

GRILLED CHEESE AIN'T JUST A SANDWICH

by Gary Garrison

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I'm standing in my kitchen, reeling from a long, tedious day of too many people asking too many things in too short a time from this one mortal person. My head's pounding, my stomach's growling and there's so much tension in my back, I'm practically wearing my shoulders as a helmet. All I seem to be able to focus on is whether I should include one, two or three slices of individually wrapped, unnaturally yellow, processed cheese slices in what I'm sure will be the definitive grilled cheese sandwich. The phone rings. I say the "f" word three times, each utterance louder than previous, accidentally drop my cheese into a sink full of soapy dish water, then pick up the phone to hear a way-too-cheery, "I love your play, man. LOVE YOUR PLAY!"

The world stands still. What cheese? What sandwich? What shoulders-as-helmet? Reality sets in with another couple of questions: which play? Who is this? (But secretly, does it really matter?) The chipper voice continues: "We want to do it. Five week run. Equity showcase, blah blah blah . . ."

I don't hear most of what he said after "five week run." I was floating, not unlike the processed cheese on top of the soapy dishwater. I drifted back down to hear him say, "we want to do a reading for you in the next couple of weeks. Is that okay?" Okay?! The man's offering me a reading and a five week run of my play here in New York, and he wants to know if it's "okay?!" I'm practically ready to offer him the whole of my retirement fund in perpetuity, I'm so thankful.

What followed from that conversation forward was one of the most painful, disturbing and enlightening experiences I've ever had in the theater. I wouldn't trade it for all the money in Tony Kushner's bank account . . . but I wouldn't wish it on any living playwright either. If you can learn from my mistakes (and baby, I made so many I lost count after a while), you'll save yourself years in the aging process. But more importantly, maybe you'll see what we sometimes do as playwrights because we're so unhealthily thankful, so appreciative that someone, hell, anyone has finally commended our art and we, in turn, respond in that painful Sally Field's "You like me. You really like me," kind of way.

A few disclaimers: I was not a victim. I was responsible for what happened as much as any one person can be in a collaborative art. And I had plenty of warning signs along the way. Wrong. I had nothing BUT warning signs along the way. Friggin' Macy's was practically shooting fireworks in front of my face, telling me to wake up. But I was too beholden to these people who were doing my play to think clearly, take sensible action or respond smartly. I was the enemy – not them. They may have been the cheese, but I grilled it.

At the first reading of the play two major problems were apparent: the central character of the play (a seventeen-year old boy) was being played by a twenty-five year old who "if he shaves looks younger, " I was told. I looked at his face and thought, "you could peel a layer of skin off and he'd still look

twenty-five.” I searched for some sort of inner calm in the “maybes:” maybe the director saw something I didn’t. Maybe the director knew his work and had seen some sort of miraculous transformation before. Maybe the actor hadn’t slept for two weeks and looked haggard and old because he was tired. Maybe I wasn’t willing to compromise my image of what I had always thought that character should look like. The WARNING FLAG went up. I ignored it – didn’t want to cause problems early on. I mean, after all, it was only the first reading. Never mind that the play is about a seventeen - year old boy being forced to grow up quicker than any teenager should.

The second major problem in the first reading: the same too-old actor was paraphrasing my text. Well, that’s not exactly true. He wasn’t paraphrasing my text so much as creating one of his own. I’m not talking about rewording just a line here and there, but whole sections of dialogue. If there were ten words in a line, five were mine, five were his. If there were ten lines in a section of dialogue, two were mine, eight were his. The third problem surfaced quickly: other actors, sensing there was a looseness, or casualness to the reading, also began paraphrasing. The fourth problem then became evident: the director didn’t stop any of the actors from doing it. The fifth problem: the actors felt comfortable paraphrasing the text in front of the playwright and the director colluded in their disregard for my artistry. The sixth problem: when I suggested to the director that the actors read the text as written so I could hear the text I wrote, he made an announcement to the cast who proceeded to continue doing exactly what they were doing before.

The seventh and biggest problem: I didn’t withdraw the play right then and there. What was I doing?! Was I waiting for some Olympia Dukakis looking deity to part the clouds, peer down and say, “you’ve got a problem here, big boy.” And this was just the first reading! We still had a second reading, two months of rehearsal and five weeks of a run to go.

Regardless of what went down in that first reading, I walked out still semi-buoyant by the prospect of seeing my play fully produced. Never mind that the director was going to cast that twenty-five year old paraphraser as the seventeen year old character. Never mind that some of the actors had an obvious disregard for the writer, and clearly didn’t take direction early on from their director. Never mind the director couldn’t or wouldn’t control his cast. Never mind that I didn’t put my foot down and demand some of the basic intrinsic rights any playwright should have when his/her play is produced. I was shamefully seduced out of good judgment by the prospect of a production.

The second reading was marked by one event: Mr. Paraphraser was worse. Not only did he paraphrase large sections of the text, he made the most bizarre acting choices I’ve seen on a stage in all my twenty-five years in the theatre. There was high emotion, low emotion, no emotion, some emotion, emotion behind hands, emotion with eyebrows, lip emotion and some emotion that simply has no description. He was loud, soft, strong, weak, screaming, whispering – usually within the same line of dialogue. I thought I was witnessing a melt-down. “No,” I was told, “it’s just his process.” I thought of that cheese floating in my sink during the first phone call I had with the director.

When the reading was over, I strongly voiced my concern about the actor. The director assured me he would be fine. The producer assured me he would be fine. The stage manager assured me he would be fine. “He’s gotten great reviews in the New York Times,” they almost sang to me in a choral ode. Then all three smiled at me and said, “stop worrying.” So I repressed the impulse to yell, “FIRE HIM! NOW! IN FRONT OF ME, SO I CAN SEE IT. DO IT TWICE TO MAKE ME FEEL BETTER,” and stopped worrying, because maybe . . . That’s right. I got a good dose of the “maybes” again.

