

2016

## **LMDA Conference GE Lessing Award, 2016**

Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas

Geoff Proehl

Brian Quirt

Introduction: Brian Quirt

Geoff, you may enjoy that I wrote much of this speech beside a lake, some of it even while paddling a canoe. That seems a Canadian cliché, but it is indeed true. As I paddled and gathered my thoughts, I hoped a great blue heron would fly past and land in the little shallow bay to my left; that, I thought, would be a fitting (and convenient) natural world metaphor for you, Geoff: beautiful, precise, a gentle shade of grey-blue, somewhat slow moving – a heron's flight is a miracle of how slowly a large animal can pass through the air, like Geoff slowly and deliberately moving through a conference, seeing all, noting where to alight and – well, you take my point.

In any case, no convenient heron.

But I do have a dramaturgical story about the man whose dramaturgical sensibility has shaped many of us in this room, and many many many beyond it. While I sat by that lake I thought of my friend, the dramaturg Ruth Little who at the Banff Centre a year or two ago while working on a new piece with Bryony Lavery about slime– called, surprise, *Slime* – shared with us many of her insights about biology and landscape. One that has stuck with me, and struck me deeply, was this. In the wild, if you listen, and listen carefully, every bird, indeed every animal, apparently communicates on a different frequency. In a richly diverse biosphere, when the sound spectrum is examined, you can place every creature on it with no overlap; and with no gaps. In an unhealthy landscape, however, there will be huge holes in the sound spectrum where creatures that once filled it have disappeared or moved to more advantageous (or less disastrous) areas. Ruth's comment has demanded that I listen to my own surroundings beside that lake differently, changing my relationship with a land I thought I knew, and now know better.

Which leads me to Geoff, as I paddled down that lake, white moon setting in blue sky, Nancy having coffee back on our deck, sun rising in the other sky to the east. And I thought of how Geoff has so elegantly and always framed his own speeches, his publications, his production dramaturgy, his remarkable book, his comments at conferences, even his notes in that wonderful artists sketchbook he carries, in terms of personal stories – rich in language, in observation, in perspectives that take us to a new place – stories from his life, his children, Morly, their sunsets, their road trips, their arguments in diners. And found artful inspirational ways to bridge his life with his life's work as a teacher and mentor and dramaturg.

When I listened to the full spectrum of the sonic landscape that day at the lake, thanks to Ruth's observation, and with Geoff's friendship over twenty years in my mind, I realized that I hear and see the dramaturgical landscape more fully, with greater awareness of what is there throughout the spectrum, and indeed where gaps are that must be addressed, in large part to Geoff and how he has helped me see more fully. And listen more carefully.

Geoff has offered me this greater perspective not through any one moment or through a specific mentorship – although often over a beer or a glass of wine – but through two decades of his thoughtful, devoted, loving, deep commitment to the field we all work within. To dramaturgy as a way of seeing, processing and understanding the world we pass through; to storytelling as a way to engage with the philosophy of living; and to the people of his landscape perhaps most of all. Geoff's students are throughout this room and across the country. And here I speak

specifically of those who've had the benefit of taking Geoff's courses, being in his productions and programs at Puget Sound, who have been mentored – gently but deliberately – for years after they graduated by a man whose influence has been so rich for so many.

Geoff has played this role in our own organization as well, as many of you know. As President from 1998-2000, Geoff pulled together a remarkable team to renew an organization that was struggling for purpose and suffering in its management. His first conference, just down the road in Tacoma, was a healing one that didn't start out so very well. In an inauspicious beginning to the conference, a dead body was discovered in the ocean just beneath the otherwise stunning café that hosted our first reception. Perhaps only a conference led by Geoff could have shaken off that omen and gone on to revitalize our organization and set not only its pathway for the next decade, but also its leadership. He, with those he gathered around him, identified those who would lead LMDA over that next ten years: DD Kugler, Michele Volansky, Liz Engelman, and myself, and many of the Executive members who worked with us through that period. He mentored us all, and I believe provided a foundation for each of our terms that led directly to the leadership we've enjoyed in recent years through Shelley Orr, Danielle Mages Amato, Vicki Stroich, Beth Bickers and now Ken Cerniglia. That is a living legacy, and a tribute to Geoff's ability to, once again, see the full spectrum of people in the landscape and know who might serve, in what way, in the best interests of this work we all do.

Geoff since his term as President has served as a leader of LMDA's University Caucus, as LMDA's archivist, pulling together the core documents of the organization at Puget Sound, created an invaluable chronology of LMDA's accomplishments over 30 years – a record that is so easily and often lost in a member-driven service organization such as ours – and most recently as a founding member of the Bly Creative Capacity Grant committee and as a Board member where he continued to offer his expertise and wisdom to LMDA's leadership.

The Lessing Award is our highest honour, offered by unanimous agreement by LMDA's Board of Directors to individuals to recognize exceptional lifetime achievement in our field. Geoff exemplifies this as a dramaturg, scholar, mentor, volunteer and leader who has brought so much to LMDA. I am honoured to present Geoff Proehl with the G.E. Lessing Award.

- Brian Quirt, LMDA Board Chair

## Acceptance: Geoff Proehl

Thank you, Brian for your eloquent words and, in London, Cindy, for your many kindnesses.<sup>1</sup>

I am tremendously honored to receive the Lessing Award.

To be named here with individuals I have read about and admired for years – Anne Cattaneo, Arthur Ballet, Michael Lupu, Mark Bly, DD Kugler, Morgan Jenness – is profoundly intimidating. I expect at any moment to look down and see that I am in my underwear and must fight the desire to tell you how unworthy I am of this recognition, but what I have decided to do instead is take this award, hide it in my room tonight, and rush back to Tacoma tomorrow before the Board changes its mind.

