

Diary Of A Playwright

The Making of Goodbye, Piccadilly

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Diary Timeline: February, 2001 through May 11, 2002

May 11, 2002: Hunched in the crowded darkness. Helpless. A nervous wreck. A soft light comes up. A man tinkles a piano. A woman starts to sing White Cliffs of Dover ... I hang on every word, every nuance, willing them on, willing my baby on. I'm never going to put myself through this again. Never -- until the next time ...

What kick-starts the creative process? People sometimes say to me that they have tons of good ideas -- but just can't "write them down". Well, sure, writing them down is hard, but I find good ideas are a scarce commodity as well. Occasionally, though, an idea drops out of the sky, and if you're lucky you recognize it, and grab it -- and hang on for the ride. This is a diary of one such ride.

February, 2001: Chatting with Peter at Eleanor and Robert's. He tells me nominated a man - - a WW2 vet -- for the Order of Canada, and the fellow is going to get it. Interesting. I hadn't realized that you or I or anyone can nominate someone, and they may actually get the thing - - our highest honour. It's not some elitist private club. So good for Peter for going to the trouble.

March, 2001: Days spent scribbling, working on an idea for a TV thing. There's a possibility of a Canadian-British co-production, and I have a vague notion for a series called The Retreat. It would revolve around a "great man" -- a once famous, now over-the-hill actor -- who comes out from England to a run-down lodge in a picturesque Canadian locale. From there he plans to dispense high culture to unwashed colonials -- for a price. There's also a secret or scandal in his past that he's escaping from, but, of course, the Canadians won't know that.

But somehow the idea doesn't catch fire. How much fresh mileage is there, really, in a culture clash between hoity toity Brits and dumb-ass Canadians? I find my mind drifting back to Peter's story, musing about the WWII vet who's getting the Order of Canada. Wondering about the other names that appear on the list each year. Who are they? Unknown to us, but pillars of their communities, surely. What are their stories?

I scribble a fateful sentence -- "what if someone from town -- the mayor -- is the owner of the lodge" -- and the whole idea gets turned on his head. My "great man" suddenly is not British,

but quintessentially Canadian -- a war hero, Mr. Volunteer, a small town mayor, whose life now culminates with a phone call announcing that he's been awarded the Order of Canada. But who is he, really? What are his secrets?

The scribbled notes come faster now. The run-down lodge becomes a country inn, owned by this man and his wife for half a century. Fragmentary ideas pile up -- "canoe trip -- Algonquin Park" -- "bomber pilot -- wounded" -- "50th anniversary of VE Day -- echoes of war -- Vera Lynn" -- "Bluebirds Over the White Cliffs of Dover" -- and more.

And names. I can't write a character until I know in my bones who he is, until I know his name. A lot of those WWII pilots had nicknames -- Cap, Punch, Red. I almost settle on "Babe" -- but it never looks quite right on the page, and there's that pig movie -- Who is this guy anyway? He's a pillar of a community, he's a rock, he's a -- Brick.

His wife, whom I've tentatively named Marge, I change to Bess. They have a daughter, a bit of a tomboy -- so a boyish name perhaps -- Samantha, Ricky -- Roberta. And so the Brickley family is born -- Brick, Bess and Bobbie. And a theme starts to emerge as well, because in the end this becomes a play about family -- how we lose them, where we find them, the deep-rooted need to be part of one.

More scribbles -- searching for a title. If one doesn't crop up early in the process they can become absolute bears. "Among My Souvenirs", "Over There", "Soldiering On" ... "Goodbye, Piccadilly" -- I immediately like the feel of it, the resonance. My daughter, Alison, asks why I didn't call it "Farewell, Leicester Square" -- which actually ties in more closely with events in the story, but I just didn't, that's all.

Early April, 2001: After my notes reach 70 pages or so, including ideas for various scenes, chunks of dialogue, I stop, turn on the computer and actually start to write.

Sometimes I write out of order -- tackle a scene here, a scene there. But that's often a sign of trouble, that I don't really know what my story's about. One of the best writing tips I've come across is to try to "feel the ground moving beneath your feet" -- to feel the story going forward as you write. But that's not easy. Everyone gets stuck, and there's no justice. The sticking points, the scenes you sweat and labour over for weeks are apt to feel sweaty and laboured when they're done. The ones written with (relative) ease often retain a sense of that ease in the end.

