

## The Second Mistake

by Liz Olds

The University of Idaho theater scene shop smelled of cut lumber and cold cream, a smell that made me feel at home, reminding me of my small scene shop in high school. The difference was scale—this hangar-sized room contained a bounty of plywood, two by fours, a radial arm saw, a band saw, a table saw big enough to accommodate plywood, and tools hanging on pegboard with outlines of those tools drawn around them in black magic marker so they would always be returned to the same spot on the wall. In my high school shop we made do with one hand-held power saw, a drill, and a bunch of hand tools—we fought over the ratchet we had bought.

The first time I entered the Idaho theater shop, a woman sat cross-legged on the floor painting a sign on canvas. “University of Idaho Theater presents *Guys and Dolls*” in bright red letters. The group of us, six first-year theater students, stood silently, nervous, shy, expectant.

“I’m O.B.” she said in a Texas accent. “Y’all must be the freshmen.”

We mumbled uneasy affirmatives.

O.B. wore a plaid flannel shirt, brown hiking boots, and a wrench attached to her jeans with a white cord. She seemed tough but also feminine with long brown hair, makeup, and eyes you could swim in. She reminded me of those camp counselors I had crushes on, and I was not so far away from those crushes to avoid getting one on her, instant, intense, and cemented by her Texas accent and that wrench hanging from her belt loop.

I attached myself to O.B. pretty much as tight as the wrench in the ensuing weeks. I followed her around the shop badgering her for things to do. She would find me something menial, sorting bolts by size or mopping the stage floor. I felt overwhelmed—there was so much to learn. Even mopping the stage floor had rules—not too much water and swirl the mop in figure-eight patterns. Mopping in straight lines produced

streaks that would show in the stage lights. O.B. apparently knew everything and, other teachers notwithstanding, hers was the brain I wanted to pick.

I must have driven her crazy with my, "O.B., what do you want me to DO?!" My eagerness resulted in some hazing. O.B. was swell, but not above having some fun at a freshman's expense.

She told me to get a piece of four by four and cut a block of wood from it equal on all sides. After I measured and cut the block, I brought it to her for her approval.

"Here it is," I said.

"Okay, now go sand the edges so they're all rounded smooth."

I set to my task.

"Here it is." I held my creation aloft.

"Okay, now get some stain and stain it. Stain it red. Be sure to clean your brush. That stuff is hell to get off after it dries."

I did as I was told, working the brush clean until hairs came out of the handle.

"Here it is." I now held in my hand a red-stained cube of wood. There may have been more stain on my hands than on the block.

She smiled. I waited for my due praise. I said, "What do you want me to do with it now?"

"Oh, I don't know, use it for a paperweight I guess."

I knew then I had been hazed, but on the other hand, I did learn how to use the radial saw, the power sander, and the wood stain. And something in her eye gave me the impression that she had a paperweight in her possession as well.

Another afternoon we were sorting through some props and I came upon a set of handcuffs. As a joke I put them on my wrists. O.B. reached over and closed them tight.

"Yeah, that's pretty funny. Give me the keys so I can get out of these things."

"I don't know where they are."

"Hah! Good one O.B. C'mon now, give me the keys."

"I'm serious. I don't think we have the keys."

The guys at the Latah County police station thought this was pretty funny. Especially when they looked closer at the handcuffs and realized they were old and they didn't have the keys either. The locksmith was similarly amused.

O.B. did apologize for that one, and I think she was a bit chagrined, but she chuckled when the locksmith finally got them off.

As my first fall in Idaho turned to winter, I received my own wrench on a cord to attach to my belt loop. This arrangement of wrench and cord served a purpose—it kept the wrench from falling and crashing onto someone’s head if you dropped it while working in the catwalks high above the house seats. To me it was a symbol. The hazing, the blocks of wood and the sorting of bolts, was over. I was one of the crew. I ran the follow-spot for “Guys and Dolls”. I worked hard to get it right, and after the run was over O.B. said in her headiest praise, “Ya dun good Liz”.

The ultimate symbol of my arrival came just before Thanksgiving. O.B. was designing the lights for the dance department’s fall concert and she asked me to be her assistant. This was the real deal, not making a paperweight.

