

• Forward: “Dancing With MacIvor” •

My relationship to the plays of Daniel MacIvor has been as producer, director, audience member and most recently, as teacher. I am not alone in admiring his unstoppable artistic output and in being astonished again and again by realizing that what seems simple is suddenly complex in the best possible way. This happens in both his writing and his production style—that is—the way he “makes” a play. Each play adds up to a theatre experience which is so intriguing that we find ourselves going back through our memory of watching it, or re-reading the play to note exactly how and at what point every detail, every word was laid in. Often in MacIvor’s plays, and in the five plays in this collection, we, the audience, are acknowledged—we are not on the other side of the fourth wall. Our presence is part of the experience we are all going through together in the same room, but that experience is not always comfortable, and it doesn’t stop the imaginary world of the play from gaining power and grabbing us by the throat.

That is what happened to me in early 2001 when I saw the play, *In On It*, at the Belfry theatre in Victoria. *In On It* has a disarming simplicity. We are introduced to the several characters performed by two men with minimal props—two chairs, a grey sports jacket, a tissue and set of keys. Gradually, we are let “in on it.” Tiny details of each character’s circumstances are exchanged so casually that we are carried along by the overlapping stories blissfully unaware of the final catastrophe. Early in *In On It*, Brian, speaking to the audience says: “There are the things that happen out of careful planning—and then there are the things that sneak up on us—the things that happen over which we have no control.” It is breathtaking how this play suddenly takes on the tragic force of the inevitable. The play captures the poignancy of ordinary lives suddenly turned upside down by the unexpected. MacIvor identifies the main theme of *In On It* as “grief.” Touring to New York just after the 9/11 attacks this play became a magnet for New Yorkers and later that year Daniel MacIvor was presented with an Obie for *In On It*.

I find a strong thematic relationship between *In On It* and his next most recent play in this collection—*The Soldier Dreams*. While attending a workshop production of *The Soldier Dreams* at Buddies In Bad Times in Toronto, I was struck by MacIvor’s exploration of how “choice” and “chance” together determine our destiny. Were it not for one or the other everything would turn out differently. In this play, we learn details about David through the stories told by family and friends who are in vigil at his bedside. Threaded through this scene are the past events revealed by “memory David” who is present to us, but unseen by the others. He shows us how, while visiting Ottawa to be best man at a planned event—his sister’s wedding—he chanced to meet a student from Germany, and through the

choices that followed their meeting, David arrived at the place where he is at this moment—dying with AIDS. The combination of mere chance and those choices lead to his untimely death.

MacIvor's fine ear for the female voice impressed me deeply when I had the opportunity to direct his play, *Marion Bridge* in 2003. Later at McGill, while teaching "monologue, storytelling and direct address" in his plays—the students found and explored many of these female voices—some of which had only been performed by him. This exploration of MacIvor's women characters coincided with an opportunity to see the newest play in this collection—*A Beautiful View* in a workshop presentation at Usine C in Montreal, with Tracy Wright and Caroline Gillis. MacIvor again uses direct address to have both women wryly reveal truths about themselves to us, while showing a completely different face to the other character. We become complicit in their roller-coaster relationship which is based on misconceptions—each believing the other to be a lesbian and herself to be heterosexual. Their evasions and confusions lead to lots of laughter. However, time and fraught circumstances ultimately bring this unlikely pair together—in fact they face death together, and—again it sneaks up on us—we discover they have actually been telling us the story of their lives from the other side. In *A Beautiful View*, mortality is once more a vital ingredient which lends an amazing perspective and depth to the work.

This conceit of telling the story from the other side is used in another play which is included in this collection—*You Are Here*—the story of Alison, as told by Alison. The bottle of sand from a desert near the Dead Sea which she shows to us at the beginning of the play resonates with time and mortality. Throughout the play, we await its reappearance with apprehension. Midway through the second act Alison turns to the audience and says: "Retrospect is everything.... It is the road ahead of you and the horizon behind you. In retrospect it all comes together. All the little details turn into that road map you didn't know you'd been following all this time. All this long time. And in retrospect we look back to see how we got there. What it must have been that got us there, how it must have happened." Throughout the play, Alison reveals various events and relationships, and ultimately the hidden tragedy in the story—her "too late" realization about her only real love. Very simply, it's given to us in the final scene of the play, after all the sand has run out of the bottle. And then we find ourselves in the same position as Alison—looking back over her life—with "retrospect."

Never Swim Alone, first presented in 1991 at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto is the earliest of the MacIvor plays in this publication—and because it's a play about competition between men, the play itself is set up like a competition. The referee is played by a woman who keeps score and determines who wins each round. Late in the play, Frank says to the audience "The winner has, and will always, rule... being first, my friends is the point."

The sad truth is that what really binds these two established men is a different point—the point to which they were racing many years before, when a young girl drowned because they wouldn't stop to help her for fear of losing the race. In spite of the nagging, eroding memory of this shared secret, the referee—who is also the young girl, brings them face to face in a last deadly round. Having set them up in this final irresistible drive for the prize, she exits. Even in this very early play—when this simple dramatic metaphor concludes, it leaves us in a deeper place—thinking about men and games of power and the world around us.

The five plays in this collection span 15 years of writing from 1991–2006 and each successive play has greater depth and offers greater themes and perspectives. While each tale has a tragedy within it, Daniel MacIvor's writing retains a unique charm, a lively playfulness, sometimes with dancing, and plenty of humour. The exploration of the ironies of "the human condition"—is what makes MacIvor's work so fascinating. He tells a good story, but he has something well beyond the story to say, and it has that ring of being about us.

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