lines and moments in individual scenes contradicted earlier moments in the same scene. How does an actor deal with this stuff? Well, on stage it would be impossible. On stage an actor must have a consistent through-line or

he will not be able to do all his actions or say all his lines truthfully. But I made a significant discovery about film acting doing this episode. All that matters is that each shot is truthful. One shot does not have to connect with another. Create the story you need for the shot you are doing, live that moment truthfully, and make up a different story for the next shot if you have to. What was the result? One of my best performances — and who knew that it didn't fit together?

Pretending the episode never happened, that the events in the story were some figment of Frohike's fevered imagination, we continued on with the series and the stories of conspiracy, alien abduction, black oil, and impending alien invasion. It was a few months before I realized that, typical of the show as a whole, what we thought and what the fans thought diverged. Many fans believed this was the true story of the Cigarette Smoking Man. But more confusing, they

didn't seem bothered by the episode being so at odds with the rest of the series. Indeed, many fans reported to me it was their favourite episode. Now I was really confused.

And so in 2010 I watched the episode again. It's brilliant. James Wong won an Emmy for his direction of the episode, the only directing Emmy ever won by an *X-Files* director in nine seasons. At the time I was astonished by the award. With all the wonderful work of Kim Manners, Rob Bowman, and David Nutter, how on earth is this the only directing Emmy? Jon Joffin, the replacement for DOP John Bartley, brought a haunting light to the episode just as he had in the aforementioned "Home." Chris Owens and I are pretty darn good if I say so myself. Was the show simply ahead of its time? Or was I just behind the times, wedded as I was, still am mostly, to things like truth, observable reality, internal consistency, narrative? But viewed through a postmodern or post-

postmodern lens, where truth is subjective, images are chaotic, and nothing is predictable, the show is spectacularly successful.

But the evanescent style of the episode was as fleeting as its inherent lack of substance. Perhaps the irony of *The X-Files* is that it explored issues of reality and cognition through the very lens that would expose those notions to ridicule from serious scientists. For from the 'modern' perspective, as opposed to a 'postmodern' one, there is an objective reality and that reality is available for concrete scientific investigation. And most of the concepts of the show have been studied and found wanting, despite Mulder's blind insistence to the contrary. But were the lens more fanciful, more ironic, more fluid, the show might have challenged more deep-seated epistemological assumptions, leaving the viewer more questioning and challenged about issues of knowledge itself. And Dawkins might seem a dinosaur to be

challenging the show as he did. Or conversely, was it all a question of how much dope one smoked?

In any event, after “Musings” the show returned to its tried and true path, setting up unexplained mysteries that could, with Mulder’s help and a belief in the paranormal, be ultimately explained. And yet some of the fans may have been ahead of the curve; they drove the writers batty. They wanted answers, but when the writers finally gave them answers they didn’t believe them. Give us answers, they cried. When the writers gave them answers, they continued to cry, No, give us the answers.

As for me, in “Memento Mori” we get the first suggestion that CSM might be the Devil incarnate. Ironic, of course, as it is a reference from Skinner, and yet as the series progressed Chris Carter drew the allusion frequently. The evil intent, the constant smoke and even fire from cigarette lighters, and the



shadowy presence certainly suggested a unique villain. In fact I was voted by the writers of U.S. *TV Guide* as Television's Favorite Villain and comparisons started to be made with Darth Vader. (I guess I should watch that show sometime.) And in "Zero Sum" it appears that I have access to unusual powers, as I am able to blackmail Skinner with my promise to cure Scully's cancer.

The publicity for me was all the more remarkable since I was in so few episodes, seldom more than a third of a given season and usually less than that. More embarrassing was the notion, based on the popularity of the series and the known fees for David and Gillian, that I must be getting filthy rich. One of my acting colleagues in Vancouver keeps referring to me as the richest actor in Vancouver. Ah, would it were true. The unknown actors who do voice work are the richest actors in Vancouver. I did make a few dollars of course, and I have a small pension from the

Screen Actors Guild, but the truth is what material comfort I do have mostly stems back to the Davis Leather Tannery in Newmarket, Ontario, and its successful exploitation of the working classes in the first half of the last century.

But at the completion of season 5, we hit the big time. We were going to make a *feature film* starring the now A-list actors David and Gillian, supported by Hollywood heavyweights Martin Landau, Blythe Danner, Terry O'Quinn, and Armin Mueller-Stahl, as well as the rest of us from the series. The film was to be shot in Los Angeles and on a glacier north of Whistler, BC. Would this be the first of a succession of blockbusters, like *Star Trek*? Would I have a major role? Would I have a full-sized trailer? No, no, and yes, I did get a decent trailer.

