

## YOU'RE THE PLAY

by Gary Garrison

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Ask anybody who knows me: I'm peculiar. But I guess no more peculiar than the guy standing right beside me at the deli this morning who ordered his coffee black, then dumped seven packets of sugar in the cup, lidded it, shook it up, dumped two more packets of sugar in, shook it up, then added real cream and a teaspoon of powdered cream to the mix, shook it up, and finished it off with a half cup of hot water. I thought, he's not buying a cup of coffee, he's building it. He paid for his coffee and asked for two more packets of sugar. My mouth dried out. I got queasy. If I drank that cup of coffee, you'd have to peel me off the ceiling of my office with a putty knife.

I walked out of the deli, saw the Sugar Man hail a cab with a nod of his head, and watched him as he pulled open the door with a strained extension of his left little finger. He backed into the cab, butt first, and just as he was about to close the cab door, kicked his feet together to shake the dirt from his shoes. The door closed and the cab sped off. What a peculiar man, I thought. What a peculiar, fascinating, intriguing man with his sugar and shaking shoes. Then I thought: who's watching me, thinking the same thing?

Always convinced that great drama was composed of characters that were quirky, odd, and unusual, I spent years as a young writer absorbed in the peculiarities of other people. It never occurred to me if I took an honest look at all that was quirky, odd, and peculiar about myself, I'd have the resource to write any character or story I'd ever want to create. The challenge is, of course, daring yourself to look deep inside and discover what it is about you that can become the genesis for all your drama instead of making it up from an overburdened imagination. When I finally learned how to do just that, my writing deepened and defined itself in a way I never thought possible. Follow my personal story to see how it came out on the other side of my writing.

I grew up in big bayou country, baby. Yeah, huuunneeeeeee. Southeast Texas. Just a button of a town with Tons O' Baptists. Big Bar-b-quin' folk who store herds of cattle in freezers and wait for a social lull. A place where a Dairy Queen and a Burger King stand as royal rural monuments to hormone-raging, acne-bearing teenagers who need a place to work and flirt. A day out on the town meant strolling Sears & Roebuck looking for a tighter fit in underwear. Think *The Last Picture Show* meets George Wallace (before the apology), marries Tammy Faye Baker (after the man of the house went to prison), mates with the cast of *Hee-Haw*, and gives birth to any character in any Tennessee Williams play—you get the idea.

I was raised in a good family and community of God-fearing, hard-working, middle-class southerners where (1) football and religion were one and the same; (2) if you could fry it, it was on your dinner table; (3) cowboy boots were an extension of the foot; (4) triple-decker shotgun racks were a necessity for your Made-Only-In-America truck; (5) the drawl was so thick you couldn't cut it with a thesaurus;

and (6) desirable home collectibles included little clay figures of pre-Civil War African Americans with exaggerated, bright red lips and molded in various stages of repose.

Into this world I was born—clearly an alien. And from my baby steps onward, I was destined not to be your typical boy, southern or otherwise. In my neck of the woods, that meant certain, guaranteed heart-ache. If you played with sock puppets instead of plastic army men, or staged theatrical extravaganzas behind your father's tool shed instead of playing stage coach in your kiddy wagon, you were destined for a Big Butt-Kickin'. If you shied away from all things "boy," like hunting, fist-fighting, watching football on TV, trading baseball cards, playing King of the Mountain, or killing frogs with a BB gun, you set your own stage for Tough Times with guys named Big Earl or Bubba.

And "set the stage" I did. Early on, I figured if I was going to be different, I was going to go the distance. I was going to be the poster child for the southern and Socially Impaired. Ninety-nine percent of my high school friends were on the Triple A-string of this or that contact sport—anything that required a jock strap. I was a cheerleader. Yep, the only male cheerleader in literally a five-hundred mile radius of my hometown, and the only white cheerleader my freshmen year. You could say I made quite a few names for myself—some I'm proud of, some still hurt. And of course, my brothers were All-Star football players for our high school and All-State somethings. I cheered them all the way to the top from a place very far down in my rebellious soul.

