

BREAK A LEG!

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In the fall of 1986 my curiosity prompted me to attend a local community theater production by Village Stage of Eugene O'Neill's "A Moon for the Misbegotten", which was being performed at Livingston Lodge in Indian Hill. In the play were two actors whom I knew in the key roles. I was sitting in the front row. During the course of the play I felt drawn into the action, empathizing with the characters, with what each was thinking and feeling, how they interacted with each other.

Soon thereafter, I thought to myself. Why not give it a try? Why not be on stage performing in front of a live audience? I could always buy a ticket and watch others perform. I felt that that was the time in my life for me to make such a move.

The forthcoming production at Village Stage was to be Kaufman and Hart's classic comedy, "You Can't Take It with You." I was told that the director, Anne Taylor, was in the process of casting. I wasted no time contacting her to express my interest in auditioning for a part. She asked me to look over the script and read the part of Mr. Kirby. I read the play carefully and focused on that part. Anne asked me to meet her at Livingston Lodge and read some of the lines in character.

As far as my acting background was concerned, I had only my high school experience to go on: Hermia's father in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and Teddy Brewster in "Arsenic and Old Lace." Up to that point I had not read books on acting, such as Stanislavski's An Actor Prepares and Michael Chekhov's On the Technique of Acting, but have since done so. My U.C. teaching experience helped, since I was for several years in front of a live, but captive, audience.

Anne notified me that I would be cast as Mr. Kirby. There I was, script in hand, an acting neophyte, but an eager and willing one. The next step was a read-through with the other actors, some of whom I knew in real life: Murph Mahler, Frank Koucky, Richard Hoskin, and Ken Schonberg. All of us became acquainted with the assistant director, production manager, tech director, lighting and set designers, costumes manager, and others. The task at hand was for each of us to get a feel for our characters and to be able to interact with each other. The challenge was to bring that character on the printed page to life. As is true for all community theater, we were aware that we could not skip rehearsals unless it was absolutely necessary and that no one was allowed to get sick, since there were no understudies. There were also no prompters during performances.

As actors, we were not only involved in rehearsals but also in first helping to build, then later strike the set. This was a real team effort, especially on the part of the set construction group, whose dedication, imagination, and hard work created a realistic and outstanding set. We needed to familiarize ourselves with the space. The director, as is true for any play, gave us advice and direction about the blocking, showing us where each of us would be in relation to each other, where we would be moving on stage. I quickly learned the difference between stage right and stage left, among other things. Soon we were off book and began tech rehearsal, adjusting to lights and sound. I had gone over my lines at least a

hundred times, or so it seemed. We all met with the director in the green room for a pep talk before the play began. We quietly encouraged each other by saying, "Break a leg!" to which the response was "thank you." I felt that I was ready to face that audience. The moment of truth had finally arrived. Lights dimmed, then momentary blackout, actors taking their places, lights up, action. I thought, Don't even think of choking or clutching, though I was nervous, for sure. Just relax, I said to myself, and be Mr. Kirby. "Just say your lines," as Noel Coward once advises, "and don't trip over the furniture."

The action of the play takes place in New York, in 1938, at the home of Martin Vanderhoff, more affectionately known as Grandpa. He is the head of this bizarre family made up of individuals doing exactly what they want to do, enjoying life to the fullest, not being criticized or critical of each other, just accepting each other as they are.

When Murph and I enter in the second act as Mr. and Mrs. Kirby, we are formally dressed, I in my own tux, she in a glamorous gown. To everyone's embarrassment, it turns out to be the wrong night. Naturally, we, the Kirbys, are uncomfortable. I am especially irritated with our son, Tony, who is in love with Alice, Grandpa's granddaughter, for confusing the nights. So, there we are, the invited guests, very proper and very formal intruding upon this very informal and bizarre company of strangers.

I began to interact with them, one of whom is Kolenkov, who believes that I would make a "great wrestler." In a flash he grabs my arms, knocking my legs from under me, and, presto, I am flat on my rear end. Then, adding insult to injury, Kolenkov, played by Ken Schonberg, falls on top of me. Ken buffered the fall as best he could. I was hoping for a soft landing on that lightly padded plywood floor, but no such luck. During the course of that three long-weekend run my right buttock was a study in black and blue.

