

Bound by Our Forefathers' Ink

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As the crisp white pages of the newest *Bloodbound* draft cascade from the printer into a scattered pile on my desk, I engage in the familiar refrain of questions that propel a writer to follow the path to his script's elusive finish line.

A sensible self-critique is always upset by a gnawing neurosis that feels unwieldy as the printer's flicking sounds produce the fresh pages. For over a year, I have spent hours huddled over my computer or scrunched in a theater seat, developing this full-length play that depicts the unorthodox relationship between two brothers who experience one night of lovemaking that would inform the ensuing decades of their lives as brothers, the love that dare not speak its name: incest. While it only takes the vivid recall of one night to confirm the perceived unnaturalness of blood-on-blood love—potentially dismissed as sick if not illegal—the theater of the 21st century allows the complexities of human behavior to flourish, both on the page and on the stage.

Yet my concerns loom large: Do the brothers speak differently enough to enunciate their pertinent class distinctions? Is it my imagination, or have recent phone calls between my brother and me begun to reflect the play's quivering sensuality? Is life imitating art? Is the sexual language heightened enough without going over the top? Is the seething intensity of the mother's fire-breathing scenes offset by moments in which her humanness peeks through? Does the homage to Martin Sherman's hands-free orgasm scene in *Bent* resonate, or does it feel like a self-conscious nudge for insiders? Is the geography of the play (hovering at a hundred pages, no intermission) consistently clear as it ricochets from past to present, from dreams to fantasies, and intentionally blurs fact and fiction? Is it believable? Specious? Too gay?

Whether blatantly employing the "I" of autobiography or carefully crafting a characterization that is emotionally truthful but protected by the conceit of make-believe, writing about oneself entails risks, from familial ostracism to public humiliation. Truth telling has never been for sissies.

Enacted in 1927 and "vigorously protested" by the theater community, according to *The Historical Dictionary of the American Theater*, the Wales Padlock Law targeted New York theaters that produced plays "depicting or dealing with

the subject of sex degeneracy or sex perversion." Credit Mae West with her unapologetic, unhysterical treatment of sexual desire, both homo and hetero, in three plays that she wrote (*Sex, The Drag, The Pleasure Man*) to order to incite the enforcement of the moralistic law, which sent a chilling message to playwrights during the first half of the 20th century. And so, the Wales Padlock Law kept offending dialog and subject matter mostly out of American drama until the 1950s.

Bloodbound is littered with "offending dialogue and subject matter." Serving time in a Missouri State Prison for a murder conviction, my real-life brother is the model for Anthony (portrayed by three actors at different stages of life). In the play, Anthony 3 cannot suppress recurring memories of their sexual entanglement, even though it occurred more than thirty years ago:

ANTHONY 3: Written on me somewhere. Maybe not directly on my body. But that's what it feels like; feels like the experience—and every gorgeous-dirty spoken word is emblazoned on my insides, on my outsides. It feels like it happens every night. For more than a week. A month maybe? Sometimes twice a night. A recurring dream—is that what's it's called?

Had it been written or performed prior to my birth in 1950, *Bloodbound* would have been in good company with the sanctioned plays of Mae West.

As a teenager destined for a career in the theater, I scoured every play I could get my hands on—those of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Thornton Wilder, Edward Albee—not only searching for juicy roles to play, but also hoping to find myself staring back at me on the page. Not until I looked in my own backyard did I find such a play, one that takes place in St. Louis, Missouri, where I was growing up in a broken family with an absent father, a theatrically overwrought mother, and a codependent sibling entanglement. Yes, all the ingredients that make up Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, a play that shattered Broadway when it premiered in 1945. Calling it a "memory play" allowed Williams to delve into the mysterious world of one's past, filled with memories that are sometimes accurate, often faulty, usually in service of a self-conscious narrative.

In a blatant tribute to Williams, I have adopted the device of the memory play to

tell the story of *Bloodbound* as honestly as I can, knowing that it isn't a shield to protect me from the judgment of my peers, audiences, and critics. Or, as spoken by "my" character in maturity...

VINCENT 3: I write a play—determined to record, to document, to archive—feelings that are irresistible but irremediable, feelings that words fail, no matter how many of them in how many combinations, how many pages, splattered tears and bloodstains, our blood—my brother's and mine—plotting the white pieces of paper (purchased at Staples), pages juicy with memory.

Would my brother remember the elusive evening as I have? Am I disrespecting my flesh-and-blood by appropriating a moment in his life that he might not choose to define him? Facts are for documentaries, not plays. Autobiographical writing is the stuff of remembrance—often blurred, even subconsciously reconstructed, differing versions of eyewitnesses—resulting in the *Rashomon* effect.

Whether they are creating a novel or a solo performance piece, I teach my writing students to distill precisely what it is they are trying to say into one clean sentence. Even if it eventually morphs into something else, I encourage them to use that sentence to keep on track; it is a signpost, a mantra, a prayer.

Bloodbound conveys a love story between brothers, bound not only by blood, but by an all-consuming and uncommon passion.

ANTHONY 3: Your tongue/ Ripped my mouth/ Open/ And I was yours// Fresh blood/ From your kiss/ Mixed with mine/ A match/ Taboo DNA// Is this/ What I was/ Waiting for/ The feel of your/ Long body/ (no, lanky, not long)/ The feel of your/ Lanky body/ Slapping against my convict/ Flesh

There are times when I stare, bleary-eyed, at the computer screen, as if believing an answer will magically appear; but, instead, I feel the stiff linen of his frilly ruff graze my shoulder, his long beard scraping against my neck, as he whispers in my ear: "To thine own self be true."

Michael Kearns is a theater artist and activist who has been involved in the LGBTQ cultural scene for more than four decades.