

The Show! By Dezy Walls

Prologue

It is the mark of an artist to create something, which formerly existed only in his or her heart. *David Mamet (Playwright and screenwriter)*

I do want something from this.

I know I said I don't care as long as *The Show* works but I want my sanity, that's what I want. If I say *The Show* will be a sensation around the world and people say I'm mad then only *The Show*, doing as I say it will, gives me back my sanity. You see where I'm coming from?

I knew someone who would circle every capital 'I' in a piece to show the selfishness of the writer. Count them if you like. There are ten in that first paragraph. Do I care? I would have happily put in ten more because, although I write this for you, my friends, it is my story. It is not a story I planned; yet I do not regret it. It is the story thrust on me by *The Show*.

I was doing OK for a person with average expectations from life. I could earn a good living slapping a piano, belting out songs to make people laugh for two hours each night. Who wouldn't want that life? Me obviously, because I walked away and slammed the door behind me!

I blamed *The Show* but was it really *The Show*? I'd been writing and experimenting with *The Show* for some time before I blew off the job. I mean you can't blame *The Show* for every little thing. Ma getting sick had nothing to do with *The Show* although it saddens me that she missed the opening performance. There was a time in my life when having her approval was almost essential. Now it's just that I would have liked her to see *The Show* especially with Peter also in it. Yeh! I would have liked that.

I remember the night the idea came up. Peter came over to my place for dinner and, in honour of the occasion I cooked with two pots.

"My life's a mess," my brother told me but I already knew that.

"A man must face his demons," I waxed philosophically.

"I am absolutely facing my demons! Why do you think my life's a mess!"

"Good, that's good," I encouraged, "you're on the right path there."

"Easy for you to say!"

"Yes," I agreed that it was very easy. "So easy, in fact, I could put music to it."

He looked up and said, "That might help!"

I began to write the story of Peter. Soon the story of Peter became my story too. Then the names changed to Dudley and Seamus those eventually becoming Simon and Jack.

For a while I buried myself in the world of Simon, a pompous character marching towards a marriage of convenience and Jack, dumped by yet another woman and seeking but a bed. I breathed the story and the songs night and day. When I eventually looked up, rubbing my eyes against the light, I realised my world as I thought I knew it was gone.

Chapter One: The Seeds of Desperation.

Begin at the beginning and go on 'til you come to the end; then stop. **Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland**

I was born a scraggly two-legged creature on to a small spinning ball, a ball so small that on a map of the known universe it is not visible to the human eye. Yet that ball is so big that if you were to stand above the Earth and look down you'd never find me.

Full of questions I luckily had parents and other teachers who knew all the answers. Everything they said made total sense to me and, on closer examination, made no sense at all. Thus I realised that being on a ball hurtling through space was the least of my confusions.

Life is a good teacher. Anything we don't grasp the first time is presented in various forms until we get it. A lesson can last from a few seconds to a whole lifetime but it's my experience that you can learn a lot in a year and three-quarters.

My 'year of desperation' (it stretched to about twenty-one months) began, as many of my other years had begun, with the presumption that life should be fair.

"If I close my eyes and try hard the world will reward me." I assumed

Life replied. "Wrong! And so the lesson shall be repeated."

She wasn't a bad person; just a person living a confused life; mixing that with my befuddled existence the result was emotionally cataclysmic.

When we met in March '03 I'd been coming off a series of romantic collisions, the latest of them still deeply bruising. Dawn and I were introduced by a mutual acquaintance at a ballad session in The Spaniard, Kinsale. My impression that night was of a very together character. At the end of the evening she was busy organising a search for somebody's mislaid purse and so rushed me off with one quick kiss. I noticed she had red hair and plenty of it but it wasn't until we met again a couple of months later that I realised how red it was.

She being temporarily based in England and me being ensconced in Kinsale, Co. Cork we had kept in touch by e-mail. The interchange was very expressive and quite touching at times. But did you know it is possible to get into horrendously ferocious conflict on a written page? Well it is. It is also possible to ignore red flags at the start of a relationship being distracted by either infatuation or desperation or a bit of both.

Dawn arrived in Ireland in May and the immediacy of the relationship only served to enhance the fierce intensity. I would love to say we had great days and bad days but in truth, like the Irish weather, we could go through four seasons of change in one afternoon. From warm embrace to storming out in high dudgeon sometimes took less than ten minutes.

Also in May I happened to get a new telephone number. It began with the digits 17 3 (which, in Ireland, is the seventeenth of March, St Patrick's Day). That was the date we had met. The next digits were her birthday (Remember I had been given this phone number by pure chance). It ended with 18, which had no significance at all until it had. On August 1st (1/8) she told me it was over. As she seduced me to her bed she said, "from now on we'll just be friends."

If I'd had any sense I'd have left it at that. But I had no sense.

Work was going well. If you discount the excessively exuberant drunks the audiences were wonderful. There was a mixture of many nationalities in that room all getting along with each other, even the Americans with the French. They would sit and sing, listen intently, stand and cheer or follow me out on to the street and back through another door; anything I asked.

Night after night was full of fun and happy people.

I was doing brilliantly especially when you consider that every executive decision by the management of this place was working against my needs as an entertainer. Mainly what I needed from the management was for the excessively exuberant drunks to have their alcohol stream cut off. Not too much to ask but I didn't get it.

So even as the crowd reached fever pitch each night I would dream of a venue where those who were now 'standing room only' and the nightly 'turned away' could all be seated and the over-exuberant drunks could be excluded. I dreamed of an environment where the best of what I was doing could be staged and brought to many more enthusiastic fans.

Over that summer I played to 15,000 people in the White House Kinsale. When I begged for new management policy for the following season I was told, "it is best, Dezy, that you focus on singing and playing piano and leave bar management to the bar manager."

If I'd had any sense I'd have left it at that. But I had no sense.

So one night over six or eight pints I decided to change my life. I didn't have a plan for this but the seeds of desperation had been sown.

