

I first met John Murrell at the Canada Council's 50th anniversary dinner at the Governor General's residence. We were seated at the same table and a delight to both of both, spoke only to each other for the entire evening. A few years later, John was approached by National Arts Centre to choose a playwright to work with for the next year's Governor General's Performing Arts Awards Mentorship Program. He shared with me that he requested my name be on the short list of writers because he liked the idea of continuing the conversation we had begun that evening all those years ago.

One of the first comments about my mentorship with John was that we seemed liked an unlikely mentor/mentee pairing. I disagree. And I think John would have disagreed as well. Certainly, John was a Canadian icon, his plays are rooted in Canadian spirit and identity. Yet, I don't think my desire to capture Canadian identity is all that different from his; only my lived experience and lens. And that difference is what made both of us deeply interested in one another's process and approach to writing.

The most concentrated period of our mentorship was held at the Banff Centre, which marked the beginning of my own extended relationship with the Banff Centre. Unknown to me, I would be invited year after year to the Banff Playwright's Lab to work on various works, perform my trilogy of one-woman plays and as well, collaborate on my first publication as a playwright, the *Fish Eyes Trilogy* with graphic illustrations supported by the Banff Centre and Playwrights Canada Press.

But perhaps one of the things I remember best of that time at the Banff Centre was when John told me, "Don't be afraid to write your play, even if you (or anyone else) thinks you're not the right person to do it. Otherwise you won't write anything."

At the time, the advice didn't make a lot of sense to me. I had never experienced fear over writing or saying what I wanted to say. But John knew better.

After multiple productions and tours of my works, I was stuck. What would I write next? How long would it take? What right did I have to comment on anything happening in our world? And also, did I even have anything left to say? Every time I sat down to write, my body doubled over into the fetal position. I admired my peers and the incredible feats they were accomplishing, which only made the pressure to generate new content worse.

It's a funny and strange coincidence that I was asked by the GGPAA Foundation to reflect on my experience in 2019. Because it was this year where the fear of writing finally broke. And in fact, a piece that I had started developing under John's guidance at Banff, that I tucked away a few years ago thinking the impulse to write it was lost, reignited in the spring of this year. It is amongst 2 other pieces I began development on this year with the support of Nightswimming Theatre in Toronto.

As artists, the thief of joy is fear. And yet I think fear is a regular guest when we make new work. John's mentorship helped prepare me for life as a mid-career, established playwright. He taught me to get comfortable with fear. And how to tell fear, "Thank you, but I respectfully disagree."

Anita Majumdar
Playwright
2013 Protégé