My role wasn't bad and included five days on the glacier. The Pembroke Glacier is an amazing ice field stretching for miles of flat

frozen plain, in this case standing in for the Antarctic. We had to be helicoptered in each day, an experience that by the fifth day was only mildly terrifying. This was summer of course, as the film had to be shot during the hiatus between seasons 4 and 5 and was to be released at the end of season 5 as part of the story of the season. Disaster could have struck in many ways, but the gods were kind and the weather bright and sunny, just what was needed, the sun reflecting ephemerally off the vista of unbroken white snow. But one day we heard a dreaded high-pitched whine. Eyes cast to the horizon: what we most feared came slowly into focus. A white plume of snow in the distant horizon, then another, and then another. Finally three snowmobiles could be seen heading towards us at high speed. Snowmobile tracks in the Antarctic? I don't think so. Somehow, somehow, the machines had to be stopped. How did they even get up to the glacier? Someone got to them

somehow and diverted their direction until we saw them disappear at blinding speed across the opposite horizon. The show continued.

More or less. Well, if I thought waiting was bad on a television series I didn't know waiting until I got to a feature. What's to light on a glacier? But still it seemed as if we waited endlessly and then did our simple shots so many times that every possible angle must have been covered. Even when we shot on set in Los Angeles, a three-hour wait between blocking and shooting was typical, it took that long to light.

And then, of course, if one is in a group scene one might wait for up to two days, endlessly doing one's lines off camera to support the other actors before one's own coverage is shot. How do you remain fresh in those circumstances? We had a large Syndicate scene in the film when John Neville, as the Well-Manicured Man, confronts the rest of us. He

was on one side of the room and we were on the other, and so for nearly two days Rob Bowman, the director, shot over John's shoulder while he got coverage of each of us for our lines and our reactions. Finally, when he had everything he wanted from that side he announced that we would "turn around" for the next day's shooting. In mock amazement John feigned a faint, he had been off camera for so long. But the real problem was the next day. Rob and Chris didn't like what John was doing when they finally paid attention to his performance. Film directors tend to focus exclusively on the actor in the shot. Now when they finally noticed his performance they wanted it to be different. But he had already been doing it this way for *two days*. How did they expect him to change now, locked in as he performed was? I guess they worked it out somehow. But I was reminded of many — fifty — years earlier watching the great John Dexter and Peter

Shaffer trying to fix *Black Comedy* when we beginners knew better how to do it. Had Rob had experience as a theatre director he might have realized that a group scene is an ensemble scene, and, given that he now had so much more time than when we were doing television, rehearsed it as a group until all the pieces fit together and then shot it. The television directors were really excited by having so much time on the feature, but they used it to do more television, not to do better drama, or so it seemed to a neophyte film director like me.

I have been asked to do some pretty strange things for *The X-Files* — fly in helicopters, smoke, sit in a makeup chair for four hours — but never before or since have I been asked to ‘unact’ a scene, never mind my biggest and best scene. Chris called me personally on this one, and so he should have. It seems when they ‘tested’ the film, meaning when they showed it to focus groups, a

tenuous test at best, the viewers who didn't know the series didn't 'get' my scene; there were too many references to my ongoing relationship with Mulder. And since they wanted the movie to stand alone for an audience unfamiliar with the series as well as to appeal to regular fans, my scene would have to go. Well, that's bad enough, to be told that your great scene will be dropped from the movie. But I had to return to L.A. to reshoot the background to the action that would replace the cut scene. And so I went back to L.A. to shoot myself out of my best scene. And as if that weren't bad enough, none of what I did in that reshoot appears in the movie.

I guess all actors work in different ways, but my simple suggestion to one actor that we run our lines in advance of shooting our scene the next day provoked an odd response: "Well, I can read my lines back to you if that helps, but I won't be learning

them.” Perhaps feature film actors, used to so much time, don’t have to worry about basic things like learning one’s lines. I imagine he felt he would be more natural if he worked in this way. He wasn’t. Armin Mueller-Stahl, nominated for an Oscar in *Shine*, worked quite differently. He could be seen saying his lines over and over again to himself between takes. Apparently he had been so keen on the show he had asked to be in the feature, but was now quite challenged by Chris Carter’s convoluted dialogue.

We call it running lines, but for me, and many others, what we are really doing is having a quiet rehearsal of our scene, feeling out how it is going to play with the other actor. Director Kim Manners understood this all too well, having once been an actor himself, and he would see us doing lines, walk over to us, cross his arms, and listen to what we thought would be our private rehearsal. Suddenly we had to up our intensity a notch or



five. At the other extreme, doing low budget features in Vancouver as one does, one can encounter the opposite problem. In these films there is often a female ‘star’ who was really famous for something else, something other than her acting skills, an ex-model for instance. For one of these, running lines was an exercise in rote memory only; we would run the scene together and then without taking a breath she wanted to run it again from the beginning and repeat this procedure several times. I had to explain that I needed a pause before doing it again since I needed to get my head back into the beginning of the scene before starting again. For me, it’s not about the words — at least I hope not — it’s about the circumstances, the actions, and the thoughts.