Chapter 2: For those who give it a go

Look, I don't want to wax philosophic, but I will say that if you're alive you've got to flap your arms and legs, you've got to jump around a lot, for life is the very opposite of death, and therefore you must at the very least think noisy and colourfully, or you're not alive.

Mel Brooks

“I can play marching and jazz and rock n’ roll,” Neil said “ I’m vershatile on the drumsh. I’ve had leshins an’ all!”

“I’m not sure there will be drums,” I told him, “What we need is acting and singing. So can you learn your lines? Can you do that for me?”

“I’ll do my besht,” he said in his strong Kerry accent, “I’ll do my besht!”

There was one particular line I could rely on Neil to remember, “Let’s all jump into Evelyn’s little yellow car and drive to …” but he couldn’t finish the line without breaking into fits of laughter.

“What’s so funny, Neil?” I asked, slightly irritated, the twenty-seventh time it happened.

He took a moment to gather himself. “T’is just funny de yellow little car.” That set him off again.

In Killarney, summer of ’04, I had tried to keep it ‘real’ by writing a show where these local actors mostly played characters with their own names and Evelyn, in real life, drove a little yellow car. I had adopted that car into the script. I tried to explain to Neil that nobody except us would be aware of this apparently hilarious fact. He promised me faithfully that on opening night he would deliver the line with a straight face. He’d think of something sad as he said it.

Good, because that was the only line he could be relied on to remember and his intuitive attempts at all other lines regularly left the rest of the cast rolling on the floor in hysterics. It would be a sidesplitting piece of theatre if only the audience could somehow be let in on the joke!

I had spent the winter rebuilding the piano-bike with my brother Paddy who, when sober, is quite brilliant with his hands. The work began in a house that Dawn and I had signed up to rent near the Old Head of Kinsale. As events turned out she never lived there. She just stored all her furniture and boxes in four of the six rooms while I paid the rent. So when she offered to foot some of the bill for the piano-bike I took it in the right spirit and let her.

Paddy carted the piano-bike way down to west Kerry to finish the work. It was a slow process but he got the job done.

Come spring I also moved to County Kerry to begin organising the Killarney show getting ready for what I hoped would be a summer smash hit.

Rehearsals were interesting. Lindsey, playing the female lead, had encouraged me to write a kiss into the script. Then, when I had to replace the original male lead for slack punctuality, she refused to kiss the new guy.

The plot featured a family going to see Dezy perform. Drama ensued along the way people got lost and got married and things like that but, to be fair, it wasn’t a great story although it had its moments. For me the best part is where the seventy-year-old father of the family delivers a dynamic soliloquy.

We’ve seen him leave the room chased by his large wife. A few minutes later this little man comes running breathlessly back on to the stage.

“Did you see her?” He shouts to cast and audience glancing nervously over his shoulder.

(Yes, I know, that reads a bit like pantomime, but let’s face it; a billion kids can’t be wrong.)

The large circular room we are doing the show in is part of an entertainment complex. The old man tells us his woman has hunted him through the whole place. He paints a picture of a thundering blundering hippo pursuing an elderly gazelle through the elephant’s proverbial china shop. As they cross the stage of the theatre next door where Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice is in full swing, the wife, blinkered by her singular objective, knocks Shylock from the stage his money flying everywhere. That’s when the old man grabs the opportunity to disappear into the rabbit warren of passages beneath the stage.

But now he has returned breathlessly to us one eye on the door in case she’s picked up the trail. I can’t remember why she was chasing him in the first place. Did he deserve it? Did he not? Who cares? She didn’t catch him.

What made this soliloquy work was how it was delivered. The listener felt he’d been in the chase himself. And the amazing thing is the actress playing the old man ... yes, I said actress ... was fourteen years old at the time.

Niamh was an all round star. She danced like a one girl River Dance for my audience in Kinsale. One Friday night I had brought a few of the troupe with me on the ninety-minute drive to give them experience in front of a critical crowd. This fourteen-year-old schoolgirl took it all in her stride.

I thought Neil would back down when it was his turn to sing but coaxed by Niamh, his mentor (although she was five years his junior) he came bravely to the mike. Let me tell you, my friends. You should have been there.

First I play a short intro on the piano, then I throw the young man an encouraging word and suddenly Neil is singing in front of a hundred people.

*If I’d had a motorcar, I coulda b’in a superstar
Funny how de world is never fair*

His hesitant little country voice and his nervous glances towards me fit the lyrics well. Two hundred eyes are on him.

Stead of b’in Springsteen up d’ere it should a b’in me

Once or twice he forgets some words. I fill in an extra bar or two on the piano and feed him some text. But mostly he is doing it himself.

*If I’d had a set o’ wheels I coulda b’in a real big deal
Coulda b’in de legend of dee age
Stead o’ b’in Bono on stage it coulda b’in me*

Then comes the speaking bit, “all you ever need in life is a little bit of luck ...”

I quickly prompt him. “All you need are the breaks”

“All I wanted was de brakes,” he continues, “and de clutch, and de carburettor and de over head camshaft ...”

Again Neil is singing:

*If I'd had an ole jalop I coulda made it to de top
Paul McCartney joining me in France*

I have to take the next line as he's drifting

And Eric Clapton begging for a chance to play in my band

But there's Neil imitating Clapton's screaming guitar as he falls on one knee imaginary instrument in hand. It's not cool the way he does it. It's hilarious. It's perfect.

The crowd are buzzing and he looks like he might panic. He's got to drive it home now. He looks to me for help. Shit! I'm more nervous than he is. I know too much.

I whisper, “If I'd even had ...”

Neil sings:

If I'd even had a heap of shit I coulda b'in a real big hit, coulda b'in the greatest of de lot

There's a silence. He could be pausing for affect before the punch line but it's too long a pause. Fuck it, I'm thinking; he's forgotten the words. I lean across to prompt but he's unaware of my presence. He's fully focussed on his audience. Big finish!

Stead of John Lennon been shot! It would have b'in me.

A hundred spring to their feet as one. The applause lifts the roof. Neil is in shock. He doesn't know what's hit him. I'm thinking it's sad because he may never remember how he did this but then I realise that what matters is he will never forget that he did it.

