

Using History: Notes from a Playwright

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The plays I write attempt to examine who we are. Who we are is, of course, some sort of accumulation of what we've come from, and (also 'of course') the answers to the questions of both our present and the future lie in the past. I've rifled through a variety of periods for my plays: pre-World War II Ontario and Europe, Peterborough post-war over the last six decades, and even a brief stint in the (crowded) backwoods of Ontario with Susanna Moodie. My quest has always been the same: to explain how we've arrived at the moment when we file into the theatre and the lights began to dim. At its most ambitious, my quest has also involved looking forward to that moment when the houselights come up again, and we begin filing out of the theatre, back into our real worlds.

To that quest, a pragmatic sidebar can be appended: I could have written essays or poems or screenplays but I've learned that theatre and history make a supple and economic couple. If history is about events, and if 'showing' is more effective than 'telling', then theatre is indeed the ideal medium. The inventiveness of a good production combined with the willingness of audiences to invest their own powers of imagination mean that it is entirely feasible to present history on stage – whereas the costs of period drama in film and television are often prohibitive.

There's another practical reason why historical subjects are attractive to dramatists. Given that a play doesn't exist until it is performed – whereas a poem or story presumably comes to life the moment the first reader encounters it – and given the extraordinarily long gestation period for most theatre works, it is very difficult to be "topical". I once wrote a play, *Big Box*, which warned about the dangers of a pending Wal-Mart invasion. It was all very prescient at the time I was writing it in 1995 but, by the time the Blyth Festival workshopped, programmed, developed, rehearsed and premiered *Big Box* in 1998, that moment of foresight had passed. The Wal-Mart

blitzkrieg had already rolled over Canada's retailers; my *Big Box* was as obsolete as the Main Streets Wal-Mart had helped to destroy. So much for topicality.

Putting those practical considerations quickly aside, it is the thirst to 'understand' that propels playwrights to muck about the past, and a similar yearning that tugs at their audiences. We have an amazing example right here in the Kawarthas, with the continuing success of 4th Line Theatre in Millbrook. Since its inception in 1992, 4th Line has become arguably the most successful theatre of its kind in Canada, mining the local landscape for stories – including the Millbrook telephone company, the Cavan Blazers, The Great Farini, Susanna Moodie, and Joseph Scriven. And 4th Line is not unique in its devotion to the regional story – this pattern of the local history play is repeated all across the country.

In fact, the local may have trumped the national on our stages. Perhaps we derive more of our sense of self from our immediate environs. Or possibly it's just a case of advanced narcissism; the lint in our own navel being more fascinating than that of our neighbour one county or province over. To some extent, national history-making also seems to have fallen out of vogue, or perhaps into the hands of special interest groups (which actually is a surefire recipe for it falling out of favour.) Whatever the case, the initial burst in the 1970s of "Wow, this is a Canadian story!" has dissipated. Or, as the *Globe and Mail's* theatre critic recently claimed, albeit as much in protest against the style of that kind of theatre as its content; "The nationalist project of 1970s Canadian theatre has served its purpose well, but in 2005 we're not served well by it."

The desire to understand the past is a wonderful thing. But, like any desire, there are countless intriguing ways to corrupt it. History is like a defenceless Barnardo child, thrust into an uncertain and often hostile world, subject to the whims or agendas of whatever writer/director/actors are involved. Some writers treat history well. Others have less than pure motives. Some of them want to suppress certain parts of it or to whip it into shape - selectively presenting it to make a point, or redirecting and correcting it. (More on 'correcting history' later.)

The responsibility of telling history is a big concern for me. There's the age-old conflict between telling a good story and telling it accurately. That battle didn't begin with playwrights, but we have certainly brought some new tricks to the table. We amplify events to make our points. We rearrange events to amplify our points. That's all fair game in making good drama – but when the story being told is local, there are risks. No one would be too upset if I wrote a drama about Julius Caesar and a gang of Romans roaming the rural areas of Gaul, burning down Catholic barns. That's in the past and “over there” and who cares if there's a few inconsistencies with the plotline or characters. But when 4th Line Theatre first announced plans to stage their Cavan Blazers story, the nabobs of local negativism were not amused. For starters, there still are many descendants of the Blazers throughout the county. Do we really want to know the truth about Great Uncle Billy's nocturnal missions? Surely it's better to let some sleeping dogs lie? And what exactly were those scruffy 4th Liners going to say about us?