But this time I start at the beginning, describe Bess rushing in and grabbing the phone, and launch into her opening speech -- "Yes!! ... Oh, Marge, sorry. I didn't mean to bark, but it's been a madhouse here! ..." I can hear her voice in my head. The speech flows pretty well (and will end up on stage a year later with only minor changes). But when it reaches two and a half pages it strikes me -- A two and a half page speech? In a TV script where three lines is the norm? Maybe what I'm writing here is a play. But didn't I vow I'd never do that again?

Why? Because plays aren't practical. Plays are old-fashioned. And, frankly, unless you're Yasmina Reza (author of *Art*) and your play gets produced a zillion times -- you don't make a lot of money. (Yes, writers do care about that sort of thing.)

But there are plusses. TV scripts, far more expensive, generally take forever to get produced. I get weary of people asking -- whatever happened to that *Rebellion of 1837* script? Answer -- the producers are still looking for financing. With a play there's a chance it will actually see the light of day before the next millenium.

And it's essential to see one's work produced. I firmly believe that a playwright (or screenwriter) doesn't learn anything from a script lying in a drawer. A novel is a complete entity in and of itself. But a script is not truly complete until it's on it's feet -- until actors are saying those lines, delivering those emotions.

Only then can a playwright truly assess his work, and hone his craft. Only then does he see that his big tour de force speech is too big, that his killer joke is a bit clunky -- that his clever exposition is, well, expository -- that his precious, polished diamond still needs serious buffing.

April, May, & June 2001: Writing steadily, and a play is certainly what *Goodbye, Piccadilly* is turning out to be -- but a play with memory scenes, flashbacks, nightmare scenes -- cinematic qualities.

A 50-year-old man recounts a story that happened when he was six -- and becomes that six-year-old, acting out the memory. In a film, this would be a straightforward flashback with an actual six-year-old, but on stage we're asking more from the audience -- to take the imaginative journey with us, as adults become children, as a desk chair becomes a merry-go-round, as a country inn becomes a cliff top ...

On top of this, there are unseen characters -- and a ghost. Is this boldly theatrical? -- or unproduceable madness? Only time will tell.

July 19, 2001: To my surprise, I've actually written a complete first draft in slightly over three months -- slow for Norm Foster, maybe, but lightning fast for me. I never believe writers who say "the story wrote itself". It's always hard work for me, and this was hard too -- but not excruciating. I did feel the ground beneath my feet, and I hope that shows.

I deliver the script to Greg. I've told him almost nothing about it, and he seems a little surprised -- and quickly checks to see that it's not 100 pages too long, like the last one.

Time management isn't easy for a writer -- well, for me, anyway. In the past when we've had holidays booked, I've invariably been racing to finish something -- and invariably failed. So the whole time we're away the unfinished work preys on my mind -- but this time it actually works

the way it's supposed to. I hand in the script, and we leave for the Laurentians two days later. And for two weeks the play scarcely crosses my mind.

August 4, 2001: The Dracula opening at the Playhouse. Afterwards Greg comes over with a slightly perplexed look. He's read the play, he says. He likes it ... there's obviously a "but" coming. I brace myself for one of those "it's not going to work for us" speeches -- but all he says is that he'd like to arrange a reading, but the actors he wants -- Mo, David, Brooke are tied up rehearsing Quarry, so we won't be able to do it until mid-September -- OK? Considering what I thought he was going to say -- Hey. No problem.

And I can use the time. My wife Joan has pointed out that the ending I've written has a jokey tone to it out of keeping with the emotions of the play. Somewhere in my subconscious I knew this too, so I immediately scrap it and struggle to come up with something better -- and polish the rest of the script while I'm at it.

September 21, 2001: A workshop reading at the Playhouse. To me, with actors reading a script they're not familiar with, it all seems a little flat, a little uneven. But the reaction when we're done is surprisingly warm. They like the play. There are some good, specific suggestions from Greg, Hollie, Matt and the others -- build up the climactic scene, this is unclear, that's confusing, why didn't Bess do such and such? -- but nothing drastic. The core of the play seems to work emotionally -- that's the key thing.

September 29, 2001: Chatting with Damir on his deck in Toronto. He directed my last play, and says flatly that Piccadilly is my best work -- "a whole new level". I don't know what this implies about my previous level, but it's good to hear. He has some suggestions, and one of his lines "How dare he do this to me?!" goes straight into the play.

