

THE GIBRALTAR POINT LESSON

My Experience at Gibraltar Point

by Michael Rawley

Giving artists uninterrupted time to think, experiment and create. This is the mandate of the Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts' Residency Program, which recently opened on Toronto Island. Sounds artsy to some, I'm sure. Maybe nirvana and essential to others. Having just returned from my residency there as one of three playwrights-in-residence in the pilot phase of the program, I freely admit I went in suspecting the former and came out believing wholeheartedly in the latter. Having had no contact with my residency partners (PUC, PACT and Theatre Ontario) other than a confirmation I had won this residency, a date and time to arrive (very Agatha Christie) and a hearty good luck, I arrived without the slightest idea what to expect, but with a 'we'll see, should be fine, I'm looking forward to it' attitude.

The centre had insisted on picking me up at the ferry dock. Why? I can walk. No, we'll pick you up. Okay. (It's actually a kick to ride around the island in a motorized vehicle.) I arrived and was immediately swept up in the embrace of the incomparable Susan Serran, who I had never laid eyes on before. And from that moment on, my life hasn't been quite the same. The first thing is I felt *really* special. I was proudly introduced and shown off to the assembled guests (and I hadn't even done anything yet.). My mere being there was important enough. I was an artist, my work was important - I had been chosen. I immediately took to that, let me tell you.

Artists need to be nurtured, we were told at orientation. We encourage naps, walks in the woods or on the beach. Stillness. Relax, take a swim - and the muse will come. **WHAT?** I came to work. I have one month to rewrite my script. I don't have time for lollygagging in the woods. Or nap-

ping. I got the impression if I wanted to sleep, eat and lie on the beach for the entire month, that was fine with them. And with no forced dissemination at the end, they'd never know. But even if they did know, it wouldn't have mattered.

That's what I didn't get about nurturing. It's about resting, letting go, not hurrying. I discovered that these are the essentials of creation. The biggest thing we as artists never get enough of is time. There is always a deadline. There is always pressure. It didn't take me long to realize that the pressure was all internal. This was the same pressure that all nine of the residents were feeling, by the way. Three visual artists, one composer, two dancers, and three playwrights.

On my second day, I took a walk in the woods. I had stared at my screen for too long without anything happening. I realized that my task was a lot more difficult than I had anticipated. It was 4:30 on a beautiful summer afternoon, dinner was at 6. (Oh yeah, the food was amazing and we didn't have to cook it ourselves.) I wandered a bit and then thought I should get back. Why, I asked myself. What's the rush? Stay in the woods 'til dinnertime. Just walk and think. And I did. I was starting to get it. And over my month there, I got it more and more. I relaxed, I let go, I slowed down. I let myself be nurtured. And the muse did come. It was flying through that place.

Needless to say, the month went far too fast - for all of us. There was discussion of chaining ourselves to the building. I didn't want to leave. Nobody did. Why would you? Room and board, my own studio, great food, a nurturing artistic atmosphere, great discussions with fellow residents about life and art and the whole damn thing at breakfast or late into the night, the run of a building full of artists, and all the time in the world to think about my art and my work.

I didn't finish my rewrite but that doesn't matter. I learned to work with more intensity, more focus and more depth. I wouldn't have learned this if I hadn't applied for the residency. This way of working now also includes walks and naps. I felt like an artist because I was treated like one. The goal of course is to maintain this level of work, this sense of self as an artist, this essential nirvana when reality hits and one is no longer in the idyllic backdrop of Toronto Island. But that would be the other thing I learned at Gibraltar Point. There is always something else to strive for.

ATTENTION PUC MEMBERS

IS YOUR PUBLISHED PLAY GOING OUT OF PRINT?

If your publisher has advised you that your book is going out of print, get in touch with Playwrights Union of Canada. While it may not be selling as well as it used to in its first years of publication, it may well be worth keeping alive by moving it into a Chapbook, in the PUC Play Service series.

Let's consider it!