

Doggie Dreams

By Gary Beck

Winter had quietly departed and spring was shedding bright light in dark places. I started performing my silent clown show on the first weekend of spring, despite the chill, at 72nd Street and Central Park West. I made more money for the three shows on Saturday and three on Sunday than I had the year before. It was just about the same amount as my salary as an adjunct instructor at Gotham University School of the Arts, teaching drama.

The clown show income was vital, since I would only be teaching two classes for Continuing Adult Education this summer. The money was slated for the development of my new play, 'Unravelings'. My theater department chairman, Ernest the 'emoter', had offered me two additional courses, but that would have meant working four nights a week, so I gratefully declined. I wanted to work on revisions of my full-length play, which just had two readings at the end of March. I had also started a new play, title undetermined, length probably three acts.

Ernest took my refusal graciously, a pleasant surprise, since he didn't appreciate my frequent caustic comments and was usually curt in our meetings. But a sea change had come over him since he found out my advanced Shakespeare class urged me to let us do a staged reading of Hamlet, with lights and costumes, I asked Ernest if we could do the reading in one of Gotham U.'s 99 seat, fully equipped theaters. Quel surpris! Ernest had readily agreed, which was out of character for him. He generally denied any of my requests summarily.

I had explained to the class the complexities of making period costumes, which disappointed them. But they got very excited when I suggested doing what was now shaping up to be a type of performance, wearing black tops and tights, a traditional format of low-budget Shakespeare productions. Once they stopped cheering, I told them the real problem. If we did the reading seated, there was no need for lights and costumes. This brought a moan of despair.

"However, if you don't want to read from chairs, the show must be blocked, and entrances and exits must be rehearsed."

There was a moment of silence, then Juno Franklin, a bright, aggressive lesbian, and my favorite student, yelled:

"Right on, Mr. K. Let's do it," followed by supportive yells from the rest of the class.

I wasn't sure if they understood what would be required, so at the risk of dampening their enthusiasm, I told them bluntly:

"It'll take a lot more time to prepare for that kind of performance than we have in class. At least four to six hours a week, depending on progress. Are you willing to give that extra time?"

Juno stood up and faced the class. "I'm willing. How about the rest of you?"

One by one the hands went up, until only two students hadn't volunteered.

Juno had started to say something to them, but I cut her off.

"This is not a compulsory part of the course. It won't affect your grade if you don't participate in the performance, but I will expect you to work on the project during class time."

One of the two, Leila, a shy, sweet girl, a frequent target of the junior lesbians, started to say why she couldn't....

I held up my hand. "There's no need to explain and there's no prejudice. The same goes for the rest of you. I will be volunteering for the extra time, so if you're not ready for the commitment, please let me know."

Juno had asked politely: "Can we talk it over without you for a few minutes?"

I got up and walked out, already staging the play in my head. I loved Hamlet and knew I wasn't ready to direct a full production. But this was a perfect chance to work on the greatest play in the English language. When I went back in, everyone made the commitment.

We had started reading Hamlet in January and by early April it was clear that the enthusiasm of the class would make the project worthwhile. Juno, who was determined to play Hamlet, was making a good case for herself. She had readily grasped the concept of not using her voice in an artificial masculine way, but still needed work seeing herself as a great prince, without contrived mannerisms. Leila, who had originally declined to participate, joined the

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production and was reading Ophelia. She and Juno had discovered some kind of chemistry that made their scenes sparkle.

I was very pleased with the progress of Hamlet, but my real thrill had come at the two readings of my play, 'Unravelings', at the loft of an artist friend of my artist girlfriend, MJ. MJ, née Marguerite Janice Van Doerner Kowalski, was a bright, loveable, fair-skinned red-head, who helped make the event a success. My ex-girlfriend, Anitra Blavatsky, a bony, chilly, pretentious artist, worked for the famous artist who I had nicknamed 'Sophisto, the master of plastic', because he wrapped the natural wonders of the world in stifling plastic. I detested his work, but Anitra had invited him to the first reading on Friday night. Wonder of wonders, he loved the play, told me it reminded him of his family, and praised it extravagantly. I was embarrassed when Anitra looked at me with her usual frosty demeanor, a haughty rebuke of the way I had sneered at 'Sophisto' for the last several years, and now he had so graciously praised me. I had smiled winningly at her, concealing my unrepentant judgment. But fair is fair and it had been an ego boost. Everyone else, following 'Sophisto's' lead, had lavished compliments on me.

