

Bridge Street Theatre

Brad Fraser (on Facebook)

I had never heard the play read aloud. I knew the producers by reputation but we'd only met briefly. It is the most personal and obviously biographical play I've ever written.

Saying I was nervous as Spencer and I were waiting to enter the theatre would be a gross understatement.

My expectations were necessarily low. As much about the writing as the production. Plus I'd recently learned they'd only had two weeks of rehearsal, with Equity restricted hours, which didn't bode well.

When the lights came up and I saw Janet Keller tears filled my eyes and snot almost immediately began to run from my nose. Thankfully I was masked. Janet has an uncanny resemblance to Shirley. I mean UNCANNY. They even share some of the same personal idiosyncrasies that Janet would have no way of knowing about. And she was costumed in one of Shirl's favourite outfits. I knew Steve wasn't me, and I knew Daniel wasn't the dog, but I wasn't entirely certain that Janet wasn't Shirley throughout that run.

Once the initial shock subsided, I was able to watch the show with both my open heart and my critical mind. The actors were amazing. Was it perfect? Not at all. This was their first public performance, first performances are never perfect and rarely even good. But this one was very good, with plenty of room for improvement. But it was mostly simple stuff, more direct connection, better pacing, exploiting the best moments, things that can be dealt with, although doing so isn't easy.

The same was true of the play. Everything that needed to be there was there, perhaps a bit too much. It needed trimming, certain lines clunked, the point of a couple scenes was unclear, ideas were repeated using different phrasing, the usual issues with unproduced drafts of plays that I would've normally addressed in rehearsal. But Covid, economics, and schedules made that impossible. So we adapt and do the best we can.

The next night the show was immensely better in most ways. Was it perfect? Of course not. This was the second performance. Second public performances are often worse than first performances. It often takes three or more performances before things really come together, and even then the show will rarely be perfect. Perfect theatre is dead theatre. It means it is being done by rote, the danger of failure is gone.

The actor's performances and choices, and each of them are excellent, taught me a great deal about the characters. The places where the actors sometimes stumbled taught me a great deal about the play, and how a writer who hasn't finessed the work enough can trip up the actor with their only partially realized intentions. The sound of the audience breathing, how quiet they were, where they laughed and where they didn't, taught me even more. It made me wish I could stay for the rest of the performances and work with director, cast and crew every day, but that was impossible. But I did leave with a strong blueprint in my head of what needed to change and how best to do it.

Two days after I got home I sat down and within three hours had made all of the changes I thought the play needed. I was able to do this so quickly because of the work that had been done at Bridge Street Theatre.

This commission, like this production, was a gift at the perfect time. Since Shirley's departure my life has changed drastically and emotional issues about her have lingered. As I said, seeing

her onstage again was a profoundly emotional experience because, and this really is a first for me, I didn't create the character of Shelley, as she's called in the play. It is Shirley. I simply wrote down what she said. Of course there are fictional moments, and things that have been tidied up to help narrative, but this script is closer to verbatim than will ever be achieved in a university drama lab.

So thank you John, Steve, Janet, Daniel, Michelle, Christine, Kiara, and everyone else involved in the show, for your amazing work and for allowing me to spend some time with her again.

And, even more importantly, it keeps the essence of her here with us, and ensures more people meet Shirley. And there was nothing Shirley liked more than meeting new people. So, in a way, I feel like I defeated the disease. Shirley may not remember us, but through this play I hope a lot more people remember her. The same is true of Shadow.

Thank you everyone who's been part of this journey.



Shirley and Shadow

Brad xo