Fame was coming in other ways. Now that my character was considered a key component of the series, we ‘stars’ of the show were expected to appear at the “upfronts” held

annually in the spring in New York. What is an “upfront,” you might well ask. It is the occasion when each network announces its coming season to potential advertisers and to the media, an event seeming to attract more attention than a declaration of war or certainly more than a Canadian by-election. Strictly speaking it’s a sales event. The stars, I prefer to call them actors, are put up in a first-class hotel, in our case the Royal Rihga, where we have to stickhandle our way around professional autograph dealers constantly on the prowl outside the hotel. It’s lovely to have a free expenses-paid trip to New York, but why are we here? At the event itself, held at some major conference centre, we are escorted, often through the kitchens, to some holding area beneath the event itself. Drinks and food are provided and we do what actors do best: we wait. At a given moment, the stars of each show are summoned and led up to the wings of the stage where

they again wait. Finally, when their show is announced, each actor crosses the stage and then returns to the holding area. That's it; that's what they, we, do. We are paraded in front of buyers. The difference between that and a slave auction is only the price, my dear.

And then there are the awards shows. I've never been a fan of those. I watched the Academy Awards once and was so bored I haven't watched them since. But for three years running, the principal actors of *The X-Files* were nominated for the Screen Actors Guild ensemble acting award. I believe this is the only awards show that presents an award to the actors as a group, recognizing the interdependency of what we do. Probably we were obliged to attend the show, but I don't recall being at all reluctant; I was curious and who knows, maybe it would be useful 'networking.' Barbara was invited as well and once again we had first-class treatment. We

were seated at a table near the front, one year, right with the A-list stars. We were walked down the red carpet, interviewed as if we might have something important to say, and wine and dined throughout. I knew nothing of the tradition of seat-fillers, so it was with some surprise that on returning to our table with drinks I found someone sitting in my chair, one of the many extras who had been standing in the back waiting to pounce on any empty chair. It soon became clear that this game of musical chairs was designed to impress the television audience that the live audience was full and terribly interested in everything that was going on.

We never did win the award, not surprising really, since we were much less of an ensemble show than many others. But it was sweet to see how the winning shows, who had to pick a spokesperson to accept the award, always chose one of the minor performers, never the obvious star. We had been

instructed to choose a spokesperson before the award was announced so that we would be ready if we won. No one in our group seemed anxious to deal with this issue. Finally I asked David how he thought we should approach it. His response? Oh, he guessed he would do it. Typical of our show, I guess. No suggestion that it be me, or Chris Owens, or Mitch. Well, I guess we weren't really an ensemble at all.

## Heading South

While my billing and financial remuneration were improving, my actual participation in the series began to diminish in season 5, primarily because I died — for the first time. I was to die on the show two more times before we were done. And another fourteen times on other shows since then. I died in the second episode of the season and didn't reappear until episode fourteen. How did I come to life? Well, we don't really know, but I was hiding in a cabin on top of Grouse Mountain, no, sorry, it was supposed to be

North Hatley, Quebec. Anyone who knows them both would never confuse them, Grouse Mountain being in the Coastal Range in British Columbia with coniferous trees and heavy wet snow, while North Hatley is in the lower Appalachians with deciduous trees and dry snow. CSM was hidden away in a mountain cabin typing letters on an old typewriter to his son, not the rumoured Mulder but to young Agent Spender, wonderfully played by Chris Owens who had previously played me as a young man. To get the letters to him, a young boy had to trudge through the snow and collect the letter along with a five dollar bill and take it down the mountain to mail it. One has to wonder how I was getting my cigarettes and food if mailing a letter was such a challenge, but only the literal-minded would ask such questions.

Apparently I left my wife and young son when he was a baby and he has never forgiven me despite my letters hoping for

reconciliation. But more mysterious is the plight of the wife, Spender's mother, who appears to be an abductee — by aliens if you were wondering. How do we know this? As Scully argues, by hypnotic regression. Spender splendidly challenges the notion of hypnotic regression and, of course, he is right. But as this is *The X-Files*, he is wrong. CSM's erstwhile wife has indeed been abducted, on my authority it later seems, and in episode twelve of season 6 she is taken up to wherever the aliens are. And forgotten. By the end of the series she is still there; there is no further reference to her.

Mind you, Spender's explanation of his mother's condition is almost as dubious. He maintains that his mother went insane because his father left them when he was little. Apparently it was true that his father, me, left them when Spender was tiny, but if that were a sufficient cause of insanity there



would be a lot more loonies in the world than seems apparent.

Meantime, after many more adventures that didn't include me, *X-Files* sped towards its end, well, not its real end, it is *The X-Files*, but to the end of season 5, to an episode called "The End," to the burning of Mulder's office, by me, and to the end of filming in Vancouver. *The X-Files* leaving Vancouver and moving to Los Angeles was to many a major betrayal. Crew and producers had dedicated their lives to the show, had given up personal lives to work the gargantuan hours the show required, and now were to be left with little more than a basketball — David's parting gift to the crew — as the production shifted to L.A. Few had the option to follow the show to L.A.; the U.S. border may be porous for uneducated Mexicans, but it's an iron wall to professional Canadians. And why did the show move? Well, it rains a lot in Vancouver. Never mind Vancouver is

considered one of the best cities in the world in which to live, David decided he couldn't take the rain any longer and wanted to shoot where it was sunnier. Good for him, not good for the show; the light in southern California is bright and etching, dispelling any sense of mystery that had been such a major part of the show. In fairness to David, rain wasn't really the issue; he just made the mistake of joking about it on a talk show and Vancouverites, who constantly make the same jokes, didn't forgive him for it. Truth is, David was getting married and wanted to have a family life in Los Angeles. It's a fair enough request, but some felt he could have been more considerate of the Canadians who had helped make the show such a success.