Word had spread through the artistic and theater community like wildfire, and the second reading on Saturday night had been jammed. The loft was so crowded we had to turn people away. The audience was even more receptive, and among the enthusiastic comments was one amusing remark. A very pretentious man from the culture desk of the Village Tonsil, remarked loftily:

"The play obviously aspires to be a dark-toned elegy, reminiscent of 'Long Day's Journey into Night.'"

He waited expectantly for appreciation of his cleverness.

In my usual tactless fashion, I quipped. "Is that a play by Chekov?"

He stalked out indignantly. But I never like the 'Tonsil'.

MJ insisted I thank Anitra for her efforts, which I did willingly and cheerfully. She had

made the event special. She stood at the door saying goodnight to the guests, receiving homage as the servant to royalty. Her teacup Maltese, Buckminster Fuller, was tucked against her bony chest.

"If she shows me his fake balls again," I whispered to MJ, "I swear I'll wrap her in plastic."

MJ suppressed a giggle and swatted me playfully.

"They're not fake balls, they're called Neuticles. Now behave yourself."

I ignored her assault on my dignity and went to talk to the actors.

"You gave a wonderful reading," I told them. "You really made the play speak to me. Thank you." On an impulse, I had said:

"I'd like to give you \$25 each for the readings, as a gesture of my appreciation."

They thanked me, then Jessica, who I had worked with before on Off-Off Broadway, said: "I never got paid for a reading before."

Derek, one of my former classmates at Northeastern, said: "I never got paid for any kind of theater before."

We all laughed at the truth of Off-Off Broadway theater poverty, and I had another impulse.

"I'd like to do a workshop production, off book, to further develop the play. I'd love to have the four of you do it...."

I gave them a moment to think about it, and Jessica asked:

"What would be involved?"

"You'd have to learn your lines, we'd have five or six rehearsals and do four performances, two Friday and Saturday nights in a row. I'll pay you for the production."

They all perked up at the idea of being paid and Derek asked:

"When do you want to do it?"

I thought quickly. "How about the last two weekends in May?"

"Sounds good to me," Jessica said, and looked at the others, who nodded agreement.

Derek added:

"Let me make a phone call to cover myself at the restaurant."

He got someone to sub for him, so it seemed everyone was on board. But I knew how unstable Off-Off Broadway commitments could be, so I had to insure they would be there.

"There's only one complication," I said. "I can only do the production if all of you make a solid commitment. There wouldn't be time to bring in another actor, who could work well with the rest of you in such a short time. Why don't you think about it, check your schedules and call me tomorrow."

They all called the next day and all said yes. I had a play in progress and a good cast. All I needed was a theater, designers, techies and a front of house staff. Fortunately I had saved enough money to mount this kind of workshop production.

MJ was very happy for me when I told her about the planned production and she wanted to help. She started by asking how much it would cost and when I estimated \$2500 to \$3500, she offered to pay for it. I knew she had a sizable trust fund and I let her pay a fair share of our expenses, but money had not been a problem for us and I wasn't going to let it become one. I valued my independence. Perhaps it may have been false pride, but I left my Kensington heritage because they wanted me to follow the family tradition, which as a second son meant I should become a lawyer, a prospect I viewed with horror. Maybe I was lucky. If I was first born I would have to become a doctor and they enlisted for life. You never heard of a doctor retiring and becoming an actor or painter as a second career. They just played golf, until they had a stroke.

