

ACT ONE: HOPES & EXPOSITION

I knew five people from the Bay Area journeying to Valdez, Alaska, this year to attend the Last Frontier Theatre Conference. The playwrights were myself, Aoise (pronounced Ay-sha) Stratford, Alan Goy, and Alan Fitch. The latter two had plays in the prestigious Play Lab (24 plays accepted out of 189 submissions). I was acting and showing *Happy Loving Couples are a Thing of the Past* in the Ten-Minute Play Festival. Also attending was actor Colin Hussey.

This is my seventh conference. I've met Arthur Miller and Lanford Wilson, talked dramaturgy with Edward Albee, been directed by Joseph Chaikin, and acted opposite John Heard. The city is nestled between epic mountains and glacial waters, and all the conference events all take place in the intimate civic center. This set up creates the odd effect not unlike sharing a fishbowl with some of the greatest minds of modern theatre.

Every year the conference gives Lifetime Achievement awards to a playwright and director; this year it's John Guare and Lloyd Richards. The heart and soul of the conference, though, is the Play Lab. Playwrights from all over the world present staged readings of their plays, and getting in is a big deal. Aoise and I met there last year, but it's Alan Fitch's first year ("I just want to see how it all works."). Three of the twenty-four participants will be awarded \$1,000 prizes.

This year's ten-member responding panel includes playwright Arnold Wesker and director Michael Warren Powell. In addition to responses from the entire panel, the 50 to 150 member audience gives feedback as well.

Actors have it easier. The conference makes sure that we have all the scripts we're reading in well in advance, schedules a rehearsal for each show, and houses and feeds us. "I want a chance to work with new people in a completely different arena," says Colin.

ACT TWO: THE WAKING DREAM OF THE CONFERENCE

The event is spread over nine-and-a-half tiring days. The first day (Friday) I learn of another Bay Area writer in the primary Lab, Debbie Zike. I have to miss her reading, *The Age of Swagger*, due to rehearsal for Aoise's play, *Somewhere In Between*. Deborah says she got a lot of great feedback on the play.

I'm reading with six Alaskan actors at 8:30 in morning in *Somewhere...* and it goes very well. Her directing ability enables her to effectively stage the reading with only two hours of rehearsal. "Boldly and confidently structured" says Arnold Wesker. "Congratulations, it's a wonderful play" says another panelist. Two people pull her aside to talk about staging it at their theatres. After two days, Aoise is the clear front runner.

On Sunday, Colin and I help provide competition in John Coughlin's *Side Show Soul*. I read 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." Aoise feels herself falling into second place.

Monday the conference begins in earnest. Everyone but August Wilson has arrived. The Play Lab drops from four shows a day to two, but the remainder of the time is filled: There are hours of workshops and lectures, and the Ten-Minute Play Festival begins. I present my play and get the laughs I want from the audience.

It is hard to explain the rush one experiences when you've presented something strong. 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, and the compliments might strike some people as schmoozing. But in Valdez, the ovations are for the heartfelt love of whole conference, and compliments are a sincere outpouring of the respect for the amount of great work going on.

I see a tall, gray-haired man trotting up to open a door for an encumbered young girl. Turns out to be Guare. He introduces himself to me and plugs Crowded Fire as people he knows in San Francisco. He's extremely personable. And the four opportunities I have to hear him speak at length don't disappoint... he really is brilliant. Aoise got to publicly banter with him at the Playwrights' Workshop he ran:

GUARE: Wait... your accent... Australian?

AOISE: Yeah. (her dialect is obvious and the audience laughs) Do you still want to talk to me?

GUARE: Yes, it's Canadians I don't talk to.

AOISE: Well, I'm from Toronto, Australia, so that's okay then.

To try to cover all the material presented this year is impossible. Brilliant people are around every corner, blocking the doors and urinals. I'd need fifteen thousand words, not fifteen hundred, to be in any way comprehensive.

Colin ends up being called in on a number of extra readings, appearing in nine all told. Alan Fitch attends everything, anxiously waiting for his play, *Gerry's Law*, to be read on Thursday. Alan Goy also acts in a number of readings and presents his short play, *Basil Doolittle*, which is solid and well-liked by the panel.

Alan Fitch gets two great actors to fill the psychological depths he's layered into his script, and *Gerry's Law* gets raves. One panelist called it "a perfect play.". Aoise and I tally up the number of plays that may win. We generally agree and cut the list to ten. Could be anyone. Artistic merit is so subjective.

August Wilson arrives later on Thursday. He wasn't originally scheduled to be there, but after video-taping a tribute to Lloyd Richards, he called Jody McDowell (the conference's head producer and fund-raiser) to say that he had to be there. He had recalled a time when Lloyd had honored him in a similar ceremony, and August uses the same opening line: "Tonight, I couldn't be anywhere other than right here." This was a fairly momentous event, as the two of them had fallen out about five years ago. The

emotions of 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.

Saturday night is the big gala. Free fresh seafood stuffed inside more free fresh seafood. Most everyone dresses to the nines. It's a last chance to see the new friends you've made. It's a culmination of nine days work. There is the presentation to Guare of the Lifetime Achievement award. Mostly, it's a great party.

And at the end of the party, they announce the winners of the two 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 ballot has come out exactly the same as that of the judges.

Then the ten-minute play winners are announced. A couple my old friends from Alaska win, but neither Alan Goy or Aoise or I place.

And then I win an award for my acting. I get a huge plaque with Patricia Neal's name, my name, and some completely garbled Latin that I suspect means "you should take up catering." Any of us could have won, as Alan and Colin did great work all week as well.

ACT THREE: RETURNING TO THE BAY

The conference over, all that is left now are the memories, the analysis, and the plans. Alan Fitch "couldn't have had a more positive experience." Colin Hussey called it "the best acting workout I've ever had." Debbie Zike learned a lot about her play. In addition to her prizes, Aoise left with three tentative offers of production.

Alan Goy's highlight was seeing an old friend from college, Sara Wagner, succeed hugely in a collection of Guare's one-acts that were performed for the writer. This was also a very proud moment for me, the cast being filled with my old friends as well.

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.

For more information about the conference, check it out on the web at www.uaa.alaska.edu/pwsc/.