

Miles to go before I sleep...

A playwright's notes



Craig Benjamin

The play, Shine Boy, had its world première at Neptune this winter. The first run of any new play can be a traumatic experience for its playwright. But when the playwright is black, the play is his first and the subject is racism, the experience can be an emotional rollercoaster

By George Boyd

MARCH 13, 1988, 2:30 p.m.
Pacing the floor in Neptune Theatre's upper bar, sadness tumbles over me like a waterfall. No misgivings, no sorrow, just sadness ... and fulfillment. In two hours when the curtain rings down, my set, the world of my creation, will be torn down and crated to a warehouse. My bloody show ends tonight.

February 24, 1988, 11:30 p.m.

Exhausted. My shoulders, legs and arms plead for rest. I watched the

show tonight. Picked up some letters addressed to me in care of Neptune, in care of CBC, in care of... I can't complain. All the letters so far have been full of praise.

I slide the key in my apartment door. I must write to those who wrote me I tell myself, but I don't know where I'll find the time or energy. I'm so tired of being interviewed, talking about how I began, talking about my future plans, talking about the 20 people who walk out of *Shine Boy* every night, talking period. But I know I must. To get the word out.

I want a cognac. I want to sit in the dark, close my eyes and listen to Bee-

thoven. I want to relax, but my mind won't stop racing. It hasn't for the two years it took me to research and write *Shine Boy*.

The cognac burns as it slides down my throat. Beethoven's Fifth thumps out of the speakers while the LED light on my telephone answering service beats out the time. It's been blinking incessantly since *Shine Boy* hit the rehearsal hall. I grope my way to the message button.

BEEP!! "It's Bev. An interview tomorrow with Charles Saunders at 1:30. Add him to the list. Don't forget. Bye." BEEP!! "It's Lee Anne. About your script. Call me tomorrow. Bye."

BEEP!!! "Do you want a *Shine Boy* T-shirt?" BEEP! "Just called to congratulate you on writing the best play I've seen this season. I guess you aren't home, so I'll wait and express my appreciation in person. Bye." (Who was that?) BEEP!! "Bev again. What about the Holly Rolland show on Cable 10?" BEEP!! "It's Carol Warring from *Morningside* in Toronto. Could you call me? My area code is..."

STOP!! BEEP!! "George this is Tony at the hospital. Dad's had a serious setback and you should come immediately." My eyes spring open in disbelief. BEEP! "George, this is Muriel. I'm at the hospital. Dad is in intensive care. Call. The number is..." BEEP!! "George, this is Ivan. We're at the Infirmary. You can visit 24 hours in the ICU. Hurry." BEEP!....

I spring up out of my chair. Tears well in my eyes. My father was admitted to hospital a day after he saw *Shine Boy* open and read that I had dedicated it to my parents. I'm from a large family, raised, educated and taught to fight in a very white world by a very black man with a grade three education. It was as if he had seen his last son off, finally embarking on his writing career...

March 1, 1988

CBC Building, Sackville Street. Pacing the halls, waiting for my call from *Morningside*. I bump into D. H. who suggests a musical must have a "hummable" tune. I suggest he missed the point. *Shine Boy* isn't like *Annie Get Your Gun*. Its message is too serious for such frivolous treatment. A radio producer tells me a certain reviewer was hard on me because I'm "local" and it's my "first time around." I say that seems all the more reason to be encouraging. He says, "Now you know why John Gray moved to Vancouver!"

February 25, 1988, 5 a.m.

With my family in the waiting

room of the ICU. My eyes are a road map of blood-red veins. I sip coffee and think about my father.

"Say," a nurse whispers, "Aren't you George Boyd?"

Suspiciously, "Yes."

"I saw your play — I loved it," she



G. George-Jakos

A scene from *Shine Boy*: "Now you know why John Gray moved to Vancouver!"

says. "I wish you the best of luck and I hope things work out all right for you ... in here." I nod appreciatively.

"Your father will be all right," a doctor finally tells us. Thank God. I can go home. But not to sleep. Get ready to do more interviews, revise the balcony scene, answer letters. Which reminds me. I tear one open.

N-----s have no business being on stage at Neptune Theatre, it says. Respectable white people won't respond or patronize the show. I should watch my step. I could be hurt, seriously hurt. I'd better be less critical of Americans. There's no address. No signature.

"Anything wrong?" my sister asks.

"No," I say weakly, my lungs in my mouth. "Just an old piece of paper."

"Why are you burning it?"

"It's just tripe and pablum. I'm not going to burn down the hospital." I feel the sweat rippling my face.

"You sure?"

Putting on my coat, "Positive. I'd better go." I kiss my sleeping mother on the forehead.

"Get some rest," my sister says.

"Yeah...." But I realize for a writer, a black, Canadian writer, there is no rest. Like Robert Frost said, I have "miles to go before I sleep, miles to go before I sleep."

As I walk down the hospital's sterile hallway, I recall the morning the glass triangle surrounding the lamp post in front of the Neptune was broken, the *Shine Boy* posters gone. I remember what seems like added police scrutiny of the Neptune building since *Shine Boy* opened.

Things really haven't changed in 100 years. *Shine Boy* rages with the truth undistilled. Perhaps that's why some people have gone out of their way to criticize it. Perhaps that's the reason for the nightly walkouts (all white people).

People won't recognize the problem, and therefore, they can't begin to address it. How could a human being write such a letter?

I think about how I was going to retire from creative writing. But now I know I must write another play, do a book on Dixon. Oh yes, "miles to go before I sleep, miles to go...."

March 13, 1988, 5 p.m.

Shine Boy has been a learning, trying experience. As I walk through Neptune, I hear them, see them, dismantling my set. I have my poster signed by the cast. My father's prognosis is great. So is *Shine Boy's*.

The wind gnaws as I step onto Argyle Street. I realize now that a writer must do what a writer must do. A writer must fight. Fight as well and as hard as George Dixon. □