I was invited to rehearsal a week after they began. I walked in on what felt like a scene from any bad segment of Saturday Night Live: the director was standing on stage directing the actors to go through

the whole script, beginning to end, only using sounds – an emotional opera, or, sound-scape, if you will. I gulped. Actually, I laughed and groaned quietly, then gulped. I watched for five minutes as the actors moooooed and hissed, clucked and cooed their way through the opening scene. Very aware that I was witnessing someone's process, all I could think of was that floating cheese in my sink again. I leaned over to the director and whispered in his ear that maybe I should come back when the actors were more connected to the actual text than what their improvisation would allow. He invited me back for the next week.

I went back several times the following week, only to witness the actors and director engaged in more improvisation, more exploration, more process (the cheese image plagued me). At the end of the week, I pulled the director aside and asked him to let the cast read the play for me so I could at least engage in the rehearsal process and offer the actors character insights I felt they desperately needed to realize the play. The director couldn't have been more accommodating, but when the actors read the play, I didn't recognize any of the characters I had written, the story or conflict. Oops. Now, there's a problem. It made sense, though, if you considered that the director had allowed the actors to improvise themselves out of any kind of emotional clarity related to the text. I stood some ground and said to the director: "you've given your actors a football field to play in. My play is the size of a shoebox. It's too small for them now. It's not interesting enough. There's not enough room for them to play in." He listened, and I believed he understood me.

The rehearsal period went on for a month more. Each time I went to rehearsal, gains were made and lost; ground was covered, then disappeared; two steps were made forward and nine steps were taken back. It was the most confounding thing I had ever experienced. How could it be that I'd walk into rehearsal one day and the actors were ready for Broadway; the next time I'd walk in they weren't ready for a bowling alley. I did everything I could think of. I talked, listened, offered advice, offered suggestions, argued with the director, conceded with the director and discussed the problems with the producer, the artistic staff of the theatre until I finally admitted to myself what I had known all along: the director did not have the skills to direct my play.

Harsh words, I know. This person had a heart bigger than all of New York and loved the theatre, but did that give him the experience, wisdom and just plain know-how to direct my play? And, adding to the emotional injury, he loved my play. He understood my play. He could have practically written the play himself. He understood the characters, their motivations, their needs, the arc of the story, my intention as a writer and on and on. BUT, he couldn't communicate that to a group of actors with any kind of inspired leadership. You can tell someone everything there is to know about what you've written, but you can't tell them how to communicate what they've learned.

Suggesting that the director be replaced would have been a waste of breath – he was everyone's friend, an integral part of that theatre company's family and had a history with the theatre in which he had certainly paid his dues. What to do, then, when you find yourself the artistic stranger in a group of artists and are put in a position to want things for your play or production that will cause a tidal wave in everyone's otherwise still water? Do you sit quietly by and let happen whatever happens? Or do you take a stand, make demands and risk the whole operation imploding on itself? When do you choose to fight the good fight or resign yourself to be at peace with whatever appears on opening night? Honestly, I don't know the answers to these questions, but it posed to me a much larger question:

Is it better to see a production of your play that doesn't fulfill your vision of what the play should be -- for whatever reason, or is better to have no production until it can be the "right" production?

Nagging thoughts: who's to say if the "right" production will ever come along? And is your vision of the

“right” production only a romantic fantasy anyway? Can we think about our work objectively enough to include a vision that doesn’t align with our own? When do we compromise and when do not? At what point, when you’re a relatively unknown playwright who’s hungry for a production of your work, do you bite the hand that’s feeding you? My mouth was opened the whole time – but I couldn’t, wouldn’t and didn’t bite down.

Opening night was a good news/bad news kind of thing. The good news: Mr. Paraphraser had learned most of his lines, though he still felt that there were sections of the text that needed his spontaneous improvements. The bad news: another actor in the cast who was Jekyll in rehearsal became Hyde in performance. This actor surprised no one more than me by filling the text with the “f” word, inexplicably grabbing his crotch for emotional emphasis, changing a lot of his character intentions he had refined in rehearsal, and during another character’s monologue, channeling a screaming baboon on stage. It was a sight to behold -- a sight, I might add, that had the full support of the director.

I talked, faxed, discussed, cursed, explained, tried to reason, tried to negotiate – but I was already way behind in the race. So I “maybe’d” myself through two more performances, but he (the actor) got no better. I kicked into overdrive, trying to talk to anyone who would listen. It got me no where. It was too late. I was too late. Everyone was in that, “we got the show open -- leave us alone” mode. So all I knew to do at that point was to disallow any press from seeing the production and tell everyone I knew not to go. How ferociously sad to get that far and have nothing to hold up to look at and be proud of. But who do I have to blame, really, but me?

I can’t make someone a better director, no matter how much I talk and explain. I can’t predict an actor’s behavior on or off the stage. I can’t make a set look better, the lights brighter, the publicity stronger or more thorough. I can’t do anything but allow other people to do their jobs, and voice my concern when they don’t. Most importantly, I have the right as a playwright at any point to step in and literally say, “Stop. No more.” But I have to have the security and strength to do just that and stop hoping against hope that problems will solve themselves so that I can continue to be perceived as a someone “good,” someone “easy to work with,” a “team player,” and a “good spirit of the theatre.” I have to learn to stand by my convictions, even if that means I don’t get the production. For me, there can be no other way now. I know the pain of too much compromise.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'J. Paraphraser', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.