

Ginny Ratsoy

INTERVIEW WITH IAN WEIR

This interview, edited for brevity, took place on September 10, 2009. In addition to being an award-winning screenwriter and novelist, Ian Weir is an author of over a dozen plays who grew up in Kamloops and had an early relationship with Western Canada Theatre that is ongoing.

GR: According to the WCT website, your relationship with the company goes back at least as far as 1974. How would you describe the company and its audience in those pre-professional days?

IW: It was a wonderful opportunity for a high school student to be given a chance to adapt a play, *Snow White*, that would be given a full production by a cast that included professionals – which kind of encapsulates where the Western Canada Theatre began, as a matter of fact. It was created by Tom Kerr, who was a high school drama teacher and subsequently District Drama Coordinator in Kamloops, and the company essentially began as an outgrowth of the Kamloops Secondary School drama programme. Tom began supplementing student productions with local amateurs and a few imported professionals. In the process a talented core of student actors was given a remarkable opportunity to develop. This led to the evolution of the Western Canada Youth Theatre, which was essentially a cadre of entry-level professionals sustained by federal Local Initiates Project and Opportunity For Youth grants. Out of that evolved the fully professional Western Canada Theatre Company. In the course of that evolution, it shifted from being an ad hoc organization that functioned on a project-by-project basis – these included some full-length “conventional” productions, but also summer playground theatre, plus excursions to venues like the Edinburgh Festival Fringe – into an institutionalized theatre that offered a mainstage theatre season. And therein lies the evolution of the relationship between theatre and audience, as well.

GR: As WCT’s most produced playwright, who has had several works commissioned by the company, you must have a sense of the evolution of the company’s relationship with both its audience and the larger community in Kamloops. How would you characterize that evolution?

IW: I think the evolution in terms of audience relationship is mainly one of size and centrality to the community. The company began on a small scale, and then evolved into a large institution – imagine a talented little group of buskers evolving into an orchestra, and I think you basically have the evolution in the company’s relationship to its audience.

GR: You’ve written a wide variety of plays for WCT – some, like *Flyin’ Phil* and *The McLean*

Boys, very closely connected to the city's history, and others, like *The Island of Bliss*, with little or no apparent connection to the city. Do you see your sense of responsibility to your audience any differently when you are writing plays that have a closer connection to the community?

IW: No, I don't think the playwright's responsibility to the audience changes. You're still aiming to do your level best in terms of creating a play with as much craft and heart and integrity as you can. But there is a difference with a play like *Flyin' Phil*, and it lies with your own expectations as to how far the play will travel. Normally, when you sit down to write a play, you're hoping to create something that will resonate with a wide range of audiences – the specifics of the play are always, as it were, a springboard to something more (you hope) universal. But *Flyin' Phil*, which I co-wrote with my wife Jude, was always envisioned as a play that was very specifically for one audience – the Kamloops audience, the community in which Phil Gaglardi was a legend. We never assumed that it would have a life elsewhere, which freed us up to craft a piece full of references (and jokes) that relied on some degree of inside knowledge about Kamloops itself. The upshot was, I think, a play that was in a very real way a celebration of the specific community.

GR: In your notes to *The Man Who Shot Chance Delaney*, you indicate that the storytelling approach that was so successful in the play evolved as a result of budget: the theatre company was unlikely to have the budget for the spectacle of a television or movie Western. Do you find budgetary concerns of the stage – particularly the small-city stage – restrictive?

IW: Actually, I was referring to the budgetary restrictions of live theatre as a whole, rather than the restrictions of the small-city stage. As a matter of fact, a theatre like the WCT has more financial resources than the majority of big-city theatres, most of which are shoestring operations catering to a niche audience. Overall, the WCT mounts plays on a financial/production scale that's pretty comparable to most of the fare offered at a theatre like Vancouver's Arts Club. But sure, writing for the theatre is always restrictive in a budgetary sense – but that's just a fact of the universe, like the law of gravity. As a Canadian playwright, you simply accept the fact that – if you want to be produced – you need to craft plays with small casts, modest set requirements and minimal technical effects. What that means is that the past two generations of Canadian playwrights have essentially spent their careers writing chamber pieces. That's certainly a limitation, but only in the sense that writing a sonnet limits you to fourteen lines. The key is to look at the limitations as a spur to creativity, rather than a block. In other words, forget about dreaming of a symphony and then trying to whittle it down to a piece for string quartet – by doing that, all you wind up with is a lousy whittled-down symphony. Instead you set out to write the best damned piece for string quartet you're capable of.

GR: One of the elements of *The Man Who Shot Chance Delaney* that fascinated me was the presence of an audience within the play (those in the saloon who listen to the storyteller Weaver). When you write for the stage, do you have a mental picture of an audience, and, if so, is that picture different for a Kamloops audience than, say, for the Vancouver audience of *Hope and Caritas*?