I mention that it's been sent to the Blyth Festival, where he's worked, and he promises to put in a word for it there. Tells me that Blyth receives over 200 new plays a year, so anything to get it moved to the top of the pile is certainly welcome.

October, November, 2001: Over the course of a couple of weeks, Greg officially commits to doing the play, my agent calls that Blyth has put it on their short list, and then, amazingly, they commit to do it as well. Maybe the decision to write a play wasn't such a bad one after all.

January 31, 2002: Another reading at Greg's. I'm grateful to Jill and the others for driving through a blizzard to get there. And it's amazing how the most obvious things get overlooked. In the play, Bess is all a flutter at the prospect of meeting Governor General Adrienne Clarkson at the Order of Canada ceremony -- (and Adrienne even makes an appearance, of sorts.) But I've specifically set the play in 1995 -- the 50th anniversary of VE Day, and, as Hollie points out, Adrienne Clarkson wasn't Governor General in 1995. And simply substituting Romeo LeBlanc doesn't cut it somehow.

Later I realize I've included a couple of Nortel jokes as well -- (which later elicit huge laughs. Does everyone in Canada own shares in that damn company?) -- but Nortel wasn't a joke in 1995. So eventually we agree to set the play in an unspecified recent past -- "not so long ago" -- it says in the program, and leave it at that.

Mo raises another problem. There's a "memory" scene where Bess describes her first tentative teenage conversation with Brick, which begins with him slipping in his football cleats and falling on his head. I blithely write -- "Brick comes on in a football helmet. His feet slip out from under him and he lands with a resounding thud, whacking his head."

Mo's response to this is basically "no friggin' way." Apart from the risk of doing a convincing pratfall, he thinks suddenly appearing in a football helmet will look silly. It probably would get a laugh -- but the wrong kind. And he's right. Sure, the play wants to evoke laughter, but the warm laughter of recognition -- not laughter at pratfalls. So I rewrite the scene, no one falls on their head, and it's better for it.

March 6, 2002: Production meeting. A first look at set, costumes. Piccadilly's main set, the Spinney B&B, is straightforward enough, but the action also encompasses a funeral home, a church, a cemetery, a clifftop, a park -- a challenge for any designer, to put it mildly.

I've written that the set may be "suggestive -- rather than a fully realistic one." Still, I'm taken aback when I see the model. I'm reminded that theatre is a collaborative process. You put your baby in other people's hands. What the designer has come up is stylized in the extreme -- very spare, all angular, dark shapes. I don't do a very good job of hiding my reaction -- bafflement tinged with dismay. But Greg, who knows more about it than I do, is convinced it will work well. I dearly hope he's right.

March 10, 2002: Tower Bridge, London. Goodbye, Piccadilly includes a scene in which one of the characters stands on Tower Bridge in despair, tempted to jump and vanish into the "muddy water". I've been a bit worried. Is this actually plausible? But standing there, I see that the scene is very much as I've described it -- a low balustrade anyone could climb over, the muddy water flowing beneath -- and I find this reassuring. I want to get the details right. We then take the Jack the Ripper Walk, which makes its way into the script as well.

March 21, 2002: Alison is stage managing Fragments by Murray Schisgal, which she and some friends have entered in the Sears Drama Festival. But it's running at 58 minutes, and there's a strict Sears rule -- a play may not exceed 50 minutes. They go on in less than 48 hours, and are sure they'll be disqualified. Can I cut the script down? I sit up late lopping chunks out of it -- sorry Murray. It's so much easier being ruthless and objective with someone else's work.

And two nights later the kids pull it off, incorporating the cuts seamlessly and bringing the show in at 47 minutes. When the adjudicator announces that they're going on to the regionals

in Perth, I'm as thrilled as they are. But deep down I know Piccadilly is too long too, and I'll have to bring this sort of scrutiny to my own work. "Murder your darlings" is a famous piece of writing advice -- so much easier to murder someone else's.

April 6, 2002: Workshop in Toronto with the Blyth people. Originally, when both theatres committed to the show, there was talk of a co-production, but it didn't work out. Now there will be two completely different productions back to back. Different cast, different director -- same play?

I find these readings both useful and confusing. Lines which sounded flat in a previous reading, and which I was tempted to cut, come alive now with a different reading from a different actor. And certain lines get huge laughs from the actors -- but will they from a "real" audience.