It took us two days to hang and aim the lights. There wasn’t time or space for kidding around. She trusted me, even letting me make some of the decisions about her design. I was feeling a bit cocky as O.B.’s assistant.

Finally came the night of the technical rehearsal when we would bring O.B.’s complicated and beautiful lighting design into fruition. I had been in the light booth before, but had never touched the board—now I ran my fingers across the buttons and dimmers with my tongue sticking just out of the corner of my mouth, like a marble player lining up to shoot. As O.B. chose the lights and levels for each dance I watched, entranced by the colors as they reflected off the dancer’s lithe bodies. The rehearsal flew by, all a blur to me. I had never witnessed anything as intricate and lovely in my young theater experience.

At the end of the rehearsal O.B. said, “Wow, that went by a lot faster than I expected, you being new and all. Ya dun good Liz.”

Opening night, a half hour before curtain, O.B. turned to me. “Let’s get started setting these levels for the first dance. Give me your cue sheets.”

“Cue sheets?”

“You know your notes for the levels.”

“Uh, notes...I didn’t take any notes...”

“What...you what...”

“I don’t have any notes.”

O.B.’s eyes grew wide as my feelings sank.

“You didn’t write down ANYTHING?! Oh shit.”

“Well, uh, I didn’t know, I mean, was I was supposed to write...”

“STOP,” she said, not yelling exactly but firm as her Texas accent could make her. “Don’t make excuses. When you make an excuse, you’re making your second mistake. We don’t have time to talk about this right now; we just have to fix it.”

I noticed she said “we” and we did fix it. Mostly she fixed it, her fingers nimbly gliding over the light board as she recreated her design on the fly. I stood by terrified while she worked. I madly scribbled down the levels and dimmers I had neglected to scribble the night before.

I expected the worst dressing down I had ever gotten. And I expected I’d be sorting bolts until I graduated.

Instead, we didn’t talk about it at all. She just looked at me at the end of the night and said, “Don’t forget.”

And, funny thing it seemed to me at the time, when Hume Cronin and Jessica Tandy came to do a show at the Performing Arts Center two weeks later, O.B. asked me to be the stage manager.

As the semester wore on, O.B. smiled less and less, and she got snappish, although she didn’t snap at me. She didn’t tease me anymore, though, and that made me sad. I knew she hadn’t been enjoying her work much, but it never occurred to me that she would leave.

She told me she was leaving a few days before the end of finals. It was a sudden blow to me—one day we were closing up the shop for the winter break and the next day we were saying goodbye over a cinnamon roll in a green vinyl booth at the Varsity Café. I was confused and hurt and angry, and sad, crushed, and I didn’t know what to say to her. So I said nothing. People didn’t hug much in the 70s. We just said goodbye, and I walked away towards the Greyhound bus station at the edge of town to go home to Maryland for Christmas.

O.B.’s lesson of the second mistake has stayed with me over the years to good effect. I’ve noticed people appreciate a straight-forward admission when I screw up,

which I still do with frightening regularity. I've also learned that apologizing only goes so far. Sorry is mostly a waste of time—the light levels and cues must be recreated and the show must go on in any event.

As for O.B., ten years later I was finally graduating in theater from the University of Minnesota and I tracked her down and wrote her a letter sharing this story. She sent me a good, solid, O.B.-style letter back. She remembered me and was glad to hear from me. She said I ought to become a writer—she had enjoyed the writing as well as the content of my letter. More encouragement from a voice of the past, which has also born fruit. We lost touch again—the last I heard she was a pilot living in Hawai'i.

Friends often ask me why I didn't get angry at O.B. for not telling me to write the cues down, for assuming I knew what to do when I was just a freshman. Perhaps they are right, that there were flaws in her teaching methods. She was only twenty-four and new at the teaching game. I'm sure there were flaws. But the lesson I did learn is so much more important—it has proved useful in far more situations than merely designing lights for a theater production.

“Don't forget,” said O.B.

I haven't.

**Liz Olds** is a writer and banjo-player living in Minneapolis. She wrote the monthly column “Banjo Noodles” in *Inside Bluegrass* from 1998 to 2000, and was included in the *bioStories* anthology *Encounters* in 2015. She has taken many classes at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, culminating in her participation in the Loft's Foreword Mentorship Program from 2009-2011. She is currently working on her memoir. This is her second appearance in *bioStories*.