On the subject of scruffy, there's another, converse danger to presenting history – and that is that we render it too comforting. Something that happened a hundred years ago tends not to threaten us now – unless a relative is somehow indicted. But actually, even the sins of the Blazers seem mild now – we've clearly progressed since those days. Protestants tend to leave Catholic barns alone nowadays. If history is the study of progress then by definition it is going to be comforting.

But that's antiseptic, especially when washed down with a gallon or two of nostalgia. Remember the *Wind at My Back* series on CBC? They were good stories and attracted a loyal audience. I wrote one about a beautiful baby contest (working from the series “bible”) and it was a lot of fun to write, but the factual connection to its setting in a 1930s depression town was tangential at best. I have the same beef with a lot of our pioneer village museums. They are too classy – lovely wildflower beds, sturdy pioneer furniture, a little country store selling stick candy... You imagine our forebears eking out a jolly Currier and Ives existence, which would be great if they had – but they didn't. Things were actually pretty smelly back then; as well as ugly, nasty, brutish and often foreshortened. The earliest photos of the countryside show a denuded, burned over,

stump-covered landscape that bears no resemblance to the cosyness of Upper Canada Village. Our own Lang Pioneer Village is also lovely in its situation, but I give it more credit for approaching the reality of pioneer life, perhaps because of its compactness. With only a bit of effort on the part of the visitor, the truth about our past can be imagined in the dim claustrophobia of the Fife Cabin – how many people lived and slept in that smoky interior? Or upstairs in the hotel where the floor is covered in straw pallets - one can nearly smell the snoring, stinking travelers, and catch an itch from the bedbugs.

The fact that ‘It wasn’t better then’ brings forth another, near-irresistible pitfall for the playwright bent on telling history as it wasn’t. That is: the oppressive virtue of hindsight. This distresses me much more than any sins of historical beautification. Our theatres are brimful of sanctimonious playwrights who, with all the benefits of their humanist university education, feel free to graft that freshly-acquired wisdom on to historical inequities. Yes, slavery is wrong. Yes, child labour is wrong. Yes, women should vote. Yes, residential schools were a disaster. We playwrights of the new millennium should accept and build on these truths but never kid ourselves that we discovered them. What is truly fascinating are those moments in history when the tectonic plates of thought began to shift. When did those first people realize that slavery was wrong – and when should the rest of the world have accepted that wisdom? Where was the tipping point? What or who led people to it? That’s what we need to know, as we use history to try and understand the issues with which we grapple today.

(Parlour game: What will playwrights will be self-righteously vilifying us for a century from now? What great self-evident truth will they present as the gap in our moral armor of 2005? My bet: waste.)

Beautification, historical hindsight... the third horseman of the historical apocalypse is simply what can and can’t be told. Theatre, like all the arts, relies heavily on government subsidies and, as a result, is subject to what the government grant-givers deem worthy of telling. Bureaucrats are a notoriously like-minded lot and none of them gives a cent without expecting something back. The Medicis didn’t – those private sponsors of old –

and neither do the public servants at The Canada Council. What CanCow requires is an adherence to certain philosophical principles – vague leftish ones, most of which I tend to subscribe to except for one: I shouldn't have to agree with anything in order to get money. (This completely begs the question of whether I am entitled to any kind of subsidy in the first place by virtue of calling myself an “artist”, but that is one of those unaskable questions the asking of which would ensure I would never get a grant in the first place. It all gets a bit Kafkaesque...) Most artists are in denial about this. It actually may take another 20/20-hindsighted playwright a hundred years hence to show how we allowed our storytelling to be shaped by who gave us the bucks. But someone should be asking this: what kind of history does our government want us to tell?

And, conversely: what stories aren't being told? Thomson Highway, the celebrated First Nations playwright, author of *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, has said that before healing can begin all the poison must be lanced. And he's right. But if we're going to turn stones, then we have to turn them all. In a local context this may indeed prove harmful. *The Cavan Blazers* is but one proof that Peterborough County was not settled by saints, not by a long shot. (There were saints, too, but sinners are always a lot more interesting, and make for much better theatre.)

