

The University of Toronto's downtown campus is a collection of old, ivy-covered colleges huddled south of Bloor street. Victoria College was the school I was registered with, and when I first arrived I joined the Vic Theatre Group as a means of meeting people, and gratifying my need to perform. Britain Harcourt was a year older, but already well established as a svengali-like producer of crazed student theatre. He was forever discovering some nubile young thing and making her a star, while convincing scores of disciples to do all the grunt work. They say writers tend to tell the same story; one of Brit's many flaws was that he literally told the same story: a mishmash of scenes from Peter Cook's *Beyond the Fringe*, combined with a few of his own strange satirical sketches, (the Chekhov thing, the Morton Shulman thing) that always opened with the entire cast filing into the theatre wearing monk's robes, flagellating themselves to the climax of the opera *Carmina Burana*. In the three years I had known him he'd directed, produced and starred in that "spectacular" four times.

One day Britain called with a tempting offer of summer work. We would rent the University College Playhouse with a gang of friends, and mount seven shows in thirteen weeks. Our pay would be an even split of the box office receipts. He reasoned that there wasn't any good theatre in the city during the summer, so we'd all make a killing. I wasn't sure.

"How many actors?"

"Nine or ten," he answered. "All people you know."

"So we'd have to take in about four or five thousand a week to make any money."

"It'll be double that," he blurted. "And I've applied for all these grants."

I was putting myself through school, and was desperately broke. I needed to make money.

A few days later I received a second slightly more frantic call.

"Slight problem. The bastard grants I applied for? Didn't get them."

"None?" I asked.

"None. So you'd better apply for pogy."

"But aren't we going to be working?"

“Any money you make, you won’t have to claim. And if you’re not getting paid, you’re not really working, are you?”

On our first day, we sat in a circle on the threadbare black carpet at the U.C. Playhouse. A narrow set of stairs led to a small theatrical space above some offices. It had been converted from an old proscenium theatre into a black-walled, black-curtained, black box. It was very hot in that box, and our search for windows led us to the realization that there were none, and there was no air conditioning.

We all had worked in shows together, and knew each other fairly well, so we raised a collective eyebrow when Brit announced he wanted to start with some theatre games, to get us all acquainted. After four minutes of throwing a large ball around, Morag was the first to snap.

“This is stupid,” she insisted, “and we’ve got a hell of a lot to do. Can we get started?”

Morag was Brit’s girlfriend at the time, and was a short-haired beauty with large bosoms. They had met when he had cast her in a fabulous new Canadian musical which had, sadly, closed before it opened. Everyone involved had claimed that she would have been brilliant had it run, so she had attained an intense if limited stardom.

All of us agreed with Morag about the absurdity of the games. Britain, or Britney, as he was sometimes called behind his back, insisted that this was part of the groundwork he wanted to layer into the company, which would enable us to work more freely together, and speed the process later. No one was buying it, but he had read a book, and he wasn’t backing down. We did a few more exercises, and some useless improvisations, but when he suggested we might want to strip down to our underwear, Morag screamed at him and stormed into the kitchen. Britney called for a short break, after which we started rehearsing.