The Jarveys in Killarney with their jaunting cars (horse and buggies for tourists) are a jolly lot of people. After the first few days of me riding the piano-bike amongst them they are singing the chorus, “It Never Rains in Ireland” with me.

The newspaper reporter stops me, her photographer on her shoulder. I know this lady is from the bigger publication.

“One minute,” she says, “I have my editor on the phone.” She speaks a few excited words into the phone and then turns to me. “Can we get a photograph of you on that thing?”

“Piano-bike,” I clarify.

She writes it down. “We'll do an interview about the show you're putting on up at The Gleneagle,” she says, reading the headline on the poster stuck to the front of the piano-bike.

“That's great,” I enthuse and then I put my big foot in it by adding, “Kerry's Eye (the smaller paper) are putting in a photo too.”

She's back on the phone to her editor. "It's no good," is all she says. She turns to me. "Good luck with your show anyway." She and her photographer walk away.

Shit!

In she twirls like a girl half her age, her mass of red hair swirling around her head. I must be playing something lively because even her friend 'Fitz' is hopping pretty lively, a silly hat in hand, as she brings up the rear.

"Where," I'm thinking, "is the man from Wales?"

In early '04 Dawn had informed me that the principle block to us 'officially' renewing our relationship was this Welshman she had had a thing with for nine years. She must see him face to face to know if it was truly over or not.

So she had invited him to visit her for the month of May, "as a friend" of course! To prove to me that it would be purely platonic she showed me the bed downstairs where he would sleep. I already knew it well. It had a backbreaking beam across it's middle.

Anyway, now it's May, I'm up from Killarney with some of my troupe doing my gig and Dawn is, I presume, out somewhere with her Welshman. But no! Here she is with 'Fitz' on what looks like a girls night on the town. Dancing and shaking what they've got, they are only a couple of kazoos or vuvuzelas short of a party.

At the end of the night she chats flirtily with me at the piano.

"I left him behind tonight." she tells me, "A week of him is already too much. Should 'Fitz' and I get a taxi or do you want to drive us home?"

"Might be a bit crowded," I start counting, "I've got my Killarney group with me."

"Oh I know. Evelyn tells me rehearsals are going great." Then laughing, "but we don't mind the crush, do we 'Fitz'?"

We dropped 'Fitz' first and as we approached Dawn's house she turned to Evelyn. "I'd like to invite you all in for tea or something but I can't. There's an Englishman up in my bed."

I wondered what had become of the downstairs bed with the backbreaking crossbeam. But all I said was, "I thought he was Welsh!"

Chapter 3: The Fruits of Desperation

How can they say my life is not a success? Have I not for more than sixty years got enough to eat and escaped being eaten?
Logan Pearsall Smith

My friend Doug said, "Why didn't you call me when it happened? I know people in the Special Branch who would have put that guy behind bars!"

“Ok,” I said, “if he’d been trying to extract money from me.”

“He was!”

“Yeah! But it was money I owed to someone. Did I tell you how he put that? He said, ‘you know the money you owe to those guys’ – and he named the printing company – ‘you don’t owe that money to them anymore.’ If it weren’t for the sinister voice I’d have been celebrating. He continued, ‘you owe it to me!’ But it wasn’t like he threatened that he would break my legs or anything.”

“No, he just implied it.”

“All he said was,” I imitated the tough guy’s strong Belfast accent, “‘we don’t use police or solicitors. The only person you’ll meet in relation to this matter will be the last person you’ll meet.’”

“Sounds sinister enough to me,” Doug said. “All the more so because he’s probably an ex-paramilitary.”

“I suspect you’re right!” Peace in Northern Ireland had left a lot of those guys with time on their hands and redundant skills. “Anyway,” I went on, feeling truly relaxed for the first time in months, “It’s all over now thanks to having seven loving sisters.”

“‘Seven loving sisters!’ That could be an order of nuns.”

“As good as but not so scary!”

Doug, still hopping mad that he missed the chance to take on this tough guy, said, “what kills me is that the bastard got away with the money.”

“As it happens,” I went on, “He turned out to be a small mild man. The scariest thing I noticed about him, when we met, was a couple of modest tattoos on his arms. In fact, he was the one who looked scared, glancing over his shoulder all the time. I’d insisted we meet in a busy Dublin pub. No way was I going to Belfast.”

“I should feckin’ hope not!” Doug laughed. “Did he even buy you a drink?”

“I offered to buy him one but he refused saying he must be movin’ on but then he stayed and chatted for five minutes even after he had taken the money from me and stuffed it deep into his pocket. He told me I was lucky. My debts were chickenfeed. ‘There’s one guy;’ he told me, ‘who owes twenty times that. That boy’s in real trouble.’ He sounded almost sorry for the guy.”

“So all this was because the Killarney show bombed.”

“Yep! It closed the night it opened.”

“I never get that! How can a show close the night it opens? You’ve gone to all the trouble to get it started and, just because only a few people come the first night, you close. How does that work? What happened to persistence?”

“Oh, it’s not that easy! I wasn’t being charged rent for the venue but I had to underwrite forty dinners a night at twenty-five euro a plate, that’s a thousand euro a night and my budget was well gone. In a room that could take two hundred and fifty you’d think we could have pulled in forty minimum but no.”

“If you kept going you might have built it up.”

“Too late. I had to cut my losses. I had started out thinking the coach drivers would pour the tourists from their busses into the show if I offered them a cut.”

“A bribe?”

“A commission!”

“I hope you offered a bigger bribe, sorry, commission than the other Killarney shows were paying.”

“Yes, but apparently anything involving group dinners is planned at least a year in advance! The drivers said they would consider my generous offer for next year if I was still alive.”

“Hah! So if you’d planned forward. Or sold tickets without dinners?” then Doug remembers, “Of course you couldn’t do that because of your forty-dinner quota. God, you really thought this out.”

“I was desperate to do something.”

“And such are the fruits of desperation. Were there other debts?”

“Lots of them! Peter ...

“Your brother?”

