

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.

The plays he had chosen were challenging, to say the least. We would start with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and simultaneously rehearse Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*. Brit's idea was to perform one show at 8:00 pm, then change the set and costumes quickly, and perform a second late night show at 11:00 pm. Once the first two had opened, we would commence rehearsals for the next. Each show ran for about three weeks. The second wave was Orton's *What the Butler Saw*, with the musical *The Fantasticks* as the late show, followed by *Beyond the Fringe*.

"Not my usual bastardized version, but the real thing! There's a huge audience for that stuff!"

Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* would play at eleven, and the final show of the summer would be Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*. Britain would direct everything, and appear in two plays.

"All the great directors do that."

Things started well. The rehearsals for *Streetcar* progressed smoothly, and we all loved working out the grand southern passions of Williams' script. The fact that we were all in our early twenties was not a problem. We were serious actors. We were working! Brit had persuaded a girl named Jennifer to play Blanche. She was very pale and frail, and from St. Michael's College, and she was very good. She also had bazooms that rivaled Morag's.

As the weeks went by, the summer turned out to be a scorcher. The humidity, plus the heat from the stage lights in the small space, and the absence of any air movement in the theatre only added to the illusion of *Streetcar*'s steamy New Orleans. Once we opened, and were mixing a lot of sweat with the overt sexuality of the play, we noticed that a lot of the audience members were necking during the black-outs. I was playing Mitch, and Brit had directed Jennifer and I to make an entrance through the audience. Because there were no windows, the playhouse was very

dark without lights. Brit had arranged the seating in odd small groups, and as we came down the centre aisle, we lost our way. The more we tried to get to the stage, the more confused we became. Jennifer gasped, and slapped one of the audience members. She had stumbled into a couple, and someone had grabbed her ass. When the lights came up, the stage was empty, and Blanche was wrestling with a couple in row D.

Wendell, who was playing Stanley, was a philosophy major who spent most of his time inhaling large quantities of bourbon and grass. He had convinced his girlfriend Lona to run the sound; that way she would see him for a few hours a day, if only from the sound booth at the back of the theatre. The high-point of the show, and probably of the summer, was the casting of Vanessa, a sultry brunette from Oakville, as Eunice, the upstairs neighbour. Brit had the inspiration that the play would begin with Eunice standing alone on the stage, smoking. Standing at centre, 'Nessa, all of nineteen, was a cool, bored, sensual, defiant Eunice; and smoked very well. It was brilliant. It was Theatre.

Brook was less than thrilled with her casting. She was a blond curly-haired beauty with porcelain skin, who thus far had managed to avoid sleeping with Britney. Perhaps out of spite, he had cast her as the hard, matronly nurse who comes to take Blanche away at the end of the play. Brook was not pleased with her costume, or with the fact that she had to wait until ten to eleven to make her first entrance. She was one of the few of us who had a steady boyfriend, a red-head named Sydney, so Blake tried to convince her that she should be grateful; with so little to do in *Streetcar*, she would have more time to spend with Syd.

The only other cast member with a partner was Adrian. He was older than most of us, probably twenty-five, and was a very fit Welsh rugby player. He wasn't going to the university, but told us that Blake had directed him in a community play somewhere, and taken a shine to him. Adrian was jolly, and up for anything. Because he was in such good physical shape, Brit had him appear naked, or close to it, in every play.

“Something for the ladies. Sell more tickets that way.”

Adrian didn't mind. He was engaged to a woman who worked at a newspaper, and as she worked odd shifts, we hardly saw her. He was playing Steve in *Streetcar*, Eunice's husband, and other than the odd off-stage argument, and on-stage card game, he too had little to do.

Of course things did occasionally go wrong. One night, in the scene where Stanley has invited a few buddies over to play poker, Blanche and Mitch are flirting in the bedroom. Blanche is supposed to turn on her radio, Stanley goes into a rage about the noise, storms into the bedroom and throws the radio out the window. On this particular night, Lona had been having trouble with cramps, and Rob, our mustachioed, muscular crew member who was running lights, suggested he rub her lower back. So when Blanche turned on the radio, nothing happened. She looked at me in a panic, and said very loudly, “I think I'll just turn on this old radio.” Still nothing. We laughed, and I had the brainwave to start whistling, hoping that Wendell would pick up on my brilliant ad lib. I was whistling as loud as I could, and Wendell, the theatrical genius, yelled out: “I said quit that whistlin' in there!” Then he stormed into the bedroom and threw the radio out the window.