As a final insult to injury: I was a natural actor/performer/comedian. I had to be: I was—as we say in the South—"butt ugly," with kinky, curly blond hair, bad teeth, raging acne, and a gangly, awkward body. I had to make 'em laugh to forgive or forget the side of me I couldn't hide. Naturally, I was the kid in the back of the class making the squealing pig noises behind his book, or telling dirty jokes to the Student Body president during a Crime Prevention seminar that made him laugh so hard he uncontrollably farted four times in a row, or burping during the final "Amen" of the school prayer. I tried out for every school play, acting like I was an actor. Sometimes I was cast, other times not. But each time I gave an audition that no one would forget.

I was different. I was fearless. The combination was sure to injure me—but it never stopped me. Nothing could. Not even my family. "Lord, the things I put my people through... my poor family. I've been the spoon that stirs their pot like nobody's business..." That's a line from one of my plays, and as with all of my writing, straight from my life. During all that craziness from elementary through high school, my family stood by me—or, at least, I think I felt them there. They must have loved me, because they didn't kill me. And I gave them plenty of reason to. They quietly understood my "difference" and negotiated it within their own souls. And though I'm sure I was as much a puzzle to them as they were to me at times, they rarely refused to allow me to be me. If you're lucky, that's what you get from your first family.

I left home in the mid-70s to study acting. I was eighteen and floating from one makeshift, well-intentioned undergrad theatre/dance/music/communications department to another. In each, I found or created my family again: my father was in every strong-willed, determined director I worked with; my brothers appeared as those ever-rugged techies I secretly admired and stood in awe of; my mother was every costumer I worked with—sizing me up and knowing every dark secret I managed to keep from the world, noting my flaws then gently hiding them in some form of fashion; and me. I was there in every actor I saw, throwing out every emotion I had on stage, begging for someone or anyone's approval. Eventually, I would move on, only to create "family" in the next academic or professional theatre I wound up in. I guess that's what we do in the theatre: we create family, then leave them for good, on a regular basis.

When I finished muddling my way through countless professional theatres as an actor and happened into

a Ph.D. program at the University of Michigan , someone new crept into my family: writers. I wasn't so quick to let them in. I mean, they looked weird, they acted weird, they talked about things I never heard of, and they wrote weird shit. Yet there was something about them I was drawn to: these scribes, these word-jerkers knew my torment, all my fears, my countless anxieties, and my handful of dreams. It was in their work, their words. I came to understand that that was a writer's job—to know me; to put my life up to my face, say, “take a look, cheerleader,” and make me feel something. Wow. Acting never came close to that. Directing seemed even more removed. But writing plays...

God, I wanted to become one of them. Desperately. So I did. Slowly. Painfully. Quietly, so no one would notice. I'd been working in the theatre almost twelve years only to discover that what I was meant to be—who I really was—was a playwright. Of course, I would never have gotten there without the experiences of acting, cheerleading, burping, and building families and tearing them down.

The work never came easy to me. For hours before writing a single word, I'd torture myself with doubts, insecurities, and this inexplicable need to have everything I wrote be perfect the first time. What kept me from totally paralyzing myself then, and even now, was a talk I had with a close friend as we sat in his car in the dead of winter with the heater up high (he couldn't pay his home heating bill), drinking Campbell's Chicken Noodle soup from a can and eating Cheese Cheetos with pink rubber gloves on so no powder residue could stick to our fingers. I explained to him that I couldn't think of anything to write for my playwriting class. I had spent days trying to think of something, nay , anything interesting, provocative, new, or daring. Nothing came. The more clever I tried to be the worse my writing got. Things were getting critical. I was regressing to a symbolism play using Jack, Jane, and Spot. Finally, he tossed his Campbell soup can out the car window and into the garbage can, turned to me, and quietly said, “Why are you trying to make something up? With your background and history?! You're the play.” I knew exactly what he meant, even though my “history” was only twenty-two years old.

That night I began writing *Does Anybody Want a Miss Cow Bayou?* , a monologue play about a nineteen-year-old girl from the southeast Texas bayou country who, knowing she's not attractive, talks like a hillbilly, and is considered “different” by everyone around her, enters the Miss Texas Pageant and shows up at the contest demanding to be one of the ten finalists that will appear on television. Armed with a shotgun for persuasion and a guitar in case the judges want to hear her sing, she pleads her case: she needs to be seen. She needs to be heard. She needs her family, who have given her up for adoption, to see her on television and ... maybe want her.

