

Touring

CBC Radio, "Fresh Air," read live-to-air before a live audience
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Before I began acting for a living, I had a fantasy about theatre life. I'd work in a beautiful old theatre and have a dressing room with my name on the door. But my first acting job was a tour. My second acting job was a tour. And my third. I learned that actors now, just like in olden days, find themselves mostly not in beautiful old theatres but on the road.

During my eleven years as a professional actor, I did nine tours. Small tours, big tours, looong tours. Even at theatre school in London, I ended up traveling about - my class performed a medieval morality play on a cart pulled by Clydesdale horses. The play portrayed the Massacre of the Innocents, and during one show, as I battled a soldier who wanted to tear my infant from my arms, I realized that I had dropped the bundle representing my baby and was standing on it. Here I learned the first law of touring: even if you're standing on your baby, keep going.

I graduated to school tours. We performed for Grades 7, 8 and 9, which meant that sometimes we couldn't hear ourselves on stage for the sound of hormones rushing through the audience. One of the plays was an adaptation of "Under Milk Wood" by Dylan Thomas, done as a footstompin' Canadian folk drama with music by Gordon Lightfoot's evil twin. Luckily, I was touring with Nancy White who, as you may know, has a finely tuned sense of the absurd, essential when you find yourself square-dancing to the poetry of Dylan Thomas before the incredulous eyes of Grades 7, 8 and 9.

That was bliss, however, compared to my next school tour, Greek tragedy on the west coast. The script called for us to do a lot of chanting in ancient Greek: "Zena the-on ton ariston a ey somy ay demi ..." A Greek scholar came to rehearsals to correct us as we chanted, so that our pronunciation would meet the standards of any ancient Greeks living on Vancouver Island. The women were costumed in demure tunics, and the men, bare-chested, wore little brown skirts. If you ever start to fantasize about the glamour of acting as a profession, imagine being a male actor in a mini-skirt, performing "Oedipus" in ancient Greek in a high-school cafetorium in Nanaimo.

The tours kept coming my way, in that era of youth grants. One of my favourites was Mid-Air Summer Theatre, which produced "Peter Pan" with a remarkably small and ever-shrinking cast. I, for example, played Mrs. Darling the mother, Curly, a lost boy, and Smee, a pirate, as well as tootling the Tinkerbell sound effects and taking care of two injured cast members, our original Peter Pan, who was in hospital with acute appendicitis, and our original Wendy, who was in hospital because the rather awkward boy who replaced the original Peter Pan flung open his arms to show her how to fly, and broke her nose.

Then there was ACME Theatre, a group of lunatics who wrote and toured a play about the history of Vancouver, which opened with a song that went, “Vancouver, Vancouver, it’s a word that you can rhyme with ‘paint remover.’” Another group, Theatre One, toured the interior of B.C. in a big red bus, in which the six of us got to know each other much too well, one a nudist macrobiotic health nut, another who ate anything in the vicinity of his mouth, a third who lived on cigarettes, illegal substances, and creamed corn. And then, during my brief hippy period, I joined the draft-dodgers, misfits and geniuses of a counterculture theatre troupe from the Kootenays, which had just received a grant to tour the province’s prisons and mental institutions in their picturesque van that had no second gear. We rehearsed - and lived - on the top floor of the village Kiwanis Club, which had no running water, or heat, or furniture.

After my brief hippy period, I was thrilled to be offered a job by the big respectable Playhouse Company, which operates out of a big respectable theatre. I ended up, of course, on tour, in a zippy, zany sex comedy about the antics of repressed university professors, which we took to the remote logging villages of northern B.C.

And then the last, the mother of all tours - a new Canadian musical, sort of like “The Shumka Ukrainian Dancers meet 'Othello',” which took four months to wend its way through every major cultural centre from Edmonton to Petrolia. I came to call us Alcoholics Anonymous on Tour, but I won’t tell you why. I will tell you that, in Montreal, the handsome prankster who was our leading man had a run-in with some humourless Quebecois police and did the show for some time with half his face mashed in. In Toronto, we all got the flu and had a mattress backstage so we could lie down and die, until it was our cue to go on and sing and dance.

Not long after that, I had a change of heart. I wanted to be a writer, I decided, and stay put. I wanted to be a mother, too. And so I left the theatre and now labour over a hot stove and a warm computer. Both my jobs keep me in one place. Home.

A while after I quit, I received a phone call from a director. He wanted me to come to his theatre and act in a play. The play was by Molière, the theatre was in Thunder Bay, and the timing was Christmas. I declined. In the old days, I would have gone. I would have left home and family to do Molière in Thunder Bay, at Christmas. An actor, in this country, has no choice but to roam constantly for work. To Regina, to Halifax, then Victoria, then Winnipeg. Hundreds of artistic nomads crisscross the country, giving their all, dreaming of a dressing room with their name on the door in the town where they actually live.

I who gave up, whose journey now, with words, is solitary and inward, thank them, and honour them, and miss them.
