

## **True story becomes "Shelley's Shadow" at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill**

*Joseph Dalton*

You might say that a series of Facebook postings by Brad Fraser was the first draft of his newest work.

Fraser, one of Canada's top playwrights, began a few years ago to write online about his efforts to assist an elderly neighbor as her health declined. His friends in the cyber universe followed the unfolding story and developed a fondness for the woman and her dog. The saga of Fraser and his neighbor became the basis for "Shelley's Shadow," which is receiving its world premiere production at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill where it runs Sept. 8-18.

Steven Patterson and John Sowle, co-founders of Bridge Street, have a respectable history with Fraser's plays, having produced one in San Francisco ("Poor Super Man") and two in Hudson ("True Love Lies" and "Kill Me Now"). Contemporary material has been a regular part of Bridge's eight-year history, but "Shelley's Shadow" is the first work to be commissioned and premiered by the company. Patterson leads the three-member cast and Sowle is directing.

For Fraser, 63, telling his own life stories through the medium of theater is nothing new. "About half my work is based on what happens in my life," he says. "There's a veneer of fiction as I change things and put them back together into something more orderly. It can be kind of embarrassing a lot of the time. It's hard to put yourself out there and be vulnerable in autobiographical material."

"David McMillan" is the name Fraser gives to his alter ego in plays. In "Shelley's Shadow," David is single, gay and living in a Toronto apartment building, getting by on sundry writing projects. Shelley is a lesbian neighbor from an upper floor, also single and with whom he's had a passing acquaintance, mostly just greetings by the mailboxes. One day out on the sidewalk he sees she's clearly in distress and unable to properly attend to her dog so he volunteers to give her a hand. That opens the doorway to a deepening friendship, to David's becoming aware of her failing memory, and to Shelley's increasing dependency on his assistance.

The one-act play chronicles about 18 months of the characters' lives. According to Fraser, that's a distillation of an actual friendship that lasted 10 years. During the latter half of that period, he found himself becoming her primary caregiver before she was ultimately moved to a facility for Alzheimer's patients. Fraser's serial account on Facebook of their unfolding relationship was so vivid and touching that when Shelley's dog, Shadow, needed some pricey medical care, the online community covered the expense through contributions.

Early in the play, Shelley says that maybe David could write about Shadow sometime. He then explains social media and obtains her permission to write about both her and the dog. Fraser recalls how it went in real life: "We got a huge amount of money for the dog, and I showed her the entries on Facebook. She cried and said it was some kind of miracle."

Interspersed regularly throughout the script are passages labeled “Spotlight on David” during which the character comments on the action or otherwise moves the story forward. Fraser agrees that the passages are suggestive of the Facebook log but remains mute on how the vignettes are to be realized onstage. Does David step forward and address the audience? Does he pick up a laptop and start typing? This is just one of at least a couple of components in the play that are left as a challenge to the director and actors.

“I’ve had a number of ideas but it’s not my job to solve those problems,” declares Fraser. “I can’t wait to see how it works and see how people respond. The first production of a play you always wonder if it will work or if we’ll need to find a new way for the next production.”

When it comes to fictional plays about his life, Fraser says “I don’t tell everything.” But it sounds like he did just that in his memoir that was published last year. According to the reviews, “All the Rage” chronicles a troubled childhood, has explicit scenes of gay sex and drug use, and recounts the learning curve of being a professional in the arts.

In “Shelley’s Shadow,” he comes through as a generous and attentive friend who goes the extra mile. Many urban dwellers strive to maintain boundaries regarding how involved they get with neighbors. Fraser replies: “You can have all the boundaries you want but when someone needs something that no one else can do, your boundaries don’t mean very much.”

The playwright acknowledges that a component of the isolation of David and Shelley may be due to their sexual orientation. “We come from a generation where getting married and having a child wasn’t an option or an idea we could entertain,” he says, adding that the AIDS epidemic robbed him of the vast majority of his friends.

Sowle says that Fraser is breaking new theatrical ground and describes the new work as “virtually unique in its presentation of the lives of older gay and lesbian characters.”

The subtitle of Fraser’s recent book, “A Partial Memoir in Two Acts and a Prologue,” suggests that still ahead for him is more living and more real-life material to plunder. While currently at work on a Shakespeare adaptation slated for a summer festival next year, he’s mindful of the ongoing need to develop and maintain a network of acquaintances of all ages, saying “I can see a parallel and a warning to me – make some younger friends.”

Joseph Dalton is a freelance writer based in Troy.

"Shelley's Shadow"

World premiere by Brad Fraser

When: Opens Thursday Sept. 8 and runs through Sunday, Sep. 18

Where: Bridge Street Theatre, 44 W. Bridge Street, Catskill

Tickets: \$10-\$22. Call (518) 943-3818. More info: [bridgest.org](http://bridgest.org)