

A dream of Acceptance

Tim Mason is a novelist and playwright based in New York but currently stranded in Los Angeles by Covid. On Tuesday 23 March 2021 he will be Zooming into London for an online performance of his magical play, *Levitation*, twenty-five years after Homo Promos gave its first UK performance. The director, Peter Scott-Presland had a chat

PS-P: Hi, Tim. The weather there is looking lovely.

TM: Yeah, it's paradise I suppose. Except I grew up in Minnesota, and I love winter, so.

PS-P: That's where *Levitation* is set, isn't it? Does this mean that it is autobiographical?

TM:: It is the most autobiographical of my plays, and the impetus came from my parents. Like the father, Arthur, in the play, my father was a Lutheran minister of the benevolent sort. He was a little eccentric and like in the play he set up lawn chairs and a pitcher of orange juice for himself to spend the night looking for shooting stars. Without much luck, it has to be said.

And I remember on a visit back to Minneapolis at the family dinner table my mother said to me sotto voce, "Whatever you do, don't get your father going on levitation". And that line set me going. I was about thirty, and I was suddenly aware that my parents were mortal. There was no incident brought it on, it was just me looking at them through more mature eyes. And now I look at myself and say, "Oh! You too!" Thirty-five, forty years later I'm seeing the same progression in myself.

PS-P: The play shows a writer returning home from New York.

TM: I'd moved to New York in 1980 in what I thought was the wreckage of a love affair that I had had with a boy in Minneapolis throughout my twenties. We were to have moved together, but about a month before that could happen, he said, 'No'. He changed his mind. So, I arrived in a hand basket in New York alone and totally at a loss.

And then I heard from Minneapolis from my parents and others that my parents' love of Victor continued unabated after we broke up; in fact, he went on and took care of my parents until their death. I had to reconcile their continued bond with him and my bond with them, so it was a great learning thing.

PS-P: One of the lovely things about the parents in the play is their all-embracing generosity, first to the ex-lover, and then to the new lover, Ira. They are the parents we would all like to have, and so few of us do. How far does the autobiography go? Was there a real-life Ira?

TM: There were a number of Iras if you get my drift.

PS-P: Well, you'd just arrived in New York!

TM: But there was one particular one, and he became a major literary agent and editor, and he helped me get my novel *The Darwin Affair* (a Victorian thriller) published.

PS-P: When you write or talk about gay relationships you use the word 'romance' a lot. Do you think of being gay as being more about affection than about sex itself?

TM: No, I couldn't say that. I was left incurably randy! I was voracious. A scamp. But it was always in my mind associated with romance. So, I would tell myself, 'This is the one'.

PS-P: Until the next one!

TM: Yeah. Or 'And also this one'!

PS-P: Tell me more about your Minnesota background. Is that where you got involved in theatre?

TM: When I was thirteen years old, the wonderful British theatre director Sir Tyrone Guthrie chose Minneapolis to be the seat of his regional theatre company, and that just

exploded the theatre scene in Minneapolis. So, there was the Guthrie Theatre and within a couple of years thirty-six other little theatres sprang up. When I was maybe fourteen, my school, which was an inner-city poverty school which was very poor in academics but great in terms of social education, did a field trip. We went to watch a rehearsal of Guthrie's adaptation of *The Oresteia*, by Euripides. We sat up on the steep alpine slopes of this theatre, watching this giant of a man, very tall with a red flannel shirt on, running down to the stage, having a word with one of the actors who was on those giant Cothornos shoes¹, and running back into the house and watching the next few moments, then running down again.

And I went, 'Oh! This is what I want.' So, I found myself auditioning as an actor for anything I could find, and I began to be cast. And when I was sixteen I was cast in a play with Minneapolis Children's Theatre and eventually I was asked to write plays for them. It was a marvellous experience, and the people around me were gay, and it was cool to be gay.

I stayed for over ten years, till 1978 when I moved to London to be my own playwright. I learned an enormous amount and had life-long friendships from that company. And also, a sense that you were not necessarily a pariah if you were gay.

My first lover Victor and I lived together. We didn't talk about being gay with Mum and Dad – until he left me. I suppose we didn't need to. Eventually we'd gotten rid of the second bed in the bedroom, and it was simply a fact. It was a fact that clearly they must have talked about, between the two of them. But in a good Norwegian Lutheran reticent way, we didn't open up and enthuse about it.

PS-P: This sounds pretty much an ideal Coming Out. If indeed it was a Coming Out. It sounds more like a Never Being In.

TM: It was pretty much a Never Being In. Then I went to college, and my friends became aware I was having little romances here and there. So, they had their own journey to compute that...

PS-P: So, you've written kids theatre, adult theatre, musicals, especially *Dr Seuss: How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Do they each have different techniques?

TM: Definitely because each is a different audience. But whatever I'm writing, I'm always trying to entertain myself. So, when adults bring kids to see a kids' show, they're not left out in the cold, because they can see Mason's trying to make himself laugh.

PS-P: I think all good writers do that. Because it's a lonely life, being a writer, so you might as well amuse yourself while you do it.

TM: You're right it's lonely. And only occasionally do they take you out of your isolation if you're lucky.

PS-P: You emerge blinking into the sunlight, like a blind mole. Your husband is also a writer...

TM: I met Leo in Los Angeles in 1986, when they flew me out for a production of my first play, *In a Northern Landscape*. He was playing the lead. It took us thirteen years to reconnect, and we had to make a lot of mistakes before that could happen.

PS-P: You have to kiss a lot of frogs...

TM: So now he writes and produces a lot of television, and I commute between New York and LA – when I'm allowed to.

PS-P: Of course, on Tuesday (23 March 2021) it's not exactly a theatre experience on Zoom, but what are you hoping that the audience will be clutching as they leave the theatre?

¹ Platform heels 2,500 years before Elton John.

TM: It's a play that allows us to see each other as we are and acknowledge our finite nature. But what the characters are trying to tell Joe (the protagonist) is that maybe what seems finite, isn't quite. Sooner or later they all come back, all the people we love. Certainly, the people I lost in the time of AIDS are with me still.

PS-P: That kind of care and compassion are needed now more than ever. *Levitation* is a great cool draught of healing water. Drink deep on Tuesday 23 March at 7.30pm.

Peter Scott-Presland - 18 March 2021