

Berni Stapleton / THE PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

I have a play called *Woman In A Monkey Cage* which got sent to somebody who sent it to somebody else who sent it to Gil Osbourn at the NAC. She called me up and asked me if I had anything new that hadn't been produced yet. The answer to that question is always yes! I mailed her off *Offensive To Some*. That first draft was only twelve pages long but Gil liked it enough to invite me to 'Page To Stage' in June of 95.

Kent Stetson, Wanda Graham and I have worked together on several plays over the years, including *Woman In A Monkey Cage*. From the beginning we have instinctively assumed our positions at the points of some sort of triangle. When the three of us sit down for the first time with a new work, Kent will see the glass half full, Wanda will see the glass just out of reach, and I will see the glass half empty. Between the three of us we manage to fill the glass up until it spills over. People ask me how do I write plays. People ask me why do I write about the things I do. They might just as well ask me how do I breathe. I like Kent and Wanda because they don't ask me questions like that.

On the first day of 'Page To Stage' in Ottawa the three of us were so happy to see each other we went out to lunch to catch up on all the things good buddies like to catch up on. Kent and I thought it would be fun to make Wanda read the first draft to us while we ate our Greek salads so we tormented the life out of her until she gave in. Until then I thought those first twelve pages were a really good beginning but when Wanda began to read I started to cringe and sweat and fret. Wanda was reading and Kent was listening and I was half insane. It is *always* this way for me. The first time I hear my work read out loud I die a little. I die a lot. It has nothing to do with who is reading it. It has everything to do with my own insecurity. So while Wanda is reading I'm sitting there picking my own work apart with vicious little silent darts. Kent is deeply curious about the character in the play and intrigued by her story. Wanda is already sniffing out those little truths that actors look for in text and sub-text. I let them talk and gradually

I'm talking too and I forget that I'm the centre of the universe and remember that I love my script.

The first few sessions were very much like that. Wanda reads, Kent and I listen, then I listen to them, then they listen to me, sometimes no one listens to me, sometimes there's nothing to listen to because no one's talking. Kent knows how to ask all the right questions. He asks me questions about the character and her tragedy. Where did she come from? What made her laugh? How does she make other people laugh? I never have to answer these questions out loud and there is never one right answer. Wanda approaches each reading from a different tack. She test drives the script like it's a car, at different paces and levels and emotions. If something isn't working in the script I have the chance to hear if it's an acting problem or a writing problem. I am always secretly amazed by the respect and faith with which they treat my work. Surely someday they will figure out that I don't know what I'm doing.

Then I have two days to rewrite. This is my favourite time. I write for hours and hours. I forget to eat. I eat junk. I won't answer the phone. I watch trash t.v. I dream about the script when I sleep and then I wake up and put the dreams into the script. I don't *have* to talk to anybody so I *don't*. The script more than doubles in length. This entire experience is one of those too infrequent luxuries for a performer. Usually I steal time to write, eke out a script between this and that, then never know if anyone will like it because I'm too shitbaked to show it to anyone.

The final sessions of 'Page To Stage' are spent once again listening to Wanda read, but it's different now. I'm not listening with the intention of doing any immediate rewriting. I'm listening to her work the material in preparation for a public reading. It's necessary for me to step back and see how my play works without me around to babysit. I make notes. Kent is always gently pushing me toward taking more risks with the piece. The toughest, roughest contents of the play don't scare him and he never second guesses anything. He never worries if it will be too hard for people to listen to. He never asks me to defend anything. All he wants is for me to go my full limit on whatever I write and he knows I'm not there yet. He doesn't tell me anything. Instead he guides me into knowledge so I can tell myself anything.

The public reading was hard and good. I'm a performer and I

almost always perform my own work. So I have to let go and understand that Wanda is not going to do it the way I would. She delivers a stunning reading. She's good. I sit in the audience and feel what they feel. I'm thinking, 'I wrote this. Yes. I can live with this. I'm proud.' The thing about Wanda is, if she can't make a section of the text work then probably no one else can. As a performer she is fearless. I mean, she will leap off a cliff. Sometimes I am tempted to make my work idiot proof. I think, well, not everyone has the talent Wanda has. Then I think, no friggin way. And then I make the text even harder. I lay in booby traps and mysteries cause I know it's like a Rubik cube.

I leave Ottawa with an agreement from the NAC Atelier to give *Offensive To Some* its first professional production in Jan/96.

