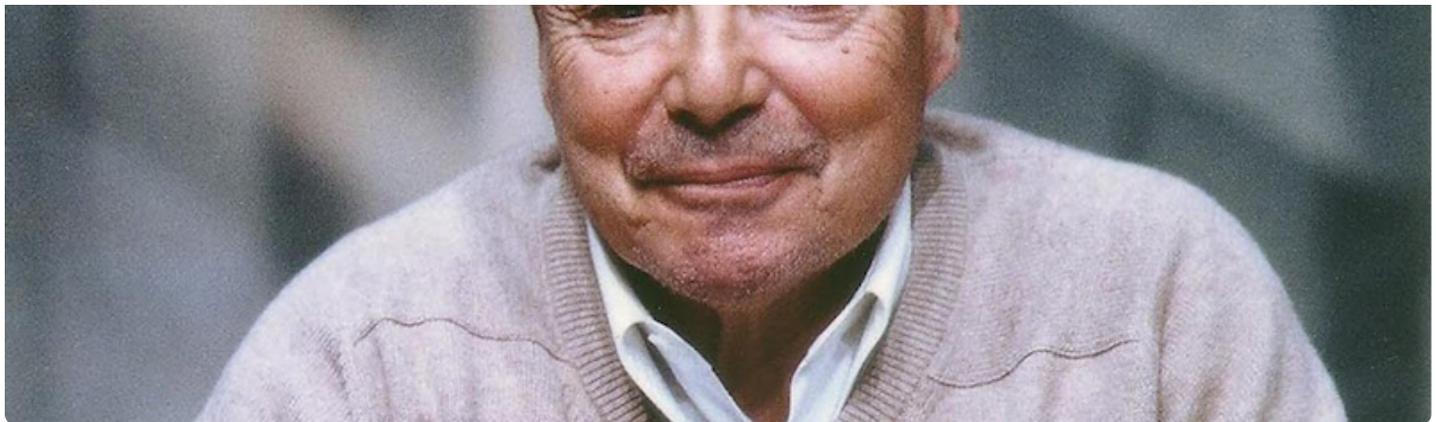




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When Words Mattered: Murray Mednick Interview, Part 2

FEATURED COLUMN /

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When Words Mattered

Poet-Playwright Murray Mednick on Writing for the Stage, Part 2

By *Gray Palmer*



Playwright Murray Mednick with director Guy Zimmerman (Photo: Courtesy Padua Playwrights)

Open Fist Theatre Company just concluded a trilogy of Murray Mednick's *The Gary Plays* at the Atwater Village Theatre. Mednick founded the Padua Playwrights' Workshop, which was held out-of-doors in Claremont for many years starting in 1978, and attracted the likes of Maria Irene Fornes, Sam Shepard, Jon Robin Baitz, John Stepling and others. His writing is part fable, part Beckett, with a primacy on language. Here is [Part 1 of this interview](#). What follows is Part 2:

STAGE RAW: *You've been in Los Angeles since 1978.*

MURRAY MEDNICK: '75 actually.

SR: *Ok, 40 years in Los Angeles, choosing, I presume, not to have anything to do with movies and TV . . .*

MM: I tried, actually. In fact, what got me out here was a gig with KCET. I was commissioned to write two plays for KCET, for *Visions*, it was on channel 28 then. They did both of them. One was called *Iowa* and the other was called *Blessings*. That's what got me into the Writers Guild. And then I did try to write screenplays. I did a couple of gigs. I just couldn't do it well. Because I don't think that way. I couldn't re-train.

SR: Theater poetry is a double ghetto. A perfect recipe for obscurity.

MM: You're out there. We're not part of the economy. Which is too bad. It's a shame that America doesn't support theater as well as it could... But you know, technically, there's a big difference between writing for the stage and writing for movies... Movies are more for a sequence of images. In plays it's a sequence of language, it's the sound, the linguistic music... Theater is not a spectacle. There are spectacles like circuses, pageants, and musicals on Broadway which are spectacular. But real theater, I think, is more for the ear and so the craft is different. Completely different. And the craft I learned, more or less by accident, through Ralph Cook and Theatre Genesis, was theater. And my head works that way, I listen for the sound and for the rhythm. Before I even know who is talking. Character comes later, usually... I usually get the lines before the people. I'm doing that now. I'm writing lines — I don't know who is talking yet. But it has a nice rhythm and a cadence. That tells me something's cooking, so I can go on with it. And sooner or later I find out who they are. It could be past characters, new characters. But I don't know yet... and then there's a kind of click, and I begin to know what it's about.