“Yeah! He offered to help me sort them out. Well, not pay them, but organise them. He’s an accountant, as you know. Peter had also helped with marketing and things from half way through the campaign. A strange thing, Doug ... Peter met a guy outside the door of the venue on the opening night.”

“Which was also the closing night.”

“Yes! Peter was taking the tickets so he wasn’t all that busy. For some reason he felt my dad’s presence. You know, us two brothers involved in something together. We’ve had a lot of friction before. But he had this feeling that Daddy would support what we were trying to do here. Anyway, the man started chatting to Peter and it turned out he had worked under Daddy in a fertiliser factory a long way from here fifty years earlier, the year Peter was born. The man, probably now in his early seventies went on about how much he’d liked Daddy and how sad he had been when he’d read in the papers about the plane crash in ’68. After the man left, Peter found me and said, ‘he’s with us tonight’ and I knew immediately who.”

“I believe you,” Doug said, “that’s how these things happen.”

“So,” I continued telling Doug, “a couple of days after the Killarney show closed, Peter volunteered to help me organise the debts. He told me first I needed to buy a lever-arch file.

‘Are you crazy?’ I protested, ‘I can’t buy anything! I’m broke! And there are a lot of things higher on my priority list than a lever-arch file.’

‘That’s the trouble with you, Dezy; you never listen to anyone. You may be broke but a lever-arch file is exactly what you need to buy.’

‘Can’t we use those yellow, purple and green plastic folders we bought to put scripts in,’ I asked him and continued, ‘can’t we make some use of the two cash boxes we acquired but never had cash to put in’.

‘You think,’ he said emphasising the two and a half inches he is taller than me, ‘that cash boxes are only meant for carrying cash’.

‘I’m sorry,’ I replied, ‘I was fooled by the name.’

‘And,’ he repeated, ‘you never listen to anyone. What you need right now is a lever-arch file.’”

“So,” Doug asked, “Did you get one?”

“No!”

“Shit, Dezy, you never listen to anyone! How’s Dawn?”

“She says I broke her phone!”

“That’s a new one.”

“I thought she was having a heart attack or something because the phone went suddenly dead in the middle of a tirade so I tried phoning back. The phone just kept ringing and going dead but I kept trying. Apparently Dawn herself wasn’t dead; she’d been answering then hanging up immediately each time. Later she texted to say my stubborn persistence had broken her phone.”

“Why was she mad at you in the first place?” Doug wanted to know.

“Because I’m leaving the house.”

“I didn’t know you lived together.”

“No, I’m leaving the house three doors up. While I lived as her neighbour I hardly saw her, yet now that I’m leaving she’s mad at me because, apparently, we’re a couple and have been all the while.”

“There’s a name for that. Where she runs away when you go to her but runs after you when you leave. What’s it called?”

“Stupidity?”

“There’s another name for it but that’ll do for now.”

“Her text” I told him, “said, ‘you broke my phone and I never want to talk to you or see you ever again.’ So I went to the movies on my own and when I came out there was a

sort of peace had descended on my soul. Doug, I think my year of desperation may be over.”

“Congratulations!”

“Thank you!”

A few weeks after the show ended I had to go back to Killarney to wrap up some business. As I was filling my petrol tank at the edge of town a lady rolled down the window of her car and said hello. I recognised Niamh’s mother. I was bit embarrassed as I felt I’d let everyone down particularly this lady’s talented kid. The poor girl had rehearsed hard for a summer show and now it wouldn’t happen.

“I want to thank you, Dezy,” Niamh’s mother said.

“Thank me, Mrs. O’Sullivan, whatever for?”

“That was the greatest experience of Niamh’s young life. It has given her the courage and enthusiasm to join the musical society among other things. She just loves performing.”

“That young lady is a bonus to any team and has a wonderful talent.” I told the proud mother.

“Well, I want to thank you from her and on behalf of all the members of your young cast. You gave them a great experience.”

I drove home quite chuffed that my apparent failure had been worthwhile for some people. Neil had got a lot out of it. And now Niamh and then I realised there was someone else, at this minute driving this car, who had gained a lot from the whole thing too.

Plus: next time I’d know what not to do.

Chapter 4: Ma: The Inevitable Influence

A Freudian slip is when you say one thing but mean your mother.

~Author Unknown

Our differences began as early as my second year on earth. And a half-century later she could recall the painful details. You could tell it still rankled with her.

I was a happy and boisterously healthy child and it must have been difficult for her losing Pauline, my delicate baby sister, to pneumonia at only six weeks old leaving Ma with my elder sister, Clare a rock of sense even at two and a half and me, a sixteen-month old bruiser with a concrete head.

I mention the concrete head as the story, which Ma never forgot, relates to that. It probably happened once or twice but she seemed to remember it as a regular occurrence. Thinking life was nothing but fun I would swing my head back on my reinforced-rubber

neck. It would snap sharply forward, my rock-like skull smashing wrecking ball style against her delicate nose and forehead. This would send pain shooting through her system but mostly it would bring severe irritation to her whole being, at the very thought that any human could be so insensitive to another.

Ma would use this story to justify her assessment that I was a creature destined to barge through life with great exuberance but without consideration for how such blind enthusiasm might affect others.

“And” she would say many times through the years, “my worst fears were realised.”

“Our worst fears are often realised,” I would retort, “we get to see what we expect to see.”

I admit on a subconscious level we may also be drawn to playing the role expected of us. But isn't that just the other side of the same coin.

Ma and I ultimately became the best of friends, possibly because, despite the recurring arguments, we never stopped conversing. We both liked to talk a lot and although 'talking to Ma' was when I was most likely to feel small and vulnerable it was also when I was most likely to feel completely at home.

For many years she lived happily alone down at Sleah Head, in west Kerry. Of course, she almost never was alone. As a mother of twelve, all of whom praised her excessively, openly complained about her and loved her passionately, she had no shortage of company. Even when immediate family were not around, the very place she lived in and the welcome she offered drew a wide range of visitors to her.