Still, the move was fine for me. They were able to get the appropriate permits for the principal actors; we were flown first-class to L.A. and put up in a first-class hotel whenever we were needed. Working on set was

really easy as I had a trailer right outside the door of the studio. Working off set was something else, shooting in a desert being a shock to my cold weather system. On balance though I was happy to have the opportunity to work in L.A. and learn something of that world.

Whether it was a function of shooting in L.A., or that the show was now mainstream with a lot more money, or that the creative team had improved, or all of the above, the production values of season 6 are high, and the tone very professional, quite a contrast to the early seasons. For me, my billing had moved to first position, after David and Gillian of course, and my role in the storylines that involved me enhanced. The personal relationships underpinning the major science fiction arc were more developed, my relation to my son for instance, the official one, not Mulder, though that was to come, and the curious history of my relationship with Agent

Fowley, played by Mimi Rogers. And the evolution of Gillian's bust line continued though she was not yet showing the remarkable and unlikely cleavage of the last seasons — well, ratings began to slip; they had to do something.

Ratings were still up during season 6, and with money flowing in Chris Carter took a huge gamble, leased the *Queen Mary*, the famous Cunard liner now in dry dock in California, and did an episode almost all in one take and mostly in German, with yours truly as the leading German speaker — who unfortunately beyond counting to three and saying “thank you,” speaks not a word of that language. The episode, entitled “Triangle” for the famous Bermuda triangle where ships and planes are thought to have disappeared without trace, posits a story where Mulder somehow comes upon the *Queen Anne*, a luxury liner that disappeared in 1939. In the episode the ship is hijacked by Germans at

the beginning of the war in order to capture a passenger, a scientist with the knowledge to make an atomic bomb. Mulder is able to incite a riot onboard and force the ship to return to the triangle and disappear, thus preventing the Germans getting the bomb and ensuring that history would unfold as it did. But did this really happen or is it all some kind of dream? Some of the people onboard have contemporary counterparts: Spender is a tough SS man, Skinner is a senior officer, and I am an officer, smoking of course, calmly wielding the most power and the most brutality. And Scully is one of the passengers who ends up helping Mulder and finally allowing the “shippers” — devoted *X-Files* fans primarily interested in the relationship of Mulder and Scully — to get the passionate Mulder/Scully kiss for which they have waited so long.

Acting in a foreign language is challenging enough, but Chris decided on a shooting

style that would mean shooting the entire episode in just a few very long takes. I never knew why he decided to do this, perhaps to suggest an older style of filmmaking that would suit the time shift nature of the episode. It does that nicely on the old *Queen Mary*, but why use that style in the modern scenes? Whatever the reasoning, the challenges for the actors are major, since they have to get everything right in a long take, hit all their marks exactly, get all their lines exactly right, keep in the light, etc. On the other hand they don't have to match another shot; I could light my cigarette and draw on it when it felt right; I didn't have to match to another take. But I had to speak German fluently and without hesitation, no second takes. Looking at the episode now, I'm quite impressed. German suits me; I might have done well as a German actor. Maybe it just suits CSM, giving him the authority he seeks more easily.

Mind you, it's not clear I was actually speaking German. I had been given a tape with my lines in German and had rehearsed from that, checking my pronunciation and intonation against the tape. The American actors on the set were pretty impressed and asked me where I had learned German. The German-speaking actors on the set had no idea what I was saying. I've often wondered how they did the episode in Germany. Did a German actor dub my lines into real German?

The shooting style was never repeated on the series so far as I know. It certainly has its risks, for one can see moments that are not in good focus and line readings I am sure an actor would like to redo, but the flow of the episode is impressive and the performance, of Gillian in particular, is dynamic. She is able to truly build the performance in real time, allowing the emotion to grow as it

would in life, or on the stage. All in all, it's a pretty impressive episode.

In the middle of the season we returned to the mythology arc with a vengeance. Two episodes, one called "Two Fathers" and a second called "One Son," presumably because I shot one of my sons at the end of the second episode, built on the story line of the feature — I think. The show had now abandoned its postmodern flirtation with the surreal and firmly planted itself in the 'modern' world of science fiction, although a fiction so convoluted I am still trying to grasp it years later.

Okay, so here's the story: in 1947 aliens landed on the planet at Roswell, New Mexico. By 1973 a secret cabal based in the State Department understood the aliens were going to colonize Earth and agreed to work with them — to assist in the creation of a human/alien hybrid that would function as a slave race to serve the colonists. The aliens



gave us a foetus so that we would have their DNA — I wonder they didn't just give us the code — in return for which each member of the cabal gave up a loved one to guarantee their loyalty. CSM gave up his wife. Bill Mulder refused to participate so his daughter, Fox's sister, was kidnapped and abducted. The aliens were waiting for the experiment to succeed, the creation of the hybrid, and then they would invade. Our group at the same time worked secretly on developing a vaccine that would destroy the alien force as expressed through black oil. (The aliens sometimes seemed to appear as black oil, sometimes as ET-like creatures, and sometimes in human shape.) We would spread the virus for the vaccine by bees and thereby save the human race. But the experiment for the hybrid was successful before the virus had been developed, so now we were back to plan A.