In rehearsals for *The Real Inspector Hound*, we had great laughs working out the inane comic business, and the contrast of styles between the two plays proved to be a welcome change. The late shows were a hard sell, but if we ever had an audience for *Hound*, we would perform it with great gusto. The highpoint of every show was Wendell's entrance as the Grandfather. He was supposed to be wheelchair-bound, and have no legs. Then, late in the play, in a comical Stoppard resolution, he reveals himself to be the hero of the piece, throws off his blanket and stands. Britney had decided that the playhouse stage was too small, so we sometimes used the area in front of the stage as a playing area, and the real stage as an upstairs. In the script, Grandfather's entrance is announced by a loud rumbling as he comes hurtling down the stairs in his wheelchair. Not having stairs, Brit installed a ramp. It was only a drop of four feet, but very steep, and in the new, well-oiled wheelchair that we had borrowed for the play, Wendell would

come flying down the ramp, and hit the floor with such a terrific speed that he would be catapulted from his chair. We tried everything we could think of to keep him in that chair, but it was no use. Every time he hit the stage, Wendell would sail through the air. As we scrambled each night to lift the supposedly legless Grandpa back into his chair, we would be crying laughing. Eventually we would be laughing before he made his entrance. We were professionals. It was unintentionally the best moment in the play.

Between the shows, Rob, the crew, would have to refocus some of the lights. He would climb up a high ladder, adjust a few of the lights above the audience, then swing arm to arm across the pipes to adjust a few more. For those paying guests who stayed in their seats and caught Rob's hanging light show, it was as if they were at an Entr'acte, a between-show entertainment.

When we started rehearsing the next two plays, *Butler* and *The Fantasticks*, the cracks started to show in Britannia's plan. We would rehearse one play from ten a.m. until lunch time, grab something to eat, run around putting up posters during that break, rehearse another play all afternoon, inhale some food for dinner, or nap, or try to scrounge props, or get the set ready for the first show. Then we'd perform the eight o'clock show, change the set and costumes for the late show, maybe have a drink of water, and wham! we were into the late show. Due to a slight miscalculation, these late shows were not short, but actual full length shows, so even if we flew through them would finish sometime around 1:00 am. And then we'd all take off our makeup and sweat-soaked costumes, clean up the place a bit, and sit down for a drink. The poker games from *Streetcar* began to recur nightly, and with Wendell's seemingly unlimited supply of stimulants, we were often there quite late. The film *The Deer Hunter* had just opened, some of the guys, with crazed eyes dilated, were fond of a late night game of Russian Roulette using a starter's pistol - a prop from our next show. Screaming "Mao! Mao!" Wendell would try to get us to take turns firing the one blank. Staggering home deaf, at three a.m., only to be back at ten the same morning to rehearse again; the schedule was starting to take its toll.

By the time we opened *What the Butler Saw*, nerves were beginning to fray. The heat would not let up, the schedule was grueling, and the late nights didn't help. And then Morag discovered that Britney had started boffing Jennifer, our Blanche. The roof lifted off. They had raging fights during rehearsal, during dinner, even backstage during the shows. She wouldn't quit, because she realized she could punish him more by sticking around. We opened *Butler*, which takes place in a mental hospital, and the mood in the building was definitely very psych-ward. One day we had about six people in the audience for a matinee, and Brit and Morag had been raging for hours. She was supposed to enter through a side door, run through the audience, and disappear behind a bed-curtain. I was doing a scene as Dr. Prentice, with a maniacal Wendell as Dr. Rance, when we heard Britney, who wasn't in the show, scream "You stupid, stupid girl!" Morag responded with a blood-curdling "Keep your fucking hands off me!" and burst on to the stage crying, and dove for the bed. The shocked ladies in the house that afternoon must have thought her performance especially convincing. As did we, knowing that those lines were not in the script, and that the character who called her a stupid girl would never appear on stage.

Brook was a bit happier with her casting in *Butler*. She was stunning as Mrs. Prentice, the nymphomaniac wife of my character. She spends most of the play denying she is having an affair with a bell-hop she picked up in a hotel. The bell-hop spends much of the play naked, but Adrian was pleased with his larger part. As we needed an authentic costume, Britain sent Brook and Adrian off one day during rehearsals to pick up a bell-hop uniform from a large downtown hotel. When they didn't return for hours, we couldn't proceed and our work ground to a halt. Britney was furious. A knock at the door prompted him to scream "Go the fuck away!" When the knock came again, we opened the door, and it was two police officers. Everyone sat up, terrified that something had happened to Brook and Adrian. The cops were very inquisitive about what we were doing in the theatre, and which male members of our group weren't present at the moment. Britain was only too glad to give them Adrian's name and address. It turned out that someone had been stalking women in the area in a clown outfit, and did we know anyone who might be responsible? Any of our group would have been too exhausted by the schedule, but when Adrian and Brook arrived during the interrogation, Britney was so angry he accused his friend of

“clowning around”, and the police took them both outside for separate interrogations. They started fighting on the way down the stairway, with the police were trying to separate them and stay out of the way of the flying fists. Brook intervened, and pointed out that we didn’t have a clown costume in the building. She hustled the police off, and had a huge row with Britney, shocked that he would assume that she and Adrian were doing anything other than waiting for a stupid costume.