April 15, 2002: First day of rehearsal at the converted Valu Mart in Gananoque. There's normally a "meet and greet", but at one minute to 10 -- the actors -- Mo, Matt, Tracey, Heather and Meg are already around the table, scripts in front of them, ready to go. The message is clear. This is business. That's fine with me, and throughout the whole process they're a remarkably prompt and professional group.

But the first read-through running time is two hours and 15 minutes -- without intermission, or scene changes, or acting stuff. Length is a nagging worry, but right now I'm the only one who seems worried about it, and each time we run a scene I try to trim every extraneous word.

April 17, 2002: Heather raises problem with Scene 7. It appears to come to a climax on page 34, then continues on to page 38 where it comes to a second, similar climax. I hear there are writers who defend their "vision" in situations like this down to the last comma. Me -- I stay up until 2 AM rewriting the thing and deliver it the next day. With one climax.

April 18, 2002: Out of the blue, Heather suggests a complete restructuring of the end of the first act. I'm thrown for a loop. I thought we were beyond this, down to the fine tuning stage. I rhyme off all the reasons why I wrote it the way it is -- and why it should stay that way. And we move on.

April 22, 2002: Out of the rehearsal hall and into the theatre. My anxiety has shifted now, from will this ever see the light of day? -- to the knowledge that it's going to see the light of day pretty damn soon, too soon -- and will it be any good?

I made a decision early on in the writing to try to avoid easy (ie. cheap) laughs. If the characters say something funny, fine, but it's because they would say it as characters, not because I'm trying to be funny as the writer. (Of course, I may indulge myself once or twice -- I'm not perfect.) Laughs can be a snare and a delusion for a playwright. You can hear laughter

-- it's almost a tangible thing -- and reassuring. The audience may forget the play one minute after it's over, but at least they weren't bored.

But Piccadilly is a play that becomes more serious and emotional as it goes along -- where the laughs become fewer and we want the audience to be quiet and listen. I actually cut a couple of laugh lines, which interfere with the dramatic flow. But audience silence is tough to judge -- and a lot more nerve-wracking than laughter. Are they rivetted? Or are they asleep? Is that restlessness? Or are they reaching for their hankies? There's a major temptation to stick in a surefire (ie. cheap) laugh or two -- throw in the word "Nortel". I try to resist it.

And so, day after day, we trim and fine tune, "murdering darlings" left and right. Everyone contributing, Matt making suggestions for the precise word his British character would use, Tracey always willing to do whatever it takes to make a scene play.

In one of his big (ie. long) speeches, Mo inadvertently leaves out a chunk, and I realize I don't miss it at all. More darlings gone. This happens more than once, to the point where I wonder - - are these omissions really inadvertent, or are the actors telling me they didn't need those lines in the first place?

It's demanding, intense work, but the theatre's dirty little secret is this -- it's fun. I thought I'd stop attending rehearsals at some point, but I end up being there all day, every day. And sitting there, watching my scenes come alive, the thought actually crosses my mind -- I'd like to do this every year (fool, fool).

Greg has been very generous about including me in the process -- no artificial constraints about not speaking directly to the actors, or any of that nonsense which I've sometimes encountered. I have a notion that I'd like to direct some day, so I watch what he does and try to learn something. He stages one scene with the actors sitting with their backs to the audience. I can't imagine why, but this becomes one of the highlights of the play -- so maybe I am learning.

May 7, 2002: One final crisis over length. I try to put on my Sears hat and be as cool and ruthless as I trim precious words, but I feel as if I'm hacking off limbs with a bloody meat cleaver.

May 11, 2002: Opening night. I'm a wreck, not fit company for man or beast. I bark at my family and they send to work out my anxieties on the tennis court. I feel a bit better, and for the show I force myself to sit in the middle of the audience, rather than skulk at the back.

The actors come through when it counts. When it's over I'm surprised at the wave of emotion, elation, relief that I feel. When I raise a glass with Greg and the cast and crew backstage I can hardly speak.

Going down to the reception, I bump into Bob, who shakes my hand and says it was "hilarious and deeply moving". This is the best one sentence review I can imagine. I'll certainly settle for it. Any day. Or until the next time.

Goodbye, Piccadilly premiered at the Thousand Islands Playhouse on May 11, 2002. It was directed by Greg Wanless, and featured Tracey Ferencz, Matthew Gibson, Heather Esdon, Mo Bock and Meg Walter.