IW: Unless you're in a writer-for-hire situation – an obvious example is being hired to write an episode for a TV series – it seems to me that you're always writing essentially for yourself. This is simply because you can't write a good play (or novel, or poem, or whatever) if you

start by asking: “What would somebody else like to see, and how do I deliver it?” You have to start by asking what you yourself really want to explore – what moves you and haunts you and stirs you. So in a very real sense I just sit down and try to write a play that would delight me if I were sitting in the audience, and hope that enough other people share my taste to make it viable.

Having said that, writing is communication, and so of course a playwright always has a sense of the audience as he writes. And yes, the audience for a theatre like WCT differs from the audience at many theatres in larger centres – although not necessarily in the ways you might think. The key thing to remember, I think, is that the audience at any smaller regional theatre is by definition a broad-tent audience – the theatre needs to appeal to a wide demographic in order to be viable, as opposed to many of the theatres in larger centres, which can afford to target a niche audience. In that sense, the WCT audience actually has a lot in common with, say, the audience at Vancouver’s Arts Club Theatre. In both cases, the company needs to draw significant numbers of people who aren’t hardcore theatre fans. In a smaller centre, you need to appeal to people who aren’t really theatre fans at all – these are people who like to go out to entertainment events. And since there are fewer events in the smaller centres, people are more eclectic in their event going. (It has always been a wry fact of life at the WCT that you’ll draw better when the junior hockey team is on a road trip – given a scheduling clash, a segment of the audience will go to the rink instead.)

The upshot is that the programming at the small regionals must inevitably be more consistently mainstream than at many theatres in larger centres. This is not because nobody in Kamloops wants provocative, cutting-edge theatre. It’s just that the audience for cutting-edge theatre is always just one slice of the overall audience. In a major metropolitan area, that slice still has quite a few people in it – in a small city, it becomes numerically miniscule. And of course it’s also true that people who choose to live in smaller centres often tend to be people who have chosen not to live on the cutting edge of change, which means their taste in theatre is likely to edge a little more toward the traditional.

So as a playwright, does this mean you deliberately contrive a play for a mainstream audience, asking yourself such questions as: “What do they like in Brocklehurst?” Actually, no you don’t – at least, not if you’re writing with integrity. It’s more a question of deciding whether a.) your voice as a writer will ring truthfully in a mainstream register, and b.) the play you’re sitting down to write belongs there. If the answer is yes to both of those, then you settle down into that register and proceed to write a play you’d like to go and see.

GR: Your relationship with Western Canada Theatre (and its earlier incarnations) has been lengthy, but was particularly prominent during the tenure of the late David Ross. I wonder if you could summarize that period.

IW: My involvement with the WCT under Tom Kerr was pretty much on the student/apprentice level. During the tenures of Frank Glassen and Michael Dobbin – both of which were periods of very important growth for the company – I was in Vancouver and London, studying and taking my baby-steps as a playwright. By the time David Ross took over as artistic director, I was verging on being ready to work as a playwright on the professional level, so that’s when my path reconnected with the company.

Under David, the WCT gave second productions to my first three full-length plays, each of which had premiered in Vancouver – and second productions are hugely important in Canada, since so many Canadian plays get produced once and then disappear. David and I discovered we loved working together, and the relationship evolved to the point at which the company commissioned and premiered several of my plays. The first of these was *St. George* in 1993, and the most recent was *The Man Who Shot Chance Delaney*, which was produced in February 2009, just two months before David's death.

David was that rare and precious combination: a terrific artist who was also a terrific builder and administrator. He was also a dear friend, and I miss him deeply.

GR: In an interview in UBC's *The Grapevine*, you joke about being "The second-best playwright to come out of Kamloops" and refer to Kevin Kerr's Governor-General's Award. Upon reflection, a number of prominent theatre people, in addition to you two – Kevin Loring, Keith Dinicol, and Jonathan Young come to mind – cut their teeth in Kamloops. Do you think there is something in particular about Kamloops, or about small cities, that makes it (or them) fertile training grounds?

IW: I think it boils down to two things, actually – neither of which has to do with the water or small towns in general. The first is that Kamloops has always had a tremendously strong drama programme in the schools – this is part of Tom Kerr's legacy – which means that creative kids get drawn into drama as opposed to other outlets. The enduring prominence and success of the WCT as a professional institution is also very significant, I think, simply because the institution itself stands as a demonstration that aspiring to a career in the dramatic arts is actually a viable thing to do with your life. Otherwise, you tend to grow up assuming that acting (or playwrighting, or whatever) is just something you do in high school.