“We both have partners! Unlike you!”

We continued our rehearsal in icy silence. A few weeks later, our administrator Kate got a bill from a downtown hotel for the bell-hop costume, and for a room. The first sign of rebellion.

We had by this time rehearsed and opened a new late night show, the musical *The Fantasticks*. Not having any money for a pianist, we used recorded music in this show, and one night the sound board overheated and shut down. Instead of stopping, we continued the show, without music. Luckily our two young leads had very good pitch, and the audience felt they had been part of a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We cast members found it exhausting. Britney was playing El Gayo, and the strain of trying to run the theatre, direct all the shows, juggle Jennifer and Morag, and play a lead role was making him even more demented than ever. Adrian was playing the nearly naked Indian, and bounding all over the stage in his loin cloth. I cut my hand on a trunk during one show, and the audience howled with laughter, thinking it was a smart stage effect.

We continued to run *Butler* and *The Fantasticks*, and started rehearsing the *Beyond the Fringe* review, and Mamet’s *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. People were starting to miss rehearsals, and just ignore Brit’s temper tantrums. In an attempt to mollify, Brit announced a company meeting, and said he would be handing out our first pay cheques. We all gathered in the theatre, and in an amazing display of virtuosity, Brit arrived, crying. He explained that sudden unforeseen expenses, “Damn newspaper ads!” had stolen much of his anticipated profit, and he

handed out our cheques. Each one was for \$22.46. For seven weeks work. Even more appalling was the speech he gave after delivering these goodwill tokens.

“We must remember that this is important work we are doing. Artists always suffer. We have to suffer, or we cannot produce art. All great work is produced during times of trouble; during wars, during hard times. Happy people never produce real art. We are doing something worthwhile with our lives, not working in a factory. Or in a store. We will not be tempted by the demon coin.”

I was surprised no one laughed. Britney’s parents paid for all his schooling, and probably for his apartment. I didn’t know how I was going to get through next year. I had just graduated from university, and because I didn’t know what to do with myself, had auditioned for a theatre school. If I was accepted, I would be starting at the end of the summer. But how was I going to afford it?

Kate quit. She had been making cookies to sell between the shows, but with all of us eating them every night during our post-show poker games, and with the laughable amount of money we were making, she had had enough. She had to make some money to go back to school, so went off to find a real job. So now the box office and publicity were our responsibility as well.

*Sexual Perversity* rehearsals went swimmingly. There were only four of us in it, and we took to the caustic material well. For once, our ages weren’t a detriment to the script. The play tells the story, in Mamet’s brilliantly fractured dialogue, of two couples who meet, date, and break up. It was the only late show that really worked. It was a little risky, and it attracted an audience who either loved Mamet, or thought it was going to be a skin show and stayed for the swearing.

*Beyond the Fringe* rehearsals were difficult. It was a large cast, doing very British comedy, and though some of us had done bits of it in other Britain Harcourt productions, he

insisted that this time it would be the real thing. Of course the more we worked on it, the more some of his odd personal sketches started to creep in. No one complained, because they were skits that we knew, and none of us wanted to rehearse much anymore. Maybe it was because people were skipping rehearsals, or maybe it was familiar material so we didn't really work at it, but it seemed that we didn't have enough rehearsal time for *Beyond*. By the time we were only days away from opening, we started to panic. There were scenes that we hadn't rehearsed at all. Britney was beyond catatonia now, over-stretched in every way. Wendell's girlfriend Lona had quit, something about him not coming home for three nights, and so during a late show of *Perversity*, Brit had to man the soundboard. He and Rob had started to drink at dinner, and by the time the late show started, they were loaded. There was a little window in the booth, through which the technicians could watch the show to time the light cues, etc. As Brit got drunker, and angrier, he slid the window open, and started yelling things at the stage.

"Yer arse is a star!" was one of my favourites. Also memorable was "You're screwing me! All of you!" Of course the audience found it hilarious, and subversive, and brilliantly daring.

By the time we got to opening night for *Beyond*, tickets were selling well, and Brit was skipping around the theatre.

"I knew there was an audience for this!"

We ran through the tricky Shakespeare satire scene that afternoon for the first time, and most of us were still reading from our scripts. Brit was furious.

"Will everyone please memorize this by tonight!? Thank you!"