The scene with me and Grandpa is one I clearly remember. I come to tell Tony that his engagement is unwise. I learn from him that he knew it was the wrong night and that he wanted me and his mother to see what a "real" family was like. He also tells me that he is not going back to the job he hates. Grandpa says to me that he would hate to see Tony "wake up twenty years hence with nothing in his life but stocks and bonds." He asks me where do I think I get my indigestion from. "Happiness? Spending all the time doing the things you don't want to do? You've got all the money you need. You can't take it with you." Grandpa had some good, common-sense advice not just for Mr. Kirby but for me: relax, don't take yourself too seriously, put things in perspective, and, quoting Robert Burns, "see ourselves as others see us."

Each night when the play was over, we entered from the wings individually, then as an ensemble, holding hands and bowing to the audience. After the final performance, as is the case for all community theater plays, there was a cast party. It was a time to relax and have a good time with everyone involved in the production. Each of us received a framed oval silhouette of the main character, Grandpa. There was a true bonding, a feeling of time well spent on a project that meant so much to all of us. I didn't want the play to end. As I stated, we all worked on creating the set. Now, we had to tear it down to make Livingston Lodge ready for the next Village Stage production.

Unlike "You Can't Take It with You", which is familiar with community theater audiences, another Village Stage production, "The Real Inspector Hound", was not. "Hound," by noted English playwright Tom Stoppard, is a clever parody of an Agatha Christie mystery/thriller. It uses a play-within-a-play format. According to one writer, the play is about "the world of reality invading that of illusion: two parallel worlds intersecting and colliding with each other."

I was cast as Inspector Hound, but not, as it turns out, the real Inspector Hound. I arrive to investigate a murder, attempting to find a dangerous lunatic on the loose. I make my dramatic entrance enveloped in required-for-a-mystery fog clomping into the drawing room of Muldoon Manor, carrying a fog horn and wearing not swamp boots, as called for in the script, but large-size flippers, the kind one would wear while snorkeling.

I am determined to find the cad who killed Lady Muldoon's husband. I mistakenly think that the corpse lying on the floor is her husband. "But what are we going to do?" she asks. I snatch the phone from her, saying, "We'll phone the police." She "But you are the police." I: "Thank God I'm here. The lines have been cut! We're on our own, cut off from the world and in grave danger!" I immediately order a search of the house. Everyone exits promptly in all directions. The stage is momentarily empty. Then Simon Gascoyne, played by an unctuous Frank Koucky, enters and looks at the corpse. A shot rings out, and Simon falls dead. I come charging in and crouch down by Simon's body, pronouncing that he is indeed dead. I look up, face the audience, and ask, "Who killed Simon Gascoyne, and why?" At that point, stage directions call for "Curtain. Freeze. Applause. Exeunt."

Then, Birdboot, one of the critics, becomes involved in the action of the mystery he has been observing. He confronts some of the other characters. Shortly thereafter, a shot rings out and he falls dead. Meanwhile, Simon and I are occupying the critics' seats, witnessing and commenting on the action taking place on the stage where he and I had been performing.

The real-life critics, the ACT or Association of Community Theater judges, showered us with mostly positive comments: set design and décor were "excellent"; "Excellent ensemble work"; "scene changes very well handled"; "good use of limited space"; "brisk pace"; "creative choices for costumes"; (One remarked

that I looked exactly like the Frederick Dorr Steele illustrations of the Sherlock Holmes stories). "A rattling good evening out. I was held." "The directors understood the show and were able to make it understandable to an audience without losing any of Stoppard's word play and wit." One or two of the critics felt, however, that "Hound" should have been accompanied with another one-act play.

According to Stoppard biographer, Michael Billington, "Hound" is about the "subtle relationship between players and spectators and the secret desire they often entertain to change ends." Perhaps the play was a bit too subtle for some of those in the Village Stage audience. Some, of course, liked the play; others had reservations, making comments like, "It's only nine o'clock. Now what do we do?", "I thought there was going to be another act." Because some of us actors were better than others with the British accents, another comment overheard was: "I didn't understand a word they were saying." "Would you please explain to me what was going on?" Oscar Wilde once made this observation about some play: "The play was a great success, but the audience was a disaster. The Village Stage audience was really not a "disaster", but some were in a state of confusion. Overall, the run was successful, in spite of the complex plot and subplots.