Ralph, you know, was a minister to the arts. Ralph Cook believed that there was something underneath a play, or hidden in a play, if it was written by a real poet, that had special meaning. It was a kind of Christianity, really. I'm realizing this in retrospect. He was hired by Allen [Rector Michael Allen of St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery]. He was a Christian man. That was an attribute of Ralph's. He had a, not a systematic, but a real — not a theological, but a spiritual approach, to what theater was about, and what the search for the meaning of things was about — through the writing of the local poets. A very interesting way to go. And I was a local poet who happened upon him through my friend, Warren Finnerty, who was acting in Ferlinghetti's play. And I was a fan of Ferlinghetti's and his poetry. I knew that whole group. I knew that scene.

So, my first friends were poets and actors. On the Lower East Side. This was the '60s, early '70s. And that's where all my attitudes about theater were formed... my sense of... that the playwright can be the director, for example... was at Theatre Genesis then. He didn't mind, Ralph Cook... He *did* mind, actually, but he let us direct if we wanted to.

Padua Hills Workshop and Festival



Darrell Larson, Norbert Weisser and Chistine Avila in a performance of THE COYOTE CYCLE, at the Padua Hills Playwrights Workshop outside Claremont, circa 1980

MM: And at Padua, I thought it was important, central, that the playwrights direct. I'm a real believer in that.

SR: So that a playwright learns about the theatrical event?

MM: And also that he/[she] has the privilege of making those final choices. That's really important. He has that right. And it ought to be his privilege. And [Maria] Irene Fornes always agreed with me about that. She always directed her own work. She was totally right about it. She was fantastic to work with. Irene was one of the most brilliant people I've ever known. And she had her own stylistic integrity. She was a poet, too... *Mud* is a great play. It's a great play. We did it at Padua, which she directed. John O'Keefe was in it. He played Henry. He was terrific. He's also a good director. And so is [John] Stepling. See, we had the advantage, at Padua, the four of us, being able to direct. And we knew how to talk about the theater. And we each had our own approach. But we could talk intelligently about it.

So, that made it a really excellent school. Cause it had all the sides that a good theater school needs: Good

teachers, plays that are being performed for an audience, a company of actors who could read the student plays, workshops, and maintaining a professional performance schedule. So, we had all those aspects going at once. But the essential, most important thing, is, we had the four of us who could talk about the theater. So that those meetings we had about the student plays, there with the students, were of a very high level of intelligence... I miss that... Those were really good experiences. Saturdays. Once a week. We'd have workshops during the week.

SR: Fornes, Stepling, yourself and O'Keefe.

MM: Yeah, and I'd hire four other people each year. There'd be eight teachers in all. But the four people I hired every year were us four. I was the artistic director, so I was there. But the three people I went there every year were Irene and the two Johns. So, we had that continuity...

Stepling is usually right about what he says. And he was good at Padua. It was good to have those other voices there. And he could write well for the site-specific spaces. It was very interesting what we did in those days. I hope Padua survives in memory. It's very important, historically.

SR: The scripts are there.

MM: The scripts are there. And the students, you know, if they stay alive. I guess I've been thinking about a lot of that stuff lately...

Recognition

SR: You're the recipient of two Rockefeller Foundation grants.

MM: And a Guggenheim.

SR: And a Guggenheim fellowship. Is there anything to say about that kind of support now?

MM: It was really important then. Oh, absolutely. Like I was saying, it's support, you know. Like at Genesis, we never had any money. So... it made things really tough. I mean, we got used to it. We got used to doing minimal shit. You couldn't do much with cues. You couldn't pay the actors. You'd conceive and you'd write that way.

SR: Empty space plays?