The play was produced a month after I wrote it. A year later it was published by Buffalo Press. Since then it has been produced all over the country in a variety of venues, and every time I see it and hear the actress recite the line, “ I knowed I ain't like them other girls. Hell, I never thought I had to be 'till I seen the sour look on all of your faces...” I swallow hard and relearn my first lesson in playwriting and being a playwright: You're the play.

The success of *Miss Cow Bayou* comes down to one thing, folks: I'm Miss Cow Bayou. I'm that young girl from head to toe, heart to soul. She's got all my hurts, desperation, jealousy, ignorance, and fearlessness right there for you to take a long, painful gander at. It's almost shameful, it's so autobiographical. But the audience doesn't know that. What they see is a young woman who has very real needs and raw feelings just bubbling at the surface, who desperately wants something – NEEDS something -- from those around her, and who receives the worst possible thing: their indifference. Who couldn't relate to that? I couldn't extract myself from that play if I wanted to.

Everyone's life is fascinating, unusual, and worth drawing from because all of us have big events that profoundly affect us or tiny, quiet moments that change our lives forever. Everyone has some secret

that has to stay hidden, an oddity that defies explanation, or a curious relationship with the world. And we've got weird people in our lives: an uncle who has never been able to remember our names no matter how many times someone repeats it for him, a next-door neighbor who practices witchcraft and is the president of the local PTA, or a best friend who has an obsession with Brazil nuts. We've all wondered why our local librarian dabs at her mouth with a Kleenex every time we walk in the door, then gives us a wink when we walk out; why the guy at the car wash reads his Bible while he's drying our car with a dirty rag, or why our minister stores the church money in ice cream cartons in his freezer. We are surrounded by fascinating people—ourselves included. And therein lies my second lesson in playwriting and being a playwright:

My own life can be the stuff of interesting drama.

When I look back over all the plays I've written, I see that they're littered with everyone I've known, wanted to know or, sadly, would never know. No one is there more often than me, with my issues, big heartaches, and joyful celebrations shining like a beacon inside the smallest monologue or ten-minute play. My "stuff" oozes out of every word I write for every character I create. And I'm convinced that whatever success I've had in this career is directly related to my ability to say in my work, "Damn! It hurts when your best friend betrays you" in such a way that you'll respond, "I know what you mean."

Why spend a frigging eternity trying to innovate or fabricate the emotional life of a character in your play when what is so special and precious about you, the thing that makes you the object of all kinds of interesting reactions from different people, is enough to create a compelling character or a dramatically riveting story? Alright, so you haven't swum the seven seas, taken an apartment in Venice just for the inspiration of the view, been an intern on Capitol Hill, had a torrid affair with someone whose name you don't remember, or combed the back hills of Tennessee looking for the definitive log cabin. If you've lived on the face of this earth for fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years, or longer, and if you've listened to your own life stories as they've unfolded – but I mean, have really listened --, you have all the dramatic material you'll ever need for a lifetime of writing.

We're complex beings that no one understands but everyone's trying to understand. That's why we write. We're trying to make sense of ourselves. And if what we write for the theatre are people in dramatic situations and not the reverse, doesn't it make sense that you'd want to understand more of yourself and use yourself as the catalyst for any art you create? Look, I need every shortcut I can find when I write. If I know I'm carrying around a tremendous resource for dramatic material inside of me, how dumb am I not to use it? Not that dumb, baby.

Through my writing, will I ever understand what family is? I don't know. But clearly I keep trying to answer that question over and over again in every play I write. That little boy who grew up in bayou country and swatted away every social convention, replacing it with in-your-face daring and courage, who challenged and almost defied his family to love him then looked for family in every theatre experience he had, needs to know the answer. So here I sit, with all my plays, following the "what is family" thread woven inextricably through them all—and I am thankful that I have some mechanism for exorcising my demons and celebrating my enlightenment. Thank God I'm a playwright.

