No Business Like Show Business

Randall David Cook ’91

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In June, Randall David Cook’s first play, Southern Discomfort, premiered at the Aronoff Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. The play, a dark comedy involving a family of dysfunctional Southern women, is best described as “Steel Magnolias on acid.”

Herewith is the playwright’s journey from the writing of the first page to his first professional production, abbreviated greatly, for it has been said that the soul of wit is brevity. No matter how seemingly outrageous, the stories are true.

Some names have been changed to protect the author, not the innocent, for innocents don’t survive in the theatre biz, with the possible exception of Carol Channing.
ACT I: NEW YORK CITY

June 1996
I start and finish my first job in the theatre world in record time: three weeks and two days. The Boss, a brilliant liar with an encyclopedic knowledge of theatre, sits at his desk and answers the phone something like this:

**BOSS:** Hello. Yes, this is Frank (not his name). You want to speak to Albert? Let me get him for you. (**BOSS** puts phone down for three seconds, then picks it up again without the slightest change in inflection.) Albert here, what do you want? Yes, I still think August Wilson is very, very overrated. Is that all? I'm very, very busy and surrounded by idiots who know nothing about theatre. Wait a minute. Mr. Cook?

**ME:** Yes?

**BOSS:** Walk this over to Isabelle Stevenson's office, and walk fast. The exercise will do you good. And when you get there, don’t talk to anyone. Just hand over the package and leave.

**ME:** OK.

**BOSS:** And before you go, let's have a pop quiz! Where was Strindberg from?

**ME:** Sweden?

**BOSS:** You don’t sound completely sure of your answer. You young people — you know nothing! You think it’s bad here? You could be working for Barry Weissler. His assistants get to eat lunch only if he does. Go deliver the package. When you get back, I may fire you.

I end up quitting before I get the ax. And though The Boss had lied to me about the nature of the job, the hours, the benefits and even the salary, I know better than to burn a bridge.

July 1996
The Boss is named to the exclusive nominating committee for the 1997 Tony Awards.

August 1996
My second job in the theatre industry, as a Guy Friday to an Oscar-winning writer and his harpy wife, lasts twice as long as the first one. In due course, I am lied to about the nature of the job, the hours, the benefits and even the salary. Strange, but I sense a pattern emerging! There's nothing wrong with the writer, at least on the surface, but the wife is ... well, rather than be forced to go on, and the lion watches only NBC. Employees who insult the lion in any way, form or fashion are immediately given the boot.

But that is not how I get fired. One sad afternoon my grandmother, who has been in a coma for several weeks following a car accident, dies. I ask to leave the office to fly home for the funeral, and as I am saying goodbye . . .

**HARPY WIFE:** Don’t come back!
most notably A Streetcar Named Desire, and Granddad Louis B. Mayer was responsible for the last letter of the MGM acronym.

Daniel is the chairman of Ensemble Studio Theatre (EST), a reading developmental theatre. Trained from a young age to evaluate plays, he reads my script, loves it and asks to meet for breakfast, which starts with a question I often ask myself.

DANIEL: Where on earth did you come from?

That question is followed by two hours of notes, and the summer vacation I had planned is now off, to be replaced by rewrites galore. Interestingly enough, Daniel insists that I cut as much as possible from the second scene. I start to sense another pattern emerging.

September 1999
Daniel, citing a dislike of the original title and a deadline that must be met, changes the name of the play (without my approval) for the EST reading to Hot Buttered Bourbon. There is no mention of hot buttered bourbon in the play, so I have to create a new line for the grandmother's entrance.

BEFORE:
DIXIE: Where's the bourbon?

AFTER:
DIXIE: Where's the hot buttered bourbon?

October 1999
Hot Buttered Bourbon is included in Octoberfest, EST's yearly festival of new plays. Daniel assembles a fine cast, including Roberta Wallach, the talented daughter of stage legends Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson, as the lead. Roberta and the other cast members are wonderful, but the play, moving far too slowly on night one, falls flat. And one actress literally freezes on stage, her script in hand but her mind in Mozambique. I watch in terror as she mangles or drops line after line. My only solace is that her character gets shot before the end of the first act.

The second night goes far better, and the audience erupts wildly at times, but not enough to keep a certain Oscar-winning actress from leaving at intermission. I'm crushed by her departure, and from that point forward prefer not to know if any notables are in the audience.

