

Preface to Three Plays **(published by Scirocco Publishing, 2004)**

ALTHOUGH THEY'RE NOT MUCH MORE THAN A DECADE OLD, *Midnight Madness*, *Writing With Our Feet* and *Into* bring to mind a career's-worth of actors, directors and designers. These plays have been performed in a variety of theatres, to audiences happy and not so happy. I have been brave at their opening nights, occasionally fearful and/or medicated, and once I met the mayor of Hamilton while cowering under a table. I cut my theatrical teeth on these plays and they made my choice of profession irrevocable.

Midnight Madness, *Writing With Our Feet* and *Into* were written in reasonably rapid succession, between 1987 and 1993. In addition to their chronological proximity, they have other links. They are comedies. All three plays are concerned with personal change and growth within, or in opposition to, the context of a wider community. I have written other more overtly political plays; they are (as one might expect) less popular though perhaps more cathartic to write. I have also adapted the works of other writers – most notably Helen Weinzwieg and Margaret Atwood – and that has brought a great deal of (very different, slightly vicarious) creative pleasure. But, although *Into* is “inspired” by a Julio Cortazar story, *Midnight Madness*, *Writing With Our Feet* and *Into* are all very much originals; I take full and sole responsibility for them.

The plays in this collection have also been widely performed, from Perth, Australia to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, in most Canadian provinces and in many American theatres. I like to think they are popular for the right reasons – as good pieces of theatre that connect with their audiences. I don't write to satisfy myself; that just isn't going to happen. Any gratification I get from this process has to come from the effect these plays have on others; to have them produced so widely has, of itself, been my reward.

One other thing that links these collected trio: I have rewritten the damn things a dozen times each. I must have been a plastic surgeon in a previous life, or a serial alchemist. I cannot seem to leave my plays alone, and the great advantage of having so many productions is that I've had unlimited opportunities to fine-tune them. Most of the rewriting has been just that – tinkering – but in some cases entire characters and scenes have vanished into the ether. The plays are generally better for the surgery, but there does come a time when a playwright has to let go, and – to paraphrase the last line of *Writing With Our Feet* – “Now is most definitely the time”.

SO HERE THEY ARE. I've been asked to spin a few words on them, and to do that I should begin by describing a funeral I attended long ago, in my formative years. An elderly relation had died; a good woman who had lived a good life in a good, small town. Our family congregated outside the church before the service. (In those days, in those towns, as a sign of respect the grieving kin of the deceased would enter the church en masse and take up the front pews. I would later know this as ‘making an entrance’). Just before we were given our cue to enter, an errant uncle let fly with an especially funny and incorrect joke that had to do with the deceased's physical handicap. Our entire family dissolved into wild and guilty giggles on the church step, then sucked it up and trooped in. But throughout the service I could see familial shoulders quaking, and I knew that some of the tears that day were not ones of sorrow. It was a very good joke.

I still think about that funeral. Although this is likely a truth I was already inhaling from a family addicted to gallows laughter, it was precisely summed up for me that day: you can't have the serious without the ludicrous. This entire journey of life is pretty foolish, and there's no reason to treat its finish any differently. And that also applies to the little journeys we take whenever the lights go down in a theatre. No matter how serious it is, life pounds the boards with the ridiculous – or it just isn't real.

So I call these three plays comedies and I can maybe even break that down further: *Midnight Madness* is a gentle one, *Writing With Our Feet* veers into blackness; and *Into*

is a bit surreal. Apart from the humour, and some thematic links, the plays are very different stylistically. I began my playwriting career mired – and I use that term willingly – in naturalism. I came from a time, place and era where the only theatre I could see was naturalistic and, never having had an academic background in the profession, I had no way of being aware that there were other writing options. I also had no idea how restrictive naturalism is, how claustrophobic, how unnecessary it is (or how popular it is with audiences) until I wrote *Midnight Madness*. I wouldn't begin to break free until I began *Writing With Our Feet* and, for the most part and to varying degrees, I have been dramatic off-roading ever since.

