

Introduction: Notes on Larry's Party

"Where you start from, there you end," Carol Shields tells us on the final page of *Larry's Party*. But where did the musical version of her book actually start? With a phone call, of course, like most theatrical projects.

Morley Walker of the *Winnipeg Free Press* called me out of the blue one day in the summer of 1997 to ask if I would be interested in reviewing Carol Shields' new novel, *Larry's Party*, for his paper.

I immediately said yes, as I was a huge fan of Carol's work, and had the pleasure of knowing her slightly from our mutual years in Winnipeg during the early '80s.

But then I asked Morley why he had chosen me. "You seem a lot like Larry to me," was his answer. "You're the same age, lived in Winnipeg at the same time, got married at the same time, lots of things."

I read the book and gave it a glowing review. Fade out.

Fade in on an April night the next year, 1998. My long-time collaborator Marek Norman and I were driving home from a show at Toronto's Canadian Stage Theatre.

At that time, we had productions of our *Dracula* scheduled for Halifax that fall, and our *Emily* in Charlottetown the following summer. "Wouldn't it be nice if could drive home from rehearsal in ten minutes like this," offered Marek, "instead of always having to go out of town?"

I agreed, and we both commented that Canadian Stage had such a high standard of production that it would be a pleasure to do a show there. And Martin Bragg had just taken over as Artistic Producer, so the time was ripe to hit him with a fresh idea.

I've known Marty for twenty years, and he likes work that is Canadian, and work that is popular...ideally both at the same time. What better way to combine them than in an adaptation of a popular Canadian novel. And what was more popular at the time than Carol Shields new best seller, *Larry's Party*.

Marek had loved the book, and you already know how I felt about it. I went home that night, picked it up again, and it fell open by chance to a passage near the end: "And we will go round and round. Watching where we're going. Where we've been."

That almost read like a song lyric to me.

We were halfway home. The next day I set about contacting Carol. It wasn't hard. A quick search on the e-mail directory at the University of Winnipeg where she was then Chancellor gave me what I needed.

I sent out a cheerful and cheeky request for the rights to turn *Larry's Party* into a musical.

Forty-five minutes later Carol's answer appeared on my screen:

"Richard, I never thought of it that way, but you know more about musicals than I do, so go ahead with my blessing."

I picked up the phone and called Marty Bragg. After some preliminary congratulatory chat, I cut to the chase.

"Marty, do you know *Larry's Party*?"

"Love it. On the top of my to-do list. Want to get the rights to turn it into a play."

"Too late, Marty, I've got them. And it's going to be a musical."

"Then you better write it for us."

"That was the idea."

Done like dinner, less than twenty-four hours after the idea first hit.

Then came the hard part, writing it. I began by visiting Carol in Winnipeg, and talking to her about Larry and his book. "Don't make him a buffoon," she pleaded. "I love Larry." I loved him too – so of course I agreed.

By the end of November, 1999, we had finished a first draft, and had done a presentation for Canadian Stage and several other theatres. The result was immediate and positive.

Early in 2000, we had a three-city Canadian tour lined up and the brilliant Robin Phillips set to direct an impeccable cast led by my friend and colleague of thirty years, the uniquely wonderful Brent Carver.

Months of re-writing followed, under the watchful eyes of Robin and Katherine Kaszas of Canadian Stage's New Play Development Program. And then, before I knew it, we were into rehearsal, which is proving to be a thrilling process as I write these words.

Turning the story of Larry Weller, master maze-maker, into a musical has been a unique journey. And it all began with a book and a phone call.

Welcome to Larry's Party. I am so glad you're here.

— Richard Ouzounian
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