She'd say, 'drop by anytime' and drop by they did. No wonder! Sleah Head, the most westerly point of Europe overlooking the Blasket Islands, is probably the most beautiful place in the world and she was a renowned convivial host. Ma's house stood perched on the base of a mountain above the sea, commanding a view from her porch, which the tourist viewing area, two hundred feet below, could not but envy.

In that porch Peter and I sit with our sprightly eighty-year-old mother a few short weeks after the Killarney show has closed. Peter is gazing in awe at the view, which is ever changing depending on the moods of the clouds, sunshine, winds and tides, while Ma and I slip habitually into another episode of our lifelong revolving conversation.

“Why Ma,” I inquire of her as I had many times throughout the years, “When my Father was so suddenly taken from us did you not ask me, as your nineteen year old son, to be in some ways the man of the house. I've seen twelve year olds fill such a role in similar circumstances.”

“Well” she pounces, “if you, at nineteen had half the sense of the average twelve year old I might have called on you. I didn't need a man of the house. What I needed from you was to finish your degree and be an example to the younger boys.”

“I tried, Ma, I tried. It wasn't for me.”

“What was for you? That’s the question Daddy and I asked ourselves a thousand times back then.”

“You could have asked me.”

“Of course we asked you. You wanted to go to London and be a rock star.”

“A continuing conversation along those lines would have been welcome. Look for the answer in the question.”

“There is no possible answer in, ‘can I take my college fund and go to a strange city to play rock and roll?’”

“I gave in, Ma! I went to University. Do I get credit for that?”

“You went in body but your mind went elsewhere.”

“That’s what happens when you only do it to please your father.”

Peter, who had been half listening now butts in and not so much changes the subject as kicks it sideways, “Listen to your mother, Dezy,” as if she were not his mother too, “You can’t just keep thinking up crazy things and diving headlong into them.”

“Why not? *Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.*”

“Typical, Dezy, you listen to Goethe who’s been dead for almost two centuries but you don’t listen to your mother. Ma, didn’t I once hear you say, *‘If you fall off get back on your donkey immediately. Don’t even check for blood.’*”

“No!” Ma tells him, “What I said was, *why would you ride a donkey when there are horses in the stables?*”

“Those horses seem to turn into donkeys as soon as Dezy sits on them.”

This coming from a guy who joined me in Killarney because he was at a loose end having just crashed yet another brave business venture into the ground. His public image had always been that of the well-dressed successful accountant, with the impressive house and the elegant wife. All had recently fallen apart and the real Peter had begun to emerge from the cocoon. I liked what I was witnessing although fully aware that it could not be easy for him.

“You are an excellent public speaker,” I tell my brother, “I have an idea for you.”

Ma looks pleased that I am coming up with something positive.

“How about,” I suggest, “You write a book and do a lecture series on, ‘how to not succeed in business’?”

Ma jumps in before Peter can answer, “Don’t be ridiculous, Dezy. Nobody wants to know how not to succeed in business. That may be the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

Peter comes quickly to my defence, “Dezy did not say, ‘how not to succeed in business’ he said, ‘how to not succeed in business.’”

“It’s at times like this I wish your father were alive to drum some sense into you boys.

I continue to explain, “*How to not succeed in business* would (a) make them laugh and (b) point out some of the things Peter did in business and now realises should never be done. It would be a smash hit.”

“And make a fool of your brother.”

“I think your problem Ma, is that your own brother being a successful politician and your husband and his brothers being top management has spoilt you. You can’t bear the world knowing that your son’s best asset might be that he understands how to not succeed.”

Peter puts his hand affectionately on her shoulder. “I don’t know if I’d do it, Ma, but you must admit it has something.”

“You know, Peter”, Ma sounds quite frustrated, “since that change in you, you’ve become very strange.” He takes his hand away.

“Hey, Ma,” I protest, “Peter hasn’t changed? He’s emerged. We should be celebrating. Peter was acting a part all those years. Now we are getting the real thing.”

Peter stands up. “I’m going to bed. I need a nap.”

Ma looks at her watch. “It’s two in the afternoon!”

“And who made the rule of when humans sleep?”

“Normal people sleep at night.” She informs him.

“Normal people?” He laughs, “Let me know, Ma, if you ever spot a ‘normal person’. Get a photograph.” Peter pecks Ma’s cheek on his way out.

There was a time when I really did listen to Ma. I was thirteen and as my world expanded my views on what was ‘cool’ contracted.

“Clare and her friends are going to that new ‘picture’ in town tonight. Why don’t you go with them?” Ma asked me.

“I’m not going to see that ‘picture’! It’s about men dancing in the street.”

“You should go. You would enjoy it.”

“No I wouldn’t. I liked ‘The Hustler’. That’s the kind of ‘picture’ me and Daddy like.”

“Well, Daddy is at a meeting tonight, but he told me he’d like to see this ‘picture’ himself.”

“He did?”

“Yes, he did!”

“Ok, I’ll go.”

So I went with my sister to see ‘West Side Story’. The following night I went with my father to see it again. The next afternoon I saw it twice on my own and by the weekend I’d seen it again. From the moment the coloured dots came on the screen and Leonard Bernstein’s wonderful music hit my ears I was enraptured. Looking back it was a life changing moment and Ma had been the catalyst.

As I stuttered into a show business career Ma at first warned against, later ruefully accepted my choices, and in the end became my greatest fan. She would interrupt any party, no matter what anybody else thought, and insist that I perform. It had not always been so by any means but, as in any great story, you’ve got to wait until it is almost over to see if there’s going to be a happy ending. Such is life!

Chapter 5: A moment of triumph

All moments of triumph are followed by the words, ‘what next?’

The third of June ’06 turned out a warm summer’s day in Kinsale. The kind of bright sunshine that is so welcome in Ireland! The day is all the brighter for Peter and me as it is the day following our opening night, our moment of triumph.

“What next?” Peter asks as we sit behind our promo table on the corner of the street. We sit there because there are still a couple of tickets to be sold for the follow up performance tonight.

“*The Show* will lead the way,” I say not sure what that means or why I would even think it but I let it be.

