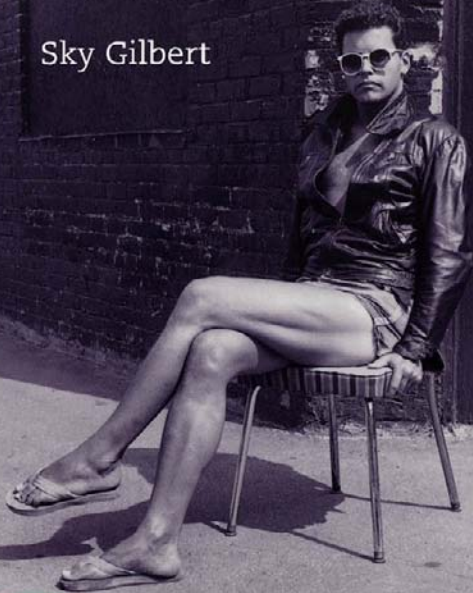


Sky Gilbert



E

jaculations
from the
Charm Factory

A MEMOIR

A stylized logo consisting of a white letter 'E' inside a dark grey circle, which is itself inside a larger, lighter grey circle.

Ejaculations
from the
Charm Factory

A MEMOIR

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Ejaculations
from the
Charm Factory

A MEMOIR



Sky Gilbert

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This is the way I am
Yes I'm just made this way
And when I want to laugh
Why then I laugh all day
I love the guy that loves me
So how am I to blame
If the guy who loves me
Is not every night the same?
So that's the way I am
I'm made this way you see
So what more do you want?
What do you want from me?

The Queen of 42nd Street

—JACQUES PRÉVERT (TRANS. ERIC BENTLEY)

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Then suddenly, in the midst of some very witty dialogue, the entire cast will walk to the footlights and shout Chekhov's advice: "It would be more profitable for the farmer to raise rats for the granary than for the bourgeois to nourish the artist, who must always be occupied with the undermining institutions."

The Dream Life of Balso Snell

— NATHANAEL WEST

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This book is dedicated to the true Buddies in Bad Times

Ken McDougall, Patsy Lang, David Pond,

Edward Roy, R.M. Vaughan,

and (especially) Sue Golding

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank two people who supported me during the writing of this memoir: Michael Holmes and Ian Jarvis. Michael, my editor, is everything an editor should be — tactful, judicious, and incredibly sharp. This memoir would not have been possible without him constantly nudging me to dig deeper and “write proud.” Ian Jarvis, my boyfriend, is my inspiration. He offered me canny advice on countless tricky issues. Also, I love him.

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1

Making Buddies

I write this with trepidation. Mainly, I wonder why you would want to read it. What is there about Sky Gilbert's life that's going to hold anyone's interest through a whole book? I certainly don't think my personal history is particularly fascinating to anyone but a dear friend. If this book has any value, it will be because of the important period of time onto which my life has trespassed.

This memoir spans the 18 years, from 1979 to 1997, when I was Artistic Director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto. It was a time when my life intersected, intimately, with two worlds — theatre and sexual politics. And I was able to watch both change, gradually but fundamentally.

What's so important about the period from 1979 to 1997?

March 18, 1979, was the closing night of the Broadway play *On the Twentieth Century*. This brilliant musical comedy was directed by Harold Prince, with lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, and music by Cy Coleman. *On the Twentieth Century* was one of the wittiest, "singiest" musical comedies to be born from the hothouse of American musical theatre. It was also a gigantic box office flop. Why? Because by 1979 Andrew Lloyd Webber was developing the "mega-musical," and Michael Bennett's *A Chorus Line* was already on its way to becoming one of the longest-running plays in Broadway history. In 1979 the tide was changing in New York theatre; intelligent lyrics, good books — *talent* — didn't matter anymore. Big bucks did. Not coincidentally, as the brilliant librettists seemed to disappear, so did the serious playwrights. Also not coincidentally, as New York was experiencing this dumbing down of the mainstream, there was a corresponding renaissance of the avant-garde. Richard Foreman, Lee Breuer, and Elizabeth LeCompte concocted astounding visions with experimental theatre companies like the Ontological Hysterical Theater and the Wooster Group. These fundamental

changes in New York's arts scene would eventually have their effect on my professional theatre life in Toronto.

And two months later in San Francisco, on May 21, 1979, Dan White was given a lenient sentence for a heinous cold-blooded hate crime — the murder of gay city hall supervisor Harvey Milk. Near riots ensued outside San Francisco City Hall. The murder of Milk was symptomatic of the furious backlash that accompanied the rise of gay liberation in the '70s. From Anita Bryant's rage against homosexuals (who, she said, "eat sperm") to Toronto's bathhouse raids, the war was on. Gay liberation changed its very nature during the '80s, especially when the hatemongers were given additional ammunition by the mysterious "gay epidemic" that was to surface two years after White's sentencing. These changes had a significant effect on my work as an activist in Toronto.

