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a novel



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Spadework

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Collected Shorter Poems by W.H. Auden. Reprinted by
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First mass market edition

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Findley, Timothy, 1930-
Spadework : a novel

ISBN 0-00-648501-4

I. Title.

PS8511.I38S63 2002 C813'.54 C2002-900532-9
PR9199.3.F52S63 2002

OPM 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the United States
Set in Sabon

spadework

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*For Matthew Mackey,
whose spade began it all,
and for
the people of Stratford,
with whom I share my daily life.*

prologue

For who is ever quite without his landscape,
The straggling village street, the house in trees,
All near the church, or else the gloomy town house,
The one with the Corinthian pillars, or
The tiny workmanlike flat: in any case
A home, the centre where the three or four things
That happen to a man do happen?

W.H. Auden
Detective Story

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Stratford, Ontario,

Thursday, June 25, 1998

Swirling people. Lights. Music. Enough to make a person dizzy. This was only the beginning. Then you had to get through the doors, hand over your tickets to someone you could barely see in the crush and, after that, find your seat.

Opening night—and nothing in the world to equal it. The audience radiant with expectation—the actors sick with apprehension.

Everyone—as the saying goes—*was there*—all the stars, all the rich, all the Festival Board and staff—the Artistic Director—his assistant—the designer, the composer, the lighting and costume designers, the mass of visiting actors, writers, directors . . . And the critics, all of whom were attempting—as always, without success—to maintain anonymity. *Who—me?*

They were somewhat overshadowed by the simultaneous presence of the Governor General and the multiple rumours of visiting actors Meryl Streep, Anthony

Hopkins, Vanessa Redgrave, Emma Thompson and Jude Law. (These rumours seldom proved to be correct, but on occasion, some were true.) Nonetheless, the critics meticulously found their way to their aisle seats and stood waiting one by one, still feigning absence, until the rest of their rows had filled.

As always at Stratford's Festival Theatre, the evening began with fanfares—trumpets, applause and the raising of flags. Because of the Governor General's presence, the national anthem would be played. People would stand—most of them would sing and there would be extensive applause, since the Governor General was an extremely popular figure.

In the midst of all this, Jane Kincaid and her seven-year-old son, Will, made their way to their privileged seats in the orchestra, five rows from the stage, two seats from the aisle. They sat down—stood up—sat down—stood up and sat down again as other members of the audience filed past them, laughing, smiling, excited, lost, apologetic, clumsy, graceful and awkward by turns. Sitting on Jane's other side was the play's director, Jonathan Crawford.

They barely spoke beyond the necessary acknowledgement that they were aware of each other's presence. After the national anthem Jane could see that Jonathan, as was natural, was almost catatonic with nerves, while his masklike expression said: *nothing can possibly faze me—I've done my job—it's over and the rest will be theatre history . . .*

Jane Kincaid knew better, but said nothing. She was almost in the same state. Her husband and Will's father, Griffin, would be appearing that night as Claudio in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*—and by all accounts, he was sensational and well on his way to stardom. Jane had deliberately stayed away from the dress rehearsal and the previews—wanting to savour the moment with Will.

Like all roads leading to the limelight, Griffin's had been long and arduous. He had begun his acting career at the University of Toronto—on a dare, playing Brick in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. He had broken his leg in a hockey accident and was bored. Since Brick wears a cast on his leg all through the play, Griffin's girlfriend of the moment, who was playing Maggie, the "cat" of the title, had said to him: *why don't you give it a whirl? After all—a person never knows*. What followed was the proverbial story of a duck taking to water. Griffin was stricken as by contagion and almost at once had given up the study of law.

He had gone on to play Brick on two other occasions—in Vancouver and in Winnipeg, which is where he met and fell in love with Jane Terry. They married just before moving to Stratford.