November 1999
I hear nothing. From months of rewriting and hard work to absolute silence. I decide to continue working on a new play, and I also decide to change the title of my play back to Southern Discomfort. No bourbon needed, hot or buttered.

ACT III: THE SAME, 3 MONTHS LATER

February 2000
My new play, Interviews with Aphrodite, is chosen by producer Patricia Watt to launch her spring reading series, and the reading goes wonderfully. Patricia's father, Doug, the former music critic for New Yorker and drama critic for The Daily News, is very encouraging. Someone who does not know my preferences on the matter runs up to let me know that Marisa Berenson, star of Cabaret and Barry Lyndon, is in the audience. Not only does she stay until the end, she congratulates me warmly after the show.

March 2000
Cerasela calls. Her husband has been named principal trombonist with the Cincinnati orchestra, so she moves to Ohio, starts making contacts and pitches Southern Discomfort to a few artistic directors. Michael Shooner of New Edgecliff Theatre (NET) reads the script, loves it and decides to produce the play during the 2000-2001 season, with Cerasela directing.
April 2000
More silence. I start working on Sake with the Haiku Geisha, a series of interlocking one-acts inspired by my two years of teaching in rural Japan.

May 2000
Another reading of Southern Discomfort, this one at the Cincinnati Museum of Art. It goes well, and in some ways the audience enjoys the play more than New York audiences. However, the theatre critic of The Cincinnati Enquirer, Jackie Demaline, attends and evidently hates the play from the very start. Critics do not typically attend readings of plays in a professional capacity, as readings are considered works that are in progress, but apparently Jackie is not typical. It’s later reported to me that she had such a visceral reaction to the show that she approached members of the theatre board and told them not to do the play... OR ELSE.

June 2000
Good and bad news.

Good: Cerasela is one of two candidates accepted to the prestigious director’s program at American Repertory Theatre (ART) at Harvard.

Bad: She won’t be able to direct the show.

July 2000
Daniel Selznick attends a new playwright’s festival in which one of my one-acts has been selected as the evening’s closer. I tell him about the Southern Discomfort situation and ask if he’s interested in directing the premiere of the show in Cincinnati. Negotiations between Daniel and NET begin.

August 2000
Theatre in Cincinnati wavers a bit (a reaction to critic Jackie’s opposition?) and postpones the show until spring.

I’m bothered only slightly by this news, as pressing matters elsewhere are keeping me occupied. My first screenplay has been named a finalist for the Sundance Filmmakers Lab, and I have three weeks to turn in a final draft. I’ve written only the first third of the script because that was all that was required for the application and because I thought I didn’t have the slightest chance of making it to the next round.

Three weeks. Three weeks. Three weeks...

The stress of the deadline goes straight to my back, and I wake up one morning unable to move. It takes three hours to sit up, and the spasms are so severe I’ll try anything, so I visit an acupuncturist in Chinatown who sticks dozens of needles in my back and legs to ease the pain. The treatment works, and I finish the screenplay. Now more waiting.

December 2000
The wait is over. The screenplay isn’t chosen. I read over it again and see a huge problem dead smack in the middle that I didn’t see before. I don’t know how to solve it.

February 2001
Southern Discomfort gets postponed again, this time from April to summer. I’m furious about the delay as quite a few friends and family have already purchased plane tickets, and I still haven’t received a satisfactory explanation. NET’s Michael Shooner says something about problems with the set design, the budget, casting problems and Daniel’s schedule.

March 2001
Rewrites, rewrites, rewrites. I kill at least two trees this month with drafts.

April 2001
The postponement turns out to be a blessing when major race riots erupt in downtown Cincinnati during the week the show was scheduled to open. Can’t see theatre when a curfew is in effect! But critic Jackie is still on the case, writing that there has been “much off-stage muttering about fund-raising and rewrites.”

How confusing gossip is! The rewrites had been finished weeks before the delay was announced.

May 2001
Daniel returns to Cincinnati in May and doesn’t stop calling, telling me that I need to look at this line and that line, and then something else. Since I’m not there, and since much of the play is farcical and has never been blocked (the movements actors make on stage), I take it on his word that the changes are needed. And, indeed, can a play ever be too tight?

June 2001
Jackie writes in The Cincinnati Enquirer that “Mr. Selznick and his cast have been rewriting furiously.”