There has been much soul searching; I’ve made significant changes in the two years since Killarney. I have quit drinking forever on the full realisation that it gives me nothing I want or could possibly need. There is a new woman in my life. And even though Una and I may not have enough in common to create the romance of the century, at least there is peace in my heart. Time will tell if that’s enough. Whatever, I am worth more than the pain brought on by the turbulence of irrational romance. Peace is good right now.

But the most significant change I have made is I have decided to trust. To trust in whatever it is that guides us when we pay attention to it. Paying attention to such a silent voice is not easy against the constant internal chatter in our heads but I’ve learned to be calm and listen.

“The Show will lead the way,” Peter repeats my words. “I like how that takes all responsibility away from ...”

“Hey, mister,” A passing twelve-year-old boy interrupts him. “Are you one of them Hare Krishna fellahs?”

“No,” says Peter standing up to fully display his colourful kaftan, “I’m an African prince!”

“You’re not black!” is the quick retort.

Peter glances at his reflection in a shop window. “Oh, you’re right, I’m not. Still, I’m dressed like a prince so I must be one.”

“You’re mad like your brother,” the kid says skipping off to join his friends who’ve remained at a safe distance.

Two days earlier Peter and I have been in a screaming match as rehearsals for the opening night of ‘Not the Life I Ordered!’ reach pressure point. There are many advantages to a musical play with only two protagonists on stage but the main disadvantage is the unbroken emotionally charged interactions throughout rehearsals. The impact is intensified when the actors concerned are brothers and playing characters based on their own life stories.

I have this eternal picture of Peter in a pink skirt and top, a blond wig and size nine high heels screaming, “Don’t call me a prima donna. I am not a prima donna,” as he storms off to the dressing room.

“Careful,” I tell him, “or I’ll write a song around those words! This scene has got potential.”

He can hear me as I say this, since the dressing room he has run to is merely a curtained off corner of our space above the Thai Cottage Restaurant. Such is our little ‘theatre’. It boasts a capacity of seventeen seated.

“Write what you like,” Peter says, “I’ll sing what entertains but if we had a real director you, as the writer, would be expected to finish the script more than two days before opening night!”

And so it goes but come opening night we are on fire, particularly Peter, in this, his showbiz debut at almost fifty-two years old. He wows the sell-out audience of nine friends and eight strangers. I happily play second fiddle. Well, I played piano but you know what I mean.

Of the seventeen tickets we sold, two stand out for me. In Jim Edwards, which is Kinsale’s most respected pub/restaurant, late on the previous Thursday afternoon a lady and her adult daughter are having a meal. They have offered to switch tables with three poor souls who seemed to be overcrowded where they were. This act of kindness leaves the two ladies dangerously close to two strange Irishmen. The long haired and apparently weirder of these two men makes an excuse to open a conversation, not with the purpose of chatting up the two pretty ladies, but to sell them tickets to a show.

He asks them inane questions like ‘why, if you are mother and daughter, do you speak with different accents?’

Clare explains that they are originally South African but her daughter, Veronica, has been raised in Florida. She and her ex, Veronica’s dad, moved there in ’92 with their three little girls. But yes, she would like to hear about *The Show* as judging from the poster it might be fun. So I sell them two tickets.

“I hope you guys will show up,” Clare adds before they leave. Veronica laughs at the idea of giving thirty euro to strangers in a pub just because they say they have a show.

“Oh, well,” muses her mother, philosophically, “it’ll be an experience either way.”

“Don’t worry,” Peter reassures them, “We’ll be there. After suffering through rehearsals for months with this guy I’m not missing opening night.”

And, of course we were there. After the performance there were many compliments from people like my close friend, Neasa and her fiancé, Ken, my ever-supporting sister, Clare, my son Ronan, who acted as Maître d’ to give the event some class, and many more. But a genuine compliment from a stranger carries extra weight because it’s given without bias.

“How do you know the Florida lady’s compliments were genuine,” Peter asks me as we soak up the June sunshine and dissect every detail of the night’s triumph.

“The truth is in the eyes,” I tell him.

“Yes, you told me, the dark brown eyes. Funny I was talking to her for two hours at your pub gig the night before and I never noticed what colour her eyes were.”

“She didn’t like the pub gig so much because she thought the songs were better highlighted in *The Show*.”

“Perhaps because I was singing most of them,” he suggests modestly, “Strange, though, how Clare’s compliments about your songs were so enthusiastic and her brown eyes so truthful, yet she never bought your CD! Hey, speaking of *The Show*, wasn’t that beardy fella there last night? ”

Gerry Conway has just rounded the corner. He’s grinning as he pulls an empty cigarette packet from his pocket.

“I’ll be with you in a second, lads, I must grab a packet of fags,” Gerry says before hopping back around the corner for his nicotine fix.

“He looks fresh this morning,” Peter comments.

“Why not? It’s the rewards of sobriety.” I smile. Peter’s phone rings. He steps into a shop door to answer it.

“Great show last night, lads,” Gerry says coming back. He leans on the table in front of me. “You know, I’ll be the first to admit, Dezy, I didn’t think putting your songs into a musical would work.”

“Yes, you told me that many times. But you are also the guy who told me that when someone says ‘that’ll never work’ you can be sure it will work. So when you said, ‘that’ll never work’ I knew it definitely would work.”

“So, I’m right both ways.”

Peter rejoins us taking his seat next to me. “Lucy’s coming and bringing a friend. It’s another sellout tonight.”

Gerry extends his hand to Peter saying, “I must shake this man’s hand. Your piano bashing brother I’ve seen a thousand times, even performed with the fecker but you, my friend, were a surprise packet. Are they teaching acting and singing in accountancy class these days?”

Peter takes the compliment graciously.

“All you need, lads is a director.” Gerry continues and, judging by the way he leans his head, he is serious. “This show has huge potential. It was good last night but, to be fair, half the audience were friends and family.”

“Tell him,” says Peter, “what the lady from Florida said. She wasn’t friend or family.”

“Never mind the ladies from Florida, this show needs a director.”

“You mean Jackie,” I ask him because he’s told me once that his girlfriend is an excellent and experienced director.