I must also fight the desire to begin a long, long list of names of those who have made this honor possible. Every time I try to do so, a little voice says, but what about . . . so instead I want to acknowledge, however inadequately, that I am the astoundingly privileged recipient of a lifetime of love and care, much of it from people in this room and as I name these communities of generosity I would invite you to think not only of those who have made my journey possible but also yours: Family, Teachers, Mentors, Colleagues, Students, and Collaborators. The only names I will drop here tonight are Josh, Kristen, and Morlie. Anyone who knows me understands how risk averse and neurotic I am, how little I like change: were it not for Morlie, I would not be here, and neither of course, would Kristen and Josh.

The rest of my remarks will be brief: from this point, 1051 words, at three seconds a word, about 6 minutes.

“Encounters with Strangers: A Scene and Two Pivots”

Scene: There is a kind of *scene* I love in plays in which strangers meet in the night.

One example will have to suffice. On a bus travelling south out of Houston an old woman and a young, two strangers, speak with one another in a tiny pool of light, surrounded by darkness and, except for the hum of tires on the road, silence. The old woman knows she will die soon and wants, before she leaves, to find again, if only for a few moments, a beauty that has left her: suffering she accepts, beauty she demands. The young woman has just said good-bye to someone she loves and must deal with the fear that he may not return. They listen to one another and they talk. They offer each to each a kind of listening, as do dramaturgs all the time, that evokes language, that enables intimacy, that makes stories possible.

LMDA is that bus, that pool of light. It exists in order to make encounters with strangers possible. At its inception, this was probably not the case. Dramaturg friends got together for lunch to support one another in the lonely work they were doing. They ate and drank and talked, as we have done here tonight, but soon, David Copelin and his friends did this *remarkable* thing: they opened up that conversation so that others could join it; they created a place for strangers to meet. They said, we are having lunch, come and join us. We want to know you, not because of who you are, but because of what you do, what you know, and, most of all, what you love.

PIVOT #1: What those dramaturgs and literary managers wanted to know and what they loved owes its existence to three other spaces where strangers also meet – the theatre, the rehearsal hall, and the classroom. What these spaces have in common are the immense pleasures they have to offer those who enter them, often experienced as an opening of what we sometimes call the heart and what we sometimes call the mind, not in spite of our ignorance, messiness, and mortality, but in the midst of it, places where for a few moments we are Masha and Vanya, Olivia and Viola, Prior and Louis, Claressa Greene and Elaine Madonna Bergeron, places that nourish those transient images of beauty and significance that are our most necessary<sup>2</sup> fiction. (If those last two names – Claressa and Elaine – are not familiar, see me later and I can introduce you to their creator and her marvelous dramaturg.)

These spaces – classroom, rehearsal hall, theatre, and, this thing we call Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (part guild, part learned society, part lonely hearts club) – are relentlessly at risk: the richness of their pleasures, easily supplanted by quicker fixes and commercial gain, easily belittled by those whose power they threaten. We should never take them for granted. And those who in any way contribute to their existence, especially in these terrible times, are deserving of our thanks.

PIVOT #2: The first conferences I attended were summer church camps at Jennings Lodge on the Willamette River, about 10 miles from here. I went there throughout my high school years. I hated them, not because of my pastor and church community, but because hell-fire and brimstone preachers did their best each night to scare people into heaven, and I, obsessive compulsive adolescent that I was, could never quite make peace with God and so, time and again, would feel compelled to walk down the aisle in order to rededicate myself to a Jesus who was more like a lover who could never get enough than a risen savior.

A fictional version of this scene shows up in a piece of writing I worked on with Kugler last summer at Liz's lake.<sup>3</sup> In it, "Ogden," a young man about to graduate from high school, sits, nearly alone, in the camp meeting's open-air bleachers on an August night. His friends have gone off to get french fries; the piano player has finished the hymn played as folks filed out; the last of those who responded to the alter call are drying their tears. A stranger enters the pew behind the young man and sits, near but not close:

Ogden looked in the stranger's direction, they exchanged brief greetings. His thoughts returned to the hymn and the night. He'd almost gone forward, almost made the walk to the front to pray and give his life to Jesus one more time. But he hadn't, and that was why he was still sitting in the Billy Sunday Tabernacle on Friday night in the summer before his first year of college, wondering what he should do.

The stranger leaned forward, resting his arms on the back of the pew Ogden was sitting in, and then they talked.

Years later, Ogden could not say with certainty whether or not the conversation happened or he dreamt it, because it had been so unlike any encounter he had ever had. It was, he later thought, what it might be like to sit with an angel, even though the stranger was more probably a seminary student, who saw in the

young man who lingered in God's bleachers while his friends ate french fries, a former image of himself.

The man was soft-spoken, thoughtful, radiant. In other times, other places, the encounter would have been the first moments of a seduction, and perhaps, in some way it was. The stranger did not share Ogden's anxiety, did not think going forward was necessary or even particularly significant. Instead, he wanted to know how Ogden was doing, who he was, and most of all, he wanted him to be well, to be at peace.

When the man left, Ogden's life changed, not in any big or immediate way – he would still do for God most of the jobs he'd been doing for years – but he had felt this little shift.

It is for these little shifts of what we sometimes call a soul that we gather in classrooms, in rehearsal halls, in theatres, and at least once a year as Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas. Long may we do so.<sup>4</sup>

- Geoff Proehl

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1 Brian Quirt, Board Chair of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, 2015-present; Cynthia SoRelle, Board Chair, 2009-2015.

2 C. Rosalind Bell, playwright; Grace Livingston, dramaturg.

3 Tofte Lake Center at Norm's Fish Camp, Liz Engelman, director.

4 Thanks to DD Kugler, who dramaturged these remarks.