Jane had come to Canada from Plantation, Louisiana, in 1987, seeking work in the theatre as an artist. To her great satisfaction, she had been engaged as a property maker and designer in various

theatres and had designed the props for the production of *Cat* at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg. Less than a year later she and Griffin were married, and seven months after that, Will was born.

Now, here they sat—mother and son, their stomachs in knots—waiting for Griffin to make his first entrance. Luckily he was on within the first seven minutes. (Will timed it.)

Jane almost wept. Griffin was surely the best-looking man on the stage—on any stage—and since the play was set in the eighteenth century, his trousers clung to his legs like a second skin and his tunic like a third.

The role of Claudio is difficult, because he must be played as both a charmer and a bastard—a daring soldier and a cowardly lover who denounces his beloved Hero on their wedding day, naïvely believing she has been unfaithful to him.

One minute you'll adore him, the next minute you'll hate him, Jane had warned Will. *Not to worry, hon. It's only a play and Daddy's pretending to be someone else—as he always does at work.*

Sometimes he even looks ugly, Will had said, remembering his father the year before as one of the murderers in *Macbeth*.

Yes, Jane had said with a smile, but it was awfully hard to believe it was really him.

Playing opposite Griffin as Hero was a new young actor freshly out of the National Theatre School in

Montreal. Her name was Zoë Walker—and she was barely twenty-one. A slight twinge of nervous presentiment rose in Jane's mind when Zoë made her initial entrance off the top of the play.

Oh. I see.

One of those . . .

But after a moment Jane dismissed the thought. The girl was remarkably attractive and carried herself like a graceful animal—nervous and shy but outwardly self-assured.

Just right.

The sets and costumes were among the most colourful Jane had ever seen—in spite of the fact that the colours were limited. Everything was red, white and blue—as if denoting empire. But the reds and blues were subdued. Only Beatrice and Benedick wore strong primaries, Benedick the soldier in scarlet, Beatrice the dedicated feminist in Prussian blue—severe, imperial, certain. Hero, the virgin, wore white. Claudio, the junior officer, wore a jacket of pastel blue with red facings and off-white trousers. The Italian court figures were clothed in burnt orange, yellow and a pink that verged on red but never achieved it. Portraits in watercolours, not in oil.

The setting had been transplanted from Italy to Bath—the Bath of Inigo Jones—of spas and terraces, the waters and the baths themselves.

Jane, who at first had been nervous of this interpretation, had come to admire it—principally

because it opened so many doors on the way Jonathan had read the play. In England circa 1800, there were even greater social strictures than in Italy circa 1600, which is roughly when *Much Ado* had been written. It was the England of “mad” King George and of the dandified Prince of Wales—the England awaiting the voices of Jane Austen, Keats, Shelley and Byron. Strictures, yes—and galore—but bursting at the seams.

And so it was with *Much Ado*’s sets and costumes—with the women almost pouring from their cleavage and the men so pronounced in their trousers that a person had to wonder how they contained themselves. As for the sets, the wooden floor of the stage had been transformed with black and white “marble” squares and a terraced effect of curving colonnades. When early in the play the men return from the wars, a scene was played in the baths—all the men girded in towels and shrouded in “steam,” poised above the steps that separate the thrust stage from the audience, and stepping down into the “waters.”

It was extraordinary.

The play moved on through the convoluted plottings of its leading figures, Beatrice and Benedick, as they tried both to attract and to repulse one another—each claiming they preferred to “remain a bachelor.” Jane marvelled, as always, at the brilliance of the verbal fencing and the wit of the dia-

logue. On this occasion, "B-and-B," as they were known to actors, were played by two of the company's biggest, most popular stars—Julia Stephens and Joel Harrison, who were also paired that season as the Fords in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Jane's contribution to *Much Ado* had been a series of hand-painted "silk" fans which made perfect—if difficult—props for the women in the play. The expert wielding of a fan is not easy. Actors claim they nearly go mad trying to master it. Once having gained control of it, however, they give the appearance of its being a graceful extension of the arm—a web-fingered hand provided as a blessing in disguise to eighteenth-century women.

