

Dennis J. Reardon

Professor of Theatre and Drama

In 1966 Dennis J. Reardon, a 22-year-old senior at the University of Kansas, was in the college theatre building when the playwright William Inge introduced himself. "You must be Dennis Reardon," the author of *Picnic*, *Bus Stop*, and *Come Back, Little Sheba* said, as he stepped out of the faculty office. Inge, an alumnus of the university, was in Lawrence to teach a course in writing, a course in which Reardon was not enrolled. Someone had given Inge a script Reardon had written for a playwriting course, and Inge admired it.

Inge had a copy of the script sent to his agent, Audrey Wood, one of the major theatrical agents in the country. After a few months, Wood wrote to Reardon that she would be interested in seeing anything else he might write. "Send me your other plays," she requested, which spurred the young man to begin work on a new script.

Wood sent the new script, *The Happiness Cage*, to Joseph Papp, the producer and director of the New York Shakespeare Festival, who discovered, nurtured, and produced many of the major American playwrights of the last half of the twentieth century. The play is set in a Veterans Administration hospital where doctors conduct psychological experiments on unsuspecting soldiers in a program of experimental brain implantations.

The Happiness Cage was the inaugural production at the Newman Theatre, the flagship venue of the Joseph Papp Public Theater, in September 1970. The reviews were generally good, including a rave by John Simon, who praised Reardon for his "totally assured dialogue—succulent, pointed, literature without being literary." The work has been produced in Germany, the Netherlands, and South Africa, and in 1972, *The Happiness Cage* was released as a feature film starring Christopher Walken.

In 1970–1971, Reardon was playwright-in-residence at the University of Michigan, where he wrote his second play, *Siamese Connections*, a somber work that explores the dark side of an American farm family, especially two brothers, one favored, but killed in Vietnam, the other who survives, only to live out a dark, condemned existence, haunted by the ghost of his brother and the ghosts from his life and family. It was produced at the Actors Studio in New York, starring James Woods, and by the Public Theater. *Siamese Connections* was the recipient of the 1971 Avery Hopwood Award for Drama.

Reardon's third play, *The Leaf People*, tells an adventure story depicting the first contact by white men with a hostile tribe of Amazonian Indians. "A young musician," wrote the *Village Voice* reviewer, "goes into the jungle in search of his father, an anthropologist attempting to save a stone age tribe." *The Leaf People*, which was produced by Joseph Papp, reveals our shared humanity at a fundamental level, showing both aspects of good and evil.

In the 1980s Reardon entered academe, serving as playwright-in-residence at Hartwick College in 1980 and teaching English at the State University of New York at Albany, where he worked from 1985 to 1987 and earned, in 1990, a Doctor of Arts. In 1987 he joined the faculty of Indiana University as head of the playwriting program of the Department of Theatre and Drama. During his tenure at Indiana, Reardon has created what Chicago's trade journal *PerformInk* has called, after surveying all of the major M.F.A. programs in the nation, "the most elite playwriting program in the country."

Following early 1980s readings in New York and Portland, Maine, the play *Steeple Jack* received its world premier production at the Bloomington Playwrights Project in 1988. This full-length play is about a young girl, her father, and two transients who come into their lives. On the basis of Reardon's work on *Steeple Jack*, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded him a prestigious two-year Playwriting Fellowship.

Boone Descended, a 1992 meditation on the national character, follows the story of mysterious encounters between Daniel Boone and his direct, lineal descendant, a demoralized and unemployed diesel mechanic. This full-length play won for Reardon a Master Fellowship in Playwriting from the Indiana Arts Commission.

Another full-length play, *The Peer Panel* (1997), was chosen for development at the Denver Center Theater Company's US West TheatreFest. The Department of Theatre and Drama was honored to present the world premiere of this work in our T300 Studio Theatre in March 1999.

Reardon's *The Misadventures of Cynthia M.* (1999–2001) follows a beautiful young woman with deeply passionate aspirations who finds herself thwarted both by her own limitations and by societal constraints. Inspired by events that happened in Bloomington in the recent past, *The Misadventures of Cynthia M.* employs a wide range of styles, ranging from brutal naturalism to an unabashedly spiritual lyricism.

In early 2001 Reardon began researching the historical events that surrounded the action for his next play, *Last Days of the High Flier*. He had almost completed the play by September 11 of that year, but the events of that day caused him to postpone his work and, eventually, to rewrite it from the beginning. Set on a college campus in the wake of the Kennedy assassination, CIA activity and our creeping journey toward Vietnam serve as a backdrop to an overall loss of innocence in America. The play was given a full production by the Department of Theatre and Drama in 2004 and was subsequently published by Broadway Play Publishing.

Over his dedicated teaching career at Indiana, Dennis has taught hundreds of undergraduates the crafts of playwriting and screenwriting and provided them an opportunity to have their works read before an audience through the annual Meet The Playwrights program. Of greater note is the M.F.A. Playwriting Program that Dennis has

passionately and solely refined, overseen, and been responsible for over his many years at Indiana. As teacher and mentor, he has guided and inspired many talented playwrights who greatly developed their craft and their own voice thanks to the guidance of Dennis Reardon.

On a personal note I have had the opportunity as a director to work with Dennis on two of his plays, *Boone Descended* and *Last Days of the High Flier*. Both were demanding and intense experiences because of the passion and unwavering belief in the power of theatre that Dennis brings to the work. He is a playwright who creates an elegant story imbued with a truth that should be witnessed. His talent, passion, and commitment have well served the American theatre and Indiana University.

Dale McFadden