Now, let me turn to another play, a comedy, but one quite different from "The Real Inspector Hound." Village Players of Ft. Thomas' production of Ken Ludwig's farce, "Lend Me a Tenor," gave me a chance to play another comic character, this time a bellhop. This was a special time for me because Barbara, my wife, was also cast in the play. Her role was Julia, Chairman of the Cleveland Opera Guild. A word about Barbara in real life. Before I had met her, she was residing in Ft. Thomas after having moved there from New York. A Kentucky native, she graduated from Centre College, majoring in theater and music. When she decided to come to Cincinnati in 1986, she became

involved in community theater, and since then has acted, directed or produced numerous plays. Most recently, she has appeared at Mariemont Players in "An Inspector Calls" and as Big Mama in the Footlighters production of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

Now back to "Tenor." I had been recommended for the bellhop part (was I being type-cast?) because the director knew that I had some singing experience. For several years I sang tenor in the May Festival Chorus. I could still sing on pitch and carry a tune. The challenge for me, early in the play, was to sing the opening bars of the famous aria, "Largo al Factotum" from Rossini's "Barber of Seville." You may remember the CCM baritone who belted out the entire aria at the Holiday Observance last December. There was really no comparison between us.

Director Roger Grooms wanted me to sing la-la-la's or anything else that came to my mind periodically while I was on stage. The point of all this was that I desperately want to impress the great tenor, Morelli, who is, with his wife, staying at the Cleveland Hotel, where I am working. He is to perform as Otello at the Cleveland Opera's benefit opening. My costume was appropriate for bellhops in the 1930's. I looked like Johnny in the old Philip Morris commercials. Although the role called for a much younger man, I tried to bring as much youthful agility and enthusiasm to the part as possible, without making a fool of myself.

In one scene, I am determined to snap a picture of Morelli. Saunders, the General Manager, who considers me a nuisance, is equally determined that I leave the room, because Morelli is about to arrive. He grabs me by my shift front and hoists me up. This was difficult for him, since he was shorter than I. So, when the moment came, I helped him by jumping up as he was grasping my jacket. There ensues a wild chase around a sofa. At this point, there are four of us - Saunders, Julia, Maggie, Saunders' daughter, and I - racing around the sofa, Saunders yelling, "Get the camera!"

The thrust stage at Village Players is compact and there is little room for error. Those sitting in the front row, stage right, had to be on the lookout - legs in, not crossed or extended. During our frantic chase one evening, I inadvertently said out of the corner of my mouth to an older lady in the front row, "Watch out!" which was not one of my lines. Fortunately, there were no mishaps or tripping during the chase any evening of the run of the play. "Tenor" was great fun, a high-spirited and fast-paced comedy, enjoyed by everyone in the cast. The audience loved it and so did the judges.

Does the word "porphyria" mean anything to you? In his budget paper, "Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes", John Vester described the illness as "a hereditary defect on the manufacture of the pigment of the red blood cells, which can be traced back to Mary, Queen of Scots and affected many of the royal line, including George III, George IV and even Frederick the Great of Prussia."

Alan Bennett's play, "The Madness of George III", focused on the period when the king was suffering from this illness. In the play are four doctors, each of whom is concerned with King George's condition. In the 1995 Mariemont Players production I was cast as Richard Warren, one of those physicians. One of the other physicians, Sir Lucas Pepys, is obsessed with analyzing the color of the king's urine as well as the condition of his stool. As Dr. Warren, my remedy is blistering or cupping, resulting in blisters on the body which would raw out the "evil humours." Because of his erratic behavior, the King was placed in a straight jacket. While the poor wretch was restrained in a special iron chair, I was busy applying blisters to his body. His Majesty underwent incredible torture.