Colonization would now begin and our small cabal would be removed from the planet and taken to some safe alien place. But a rebel race of aliens were thwarting our aliens, and when we went to meet our aliens the rebels came instead and killed everyone — except CSM and Fowley who escaped. Got that? Oh yes, and Krycek who should have showed up to meet the aliens didn't, but went looking for the foetus, which the rebels had got to first. He was pretty upset about that, but I still haven't figured out what he would do with it. Meantime, my wife, Spender's mother, reappeared after many years as the successful hybrid, but she was behaving nothing like a slave, and went about demanding to be killed so that the colonization wouldn't begin. And then Laurie Holden's character (Marita Covarrubias) showed up, having been a victim of a whole other series of experiments conducted by CSM in the search for the virus. If all this is confusing

don't expect it to get better by watching the next episodes; they have nothing to do with this story line. Do we assume the colonization is stalled by the alien civil war? If I figure this out before I finish the book I will put it in an appendix at the end.

But here is a penny-wise/pound-foolish story. The first of these two episodes had a number of scenes set in 1973 when all our characters were twenty-five years younger. The makeup department did a terrific job of rejuvenating us, giving us all face-lifts by stretching our skin and securing it under wigs with full 1970s hair. It was amazing how young we all felt; we bounced out of the makeup trailer as if we really were twenty-five years younger, and at the end of the day when the makeup was removed we hobbled out as if we had actually and suddenly aged. The scenes themselves were fun to do; we saw CSM as a young idealist, almost a JFK, truly believing in the cause and that he was

saving the world. There was only one problem. Production had rented wigs for us that could not be trimmed; they had to be returned intact. They just never looked real and in the end the scenes weren't credible and had to be cut from the episode. All that is left from all that work was one still shot of Peter Donat and me as the young Bill Mulder and the young CSM. With the money they were spending on episodes by then, surely they could have bought the wigs.

I won't even try to explain the three-parter that began at the end of season 6 and continued into the first two episodes of season 7. Now that the Syndicate had been wiped out by the alien rebels and with the expected invasion of the planet in some kind of limbo, just where was the mythology story going to go? Well, we discover that humans are really alien in origin — after all, it wouldn't do for humans to be mere animals who have evolved by natural selection — and that not

only our DNA but even our religions have alien beginnings. Somehow Mulder becomes infected by something alien and can only be cured by a complicated DNA transfer between his father and him. And so in the most uncomfortable operating room imaginable I lay beside David for hours while they shot this strange procedure that would return Mulder to normality and, while not affecting me the way Mulder was affected, the procedure would slowly eat away at me. Who said I was evil?

## **Final Days**

I often regretted that I didn't negotiate the directing of an episode into my contract. I was about ready to ask for it, feeling ready to do that work, when they killed me off for the second time. Well, maybe I could write an episode. Writing for the show turned out to be almost as weird as the show itself. It started off simply enough: "Hey Frank, what would you think of my writing an episode?" Frank Spotnitz was Chris Carter's right hand and chief story editor and an all round nice person. He seemed open to the possibility, so

over a lunch we kicked around a few ideas. I wanted to focus on CSM and Scully as in seven seasons I still had not done so much as one scene with Gillian. Our looks together in the pilot had been referred to in a few episodes, but the potential had never been exploited. Frank seemed interested in this, so I thought, ‘Oh great,’ and went off and wrote an episode and sent it to Frank. No, no, no, that’s not the way we do it. We have to “board” the episode before you write it. Sorry you went to so much trouble. Oh, by the way, it was fun reading it.

Some elements of that script did make it to the final version of “En Ami” — the road trip with Scully and the fancy office for me that turns out to be a mirage. But others, alas, did not. I guess CSM teaching Scully to water ski was pushing my luck. Or finding we had to stay in a hotel with only one bed. Or having a bed scene with Mimi Rogers as Fowley. What can I say? Still, it was a start on the episode.

My next surprise was when I flew to L.A. to have a meeting with Frank and phoned from the airport to say I had arrived. Oh great, his assistant said, we'll send a car for you. Turns out she spoke too soon; they don't send cars for writers, only actors. So now as a lowly writer, I hailed a cab and headed off to my meeting with Frank. It turns out writers don't write scripts either. Each episode is charted on a large white board by a team of writers and only when everyone is satisfied with the plan is the writer then authorized to write a script. And once that's done, and the writer has written the script and hands it in, Chris Carter writes a new script loosely based on the one submitted. Well, the good news is the writer still gets credit and the money.

Well, maybe even that's not true. Chris Carter writes the script when he gets around to it. Meantime, we go ahead and shoot without one, or at least not a complete one.



Still, with Rob Bowman agreeing to direct, I was confident the episode was in good hands. I grant that, however convoluted the language, and it usually was, Chris had a better handle on CSM's voice than I did.