Those are some of the external forces that shape our telling of the past, but there are other impulses at work with playwrights as well. I often wonder why a playwright has chosen to tell a particular story. Sometimes there's a family link, or an ethnic or group connection of some sort, or a geographic coincidence, perhaps a lucky find in an archives – and sometimes it's as simple as a commission. I'm currently working on a play about the discovery of insulin for Toronto's Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People – it was they who wanted the story told and now I am going to tell it for them. It's an interesting process, because I have no personal agenda vis a vis the discovery of insulin, at least not in the way I do with other topics. For example, when I discovered that CBC Radio had bizarrely not made plans to commemorate the D Day invasion of June 6, 1944, I kicked up enough of a fuss that I got a commission to write a drama set on an Allied landing craft as it approached Juno Beach. Before writing it, I was actually warned by the

producer to “not glorify war”. I replied that I had no bloody intention of glorifying war but I was sure as hell going to glorify the men when landed into that hell of bullets. That was my agenda and the drama that resulted – which I wrote with Glenda MacFarlane – was called *The Final Hour* and was very much an expression of Glenda’s and my agendas.

When writing *The Final Hour* we also ran straight into the beautification problem. None of the men who landed on D Day were saints. They were average Canadians thrust into an extraordinary situation and that is where their heroism lay. A balancing act began for us: how to show these soldiers as flawed, scared humans like the rest of us without insulting them. They had to be rendered human because, if we couldn’t understand their commonality, if we were able only to think of them as supermen then what they did would become oddly irrelevant. Nothing kills history faster than hagiography.

There is always a duty to the story. My father often said, “Never let the facts get in a way of a good story” which, on the surface, was exceptionally odd advice coming from a judge. But he was able to separate the goings-on in his courtroom from an amusing whopper told at dinner. And, in fact, where the honesty of a story is necessary is in the spirit of the telling, rather than the minutiae – but again, this is a difficult balance.

Canadians sometimes strike me as being over-factual and afraid of dressing up an event. I actually know people who will exaggerate a story down. Our American cousins have no such qualms. They decide what they want an historical event to portray – for example, 9/11 is about the triumph of heroism in the face of terrorism – and they proceed to pump up their history to suit it.

To return to the thirst for local history, unless a commission is bestowed upon a playwright, it is up to the writer to find the story. At first glance it’s not easy pickings. The study of history in our schools is not emphasized, to put it mildly. And, as I recall, what we did learn was deadening: mostly a litany of national constitutional wrangling that would turn anyone off the study of the past. But the fact is, good stories are

everywhere about us and the best of them do seem to be local. Peterborough, in particular, is littered with them. I'm sure Toronto has its share too, but the reconstruction of that city has been so relentless over the last century that the really good stories seem to have been demolished for landfill. In Peterborough the ghosts haven't yet been squished by condos; they still walk among us.

Like a magpie, I pluck these home stories for my plays. In law school, one of the first cases we were taught in Property Law was *Grafstein versus Holme and Freeman*, a civil litigation which involved a property owner's rights to money found on his premises versus the rights of the finders of that money. The case included my grandfather as lawyer for the Grafstein family and was decided in their favour, and an important principle of property law was extended. I used that case as an inspiration for some of the events in my play *Walking on Water*, but changed the source of the money and threw in two murders.

In another play, *Taking Liberties*, I wrote a series of monologues on civil libertarian issues. One of the monologues featured a young girl defending Margaret Laurence's landmark novel, *The Diviners*. This too was culled from events in Peterborough when a local group had tried to remove the Laurence novel from high school readings lists. I had been impressed and moved by a spirited defence of *The Diviners* that a young girl mounted before the Board of Education. I didn't bring her words to the play but I tried to dramatize her spirit - the spunk that propelled her to so eloquently face a packed hall of adults, many of whom were actively hostile to her opinions.