Before we could discuss our economic relationship further, an emergency phone call from the chez Kowalski mansion necessitated a quick trip to Philadelphia. It seems the cool war between the Van Doerner clan and the Polish invader had suddenly heated up. The war had started over Mum's desire for a new opera house and Dads had laughed at her. Tensions rapidly escalated and only an urgent peace keeping mission by MJ narrowly averted divorce. But the battle lines were drawn. The days of romance were over and not even the soothing strains of Chopin could placate the Van Doerner antagonism. After all, Chopin was Polish.

Only Pard, my clever, horny mutt, was eager to go, hoping for another opportunity to sate his lust on one of the dumb but alluring female yellow Labrador Retrievers that the Van Doerners raised. I certainly didn't relish facing the strains of simmering dispute. As soon as we reached the New Jersey Turnpike, and traffic was sparse at that late hour, MJ had me explain how the theater production would work. She was fascinated by the production process and when I discussed the function of a stage manager, she insisted on volunteering for the position. How could I refuse? She was bright, capable and a lot better at dealing with people than I was.

Once again, MJ's timely intervention prevented all-out war. When an unsupervised truce was agreed to by the combatants, we headed for home. The only diversion had been Pard's attempts on the alluring bitches, thwarted, however inventive, by the dim-witted male yellow labs. They always managed to arrive in time to prevent any consummation of Pard's doggie dreams. I could feel his accusing gaze on my back as we drove to the city. But what more could I do? I would be tarred and feathered if I intervened and abetted the marauder. I couldn't dress in a yellow lab suit and divert the guardians of doggie virtue. When I proposed dressing in a Ninja suit and holding a woman dog owner captive while Pard had his way with the bitch, MJ didn't know whether to laugh or be disgusted, but she promptly vetoed what she called a 'lame idea'. Pard would have to hold out somehow until I found the female of his dreams.

Things were going great with MJ, so the only sore spot in my recently fulfilling life was the continuing sexual deprivation of Pard. I had tried many strange things to get his 'doggie ashes hauled', so to speak, to no avail. The most recent possibility for Pard had come from an acquaintance at the Tompkins Square Park dog run. Hal was one of the few dog people who would speak to me. Most of the dog parents blamed me for Pard's sexual attempts on their precious children. Hal had told me about a doggie love hotel in Venezuela, called Perro Shangri-La.

I had thoroughly searched the internet and couldn't find a single reference about Perro Shangri-La. I went to the Consulate General of Venezuela, on East 51st Street. The receptionist wouldn't even let me speak to the commercial attaché, unless I told her my business. When I explained that I wanted the address and phone number of Perro Shangri-La, she barely suppressed a look of disgust. She made a phone call, then told me they didn't deal with illicit enterprises, and had me escorted out. I phoned the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington, D.C., but they refused to discuss anything so 'repugnant'.

I told Pard of my efforts, including my requests for information from the 42nd Street library research department, calls to Venezuelan banks and other businesses, with no results. My call to Delta Airlines, to check airfares to Caracas, let me know the trip was expensive, but manageable. The shocker was that a dog would have to be kept in isolation for three months at Venezuelan customs. That wasn't for Pard. I briefly considered trying the blind man with his seeing eye dog routine to fool Venezuelan officials. I had used it many times at Gotham U. to bring Pard to class with me. But I rejected it as too risky.

MJ still thought it was a bit strange to see me talking to a dog, but she was getting used to our weird ways, and it didn't freak her out. Another proof that she was special. She had to smile when Pard listened attentively, then put a paw on my knee, as if to say: 'I understand', and gave me that winning 'keep trying, boss', look.

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The End

Gary Beck bio: Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director, and as an art dealer when he couldn't make a living in theater. He has 11 published chapbooks and 1 other accepted for publication. His poetry collections include: Days of Destruction (Skive Press), Expectations (Rogue Scholars Press). Dawn in Cities, Assault on Nature, Songs of a Clerk, Civilized Ways (Winter Goose Publishing). Perceptions and Displays will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. His novels include: Extreme Change (Cogwheel Press) Acts of Defiance (Artema Press). Flawed Connections has been accepted for publication (Black Rose Writing). His short story collection, A Glimpse of Youth (Sweatshoppe Publications). His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines. He currently lives in New York City