It's hard to say what is left in the episode of my original idea or even the ideas we developed as a group when we "boarded" the episode. A road trip with CSM and Scully certainly remained. The story as it was finally shot involved CSM luring Scully into taking a trip with him to obtain the secret science that would cure cancer. CSM needed Scully for this, as the scientist would not release the information to anyone else; CSM had arranged for a fake email relationship to develop between Scully and the scientist. As it turns out, the science will not only cure cancer, but will give the possessor power over life and death itself. No wonder it's a prize CSM would seek. CSM begins by charming Scully — well, as best as CSM can

— and winning her conditional trust. But in the course of the trip he genuinely softens towards her; he has, it turns out, lusted after her for years. But then who hasn't? By the time the science is to be picked up, on a CD, CSM is a changed man, and while he allows the scientist to be killed at the time of the transfer, he kills the assassin who was to have shot Scully. Two odd things happen after that: he gives her the CD with the science on it and throws another CD in the water. It turns out that he has switched Scully's CD for a blank one. It is the real one that he has thrown in the water.

The director Rob Bowman and I were worried the viewers would not understand why CSM destroyed the CD and Rob had considerable discussion with Chris about this, but Chris insisted the evidence was in the script; CSM had made a conversion and didn't want anyone to have this power that could, and almost certainly would, be used for evil. Well, I

lost count of how many times fans asked me, “Why did you throw the CD in the water?” But Chris, according to Rob, was adamant; no changes in the script were needed.

It’s hard enough to be credited with a script one didn’t really write, but making matters worse, was that Chris was so slow to write it himself. The key scene in the episode is a dinner scene between CSM and Scully. We had arrived at the location and we still did not have a script for the scene. I don’t recall when the pages were finally thrust into our hands, but I think it was after wardrobe and makeup. And then — then — we ran out of time at the location after we shot Gillian’s side of the scene. We had to shoot my coverage days later in a clever set built in the studio to reflect my corner of the restaurant. And then — then — Gillian wasn’t available when we shot the scene. Her stand-in played the scene with me. Although not an actress, the stand-in brought a warmth to the off

camera lines that helped me, this being one of the only scenes in the series where CSM shows some humanity.

The final episode of season 7, “Requiem,” well named for a number of reasons, marked the end of CSM on the show — apparently. Aging, sick, wheelchair-bound, CSM mounts a pathetic attempt to restart The Project, only to end up hurled down a flight of stairs, wheelchair and all, by Krycek. Wink, wink, no one really dies on *The X-Files*. Or so they say. Whatever, I was gone until the last episode of the series two years later.

But really the requiem was for David. How does an actor get out of a long running hit series? It's true, despite the fact that almost every actor in the country wants to be a lead in a long running series, many lead actors want out of their series long before the producers want them to leave. Years ago when I was just starting back into acting I had a small role on the series *Wiseguy*. We had a

large group scene to do after lunch, with many actors and extras painstakingly placed by the director and his first assistant. Once in position we waited for nearly two hours before anything happened. Why? One of the lead actors had gone home for lunch and had not yet returned. Why? He wanted out of the show, at least so the rumour went. But getting David out of *The X-Files* was far more spectacular. He willingly — well, he did want out of the show, after all — joins a group of abductees and allows himself to be flown into space in an alien spaceship.

For me, this was death number two on the show. Imagine being in a wheelchair at the top of a set of stairs and knowing that at the end of the scene you will be lying in a heap at the bottom. Fortunately, in the film business, we have these crazy people called stunt performers. I only had to be pushed off two stairs and to fall on to a mattress, worrying enough, I can tell you. The stunt performer,

Tom Morga, had to somersault down the whole flight of stairs with a wheelchair crashing on top of him. And perfectionist that he is, director Kim Manners had him do it twice. But he did offer the encouraging words, "Have a good ride."

My suffering for this episode, and for the finale of the series, would be of a more quiet nature. You might recall I returned to acting when it seemed that not only would there be no curtain call in a film, there would be little or no makeup. How wrong can you be? For this episode and the finale it took roughly three hours to put the makeup on and another hour to get it off. What took the time was the prosthetic on my neck, created so that I would be able to smoke. As a result of a tracheotomy CSM could no longer draw the smoke in through his mouth. Of course, that would also mean that he couldn't speak, but that would have seriously slowed down the pace of his scenes. So instead he spoke with a

funny voice, not an entirely satisfactory solution. But Chris was determined to show the desperation to smoke.

Whether because I was aging or because I was getting a rep as a bad guy, I was to become increasingly familiar with the inside of a makeup trailer despite my earlier aversion to makeup. A prosthetic on my neck was necessary again for my brief role in *Caprica*. My neck had to be sliced open by a sabre, blood spurting in all directions. To do this a tube had to be inserted between my real neck and an artificial neck so that blood could be pumped through as my neck was being cut. Even more debilitating was the makeup for my role as a Prior in *Stargate*. Not only was my face distorted with the use of prosthetics again, but I had to wear contact lenses that in their first iteration almost totally obscured my vision. I had to be led to my mark on the set; I could hardly see at all. Finally, they allowed a slightly larger pinhole in the lens so

that I could navigate the furniture at least. In both cases the time in the makeup trailer far exceeded the time spent on set.