MM: Black space plays. Black rooms. So, everything was minimalized. And we did write that way. But we

wanted to cast well — couldn't pay the actors enough. So, we had to have a dedicated group of actors, which we did have, luckily. But they should have been paid more. And we should have been paid. I was working as a waiter. Maybe it's my age now and I've been through the mill. But, you know, I'm ok now... But it's very important that theater arts, especially the avant-garde, the experimental side, be supported. To live and make a living at what you do is morally right. It helps the morale. And it's very difficult if you're struggling with that all the time. Anyway, that's how I remember it. We were always up against it. And gradually we did start getting grants. The state and the city. Through Theatre Genesis. But the theater was getting a little money. And then I did get these grants. And they made a big difference because I could travel, and I could eat regularly and have a better place to live. On the Lower East Side, I was living in these slum dwellings, you know, two rooms, two and a half rooms, the sink was in the bathroom. It was rough.

And it was important recognition.

SR: And now?

MM: I would like to have, speaking for now, I would love some kind of sponsor, or some kind of theater that would take me on. I've been doing my own work and supporting my own work. And I'm not done. But I don't have the money to produce any more . . . I have a back-log of plays that I would love to do, that I can't quite do at the moment. Cause I'm more or less on my own. So it would be fantastic — support from somewhere, from the state, from the county, from the city, or from a person or a sponsor or a theater, that could help me just to get my plays on. I'm still writing, I'm still good, I'm still interested in what I'm doing. But I don't have as much opportunity... The economics here are harder now. See, we could do it on nothing, then, because we were younger and more willing. And the feeling — it was opening up, experimentally. We were learning by doing it. We didn't have too much to do with the uptown scene. So, we had freedom — and money didn't matter as much. But as you get older it starts to matter more. As you know. Things have got really expensive. Even to do an off-off-Broadway type play. Fifty thousand, at least. A half-audience house... In NY, a good off-off-Broadway play could get houses, if word-of-mouth is good and reviews are good... You only get half-houses in LA. So, you can't make it that way. Never make your money back. Not in that venue. So, when you produce a play like that, or finance it, it's a give-away. You can write it off your taxes. But that's about it.

From the Family Series





directed by Diane Robinson

**with
John Diehl
Annabelle Gurwitch
Shawna Casey
Jack Kehler
Sharron Shayne
Drago Sumonja
&**

Dana Wielunski



SR: About your play Joe and Betty, the critic Bruce Weber said in the NYT that it was a miracle the playwright survived his family.

MM: That's a very good way to put it... I kind of agree with that. But I think the play is exhilarating. It is grim, but it's exhilarating. Because of the language, because of the way it moves. I'm using vaudevillian rhythms. But it's grim. No, it's not comedy. And it was tough, that way. But it was very true to life. And it caught the rhythms... I was trying to be conscientious about that. I didn't want to be too negative... It was grimmer than that, though, in real life... It was more traumatic than I wanted to make it in the play... Delight is in the music... Vaudeville is a main influence on me, I think.

SR: How did that happen?

MM: I don't know how it happened. I grew up partly in the Catskills. Spent time growing up there, so I saw a lot of stand-up. The rhythms and the vaudevillian timing. In a way it's about timing, it's all in the timing... Jack Benny was one of my idols... I'm sure Pinter was influenced by the duo acts in English Music Hall. So was Beckett. Music Hall stuff. I was just more on the Yiddish-kite element. And I like that play very much, *Joe and Betty*, although it gives me a twinge.

The Coyote Cycle

NPR:

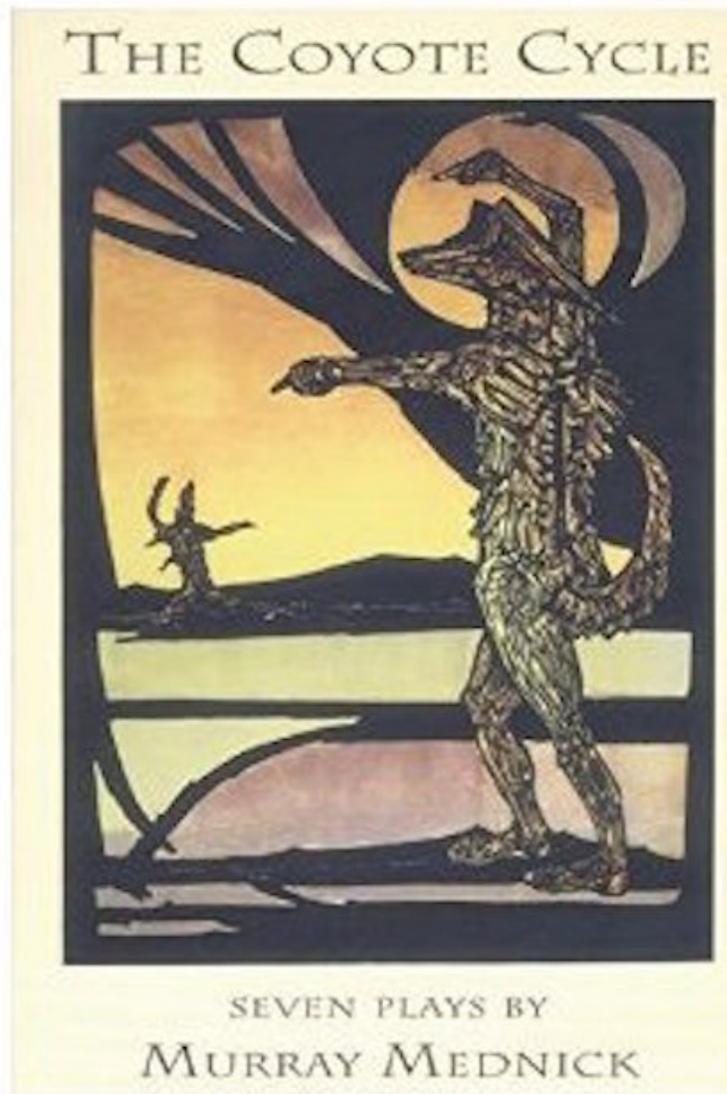
"This fusion of art and nature was magical. The audience was clearly uplifted. A sense of renewal prevailed.... The four actors— Weisser, Avila, Larson and Cohen...who have performed these roles over the years of the cycle's evolution--- sustained the performance---power and grace of movement, intelligence shining throughout. Mednick's Coyote Cycle is a major work of American theatre.."

SR: To write The Coyote Cycle, did you read ethnographic material?

MM: Yeah, I did. I read a lot of Indian stuff. But I've always been into the American Indian story. And I admire a lot of their world. And we got a lot of support from the indigenous community. That was magical. We did some ceremonies for us with Leonard Crow Dog, for example. And most of the stuff in *The Coyote Cycle* is authentic Indian mystic material. The stories are all Native American. Old Nana was an Apache. I knew a lot about it. And I invented the exercises. And based several of the plays on exercises. Some of the plays were written on-the-spot through exercises with the actors.

SR: Actors Norbert Weisser and Darrell Larson?

MM: We started at my backyard in La Verne, California. Darrell and Norbert and I started doing these exercises. That first one I took from Carlos Casteneda. Finding the Spot. Don Juan tells Carlos: find the spot that's meaningful to you. That's your spot. So, I adapted and took theater exercises, with Darrell and Norbert, like Finding the Spot, and then demonstrating its meaning to you through sound and movement. And then we started finding postures. Pointing and the Defensive Posture. That's what made the play... And I wrote it as poetry, really. *Pointing*, the first play in *The Coyote Cycle*, it's a poem, and it did beautifully... A priceless thing... Norbert... he's a class-A actor. So is Darrell... The two of them were great with me. We did all seven together. When Priscilla Cohen came in as Clown, and Christine Avila, the second year, as Spider Woman, joined us, that was the basic company. Some of the plays I wrote beforehand. And some I did based on the exercises, or the spot, the site.



SR: *You perform the seven plays all together.*

MM: Twilight to dawn is the way they were meant to be done, outside, seven different sites, twilight to dawn. And with a waterfall. So, wherever we went, when we did the all-night production, we built a waterfall. It was fantastic. Those cues are unbeatable, like Trickster erupting from the Earth. So, the last thing that would happen, we'd come to the end, and these guys are all taking these postures that I gave them, and the sun is coming up and the waterfall is coming down. It's just great, an unbelievable gift, from the point-of-view of a theater-maker.