



# Shin • Boyd

*It took Halifax playwright George Boyd a decade to get anyone to produce one of his plays. Now, he's starting at the top — with a Neptune world premiere of his play Shine Boy. But he's only starting.*

*By Tim Carlson*

**T**he low and the high points of George Boyd's still-brief career as a playwright both occurred in the middle of 1986 on the same day, and within an hour of each other.

In 1983, Boyd had written a play about the disintegration of the nuclear family called *Dinner at Nuremberg's*. At the time, Boyd believed it would be the creation that would announce to the world his arrival as a

playwright. But nothing ever came of *Dinner*.

In fact, on that August day in 1986, George Boyd had actually gone to the office at Neptune Theatre for the ignominious purpose of picking up a copy of his unwanted script. Neptune's new artistic director, Richard Ouzounian, had rejected *Dinner* too.

After retrieving the script from a secretary, Boyd decided, almost on a whim, to at least introduce himself to

Ouzounian. Ouzounian not only invited him into his office but he also seemed genuinely interested when Boyd began to tell him about his plans to write a play about the triumphant rise and tragic fall of real-life boxing hero George Dixon.

What happened next would probably be dismissed as unbelievable if Boyd ever wrote the scene in a play about a struggling young playwright.

"Sounds good," Ouzounian said when Boyd had finished. "I think we should do it next year."

Boyd was amazed. What unknown, untested, unproduced playwright wouldn't have been?

"Of course, I don't know if you can write," Ouzounian added quickly. "Come back in a few months with a few songs and a few scenes."

George Boyd left Neptune Theatre

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that day with a rejected play under his arm and an accepted idea in his head.

Sixteen months later, that accepted idea has become *Shine Boy*, one of four world premier plays Neptune is presenting this season. And Ouzounian says theatre critics he met in Boston last summer are interested in reviewing it. If it gets positive reviews, he says, *Shine Boy* could be produced anywhere in North America.

But *Shine Boy*, which opens on February 19, isn't the only project on Boyd's plate today. CBC-TV has commissioned him to write a half-hour drama on the destruction of Africville. And ideas for more plays, perhaps even a feature-length film script, are rolling around in his head too.

These may be the best of times for George Boyd, but they are also the worst of times too.

For one thing, Boyd is extremely busy. Writing the screenplay. Rewriting *Shine Boy*. Vision and revision. "Man, I'm so busy. Gimme a call next week," he says in a smooth, resonant bass when I call him to ask for an interview. But even if he had the time, George Boyd isn't sure he wants to be a writer for public consumption, a "celebrity." He's been interviewed once already for a newspaper article about his play, and the idea of another interview doesn't exactly thrill him.

"I don't like the whole *idea* of celebrity," Boyd says. "Now, I go to the bar and I'm waiting in line like everyone else, and the bouncer waves and says, 'Hey, Mr. Boyd, c'mon in.' Just because I got my picture in the paper. Well, F--- that. I'll wait outside just like everyone else."

Because he is a black man from Halifax writing a play about a black boxer from Halifax, some people have already pegged him as a local writer, or a black writer. That grates on Boyd too. "I'm a *writer*, not a *local writer*," he tells me. "I've got interests beyond what's going on in the home town. Being categorized is inevitable, but that doesn't mean I'm comfortable with it." He pauses. "If you tell people that, though, you just waste your breath." For his part, Boyd says he has no plans to waste his own breath becoming a spokesman for any cause. "That's the politician's job," he argues. "I'll devote my time to those who see my plays. Maybe I'm a writer because I'm not a spokesman."

When you get right down to it, Boyd admits, he's a loner who doesn't even especially like to talk shop with other writers. "Talking about writing, what's that? If I'm a carpenter and I go over to my carpenter friend's and say 'hey, let's talk about hammers.' What's he going to say? F--- off, man. Writing — same thing."

But for all that, George Boyd does agree to an interview. George, as his brother Frank is quick to point out, has "a tough-as-hell side and a gentle side." Richard Ouzounian agrees.

"George is voluble, explosive, a big, tough guy," he admits, "but he's not insensitive. He gets hurt easily."

When you first meet him face-to-face, however, it's hard not to be most aware of his explosive side. He is nearly six-and-a-half feet tall, and his soft, low voice escapes from between teeth that are clenching a Colts cigar. At first, he is reserved, answering questions with short, pointed statements of fact, then taking a sip of coffee and staring out the window until he's got the next answer on the tip of his tongue.

But gradually, the gentle side emerges. Ideas begin to occur to him, and pretty soon he's on a roll.

Boyd says he didn't stumble into writing by accident. Or drift into it as he was drifting out of adolescence. Or decide, as an adult, that he would try writing on for size. He says writing is simply what he was destined to do.