Two years later I would return to die for the third time in the two-hour finale of *The X-Files* series. There would be no mistake about my death this time; rockets were fired from helicopters and I was fried to a crisp. But not before another scene with all the makeup, where I declare that my purpose in life was to see my son — Mulder — broken and destroyed. Well, that wasn't my back-story before, but as I have said, I learned to be flexible while on this show.

This episode was intended to reveal all the machinations and complications of the underlying story. I'm not sure it didn't raise more questions than it answered, but the story itself, cobbled together as the series progressed, has as much junk DNA as the human genome, a product of evolution more than intelligent design. Chris Carter was



reported to have said once that he was afraid that some day he would get Mulder and Scully into a dangerous situation that he could not get them out of. The genius of the series may have been that free-flowing imaginative thrust, that willingness to stretch beyond a prescribed structure. So maybe they shouldn't have tried to explain it. Maybe it just seems overly complicated and even pedestrian when it is laid out before us. And maybe that's why some fans refused to believe the truth even when it was spelled out for them.

But what did Mulder want to believe? He tells Scully in the final scene that he wants to believe that the dead are still with us, that they speak to us, that we are part of something larger. An underlying premise of the series is the exceptionalism of humans. How did we get here, how did life begin? By aliens, it would seem in the fiction of the story, but the assumption behind the fiction,

that we as humans are special, that we need a special explanation, is both the spine of the story and the premise that Dawkins might have attacked. To a skeptic like me, it is a false and potentially dangerous assumption.

Did the series give in to pressures from the fans and the actors? I know I wanted to show the human side of CSM, to make him less of a villain. But was that good for the story? Probably not, and certainly Chris Carter fully restored my villainhood by the end. Should Mulder and Scully really have become lovers — of course I'm still not sure if her baby was theirs or an alien — or should the tension have remained unresolved? Should L'il Abner have married Daisy Mae? It was front page news when I was a child, but then who read the comic strip after that? Should Archie marry Veronica?

Looking back at the final episode one is astonished at how the production values had increased from the first season. But why did

David seem to be just walking through it, while all the other actors, the ones who had been in the show for the last two seasons, were acting their socks off? And why did Kim Manners, the director, let him do it? Well, no one could say much to David. He does wonderful work in so much of the series, but in this episode he seems to be regretting he agreed to come back.

Gillian clearly grew tremendously as an actor in the nine years she was on the show. Her people skills may never have improved, but her acting surely did. She is quite magical in the later years. And I shouldn't say that about her people skills. She was quite friendly on the set for the last episode, joking and taking pictures. She demanded of Kim Manners, bless him, that he bend over so that she could get a butt-cleavage shot. It is hard to imagine how they must all have felt to have come to the end of the road.

For me, it was a privilege to have been part of both the show and the experience that went with it. And by the last episode I even managed to make the funny, tracheotomy-shaped voice sound believable. The show did change my life. It improved my acting no doubt, it opened new opportunities, and it was good for my bank balance, though not nearly so much as most people seem to believe.

## And Yet

And yet, eight years later the show and everything that went with it seems to have disappeared into the mists of time. It is like the *Queen Anne*, the ship that disappeared into the Bermuda Triangle, a presence as ephemeral as Laura's glass collection in *The Glass Menagerie*. Was it all smoke? Was there no fire after all? What's changed, for any of us?

The roles I audition for may be a little more substantial than the roles I auditioned for before *The X-Files*, but I still audition for

them. Only occasionally does someone, usually someone with no money, actually offer me a role. But then life as an actor in Canada seems to be like that. At least on the West Coast. I audition for small roles alongside Donnelly Rhodes or Scott Hylands, who have both played starring roles in long running series. Do you ever “make it” in Canada? Well, not if you live in Canada, it seems. William Shatner, Donald Sutherland, and Christopher Plummer live in America. Years ago my cousin Donald Davis, after playing in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in New York, returned to Canada to a declining career. When I started in the profession Canadians were the handmaids of the British. To succeed we had to go to England. And so I did. Now we are the support staff of the American industry; we provide studios, garbage collection, some technicians, and some small part actors. Support for our own film industry is pathetic

and pales beside the support given to film production in other countries of similar size. To succeed as a Canadian actor now, one has to go to Los Angeles or New York. There are actually casting agents in L.A. whose sole job is to find Canadian actors resident in L.A. for film and television being shot in Canada, where they can take advantage of government incentives for the hiring of Canadians — in American movies.

How did life change for others in the series? Tom Braidwood, who was both a First Assistant Director and an actor on the series, and then did the spin-off series, *The Lone Gunmen*, can't get work in either capacity. Of the other two Lone Gunmen, Bruce Harwood and Dean Haglund seem to be doing pretty much what they were doing before the series began. Are David Duchovny's roles very different from what they would have been without the series? Gillian Anderson seems to do a lot of stage acting and, true,

her fan base will have supported her box office. We haven't heard much of Chris Carter, save for the second *X-Files* movie, which disappeared from theatres almost as fast as the *Queen Anne* disappeared into the Bermuda Triangle.