Through Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, these two worlds — theatre and sexual politics — intersected and sometimes merged.

The most important and absolutely true thing I can tell you about that time is this: I was there.

*

The whole thing really started in 1979. I remember the day very clearly. I was living in a rooming house on Huron Street, in "The Annex" in downtown Toronto. I remember that there were lots of youngish people living there. One woman, who acted as a sort of housemother, was a dedicated salesperson for Amway products. I remember hearing that Amway was connected with Scientology. And that Scientologists never blinked. I remember watching to see if she ever blinked. (She did.) I remember a girl across the hall who was an aspiring country-and-western singer. And going to see her sing in a very tacky bar in Parkdale. I remember that Beverly D'Angelo lived in our rooming house before she became a big Hollywood star.

And I remember spinning around my room that day.

I had just discovered Patti Smith. The song was "Because the Night." It went: "Because the night belongs to lovers." I was ecstatic because I had just decided that I was a homosexual. I was spinning because I felt so happy. Free at last.

How does one decide these things? Well, my very special spinning day was a long time coming. You don't just spin around like the Wicked Witch of the West and melt into a homosexual.

No, it was a torturous journey.

A year before that spinning day, when I founded Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, I wasn't officially gay (though I suppose I was, *unofficially*). After graduating from the honours theatre program at York University in 1977, I enrolled in the Masters program in Drama at the University of Toronto. But I dropped out in 1979, just shy of getting my degree. My last year at U of T was very frustrating. The academic world was somewhat constricting for a young gay man struggling to burst out of his sexual cocoon. Yet it was also a safe and reassuring place. For instance, I liked my classes with Robertson Davies.

He was somewhat pompous, but very funny. All you had to do was accept the fact that he came from another world. Robertson Davies taught Edwardian theatre, and it was if he had been freeze-dried in that era. He was irrepressibly heterosexual and embarrassingly racist. On the first day of class he went around the room and asked everyone about their origins. He would linger a little too long on the stories told by the pretty, white, blonde-haired girls, because these were his favourites. When he came to a dear friend of mine — Forster Freed — he figured out, of course, that Forster was Jewish. “Oh, you would enjoy the plays of that great Edwardian playwright Israel Zangwill,” said Professor Davies. My friend was so insulted by the implication that a Jew would only be interested in Jewish literature that he dropped the class the next day. I understood completely. Would Forster be allowed to comment on Christian plays after Davies had pigeonholed his thesis subject as “Jewish Edwardian writers”?

At the end of the year, Davies made a particularly revealing anachronistic comment. It was a tradition for his wife to serve lunch on the last day of class. So there we were, sipping our soup in his “chambers,” the sombre basement seminar space that usually served as our classroom; on this day a door was quietly opened and we realized it was connected to the private apartments of Davies and his Australian wife. Mrs. Davies had more personality than I had expected. While she was deftly slipping the elegant dishes in front of us, and cleaning up after us, she managed to support and occasionally critique her celebrated husband's pronouncements. Robertson Davies asked everyone what they were going to do for the summer. One of the girls said, “I've got a job as a waitress.” And Davies, peering down at her through his ponderous bifocals observed, with generous Edwardian condescension, “Oh, that must be very difficult for you.” The girl answered, “No,

actually I enjoy it.” Davies’s wife helpfully chided him. “Oh dear, being a waitress is not the *awful* job *these* days that it used to be. Some girls quite like doing it.” All of which just made me think of Bette Davis in the movie of Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*, acting the part of the vicious, slut-tish cockney guttersnipe — probably the image in Davies’s mind whenever you said the word “waitress” to him.

Davies seemed to like me a lot. Of course, I wasn’t a homosexual then.

*

Since childhood I had struggled with gay feelings, scribbling endlessly in diaries, trying to quell or control my desires for men. I knew that I was able to have sex with women and I did so. Rarely. While I was at the Drama Centre at U of T, I had a very pretty girlfriend named Paula Turko, who was a Radio and Television student at Ryerson. We’d met when she was a candy girl and I was an usher at the Uptown Cinema. I loved her beauty and cheer; we had fun together. I tried to have sex with her at least twice a month, but for me it was a rather odious task. Not because of Paula, who was a wonderful partner, but because I was trying desperately to fulfil my duties as a heterosexual man without any real desire. Don’t ask me why it took me 27 years to come out of the closet. I don’t know. It’s not even that my background was particularly strict or religious.

I was, however, a very good boy.