“Jackie is great,” he says, “but you guys need more than a talented director. You need a referee. Anyway, I must run now, Jackie is waiting for me in Actons. Call me next week. By the way, what’s the name of that feckin’ show?”

“Not the Life I Ordered!”

“That comes from your God song. At least you have a good title which is a start.”

I turn to Peter as Gerry disappears. “Do you think he was offering his own services as director?”

“Sure he was! A director will be good for me,” he rubs his hands together. “From now on, when you want to tell me how to act, you’ll have to go ‘through the director’.” He uses his prima donna tone to effect.

So there you go. What next?

Chapter 6: Anyone can write a script.

When we remember we are all mad, the mysteries disappear and life stands explained. **Mark Twain**

“Can you hold this for me a minute?”

“What is it?”

“It’s the script of *The Show*.”

“Why are you giving it to me?”

“Sure amn’t I giving it to everybody!” I tell him paraphrasing an old joke.

I had to bring the script over to Gerry’s place because he ‘hasn’t had a chance to set up e-mail since moving house three months ago’.

“Now, Dezy,” says our new director, “before even reading this I can tell you, you have to rewrite it.”

“Yes, of course, I can see room for improvement.”

“Problem is,” he barrels on ignoring my comment, “There’s only one character in the show. That’s Peter’s character and although you play the piano and act as his foil it lacks the energy I see between you two guys off stage. Why?”

I open my mouth to answer but he continues, “Because your character is undeveloped. Peter’s character is bouncing off nothing and nobody. Write your own story into it. That should be the easiest thing in the world. Then you’ll see fireworks like you two create in real life. Where’s the point in having all the drama backstage. Put it on stage where the audience can see it. I’ll read this anyway,” he shakes the old script at me like yesterday’s newspaper, “but you go and write it again. When did you say we’re putting this in a real theatre; three month’s time? It’s gonna be a close call. I have to block the play, fix the script, get rid of the songs that don’t fit and train ye to act. It’ll be a close call all right. Go home and get started.”

Anyone can write a script. I’ve done it a hundred times. Most of them are under the bed or in an old box in the attic but I wrote them. The first script I ever wrote was about a band I loved. I had played a big part in the life of this band. I had pushed them forward. I had held them back. I was their manager.

The story was a tragedy. A collection of superb talents ripped apart by disagreements over rehearsal times and the true meaning of a G minor suspended fourth. Six years after the band disintegrated I was still dealing with the loss. Writing that first script was my therapy. I showed it to my mother.

Ma said the piece had too many characters. But that was not what discouraged me. It was what else she said. Namely nothing! ‘Too many characters’ was the entire critique.

When, after ten years I plucked up the courage to again expose a script to the scrutiny of someone else whose views could sting, Tony observed that my musical, *The Motivation*

Room lacked characters. Not character, it had plenty of character; in fact it had characters with character. What it lacked were characters without character.

“Where,” my friend asked, “are the bad guys?”

He suggested I create a villain who would build ruthless apartment blocks next to the kids’ playground, right up against the swings so that the six year old could merrily swing back but when she would swing forward she would smash her little face against a concrete wall. Lacking anything better I fooled around with that idea for a while. Pity me, please!

I got away from purposely writing scripts for a while.

I took my frustrations out on pianos. I would hit a C minor chord saying ‘take that you black and white bastard; how dare you fuck up my life by leading me away from a comfortable job at the bank’. I had never been offered a job at a bank but you know what I mean.

I was eventually offered a job banging pianos. That’s fair.

What a ‘live’ audience will teach you is that stories are gold and you’d better use your words well or they’ll eat you alive.

“Hey Dezy, do you know ‘Peaceful Easy Feeling’ by the Eagles?”

“No but you sing it and I’ll accompany you.” and I’d continue, “That’s very nice. You sing it beautifully. Can you write out the lyrics for me? Thank you.”

I went from knowing seventeen songs to a thousand and seventeen very quickly using the above tactic. And in my spare time I was writing my own songs.

There are two types of performers who do their own material.

Firstly there is the singer-songwriter who says, ‘I’ve suffered for my art, now it’s your turn’.

The other kind is an entertainer. Some think the only entertainers are ‘crowd pleasers’ covering Neil Diamond sing-alongs and telling slightly suggestive jokes. Maybe that’s the only sort of act an agent can sell.

“He’s a Neil Diamond tribute band.” The agent says.

“Oh, I like Neil Diamond, we’ll have that.” Says the office assistant who’s been delegated to book music for the Christmas party.

Agents cannot describe what I do. And to be fair, neither can I. All I can tell you is I am a writer/performer and my songs had better make ‘em laugh and cry every night or they don’t make next week’s team sheet. And as a performer it was not just the songs but the stories and interaction around them. I had to learn quickly what to say to hecklers, how to grab the attention of a sleepy crowd or hold a visitor all night who’d only intended to stay a minute. The latter were my favourites.

They’d say, “We’d planned to meet our friends in The Blue Haven but instead we got them to come here and we’re all glad we did. You made our night.”

“And you mine!”

So when I went to write *The Show*, ‘Not the Life I Ordered’ I had a feel for words beyond what sitting in a den, pen in hand, gives you.

Gerry was surprised when I came back with the rewrite after only five days. I can be stubborn and obsessive when I want something done. He was even more surprised that it was ‘pretty good stuff’ as he put it.

Rehearsals began on the deck at the back of Gerry’s house. From what we could tell the neighbours liked it. At least they never sent for the police.

Peter was happy. When he’d say, ‘I can’t say that. Simon would never say that,’ instead of me hopping on him with, ‘Of course you could say it. Open your mouth, move your jaw and wiggle your tongue around and you’ll hear the words coming out,’ he’d have Gerry asking, ‘what do you think Simon would say, Peter?’

And Peter and I started fighting less off stage. We were doing that on stage instead and hopefully one day someone would pay us for it. When we practiced in my house, my son Ronan, who shared a rental with me at the time, couldn’t tell most of the time if we were acting or it was real. Hey, that’s not bad for beginners.