I’m delighted to read that the cast is “rewriting furiously,” because I’m exhausted and I’d hate to be shouldering that burden alone. Daniel calls me every day, often mornings and nights. Now that week one of rehearsals has passed, I suggest that we stop doing so much script work because the cast needs to get off book. If they haven’t memorized their lines, they’re going to be in a panic later. I keep repeating this, but Daniel tells me that the cast is too excited with the progress of the script to want to stop.

When not doing rewrite work with me, Daniel is doing a hell of a job marketing the play, speaking to groups, making television and radio appearances, and entertaining all the critics in town. This too makes me nervous because expectations are being set, as in the comments he makes to The Cincinnati Post.

DANIEL: “I spent a lot of time in Hollywood in two specific time periods. One, in my childhood, the first 10 years of my life. I was three when Gone With The Wind was made. And then I lived in Beverly Hills in my late 20s and early 30s because I was an executive for MCA/Universal. [Southern Discomfort has] some of the funniest Hollywood-type dialogue I have ever heard in any play anywhere, and I fell in love with the play because it was so fearless.”

An actress freezes on stage, her script in hand but her mind in Mozambique.
ACT IV, SCENE I: CINCINNATI, DRESS REHEARSAL

Wednesday, June 19

I arrive an hour or two before the dress rehearsal. Ominous signs appear the minute I hear the cast recording that’s been chosen to usher in the audience: “Cats.” Meow.

But I soon discover that Jellicle cats are really the least of my problems.

To my shock and dismay, I’m told by the actress playing Dixie that the dress rehearsal, which will be held in front of an audience, will be the cast’s FIRST RUN-THROUGH OF THE ENTIRE PLAY. Needless to say, the actors seem miserably nervous. Not only have they not run the show in its entirety, they’ve never had full costumes or a technical rehearsal. My stomach falls several miles, a not inconsiderable feat considering its size.

Ah, tech. The set is enormous — and unfinished — with overstuffed, luxurious sofas and chairs everywhere. I should be glad there is a set, for I soon discover there is no sound, and the sound designer, who disappeared earlier in the day, does not return until after the audience is already seated.

I find out that both the sound and lighting designers are doing their first professional shows, all managed by an incredibly sweet 18-year-old stage manager who also has no professional experience and is simply flummoxed by being there. In short, no one’s running the nuthouse.

So the dress rehearsal begins, and I am astonished at what I see. A character shoots a gun, only to have the sound of gunfire go off 30 seconds after the shot. Another character delivers an entire monologue in the dark as the lights shine on an empty sofa. One poor woman is saddled with an incredibly unattractive and impractical wig that diserves both actor and character. Random crowd noises come in and out at bizarre moments. The cast, completely ill-at-ease, hides behind the furniture. Some blocking is clearly happening for the first time, and transitions between scenes are lethally long, often lasting for two full minutes while inappropriate music plays. Some cast members are desperately trying to remember their lines — and not always succeeding. Overall, this ensemble piece feels more like a bunch of characters running around trying not to drown.

The next rehearsal will be opening night. My turn to drown.

Even though the audience seems to have a good time, and everyone stays after intermission (despite my low expectations), I am in shock. For a few minutes, when the sense of impending doom is greatest, I consider canceling the show. But I decide to play Pollyanna instead.

Maybe, just maybe, they can pull this together.
SCENE II: OPENING NIGHT

Thursday, June 20
I can't breathe. The technical elements remain miserable, and the cast is still searching for lines and direction, much less honesty and character.

But the show, despite its problems, is not a total disaster. It just isn't ready. Both Daniel and Michael sheepishly avoid me at the party afterward, and I give private thanks to the French for champagne.

SCENE III: THE AFTERMATH

Sunday, June 23, and beyond

Ah, the critics. God love 'em.

Jackie decides not to review the show and instead hands off that responsibility to a local playwright, Joseph McDonough, who also has a show opening in Cincinnati and is thus dependent on Jackie for reviews. Nonetheless, Jackie attends the show (dressed in highlighter pink), sits next to Joe and spends all of intermission talking his ear off.

His review begins:

JOSEPH: “New Edgecliff has been known for producing some challenging and respected work. Sadly, Southern Discomfort misfires in almost every way. . . .