During the play, the King, played by David Edwards, displayed characteristics associated with porphyria, namely, incoherent speech, fidgeting, racing pulse, at times violent behavior, as well as back and

abdominal pain, mood swings, and hallucinations. But, at the time, who was to know what the King was really suffering from? We doctors analyzed the King's illness as madness, an "entire alienation of mind", but could not agree on remedies and wrote contradictory reports. I told Prime Minister Pitt that His Majesty's disorder was none other than "direct lunacy" and that the patient was in a "perfect maniacal state." I firmly believed my remedy was the only one that would bring the king back to his normal self.

At the conclusion of each performance, when we doctors came out as a group and bowed, the audience good-naturedly booed and hissed us. Then, when the entire cast took its bow, the audience reacted with vigorous applause. A word about my costume: I was dressed in 18<sup>th</sup> century attire: knee breeches, long stockings, long coat, laced front, buckled shoes, and a white, somewhat disheveled wig. I later asked if I might keep the wig to wear on special occasions. No such luck.

The judges gave us high marks especially for characterization, costumes, and set design. At the cast party, we all shared in the fun. Some scribbled notes on flyers and playbills. One or two that I received read, "You were a hoot," "Is 700 pounds a year sufficient for your services to us?" "Take two blisters and call me in the morning."

Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life is C.S. Lewis' autobiography published in 1955. The author described the book as "a spiritual journey from atheism to Christianity." As many of you are aware, Lewis was a renowned Oxbridge scholar, Christian apologist, and author of numerous books, including The Screwtape Letters, Four Loves, Mere Christianity and The Chronicles of Narnia. Lewis was more recently seen in the film, "Shadowlands," which focuses on the relationship between him and Joy Davidman Gresham, a 37-year-old Jewish writer from the Bronx. During their two-year correspondence initiated by her, Lewis was

especially drawn to her wit and literary knowledge as well as her poetry. Joy was a great admirer of Lewis' works and, influenced by his writings, abandoned atheism and communism and became a convert to Christianity. In 1952 she made a special trip to England to meet him, and from that point the relationship between the two develops. The play by William Nicholson was presented by Mariemont Players in 1993, and I was cast in the forgettable part of the registrar.

At the beginning of the play, Lewis, known to his friends as Jack, refers to himself as "a comfortably-situated, middle-aged bachelor." He addresses an implied audience on the subject of love, pain, and suffering. "If God loves us," he stated, "why does He allow us to suffer? God loves us so He makes us the gift of suffering. Through suffering, we release our hold on the toys of this world, and we know our true good lies in another world. This world that seems so substantial is no more than the shadowlands. Real life has not yet begun." Little did he realize that soon "real life", a new life, would begin for him when Joy Gresham enters his world.

Initially awkward around her, Lewis finds Joy, though she is seventeen years younger than he, to be a woman to whom he could easily relate, first intellectually, then emotionally. He admires her brashness, vivacity, and quickness of mind. He later wrote that "her mind was lithe and quick and muscular as a leopard." After forming a closer relationship with him, she briefly returned to America, allowing her husband, Bill, to divorce her on grounds of desertion, hence freeing him to re-marry. Back in England, she moves to Oxford, close to the Kilns, Lewis' home. Now, Joy and Jack are together, ideal soul mates.

The Home Office does not renew her permit to remain in England, but Lewis sees to it that a "technical marriage" be arranged in order to give Joy and her son, Douglas, British nationality and thus the

opportunity to live in England and be with him. This is where I come in as the registrar, performing the necessary, perfunctory duties. Lewis, arriving late, is ill at ease. He carries a pile of books, which he drops on the floor, and forgets the ceremonial ring. No matter. He and Joy sign the register and leave, relieved that it is all over. As Lewis says, Joy will keep her own name and she will go on living in her own house. Everything will continue to be the same. He realizes that this ceremony is merely "a bureaucratic formality" and not a "true marriage in the eyes of God." However, it serves the purpose for the time being.