Of course we would. We had a full house coming. He still hadn't come up with an opening to the show, so at the last minute Britney announced that we would be doing the monks' entrance; his old stand by. No one was surprised. There weren't any monks' robes to be had, but

there were scads of old black theatre curtains. We didn't have any flagellating whips either, so lighting extension cords would have to do. We stumbled through it once, laughed in exhaustion, and went away to eat and prepare for the opening night.

By eight o'clock the little black playhouse was full of people. We donned our curtains, pulled them over our heads, grabbed our extension cords, and waited by the many doors to the theatre for the music from the climax of the opera *Carmina Burana*.

"Remember, really hit yourselves. It's not funny unless it hurts!"

*Beyond the Fringe* does not open with monks parading in to *Carmina Burana*. This audience had bought tickets to what they thought was going to be *Beyond the Fringe*, as it was advertised in the newspapers and on the posters. The music started, the doors were thrown open, and we marched up the aisles. The extension cords proved to be a bit too real in their flagellating properties. The large yellow plugs on the end of the cords really hurt as we swung them over our shoulders. The curtains were too long, so people were tripping, and weren't thick enough to protect our backs, so actors started to cry out. Not that you could hear anyone, due to the blasting volume of the *Carmina*. Morag and I were choreographed to escape down the centre aisle, and out the main doors of the theatre. Once outside, we were laughing and panting when we noticed that a middle-aged woman had left with us. She was looking at us with fury. Morag nodded sympathetically.

"Ya, it is hot in there, isn't it?"

The woman sneered, turned on her heel and stomped down the stairs. Morag and I ran down the back hall, screaming that we'd already had our first walkout.

As the show progressed there were a few laughs. Some of the sketches went over very well. The Britney originals drew stony silence. There was one with a gas lawnmower running

through it, that filled the theatre with acrid smoke. Then we got to the Shakespeare sketch: *So That's the Way You Like It*. I started it in a cape and fancy hat and wig, and rubber boots. We had to put our own costumes together, and we decided that makeshift was funny. I had had the inspired idea to write my unlearned lines on a scroll, and read them like a town crier. I strode to centre stage - with all the other actors milling about, not really knowing where they were supposed to be, all in various thrift-store-Shakespearian costumes - and started to read. "And so we bid you welcome to our court." The audience loved it. They knew I was reading, and could see me trying to pretend I wasn't, and thought it was a brilliant piece of direction by Britain.

I continued in a poncy faux-Shakespearian declamatory voice. "Get thee to Gloucester, Essex. Do thee to Wessex, Exeter." On and on I went, blithely mixing up all the names, and it was going fairly well. When it came time for other actors to speak, I noticed that a few of them had had the same idea, and they too had scrolls, and were reading their lines. Brook came in as a deranged Ophelia, scattering flowers, and reading her lines from a page concealed in her basket. 'Nessa was reading her beggar woman. Wendell was reading his courtier. The audience was howling, and we were laughing, and reading. None of us had discussed this beforehand. Even the sword fighters had one hand on their broadswords, and one hand on their cheat sheets. Britney was ecstatic. He made us do it that way for the entire run.

With *Fringe* and *Perversity* up and running, the final rehearsals for *Under Milk Wood* were underway. Perhaps it was because we were rehearsing just one play, and now that the summer was waning we could focus on the task at hand, but something magical happened. Rehearsals went fairly well. Britain had some innovative staging ideas, and for once we all took to them. With the lyrical, beautifully written material, we all strove to learn our lines, and bring as much character and concentration to the work that we could.

It was the hit of the summer. We were all dazed, after the grueling hours that we had put in, often playing to very small, quiet houses. We were stunned to have such a palpable hit. Turning people away. We were still partying late at the theatre, playing cards, dancing to the

blaring Bowie or Springsteen, but not having to rehearse another play, we had our days free. When we came in for *Milk Wood* each night, all the tickets would be sold. And the public would love it. Would love us in it. We were creating something hot. And there is nothing like it.

I got a letter from the Theatre School. "We are pleased to offer you a spot in our first year class. And we are pleased to offer you a scholarship." I was starting over. Money would still be tight, but at the same time I ran into the brother of a friend from Kirkland who was running a restaurant, who offered me a job, waiting tables. To quote Mr. Williams: "Sometimes there is God, so quickly."

A few weeks later, it all came to an end. The last show closed. The final party was anti-climactic. Everyone went back to their respective partners, somewhat reluctantly. Britain had done a final tallying of the books, and sadly, "More bills!" no more money would be coming our way. I pulled him into a corner and told him my news. I was going to theatre school. The summer season had inspired me. He tried to convince me that I didn't need to study theatre - I had Lived it. I was adamant. I knew what I had to do. I was under a spell. He congratulated me.

"My boy!" he declaimed, even though he was only a year older than me, "You *will* be an actor. You *will* make a life in the theatre. Not a living; but a life!"