I SUPPOSE I SHOULDN'T SLAG NATURALISM, in that it has served me well and put bread on my table. *Midnight Madness* is an hour and a half of real-time in the life of a bed salesman, and those ninety minutes have been seen in forty to fifty productions coast to coast. The play, written in 1987-88 (and, of course, revised ever since), was my second Equity-produced play, following on the heels of *Sister Jude*. That play was a flawed piece that focused on Wesley Marshall, a young man with a keen sense of personal sin and concomitant thirst for salvation. The story that formed its spine won the Toronto Star Short Story Contest and ever-economic, I had grown it into a full-length play. Structurally *Sister Jude* was all over the place, somehow I figured that out, and I set out to rectify that with my new play. As a result, *Midnight Madness* was carefully and logically plotted. It also featured poor Wesley again – as he aged, there became more sins to enumerate, more salvation to bestow.

By the time *Midnight Madness* takes place, Wesley is employed selling beds – the catalysts of other people's pleasure but certainly not of his. He works upstairs in a dying furniture store on a main street that is gasping for its economic life. Wesley bears scrapbook witness to the evolving lives of his old classmates, while fighting hard to live as little and as obscurely as possible. Central to this is his ability to fly low under the sexual radar. So it seems only natural that, in the last moments of his store's history,

Anna Bregner, an old classmate, fellow pariah and Woman With A Past should bound up the steps to his Bed Department.

The leap of faith that often fires our major life decisions fascinates me. I tend to think it is most often a cumulative thing, but occasionally there can be a dramatic snap of will, and that of course makes for better theatre. Wesley (and later, Jean-Francois) will make big personal leaps, but not before they get a lot of pushing and, in Wesley's case, that's about ninety minute's worth. He was an awfully easy person to write because I share some of his characteristics, as do we all. In *Into*, Lucy Cormier says, "Comfort is false" but for anyone prone to hibernation, it is also a necessity.

I was still close enough to my high school years that I could also remember and write about the horrible cruelties that abounded there, especially as they were visited upon the weak, meek and square. I suspect that this is the key to the enduring resonance of *Midnight Madness* – everyone in every audience has been the brunt of some awful deed or insult in high school and, if they weren't the brunt, they were by definition the brunt-givers. Quite often they were both. And so within the walls of a gentle naturalistic play I'm offering up a highball of remembered guilt with a chaser of expiation...

The other thing I wanted to address in *Midnight Madness* was the death of the small town downtown and, in particular, our local control over our economic destiny. A wonderful and perhaps even romantic period in our retail history was drawing to a close in the 1980s. The chain stores were taking over from the independents, the malls began spreading like retail melanoma, and the big boxes were waiting in the wings – or suburbs. Our eclectic and vital downtowns withered. In my hometown of Peterborough (which I thinly disguise as "Ashburnham") many of the old stores were owned by Jewish families, who lived and prospered in a tiny counterpoint to the overwhelming WASPness of the city. And in many small cities these small but viable communities have dwindled along with their stores. In any event, I wanted to position Wesley against this backdrop – the end of Bloom's Furniture was looming over this head; his way of life was ending just as certainly as that of his eighty year-old employer and his particular little subset of Upper

Canadian society. The play is a lament for the passing of those great family stores; they and their owners had a personality (and a commitment to their street and community) that no mall or big box will ever possess.

Midnight Madness was initially co-produced with the Muskoka Festival in Gravenhurst, Peterborough's Arbor Theatre and Toronto's Tarragon. Bill Glassco directed the play's development and premiere production. Bill is truly a gentle/man and the play was informed with his respectful touch. He perceived *Midnight Madness* as a character study and we concentrated on that, with the help of two gifted actors, Michelle Fisk and John Dolan. (In an early victory for non-traditional casting, Graham Greene played the offstage voice of Mr. Bloom). It became clear that in order for the play to work – because it isn't exactly rife with dramatic action – it was necessary for the actors to completely inhabit their characters, and my job was to make that possible.