“Director Daniel Selznick tries to keep the mayhem zipping along, but Mr. Cook's mind-boggling tone changes snuff out both the comedy and the drama. . . . You'll laugh, you'll cry, your jaw will hang open in disbelief.”

Rick Pender from CityBeat, a Cincinnati arts publication, writes what I consider the smartest (and fairest) review.

RICK: “Southern Discomfort wants to be a very zany, dark piece of comedy, and at moments it achieves that. Unfortunately, a lethargic pace — inspired by a script that often talks too much — and a set of performers, each talented in their own right, who never quite jell as an ensemble, prevent it from succeeding. . . . Southern Discomfort is not without its entertaining moments, but Cook's script needs more focus and balance to succeed as a satisfying comedy. NET should be congratulated for helping that cause and advancing the career of a promising writer.”

Painful as the reviews are, I am genuinely excited about each successive performance because the show, now using performances as rehearsals, is finally beginning to take its proper shape. The actors stop worrying about their lines and begin focusing on the truth of their characters. Transitions are smoother, and comedic moments are actually funny as opposed to worrisome. Even the technical elements improve, though at this point I enjoy guessing which characters will be left in total darkness during the course of the show.

By the next Saturday night, the last performance I see before returning to New York, the show is in great shape, and for the first time I am able to look at it with a critical eye and see what I need to tighten and clarify for future productions. Laughs are huge and constant in the first act, and I hear people crying and sniffing during the second act. I hear which lines are clunking and need to be replaced, and I can see the elements of the show that are really, truly working. And yes, it is now more than clear that the fabled Scene Two, already chopped to death, needs to be halved.

Make no mistake: the audience is the real test. And fortunately, word of mouth on the show is strong. Performances the week during the second act. I hear which lines are clunking and need to tighten and clarify for future productions. Laughs are huge and constant in the first act, and I hear people crying and sniffing during the second act. I hear which lines are clunking and need to be replaced, and I can see the elements of the show that are really, truly working. And yes, it is now more than clear that the fabled Scene Two, already chopped to death, needs to be halved.

Make no mistake: the audience is the real test. And fortunately, word of mouth on the show is strong. Performances the week after the opening are well attended and almost sell out on the weekend, and it is only a few weeks before I hear from Daniel again.

He wants more rewrites.

Another pattern emerges, and the madness continues.

Randall David Cook shares a moment with Anne Close, “Dixie” at the inaugural reading of Southern Discomfort.

Author, Author!

After graduating cum laude from Furman in 1991 with a degree in business administration and a place in Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges, Randall David Cook primed himself for a career in international business.

For two years the former Paladin editor lived in rural Japan, working as an assistant English teacher in two junior high schools. Upon his return to the States, he enrolled in the international business program at the University of South Carolina, spent most of 1995 in Paris as an intern with Total, France's largest petro-chemical company, and earned his master’s degree in 1996.

At which time he moved to New York City and, in his words, "immediately refused to have a corporate career."

Instead, filled with fantasies of a life in the theatre, he sought fame and fortune there. But after his first jobs on the theatrical (more like lunatic) fringe proved somewhat disconcerting, he reconsidered and put his dreams on hold while putting his degrees to use. Eventually, he discovered that he could apply his business acumen toward a higher purpose: supporting his playwrighting jones. Little did he know that his first effort would take him on the roller-coaster ride he describes on these pages.

Since beginning his long day's journey with Southern Discomfort, he has written five other plays that are now in various stages of development. All have been read or performed off-Broadway — or off-off-Broadway. Save With the Haiku Geisha won the 2001 Southeast Region Playwrights Award for Best Play and was a finalist for the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference and the Charlotte Play Award. Third Finger, Left Hand, produced by the Regardez-Nous Theatre Co., played to strong reviews this fall at New York's Flatiron Playhouse, and English was selected for The PAL Company Disaster Relief Playtest in late October.

At the end of the year, Cook plans to leave his position with a financial Web site and devote himself to writing for stage and screen. His experiences have armed him with a thicker skin, an extra dose of assertiveness, a talent for laughing at himself and at life's follies, and a fuller understanding of the phrase "hurry up and wait."

More to the point, his confidence in his ability to make a living as a full-time writer does not appear to be misplaced. To quote NewYorktheatre.com, "Playwright Randall David Cook is talented and imaginative . . . he's certainly a writer to keep an eye on."

As long as he avoids the hot buttered bourbon.

— Jim Stewart