History rarely unfolds dramatically. Big events unfold at a snail's pace. The greatest playwright in history will be the one who, a hundred years hence, manages to make our current constitutional wrangles the stuff of gripping theatre. *Meech: The Musical* anyone? (I thank God I'll be gently decomposing in Little Lake Cemetery by the time that one hits the boards...) Out of necessity, audiences will, in fact, accept a certain degree of historical licence, even with local stories in which they may have some emotional stake. They might let you mix your decades. They might even let you say that Great Uncle Billy

was a serial killer of Catholic farmers. But if you were to turn around and imply that G.U.B. had red hair instead of blonde, they'll come down on you like a ton of bricks. And the writer who gets his details wrong risks irretrievably alienating his audience from the story. The devil is indeed in the details.

I recently was an extra in a television production of a work I had written on Al Purdy for CBC. The filming was outside Grossman's tavern on Spadina Avenue in Toronto; the scene being shot was set in the 1960s and in it a young poet, perhaps Al Purdy himself, was trying to sell poems to passersby. The take started, and I strolled up Spadina – a model extra I thought, careful to not look at the camera, and injecting in my walk a nifty blend of thoughtfulness with a subtext of beer-thirst. Suddenly the director yelled “Cut” and then, to my mortification, asked (loudly), “Would someone ask the writer if he thinks people actually carried Aberfoyle water bottles with them in 1965?” Had that scene gone to air, there would have been many viewers whose suspension of disbelief was been entirely shattered by the site of the hydrating extra and his plastic water bottle. And once you lose them...

It's the same with language. My play *After You* is set on Stoney Lake in the 1930s. In it, two young women are falling in love with the same young man, and one of the girls lets fly with the F-word. My mother, who pre-reads my drafts and offers up editorial wisdom, declared that no well-bred girl of that era would ever have used that word. I argued that she couldn't possibly know that for sure, that somewhere on Stoney Lake there might have been an exception, a young girl not of her acquaintance who was willing to shock her friends with bad language. (A decade later and we are still arguing this point.)

There are two issues here. The language of the young woman was an historical detail that was within my mother's ken and it rendered the world of the play inaccurate for her. The other issue – which constantly arises when culling the pasts of family and friends for storylines – is that local audiences will inevitably spend time grafting real names to fictional characters. My mother might well have suspected that some members of the audience would think the potty-mouthed young woman was her. (For the record: I have

had women in my plays commit murder and adultery, produce dozens of children out of wedlock, lie, cheat, cuss like sailors and drive cars badly. My mother has dented the bumper of her Camry, but none of the rest.)

But if the devil lies in the details, then details are also the devil. I was often stymied when researching the piece on D Day that we wrote for CBC. The vets we interviewed constantly diverged on details, lending credence to the observation that one man's war was different from the war being waged by a man fifteen yards away. This was especially true on D Day, when the various regiments landing at Juno Beach and others met with wildly different degrees of resistance. In *The Final Hour*, Glenda MacFarlane and I focused on the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, a regiment out of Manitoba that incurred massive casualties because the gun placements facing their section of the beach were not knocked out by the Allied bombardment.

But it was the details again that stumped us. Some vets, for example, said the mood in the landing craft was sombre and very little conversation took place; others recalled chatting to pass the time. All of them agreed that the turbulent seas caused a great deal of sickness – a detail that we actually had to downplay, because audiences can only witness so much retching before being turned off...

That is just a snapshot of my tussles with history. I haven't gone into the great panty-hose debate with *The Edible Woman* (solved by my dentist's wife who remembered exactly when panty hose appeared in Toronto because she was able to snag a pair just in time for her wedding). Nor have I touched upon the Homer Simpsonian "doh" that an actor threw into a 1920s party scene set on the left bank of Paris, which forced us to erase an hour's of recording at CBC.

Details. Choice of subject. How to tell it. Why tell it. What's here. What's down the street and around the corner. I'm fully prepared to argue that Peterborough has more history per block and concession than anywhere else, and I look forward to continuing to write plays that use local stories. This region was settled by rogues and knaves and good

people with bad luck and bad people with good luck, and it all adds up to a big box of history, waiting to be dramatized. The question really is not whether there's an audience for history – the issue is how do we tell it. And that inevitable friction between drama and factual adherence to the past is itself the stuff of drama.

Dave Carley is a Peterborough-born and raised playwright. His plays set in 'Ashburnham' include *Taking Liberties*, *Walking on Water*, *After You* and *The Last Liberal*, and they have been performed around the world. Dave's website is www.davecarley.com