That production bestowed a rare, early gift on my career. As *Midnight Madness* traveled from Gravenhurst to Peterborough and then to Toronto, I had an opportunity to do a huge amount of rewriting. And to learn how to rewrite. In the subsequent decade and a half, its continued popularity has allowed me to tinker to my heart's content. (Oddly, unlike both *Into* and *Writing With Our Feet*, *Midnight Madness* has never been produced in the United States. Perhaps Wesley is simply too repressed for our American cousins. On the other hand, Wesley does set out to remake himself – both at the YMCA and then outside his furniture department - and surely that locks into the American Dream?)

Wesley and Anna reappear in *Two Ships Passing* (written ten years after *Midnight Madness*.) As you might be suspecting, I have a terrible time letting go of my characters. They are family and, if I can't rewrite them, then I want to reintroduce them. And knowing how much my own life has changed over the past decade, it seems almost unfair to leave them frozen in time. And so, in *Two Ships Passing*, Wesley discovers his libido and the left-leaning Anna becomes an activist judge. Anna's son Jason – a pre-teen in *Midnight Madness* – is now a right-wing apologist of the National Post ilk. The offstage Mr. Bloom is dead (golfing, Florida) but I did bring him back him centre stage in a later

play, *Walking on Water*, where we discover the early source of his business success. And Bloom's son Ron appears in two other more political plays, *Taking Liberties* and *The Last Liberal*.

AT FIRST GLANCE, *Writing With Our Feet* seems a great departure from *Midnight Madness*. Stylistically that is true, but thematically it's not. Written largely in 1989-90, it continues with many of the themes first explored in *Midnight Madness*. The central character, Jean-Francois, is agoraphobic; he lives in a garage and must gird his loins to leave. In this case, there is an existing, peripheral love interest in JF's life but the main force for positive change is his sister, Sophie. She hovers over his foot garage, summoning up a bizarre cavalcade of would-be JF-outers.

The writing process for *Writing With Our Feet* was entirely different. Whereas I had carefully plotted *Midnight Madness*, this play was an exercise in automatic writing. It happened in two spurts – first the initial narrative scene (which was performed as a short piece at Alberta Theatre Projects' Brave New Works) and then the full play. If I added up the total writing time for the first draft, it could not have been more than three or four days. It just flew out. I can't explain it. I didn't realize in advance that JF and Co. – superficially so unlike me and my world - were in residence, but there they were and here they are. Not everyone was amused. The play was nominated for the 1992 Governor General's Award and in those days *The Globe and Mail* hired a fusty U of T professor to conduct an annual excoriation of the nominees. The play was beyond the poor man's ken, but he did manage to bray about appropriation of voice, as he claimed I was not of JF's ethnic background. (I'm assuming he spent a few days researching the various ins and outs of my family tree.)

I have never known of anyone who was genuinely creative to raise the appropriation issue. Those of us who are actually "doing it" spend our lives engaged in a thousand acts of appropriation, and it is that ability that needs be judged. In this collection of three plays I have – among others - appropriated the voice of a Roman Catholic priest (I'm

most definitely neither); a dead car designer (I'm alive and writing plays); a legless drunkard (I still have my legs), and a disaffected white youth (one out of three). That said, some of *Writing With Our Feet* has also grown from personal experience, including the central metaphor. As I state in the play's dedication, my sister and I really did learn how to write with our feet, out of fear that we might one day lose the use of our hands. *Writing With Our Feet* is about a pair of odd siblings and I'm not sure it gets much stranger than two kids spending time developing a legible toe-script.

