

The Australian

Inspired by travels with my father

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Playwright Mark Swivel's new play *Water Falling Down* opens at the Cremorne Theatre in Brisbane. Picture: Alan Pryke
Source: The Cairns Post

ASK playwright Mark Swivel to describe the language disorder aphasia and he takes you to a speech pathologist's office in Sydney.

It was here that he watched his father, a former English teacher and charismatic storyteller, struggle to form the kind of words a child expresses with ease.

"The speech pathologist would show Dad kids' picture books with the word and the picture for the noun," Swivel recalls.

"Say it was a comb, for example: Dad would gesture to comb his hair, but the word would not pass from his brain to his lips.

"The great sadness in Dad was all the language was there inside of him, he just couldn't get it out."

The legacy of things left unsaid aptly is at the core of *Water Falling Down*, which was inspired by a European road trip Swivel took with his father soon before the latter's death.

Although he is quick to separate the play and the real events that helped frame it, Swivel admits the story grew from a "misery memoir" he wrote to work through the grief.

Queensland Theatre Company will stage the production's premiere next month.

"Very little of the dialogue in the play took place in real life, and in many respects the scenes consist of conversations I would have liked to have had with my father," Swivel says. "Both characters are considerably more articulate in the sense of elaborating their life stories than we were in real life.

"The truth of travelling with your father is really one mundanity after another."

That's not to say the trip didn't include several defining moments, which Swivel can laugh about now but chose not to include in the play.

He describes the experience of reporting lost passports in London as "one of the greatest challenges of my life". After fronting up to Australia House in the middle of winter, Swivel Sr needed to use the toilet, with the nearest public restrooms located across the road. Refusing to budge, he convinced consular staff to let him use their facilities instead.

"When he comes back about 10 minutes later, he's got people on either arm - he had trouble walking - and they're laughing away like they've made a great and enduring friend . . . there were moments like that all the way through," Swivel recalls.

Another incident saw the playwright accused of abandonment after he stopped to read a map at a German service station and his father decided to wander away.

Despite the idiosyncratic source material, Swivel presents the players as representative characters, referred to simply as Dad and Son throughout.

The lyricism of the work first attracted director Andrea Moor two years ago when it was selected for PlayWriting Australia's national script workshop in Brisbane. There was also a personal connection; Moor knew the story's themes firsthand after nursing her mother.

The writer and director have since swapped war stories and say they represent a growing number of their generation experiencing the role reversal of caring for an ailing parent.

"We've all gotten very good at blaming our parents for all our emotional issues and I think this play really addresses that," Moor says. "When do we get to the point where we can in fact forgive them and move on and consequently grow up? All those issues were really pertinent to me."

In addition to its discussion of mounting baby boomer guilt, *Water Falling Down* also raises awareness of a disorder that receives little attention in the mainstream media. Aphasia afflicts a growing number of Australians, with sufferers experiencing difficulty producing and comprehending spoken and written language. The causes are varied and in some cases remain a mystery.

Appropriately, the play's title stemmed from the new vocabulary Swivel's father developed as a result of the condition. "The main thing that happens is that nouns fall away, so that's the first thing and it's the dominant thing," Swivel explains.

"Nouns are like potholes, and actually there's no linear sense to it because 'water falling down' is what my father called rain. But of course water falling down has a noun in it, and he distinguished too between water falling down, which is rain, and 'water running down', which is a shower. Aphasia itself has many manifestations."

The subject matter is a world away from Swivel's first play, *Struth*, a comedy that was staged for Griffin Theatre in 1990 while he was still studying law and arts at the University of Sydney. A less than spectacular follow-up two years later

convinced the young writer it was perhaps better to make a living from the legal profession after all.

Soon after graduating Swivel won a large government grant to research the contentious issue of policing beats, public places where men meet to have sex. He then landed a position with a firm that specialised in credit unions, a move that has helped shape his career. (Swivel is a director of the Sydney Credit Union.)

That Brisbane should host his first produced play in almost 20 years was as affirming as it was unexpected. "Frankly, I had a crisis of confidence [that] lasted for a very long period so I can't tell you how miraculous it is that this play is on. It is completely amazing and I'm very grateful," Swivel says.

When *Water Falling Down* was programmed in the showcase season of last year's National Play Festival, Swivel took the opportunity to canvass the thoughts of outgoing QTC artistic director Michael Gow. The veteran playwright told Swivel he liked the piece but suggested some changes were necessary. Swivel took the advice and fleshed out the story further, and it was this revised version that convinced Gow to program the play for QTC's 2011 season, his last.

"In the very early versions of the play, really what you had was a very strong sense of the voices of the characters and the way that they spoke to each other, but it's fair to say that it wasn't dramatic," Swivel says. "Over the course of the workshops the characters became clearer, the narrative became sharper and the dialogue became tauter."

After bedding down the script before Christmas, Moor worked with designer Ross Wallace to create projections and a soundscape that helped the story along without swallowing it. The result, she says, has the spare beauty of a Pinter or Mamet play.

Swivel says he hopes audiences will take *Water Falling Down* for what it is, a meditation on what happens when two people are placed in close proximity, with one dependent on the other.

"It is a kind of dance that they do together and I'm sure if you talk to the actors they'll say that it's quite challenging to do. Even though it's a small and quiet world, it has its own intensity," he says.

Returning to the road trip that started it all, Swivel reaches for a final analogy to push the point further. "You know those snow domes you get when you're travelling? Well, it's a bit like watching two people for an hour and a half in one of those."

Water Falling Down is at the Cremorne Theatre, Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Brisbane, from April 4 to May 7.

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