My mother tells a couple of stories which, I think, are revealing. Apparently, when I was very young my room was quite messy. My mother took me aside one day and told me to keep it clean. Well, after that discussion my room was always spotless. In fact, I insisted on keeping my room so clean it gave my mother the creeps. Soon after I was born, a sister arrived, and there was much sibling rivalry, although we get along fine now. Lydia was smarter (apparently she learned to tie her shoes before I did) and, being a very pretty little girl, she got a lot of attention. My mother found me one day, banging my head against the radiator. Of course she was alarmed. The doctor told her not to worry — I was only trying to get attention. Some might say I’ve been banging my head against that radiator ever since.

And then there were the letters to God. As I mentioned, we were not particularly religious. We belonged to a New England Protestant sect called the “Congregationalists.” The nearest my parents could come to defining the religion was to say that this sect believed in allowing the congregation to have

power in running the church. Still, as a child, God was very real to me — so real that I would send him letters. I'd fashion them into little airplanes and hurl them out the window. I'm not sure what was in the letters. But I'm certain that God (if she exists) received them, and, as usual, proceeded to do whatever was necessary, regardless of my missives.

I was born in Norwich, Connecticut, which is a very small town. But we moved to Buffalo, New York, when I was six because my father (who was a manager at the Travelers Insurance Company) was transferred there. In Buffalo, I was a precocious student at Harlem Road School. I was precocious at home, too, organizing the neighbourhood kids into impromptu performances that I wrote. I once gathered a whole bunch of Beatles songs and rewrote the lyrics so that they would apply to my little play, which had something to do with a witch and a frog. In Grade Six I was Mrs. Zielinski's favourite and I was asked to write my autobiography. Because of these impromptu performances, I titled the piece "The Autobiography of a Playwright."

When I was 12 and my sister was 11, my parents divorced. It was a traumatic time for both of us, because we'd lived an idyllic life in a Buffalo suburb. What had been a kind of *Leave It To Beaver* existence suddenly turned strange. We had done a lot of figure skating in Buffalo, and my parents were quite active in the local curling club, so my mother thought that Toronto, a very popular figure skating city, would be an ideal place for us to start our new life.

Perhaps I should say something at the outset about being an American in Canada. I'm still an American citizen — some Canadian immigration guy talked me out of taking Canadian citizenship years ago, saying that I have all the advantages of dual citizenship as a landed immigrant.

The fact is, I talk like an American, walk like one, and think like one. If you've spent the first 12 years of your life in the USA, it's hard to leave your Americanness behind. The influence, in my case, is mainly cultural. I was brought up on American sitcoms. You might say that many Canadians are, too. The difference is this: Americans identify with their own cultural icons. Canadians, though they watch American TV, distance themselves from American stars and dare to judge them. For example, in Buffalo, everyone from my parents' generation idolized Judy Garland. When I came to Canada I heard people say things like "I find her very loud." Judy Garland, *loud*? In America, that's like calling the Pope a dirty old man. And I'm convinced that

my mother — though she might deny it — modelled herself after Lucille Ball. (And not just Lucy's wacky side, but her glamorous, motherly side, too.) These people were not just characters we watched on TV or in movies; they were role models and gods.

In those early expatriate days, I wore my Americanness as sort of a badge. In junior high I found myself ridiculed when I defended American politics (I was a very right-wing adolescent; my mother campaigned for Barry Goldwater). I was the “loud, argumentative American” and proud of it. I'm still loud and argumentative. And there's a huge American influence on my work. There is very little that is bucolic or ruminative about Sky Gilbert's novels and plays. My work is controversial, funny, and often makes direct or indirect reference to American cultural icons. I think this has made me a bit of a misfit on the Canadian art scene (never mind that I'm an outspoken drag queen).

Or maybe it's the fact that I think what I've got to say is actually *important*. It seems to me that lots of people everywhere have writing or acting talent, but it's the ones who are brave enough to trumpet their speciality who get noticed. That bravery is something I learned from being an American. (That came out sounding patriotic; I didn't mean it to, honest.) It seems to me that every damn TV show and movie I watched as a kid repeated one theme and one theme only: Follow your own path! Be an individual! Open a new window, open a new door! Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, I took the one less travelled. Do you get my drift? Unfortunately, even though Americans go on and on about the importance of individualism, they're not very good at handling *real* individuals. That's what makes me glad I live in Canada. I followed my own path and it led me to become an outspoken homosexual and drag queen — an entity that is tolerated, I think, slightly better in Canada than the U.S. The American cultural message is contradictory, to say the least — be your own person, but don't act too strange. Go figure.

But I've digressed. Suffice it to say that my mother took my sister and me to Toronto, where we could continue our schooling and be near ice rinks to pursue our figure skating careers. We joined the Granite Club and worked hard with our skating “pro,” Mr. Menzies. (Figure skating stardom, however, was not in the cards for me; Mr. Menzies said I jumped like a ton of bricks.) Then we moved to Don Mills. I remember my mother mentioned that Don Mills rivalled New Rochelle, New York (where Dick Van Dyke and Mary