The second workshop happened in St. John's in Oct of 95. Since Ottawa I have tinkered with the script, but nothing serious. For the first few days the sessions focus on the really really hard stuff. What happened to this woman's kids? What exactly did she do to her husband? We're talking the kind of minute details that I've been avoiding. I like to listen to Kent and Wanda talk about what the current script leads them to believe about the woman. I like the way they disagree about certain things. This is how I learn that the only thing that is important right now is what I know inside. The play will be interpreted in a hundred different ways. During this week I have a chat with Wanda about nudity on stage: how does she feel about that, will she be able to do that? I have to, *have* to give the woman in the play a chance to validate her experiences, to share the marks that years of beatings have left on her. So, that particular scene goes in the play. Sometimes Wanda asks me questions about the play for which I have no answers. She is evolving out of workshop mode now and starting to work the play as an actor. This is good. It means the play is ready. This is bad. What happens to *me* now? Kent is calm and gentle and he has a soul of steel. This is good. It means he's just what he is: honest and forthright and challenging and incredibly supportive. He's now talking a lot about the structure of the play, the way I've decided to make it a two act for now. We spend a lot of time talking about that. He is very very organized. This is good. I'm juggling my twelve year old son, two cats, a dozen other work commitments going on at the same time, and Kent just keeps me from sliding off the path. There is another public reading to conclude this workshop phase and Kent is very good at sifting

through the barrage of comments and stories that people want to share afterwards. He knows when someone has a valid question or point about the script and when someone has been so stirred by the material that they just need to talk, but he never patronizes, and he manages to make everyone feel like they've made a contribution. This is good, because I am usually incapable of talking about my work. If someone asks me what *Offensive To Some* is about, I can't answer. If I do manage to answer I have a gift for making the play sound stupid and boring.

The Ottawa production of *Offensive To Some* in Jan/96 was very difficult for me. The reviews were phenomenal, Wanda was breathtaking, Kent was visionary. I was lost. It's the first time I've ever been in such close proximity to a play of mine that *I wasn't in*! I don't know what other writers do when a play gets up on its feet, but I'd sure like to know. I spent a year nurturing every syllable on every page and suddenly I wasn't essential anymore! I think this is called 'empty nest' syndrome. Same thing. Post-partum depression. Of course I was always welcome in rehearsal, and always included and briefed on production decisions. Of course I knew my work was in good and talented hands, and I trusted Kent to fly it to the moon. Of course I knew I could not keep this play home on the shelf for the next twenty years until I felt it was *really* ready. Of course of course of course!

I've done a lot of workshops in my twenty years as an actor/writer/comic. Sometimes I'm the writer, sometimes I'm working on someone else's script. I've been at too many workshops where the session begins with everyone tearing the work apart. I've been at too many workshops where everyone thinks they have the right to tell the writer what to write. I've been at too many workshops where people become preoccupied by what *they* think the script should be instead of helping the *writer* find what the script should be. Workshopping is a sensitive, finely-balanced, excruciating process — and that's if it's done properly. In clumsy hands it can be the ruination of a blossoming work and author. In cruel hands it can do psychological damage.

After each performance of *Offensive To Some* in Ottawa there was a talk-back. Audience members who wished could stay behind and give me their comments or questions. Many people longed to believe that this was *my* story. They wanted to feel that I had given them myself. It wasn't enough for me to describe the work as a fiction. They needed

to know where it had come from. This was hard for me because *I* don't always know where it all comes from. Here's what I told people in Ottawa:

The turtle is real. One time a big old gigantic dead turtle washed up on a beach near my home in NFLD. It was humungous. It had perished because something had taken a big bite right out of its guts. People came from miles around to look at that turtle. Camera crews filmed it, newspapers did articles on it, and everybody had their snap taken with it. That was one famous turtle. Everybody was ooohing and aaahing over the size of it but all I could think about was 'what took the bite out of its guts? Now *that* I'd like to see.'

Sylvie is based on a historical figure in NFLD. The last woman hanged in NFLD met the noose sometime early in the last century. She's not famous or even infamous, so I decided to give her a really good juicy story. As a matter of fact, Sylvie is so vivid for me now that I know I will certainly give her a play of her own in the future.

There was a woman on trial in St. John's a few years ago for murdering her abusive husband. He had been beating her up and she picked up a kitchen knife to try to scare him off. He was in such a rage that the momentum of his blows on her took him off balance and he fell onto the knife. She was put on trial and I can't remember if it was for manslaughter or what but I remember the prosecution just torturing this woman. It was completely understood by all that she had been horrifically abused for years, that she was as timid as a church mouse and that she was horrified by what had happened. So, no one could understand why the prosecution was determined to make an example of her. I watched all this on the news every night and I thought, 'Well. If she had her time back she should have really done a job on him. Just went right to work on that bastard with that knife. She's taken such a shit-knockin from the court, she could at least have got some satisfaction from her crime.'

So all of these things and more got knitted up into *Offensive To Some*.