

As anyone who attended an ACTF in college can attest, theatre conferences are 1/3 education, 1/3 theatre, and 1/3 party. Every year I attend the Last Frontier Theatre Conference in Valdez, and it's all three of these aspects that keeps me going back.

The city is nestled between epic mountains and glacial waters, and all the conference events take place in the intimate civic center. This creates an odd effect not unlike sharing a fishbowl with some of the greatest minds of modern theatre (this year it's Edward Albee, August Wilson, Lloyd Richards, Arnold Wesker, and my favorite American playwright, John Guare, among others).

*"All these new playwrights... it's like the early days of the Eugene O'Neil Conference"*

*-John Guare*

For the party third of the conference, all roads flow to the authentic Alaskan Bar, the Pipeline Club. Arnold Wesker joined us there nightly, August Wilson until three in the morning on the last night. Our first night there, there's a hair-pulling cat fight. SF Actor Colin Hussey rushes up and raises the arm of the winning woman... welcome to Alaska!

To explain what it's like in Valdez is fairly impossible... Brilliant people are around every corner. You trip over one Pulitzer winner to get to another.

Despite all the luminaries, though, the heart and soul of the conference is the Play Lab. Playwrights from all over the world present staged readings of their plays, and getting in is a big deal. Two of my Bay Area colleagues, Aoise Stratford and Alan Fitch, are presenting their plays, *Somewhere in Between* and *Gerry's Law*, respectively.

I act in Aoise's reading on Saturday... halfway through, I knock over my music stand. Overlooking my gaff, the ten-member panel calls it "boldly structured" and "a wonderful play." Whew.

Guare arrives on Saturday. He introduces himself to me and is extremely personable. And the four opportunities I have to hear him talk at length don't disappoint... he really is brilliant, who knew?

On Sunday, Colin and I read in John Coughlin's *Side Show Soul*. I get the lead, he the principal foil. I still don't really understand the script, but the performance is very well received. Panelist Tom Riccio declares, "I've been coming here for three years, and this makes it all worth while." A conference organizer comes up to me, teary-eyed, and tells me that "the playwright doesn't know how lucky he was to get you [as an actor]." Aw...

When you've done well in Valdez, people grab you in the hall to tell you you're great. Standing ovations are standard for the evening performances. This could be called pandering, but in Valdez, the ovations and accolades are really for the whole conference.

The week becomes a blur at this point. I act in more readings, present a short play of my own, see a lot of theatre and listen to a lot of discussions.

Thursday night, August Wilson opens his tribute to director Lloyd Richards by saying "Tonight, I couldn't be anywhere other than right here," the same phrase Richards had used to introduce him years ago. This was a fairly momentous event, as the two of them had fallen out about five years ago. The pain and love and regret on August Wilson's face, and my own tears, are a memory I'll carry with me all my life.

*"Realistic art is a contradiction in terms. You cannot experience any reality but your own."*                    -Arnold Wesker

Saturday night is the big gala. Free fresh seafood stuffed inside more free fresh seafood. Most everyone dresses to the nines. It's a great party. And at the end of the party, they announce the winners of the play competitions and the Patricia Neal Acting Awards (for the best 5 readers out of 105 total). That's when the Bay Area sweep begins.

Aoise wins first. Then Alan Fitch. Then a fine Baltimore playwright, Paul Sambol. All three are asked to remain on the stage to receive a second award, as the Audience Choice Awards have come out exactly the same as the panelists’.

And then I win one of those plaques with Patricia Neal’s name, my name, and some completely garbled Latin that I suspect means “you should take up catering.” Flattering, nonetheless.

I left proud. Of myself, somewhat, but really of the quality of people I have to work with in the Bay Area. Some of the best actors, directors, and (most underrepresented in our theatre scene) PLAYWRIGHTS in the country. The mark a theatre community makes on the world scene can usually be judged by their playwrights; I hope that the trend I’m seeing of more productions of local writers will continue, and that we can nurture and appreciate these important voices.

*“Playwrights can write regional plays and make the places they live more universally acceptable.” -John Guare*