Sadly, soon thereafter, Joy becomes ill with bone cancer. As she lies in a hospital bed, Lewis insists on a bedside marriage. "I'm going to marry you, Joy," he says tenderly to her. "I'm going to marry you before God and the world." Joy's cancer goes into remission, much to the surprise and delight of Lewis. Though weak and having to use a cane, Joy says it's about time they went on their honeymoon. Why not to Greece, where she had always dreamed of going? Both of them share the love of that country's rich cultural past. Lewis, who has never traveled abroad except once when he was a boy, sees to it that arrangements are made for them to make that journey, realizing the risk.

In a scene change, of which there were many, Joy and Jack are in a small hotel in Greece. They live for the moment. This is the time of supreme happiness for both of them, during those precious spring days. The dialogue goes like this:

"Jack, you just don't know how to be in the sun."

"What do you mean?"

"Come here and I'll show you."

"You know I don't like surprises."

"Now put that face of yours up here. Feel it on your face. The sun so close you could stick out your tongue and lick it. No words. No thoughts. Just the sun on your face. The sound of the wind in the olive trees. In this land nothing is impossible. Nothing is forbidden. You could even take your coat off."

Joy, aware of her impending death, asks Jacks, "What will you do when I die?" She needs to talk to him about that inevitability now. First he responds, "I don't know." Then he says, "I shall manage. Don't worry." Joy responds, "I think it can be better than that. Better than just managing. What I'm trying to say is that pain, then, is part of this happiness, now. That's the deal."

After their return to England, Joy succumbs to cancer. Before she dies, she says to him, "You have made me very happy. I am at peace with God." Lewis, in great emotional pain, conveys to her how much he loves her and how happy she has made him: "You are the truest person I have ever known. . .I love you too much, Joy."

The final scene between Lewis and Joy's son, Douglas, is heart-wrenching. He says to the boy: "I loved her too much. . .it doesn't seem fair, does it? If you want the love, you have to have the pain." He wraps his arm around the boy, who is searching for comfort. This once "comfortably-situated, middle-aged bachelor", who has held in check his emotions throughout most of his adult life, remembering his own mother's death from cancer, "in heartbreaking sobs unlooses the grief of a lifetime." This man, this scholar, who in the beginning of the play lectured about love, pain, and suffering, has personally experienced these emotions. After Douglas exits, Lewis speaks to Joy, in his memory, echoing her words: "I find I can live with the pain, after all. The pain, now, is part of the happiness, then. That's the deal."

When the performance was over, there was a brief silence, then a resounding applause and standing ovation for Roger Grooms, who played C.S. Lewis, then for the rest of us in the cast. Of all the plays I was in, none affected me quite as much as this one. I was moved to write the following poem, copies of which I shared with everyone in the cast:

"To Jack"

In "Shadowlands" we came to know you better,  
 Witnessing your wit, your warmth, your love of  
 learning,  
 Making us aware of life, especially of ourselves.  
 Real life began for you when Joy embraced you with  
 her love.  
 The happiness you shared with her  
 Brought you pain and suffering when she died.  
 Yet, while she lived, you loved, she loved.  
 She awakened you to life beyond the walls of  
 Magdalen;  
 She shared with you the joy of learning,  
 The sun of Greece, where your tongue touched and  
 licked  
 The morning sun as she held you in her arms.  
 You were indeed surprised by Joy,  
 Surprised into a love you had not known before.  
 This love, this joy, this happiness fulfilled,  
This was your reality, beyond the shadows of the  
 world we know.

I was cast in five other plays: the headmaster and a barrister in "A Voyage Round My Father" by John Mortimer at Village Stage; the judge in "Tom Jones", a play adapted from Fielding's novel; a professor and the First Dead Man of the funeral group in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town", both Mariemont Players' productions; the brother of the landlady in Maxwell Anderson's "Bad Seed" and the father of the groom-to-be in "Forty Carats" at Village Players. My community theater acting experience lasted just over ten years, ending with "Forty Carats" in 1998.

An insertion here, if I may. In February, 1996, Playhouse in the Park presented a production of "She Loves Me," a delightful musical based on a play, "Parfumerie", which in turn became a well-known movie, "The Shop around the Corner", starring Jimmy Stewart. Someone I knew who was and is on the Playhouse staff and also a director of several community theater plays here suggested my name to Ed Stern, Producing Artistic Director of Playhouse. After hearing from his office, I jumped at the opportunity of being cast. How could I not accept the chance of appearing on stage at Playhouse? I found out that it would be a commitment of four-and-a-half weeks consisting of about forty performances, including matinees. I had the time, and I wasn't planning to go anywhere.