Chapter 7 ... Anything Else is Sticking Plaster

Do what you love in the service of people who love what you do.

Steve Farber - The Radical Leap

I had just hung up the phone from my sister when it rang again. I looked at the display. It said Paul. I didn’t want to talk to him right now. I wouldn’t want to talk to Paul O’Shea, the bar manager at the White House even at the best of times and this certainly wasn’t the best of times.

My sister, Clare had told me Ma was worse than we first thought. But it was hard to imagine her sick. The last time I had seen her she and her two friends were laughing like three teenage girls who’d skipped school for the day. Ma, Sheila and Aine told me I’d have to come up with something more shocking than The Stress Management Song. They’d become immune to that one. The time before that Ma had driven Una and me from Sleah Head to Killarney and after high tea in The Great Southern she had set off alone on the ninety-minute journey back home. Now my sister was saying that fluid was building up on Ma’s lungs and even though they drained it, it could come back without warning. When she came out of hospital she would need minding.

“Ridiculous! Ma’s the one who does the minding. Always has been.”

But she would not be going back to Sleah Head to live alone and even in Colette’s granny flat in Dublin, Ma would need constant watching. I instantly agreed to take my turn and

stay with her at least one night a week once she came out of hospital. Dublin was four hours away for me and I knew ultimately I would have to move closer.

All this was rushing through my head. The phone was still ringing. Shit! I was going to have to take this call. If I didn't he'd only call back tomorrow.

“What is it, Paul?”

“Hi Dezy, remember what we spoke about a couple of weeks ago?”

Of course I remembered what we'd spoken about a couple of weeks before. Paul wanted to cut my wages. By Paul's estimates I was chasing business away from The White House bar by telling drunken idiots who fell over my piano what to do with themselves. The fact that the bar was jam-packed Monday to Thursday evening when I played there was irrelevant to Paul. I was chasing away the big drinkers and this, he claimed, was beginning to show in his books.

“So is it like this?” I asked him, “I bring you a hundred people a night when you don't even have that many on a Saturday night but because they drink in moderation you can't make money from them? You can only serve customers who require excessive doses of alcohol to carry on living? I don't need the money, Paul. I earn more from the audience than you pay me. But there is a principle at stake here.”

“Exactly,” Paul snapped at me, “We give you a platform to sell CDs and you put your jar around and people stuff it with cash. I've seen what you collect. The White House does that for you.”

“Paul, are you by any chance peeved that I earn more than you do, you being the manager and I being a mere piano player?”

“Don't get personal. You're just going to have to take the cut. That's it!”

“OK, Paul, if that's how you feel, why don't you just give me one week's termination of employment notice. Put it in writing and send a copy to Michael?”

Paul agreed to that plan more readily than I expected. The Michael I was referring to was Michael Frawley, the owner of The White House, the man who had called me his ‘people magnet’ the first year I worked for him. Paul had come on board the following season to help handle the extra revenue I'd generated and from the start we had not seen eye to eye.

He built what I like to refer to as the ‘confessional box’. For the Catholics among you that's what it looked like. It was a sort of porch inside a door, which prior to that had opened on to the street. Paul's purpose was to stop crowds from gathering outside on the footpath and enjoying the show with their heads in the door while ‘buying no drink’. The point Paul was missing was that, fifty people in a doorway with their asses sticking out so the whole world could see them was a great advert. It screamed, ‘something's going on in

there!’ And, pre Paul’s time, the crowds just poured in through the other door. ‘The confessional’ didn’t affect business but it blocked my view of some of my audience in the far corner. I wasn’t a happy boy when I saw that. It was not a good start to our working relationship.

I came off the phone call and ranted to my son, Ronan for an hour or more. It was a mixed message of non-acceptance that Ma could be seriously ill and anger at Paul’s shortsighted mismanagement. Ronan, knowing both Ma and Paul was just the ear I needed. He sympathised with conviction. I headed off for rehearsals of *The Show* feeling better. I didn’t say much to Gerry or Peter as the business of ‘Not the Life I Ordered,’ was in itself sufficient therapy.

Monday evening I sat behind my familiar piano in the White House bar. It was, as usual, standing room only with tourists from every corner of the world packed in around me while the other establishments in Kinsale served one or two Monday night customers. Before I began I had been handed Paul’s letter. I couldn’t resist reading it to the audience.

‘Dear Des, you have been warned regarding your rudeness to some of our best customers. You have ignored these warnings and your attitude is now beginning to affect business.’

I stop reading to ask the crowd, “How many of you came here tonight to see me?”

More than a hundred hands go up as some of them put up both hands. “Ah, yes,” I say, “It does look like I am affecting business.”

I could have left it at that but you know when you are ready to press the self-destruct button nothing will stop you.

“I’ve been told,” I continue, “By a successful bar manager miles from here who would know these things, that if an entertainer brings in the crowds a good manager will find a way to make it pay. Drink, apparently, is not the only product a small hotel like this sells. So, how is it that our manager here, Paul O’Shea cannot make this pay?” I look to Paul’s staff of ‘little fishes’ behind the bar (They got that name because they scurry away in a shoal at the first sign of a customer ... they hate me because I keep them busy). Miraculously I catch their eyes, “Could it be because he’s an ASSHOLE!!!!” The crowd loved that. The little fishes cowed down and one or two slipped away apparently to report to the boss.

Predictably after that, Michael not only did not back me against Paul. Instead he texted me the following morning saying that as I’d now resorted to abusing the staff in public I need not play at The White House again. I was disappointed that this man who had valued what I did for him didn’t think me worth a phone call.

I wondered why I self destructed and blew away work I loved and an income I could use. At first I partly excused it by saying I was upset at Ma's condition and blamed Paul's intransigence for the rest. But it wasn't any of that. Something deeper was driving me.

This is how it works. No matter how far or rough the journey is to the place you need to be you must forsake all other roads and begin that journey. Destroy all other options. Anything else is sticking plaster!

As I walked into rehearsals for *The Show* the next day Gerry said, "You look happy."

And despite much turbulence of mind, I could truthfully answer, "I am."

To be continued