Jane was proud of what she had created, using the finest netting as her "silk" and painting on it with acrylics—romantic scenes of stolen love affairs set in English gardens, French chateaux and Venetian gondolas.

In the interval, against her will, Jane was forced into encounters with friends, fellow artisans, company members from other plays and strangers. She found all this extremely trying, because she knew that Griffin's "big scenes" were still to come. She soldiered on, however, watching with envy as Jonathan Crawford managed to get to the exclusive VIP Lounge before he was besieged.

She concentrated on Will. She took him outside into the gardens, bought him a hot dog and a Pepsi

and herself a glass of wine and smoked three cigarettes with her back to intruders and one hand on Will's shoulder. It was one of those nights when you wished no one knew who you were.

But glorious.

Griffin and Zoë, both relatively unknown, were triumphantly received at the end with cheers of approval and pleasure. (Two days later, a double interview was published with the headline: MUCH ADO ABOUT STAR BIRTHS.)

There were twelve extended curtain calls for the company that lasted almost fifteen minutes. It was everything an actor could hope for, everything a director works for and everything a wife and son could have prayed for. Magic. Will turned to Jane and said, almost as if he himself was a pro: "I bet that was a first for Dad."

Luckily, Jane knew her way around the backstage area and had already inscribed on her mind an indelible map of the route to Griffin's dressing-room.

When she and Will got there, it was already filled with other well-wishers, and when at last they managed to push themselves through to Griffin's presence, they found him sitting stark naked, with nothing but a make-up towel in his lap.

Jane closed her eyes.

What will all these people think?

Then she thought: *well . . . as the saying goes, Griff is well-equipped and has never been one to hide*

his candle under a bushel . . .

When he stood up and opened his arms to Jane, all she could do was go in. Still stunned by the audience uproar, she was almost speechless—if not of sound, then certainly of words. Something like *yes!* did manage finally to be articulated—but barely.

Will, in situations where his father was more the actor than Dad, shook Griffin's hand as if they were meeting for the first time.

"Enjoy yourself?"

"Did I ever!" And then: "you were terrific."

"You coming to the party?"

Will looked at Jane.

"Yes." Jane smiled. "Of course he is. He's old enough to make it all the way to midnight. Aren't you, Will . . .?"

"Sure. Yeah. Thanks."

Griffin sat back down, spread the make-up towel on his lap again and continued removing his "face" with cold cream and Kleenex. Will was always fascinated by this and stood watching him in the mirror.

Jane went to speak with Nigel Dexter, who shared the dressing-room. Nigel was Griffin's oldest friend in theatre. Half a year older, he was slightly rougher, infinitely tougher and harder to tame. As young men of an age, they made a perfect pair, from a theatrical point of view—their talents both opposite and complementary. In *Much Ado*, Nigel was playing one of the Watch and was riotously funny—impossible to

discipline, totally incapable of comprehension and consequently surprisingly loveable.

“That was gorgeous!” Jane said.

“You like?”

“I *adore*. You really are remarkable, my love. I’m just saying hello, now. We’ll see you later.”

“Yes. With bells on!”

Jane went back to Griffin, kissed him on the lips, reached down and patted him on his naked hip. “We’ll see you there. Don’t forget to wear your pants.”

The opening night party was sometimes held in a private home or in a restaurant, but this time it was in a marquee, erected in one of the extensive gardens that surround the theatre. Cast, crew, staff—all the designers, cutters, fitters, painters and musicians, as well as relatives, friends and visiting theatre folk—to say nothing of the Governor General, her consort and aides and the premier of the province with his wife were in attendance. It was the very definition of a Gala Occasion.

The weather was warm—the breeze was balmy and the night so exquisitely perfect that three sides of the marquee had been left open.

The great cars came and went, depositing honoured guests and other dignitaries. There was unob-