I was cast as Mr. Liszt. No lines to memorize. In fact, I had no lines at all. For this, I was being paid? I appeared in only one scene in the second act - at the Café Imperial, an elegantly dressed Old-World gent in white tie and tails. One of the newspaper critics wrote that this was the "most delightful moment in the show" and "a pleasure to watch" and even mentioned my name appearing among the ten others also in that scene.

In that scene I was seated at a small table across from one of the many beautiful young ladies as we revolved on stage. I refer to this as my revolve-on role. I just sit there at the table savoring a glass of "champagne", which is unfortunately empty. Then all hell breaks loose. There are great moments of slapstick, where utter confusion ensues. I am supposed to remain calm amidst all of this, lifting my glass, either toasting someone or requesting more champagne. Suddenly, a young woman sits on my lap, another pulls her away almost knocking off my full-head-of-hair white wig, and a waiter drops a tray of food perilously close to me. I can't remember all of the details as to who was bumping or colliding into whom, but it was all great fun.

During the run, I got to know all of the cast members, one of whom was Dorothy Stanley; she identified herself to me as "cousin Dottie." In a Boynton card which read "Goodbye and Good Luck from the Whole Wild and Crazy Bunch" were comments from certain ones: "So glad you were with us. Have you ever thought of growing your hair?" "Why not get up and dance with me tonight?" "It's been a pleasure dropping a tray on you." "Hey, Mr. Liszt, see you in the concert hall." Ed Stern was backstage with us during intermissions. At the conclusion of the run I wrote him a letter, saying what a joyful experience it was for me to be in that fabulous production and meeting all those talented young actors. He replied in words to me which meant so much, even though my part was so small: "Your energy, commitment, and good humor are wonderful commodities that you brought to our production."

Now, back to community theater. For those I was with in each of those plays and for those involved in the more than twenty community theaters in the Greater Cincinnati area, I have only the highest regard and admiration: for actors, directors, stage managers, producers, those in charge of set design and construction, lighting and sound, props and costumes, and everyone else involved in the productions. They are all dedicated amateurs, amateurs in the best sense of the word, that is, in this case, those who love and are devoted to theater. They are high school teachers, CPA's, attorneys, salesmen, as well as active and retired business people. There is, then, a range of occupations as well as of ages, of talent and experience. They are all aware of the hard work and dedication that go into each production. Everyone works together as an ensemble. The ideal is to have no prima donnas.

I particularly admire the creativity of the various directors, from whom I learned so much. Each has an overall conception, a vision, of the play he or she is directing. I found that they do not exactly

follow the stage directions in the script which could have come from the stage manager's guidebook of the original production. The director offers suggestions and advice to the actors, but lets the actor bring his or her own ideas and personality to the role. Needless to say, I got plenty of advice from Barbara.

All of my roles were secondary ones. As the saying goes in theater, "There are no small roles, only small actors." An experienced community actor friend expressed it this way: "I receive immense pleasure in creating a believable character, regardless of the size of the role." Acting has given me an opportunity to be someone else, "to create a believable character", and to do and say things I could not do or say in real life. As actors, we all feel an obligation, a privilege, a responsibility to acquaint the theater audience with our particular character, to make that character as fully known as possible. I love feeling the excitement (I have to admit that there were moments of trepidation) of appearing on stage in front of a live audience, who in turn enjoy observing live action taking place before them. The result is a real, palpable human connection. It is the immediacy of live theater that makes it all so exhilarating.

For the past five years, I have been attending the play-reading sessions at Mariemont. Those who are present are assigned a part. We read the play, involving ourselves as much as we can, making our characters come to life from the printed page. It's all over in about two hours, followed by a discussion. At times I feel the urge to return to the stage, to audition, wait for callbacks, begin rehearsals and make that six-week commitment, then eventually to hear from the stage manager, "Five and places" just before the performance begins, then hear those special and familiar words of encouragement, "Break a leg!"

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