With *Writing With Our Feet* I also learned that when a play arrives unbidden there's always a danger – or benefit – that characters may also appear who at first blush don't fit. In *Midnight Madness*, there's a clear logic to who appears in that dusty bed department, but the rules break down in *Writing With Our Feet*. Raymond Loewy – the celebrated designer who was justly named by Time Magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century – has no business lurking in JF's Montreal garage. But Loewy haunts me, so there he is. I've long admired Loewy's work – beginning with another (odd) childhood fixation, this one with Studebakers. As I learned more about Loewy, I began to realize his seminal impact on how we live our lives. Loewy fervently believed that good design should not be hidden behind museum walls or in the salons of the rich – it should exist in our everyday life. It could be as simple as the curvaceous utility of a Coca Cola bottle or as visual arresting as a bullet-nosed Studebaker. Loewy wanted to fill his adopted America with functional beauty – art that worked. JF – if he is to be a true disciple of Loewy – must also take his foot-creations to the public.

Some of the other characters were surprises too. I have an aunt who has publicly claimed to be the model for battle-axe Aunt Zenaide, but in truth she's far too well-behaved. Aunt Zenaide just “sprang”. And, although other relatives have sex lives that would make the peccadilloes of Alphonsinette fairly pale by comparison, I have not yet portrayed their excesses. With the exception of Loewy and the idea that two children might actually spend time foot-writing, *Writing With Our Feet* is utterly fictional, appropriated from the murkier recesses of my brain.

Like *Midnight Madness*, the play is about community and the courage needed to participate fully in it. Again, it loops back to my own populist instincts; like Loewy, I cannot see any use in creating if it is not taken outside the garage. That great Canadian play curse that George F. Walker calls “The Dixie Cup Syndrome” hangs over me like a cautionary sword; I don’t want my plays to be produced once and then tossed to the side of the cultural thruway. I want them to be done and done, and done. Naturally, that cannot dictate or even shape the writing process but, ultimately, process is process, and only process. The real payoff in this trade comes when those theatre lights dim.

Luckily, *Writing With Our Feet* has also had a great number of productions across North America and I’ve again used that opportunity to do some fine-tuning. The first production, by Theatre Terra Nova, took place in a one-time Hamilton porn palace that that fledgling company was renovating. *Writing With Our Feet* was the opening play in its musty new space. The company decided to throw open the theatre’s doors for the official premiere, in order to thank the residents of the city – it was, after all, their tax dollars that was funding the restoration. Back then, *Writing With Our Feet* clocked in at well over two hours. After the mayor cut the ribbon and the lights went down, things got harrowing. The audience was expecting a light comedy and, indeed, some of the more traditional patrons were expecting some heavy porn. I was giving them overlong, surrealistic mayhem. I retreated at intermission to the theatre office and somehow found myself under a table. I cannot remember exactly how or why I went under that table. I do remember the office door opening during the second act and a very tall man (they are all tall when you’re hiding under a table) entered to use the phone. He noticed me with not a great deal of surprise – apparently under-tabled men are commonplace in Hamilton - and asked me what I was doing. “I wrote the play,” I replied. Mayor Morrow shrugged and went about his duties.

Luckily the play’s life did not end there. A Toronto premiere directed by Jackie Maxwell followed, first with Stephen Ouimette and Tanja Jacobs, and then with Tom McCamus and Ellie Rae Hennessey in a remount a year later. As with the triple production of *Midnight Madness* this gave me the chance I needed to hone the play into proper shape.

That extra half hour was shaved and I remained free-standing at both Factory opening nights.

The new set of lessons I learned from *Writing With Our Feet* have served me well. First, I realized – the Hamilton opening night fiasco notwithstanding – that audiences are ever willing to take risks and are actually pretty patient. (The Hamilton premiere still got a standing ovation but maybe they just needed to stretch their legs.) I realized, if I didn't know it already, that there were strengths inherent in theatre that weren't present elsewhere. Primary among those opportunities was the elasticity you have with time and place. Theatre audiences are very quick to embrace non-naturalism and I decided it would be a shame to ever again waste that chance.