People in their forties still recognize me. "Hey, it's the Smoking Man," they call out to the blank stare of their twenty-year-old friend. "Remember *The X-Files*?" they continue, barely able to divert their young friend from texting her schoolmates. The show was a global phenomenon of the nineties. The show itself now seems as ephemeral as the stories on which it was based. Soon it may appear quaint for having used real actors and for telling stories written by writers, with the viewer forced to sit and watch, unable to influence the story whatever button she pressed on her remote. Well, maybe things won't get that bad. Maybe actors will still be



needed for something, the commercials if nothing else.

And so how does the life of William B. Davis proceed? In the mid-nineties acting overwhelmed all other aspects of my professional life, directing disappearing altogether and teaching relegated to very brief stints. Recently, the wreckers tore down my old school, making a hash of it with large blocks of concrete falling in the street — the ghosts of the actors resisting to the last, like the actors' photos that still stood after fire gutted the Dundee Repertory Theatre. With the series fading into memory, acting for me might have declined anyway, but its current decline has been hastened by a general contraction of the industry in Vancouver. As I move into my seventies I suppose I could retire and work on my golf game. But I don't play golf, so that won't do.

Barbara Ellison and I continue to be professional colleagues while our personal lives

have diverged. We came close to wrecking our lives by doing a daytime series for the CBC called *49th and Main*. We won a national contest to produce this series, which Barbara wrote and I directed; we shot seven episodes before the CBC decided that a daytime series was not in their budget. I wrote and directed three short films, working my way towards doing a feature, which I might do sometime. And just as if *X-Files* had never happened, I am scheduled to direct two plays for the theatre, one for an acting school and one for a community theatre. There are still occasional acting roles, and for those of a certain generation there are still conventions where, strangely, people will pay good money to get my autograph on a picture.

I continue to look for ways to make a difference, to alert people to the impending twin disasters of climate change and resource depletion, to convince people that back to the land will neither happen nor

work, that immense conservation combined with intense use of the technology that will work — nuclear power and GM food to name two — need to be deployed yesterday, or it will be too late.

And my inner struggle between stability and adventure, between domesticity and romance, continues into my seventies. I have fallen in love, maybe for the first time (when you get to a certain age it's now or never) with a lovely young Italian who, to my wonder and delight, finds a man of my age — well, this man of my age — to be exactly what she wants in her life.

*William B. Davis*  
Vancouver, 2011

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# PHOTO SECTION



(LEFT) Cancer Man, age 3.

(RIGHT) Carroll Langstaff Davis,  
my mother.

(BOTTOM) Bruce Davis, my father.  
Smoking was in the family.







Muskoka, Uncle E.J.'s cottage with  
the beach in the foreground.

(BELOW) Our family home in King,  
Ontario, in the late fifties.







*The Snow Queen*, Josephine  
Barrington's Juveniles, 1951.



A publicity photo, age 12.





*Hamlet*, Hart House Theatre, 1956. I played Horatio.

Jeanneret House, 1957. I'm in the top row, centre. Ian MacDonald, future president of York University is on the tricycle; John Woods, future president of the University of Lethbridge, is on his left.





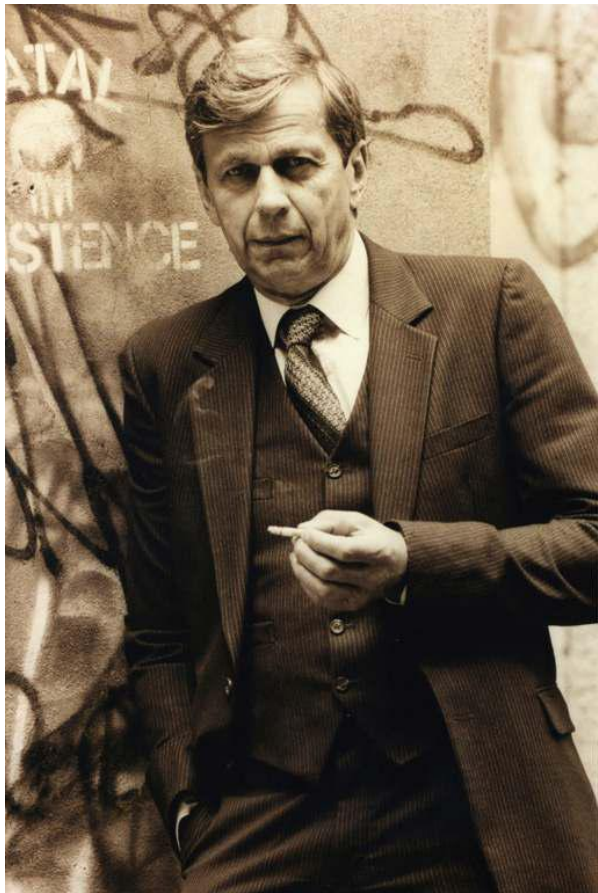


*The Tempest*, Hart House Theatre, 1957. (ABOVE) I'm on the left with Catherine Cragg. (BELOW) Donald Sutherland as Stephano in the foreground, I am centre stage.













With the crew from *The X-Files*. Producer Robert Goodwin is on the left.

With David Duchovny in *The X-Files* episode "Talitha Cumi."