Boyd, 34, was born and raised in the north end of Halifax, one of nine children of a dockworker and his wife. Boyd describes his mother, May Winnifred, as the quiet-philosopher influence, and his father, Frank Sr., as the "make money, feed the kids, disciplinarian type." The children were achievers. In fact, all the Boyd boys — except George — have university degrees. "George was more the maverick," Frank explains. "He had a great deal of determination to do things his own way." (Henry is now an artist, Tony is a Sobey's executive, Ivan is a hotel auditor, Juanita and Muriel are in the civil service, Clara is a legal secretary and Frank Jr. is a communications officer with the City of Dartmouth and author of non-fiction books, including *McKerrow: A History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia*.)

At Queen Elizabeth High School, George Boyd played football and basketball, was well liked and had an active social life. But academically, the only subject he really enjoyed was English. Because he already knew what he wanted to do with his life, he says he would have preferred to get out and "watch people's conflicts and interactions."

Boyd tried university for three years, taking English and political science at Saint Mary's University. In 1976, before he obtained a degree, he quit to start his writing career.

He moved into the cheapest apart-



ment he could find in Dartmouth and, while he wrote, survived on unemployment insurance benefits and cans of Campbell's Soup. But when he emerged about a year later with a finished play to show for his troubles, no one was interested in producing it.

After spending a year travelling through the United States, working at various jobs to pay his way, he returned home and — shelving for the moment his plans to be a full-time writer — took a reporter's job at CKBW radio in Bridgewater. Later, he moved back to Dartmouth where he landed a job at CFDR. Then, in 1983, Boyd was accepted for a CBC training program for visible minorities in Toronto. At the end of that course, he joined CBC-TV's *First Edition* as a news editor.

Through it all, of course, he continued to write. In August of 1986, 10 years after he'd left university to become a writer, Richard Ouzounian finally sat up and took notice.

For Ouzounian, it was the passion Boyd so clearly felt for the story of George Dixon that ultimately convinced him to take a chance on the unknown writer.

George "Little Chocolate" Dixon was born in Halifax on July 29, 1870, but moved to Boston with his parents when he was still a boy. During a boxing career that spanned 16 years and probably included more than 800 fights, Dixon, one of the first blacks to fight whites, became the first black boxer ever to win a title. The first to lose then regain a title. The only boxer to hold titles in three different weight classes. The first to shadow box.

By the time Dixon lost the featherweight crown in 1900, he'd amassed a small fortune. He didn't keep it long. He was generous to friends, charities, jewellery stores, race tracks, bars and, eventually, opium dealers. He died in 1909, alone and penniless in the mental ward of a New York hospital.

Friends, who Boyd says abandoned Dixon when his money and celebrity status ran out, regrouped to have a

memorial erected in Boston's Mount Hope cemetery. The memorial, which his manager claimed he had inscribed, "Here lies the gamest pugilist that ever lived," was never erected. The money disappeared, Boyd says.

Essentially, *Shine Boy* is the demys-



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tification of Dixon's life. A play, with music, about his unsung qualities and the spirit Dixon showed in overcoming the obstacles fate placed before him. "Dixon was a fighter in every sense of the word," Boyd says. "Really, the ring is just a metaphor, it's what we're all up against. For every time someone told him no, he said yes. And he succeeded."

So did Boyd. When he returned to Neptune in November with the songs and scenes Ouzounian requested, the Neptune artistic director was cautiously optimistic. "It was obvious the man could write," he says now, "although he didn't have a firm grasp on the mechanics of stage work." Ouzounian helped Boyd get a writing grant so he could quit CBC and work on

*Shine Boy* full-time. At the same time, he invited Boyd to sit in on Neptune rehearsals to get a feel for the production process.

Last February, Boyd brought in his first draft, which was workshopped and revised by the cast of a play then in production at Neptune. After that, Ouzounian told Boyd to throw "self-censorship" to the wind and to write *everything* he wanted into his play. Boyd returned in the late summer of 1987 with a Tolstoy-sized manuscript. "It was way too much, but it was right," Ouzounian says today. "I compared it to the *Barometer Rising* script and said, 'Okay, George, *Barometer* runs two hours, ten minutes. Yours would run three-forty. We have to do some cutting. Not rewriting. Just cutting.'"

The cutting wasn't finished until early December.

Today, Richard Ouzounian is pleased with the results. "A lot of writers have to write speeches to get across what they want to say. George has a real sense of finding an action or image that illustrates his theme. He *has* to write for the stage."

But Boyd, who says that writing a script is "like living with 15 people," isn't so sure right now. For a man who would prefer to be alone with his thoughts and his word processor, the collective, compromising nature of mounting a major stage production has been wearying. "Don't ever write a play, man," Boyd advises, but there is a wry smile breaking through his serious, worry-lined expression.

It is clear this is also George Boyd's best of times. While Ouzounian's decision to give Boyd his chance with *Shine Boy* may be the high point of his career to date, if the play succeeds, it may turn out to have been only a starting point. That's why, in spite of his feelings about celebrity and publicity, George Boyd will be doing what any other first-time playwright would be doing on opening night.

"I'll be biting my nails," he says. ■