AT SOME POINT over the intervening years after *Midnight Madness* and *Writing With Our Feet* I seem to have developed a more benign view of community and the possibilities it offers society's marginals. The community in Wesley's case is stifling, judgmental, and in *Writing With Our Feet* it is a scary, external force. But in *Into* a viable community is necessary for both survival and nurture. And it works best when it is diverse – whereas Wesley and Anna were suppressed by a moral monolith, *Into* features four disparate personalities forced together. And fractious though their little unit is, it affords greater potential for happiness than the adjacent, homogenous groupings: the novacain-addicted Dental Confederation or the angry Anne Murrayites and, worst of all, the Disaffected Youth with their bad music and incessant brawling. Different is good, and even better when it stands united.

Into was inspired by the Julio Cortazar story "The Southern Thruway". My involvement began in adapting the Argentinian's short story for a radio drama, as part of a Cortazar series that producer Bill Lane had commissioned at CBC. The radio version stuck closely to Cortazar's text, the story of a traffic jam that lasts for hours and longer, and featured a male narrator. The radio version was about twenty-five minutes long.

Next stop was the Toronto Fringe Festival, where I so radically changed the story and characters that I decided the proper attribution for Cortazar's influence was "inspired" rather than calling it an adaptation. The characters were all changed, the highway moved to North America, I placed a nun stage centre and began the play with a long monologue. All I retained was the basic premise of the story – a traffic jam and the fragile community it created.

Amid all this magic realism, I also injected some straight-ahead storytelling. The nun's monologue at the top of the play was my chosen way of venting my anger at the Catholic church for its increasingly reactionary positions on any number of social issues. What should be, and periodically is, a liberating institution for social progress was being dragged relentlessly back into the dark ages by the Pope and, locally, a pair of reactionary Cardinals. As Boy says in the play, "It really made me mad." I sharpened my metaphorical buns and began tossing them. I was told constantly that giving over the first fifteen minutes of a play to a monologue, before going into a more conventional structure, "just wouldn't work", that you couldn't have two stylistically dissimilar sections in a play without somehow alienating the audience. I thank God I didn't listen because the nun's monologue has always worked. (I've noticed that the two biggest under-estimators of audience intelligence are theatre programmers and theatre professionals.)

The Fringe show was a hit and I expanded it yet again for stage, this time a 90 minute version at Theatre Passe Muraille. Bill Lane – the original radio producer – came and directed the Dora-nominated show and most of the cast returned from the Fringe version. *Into* has been subsequently been performed from Perth, Australia to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, to Halifax, proving I guess that there is indeed a universality to our need for community or, failing that, traffic jams.

MY WORK IS OF NO CONSEQUENCE if it is not performed, but it is a wonderful thing to have it collected on paper. As these plays now go to print, I vow that there will be no more rewrites. Luckily, the rewriting impulse eventually yields to the drive to

create something new. That ginger step out of the bed department or foot garage is part of a writer's daily routine, or should be. But as I eject this disk, I find myself exceptionally grateful that these plays are being preserved in this volume. They are a big part of my life and it would be unnatural for me not to hope that they can't be a small part of yours.

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Dave Carley

Dave Carley is one of Canada's most produced playwrights. In addition to the three plays collected in this volume, he has written *Walking on Water*, *After You* and *Taking Liberties*. He has adapted a novel by Margaret Atwood (*The Edible Woman*), a collection of stories by Helen Weinzwieg (*A View From The Roof*), and written a number of radio plays which have been broadcast nationally on CBC. His journalism has appeared in a variety of publications, ranging from Time Magazine to The Kawartha Sun. He was founding editor of CanPlay, the Playwright Guild of Canada's magazine, and has also edited two anthologies of radio plays, *Take Five* and *Airplay*. In 2000, Dave was awarded the Arthur Miller Playwriting Award by the University of Michigan and he has won a number of other national and international awards for his writing. Dave lives in Toronto. His website is www.davecarley.com