

# Solange De Santis

## Larry's Party

By Solange De Santis

"The stakes are very high" for the creators of the new musical, *Larry's Party*, according to book writer and lyricist Richard Ouzounian. Based upon the novel of the same title by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Carol Shields, the show stars Tony Award-winner Brent Carver and is directed by Robin Phillips, one of the top directors in North America.

So, "as a friend of mine put it, 'If it stinks, it'll be your fault,'" said Ouzounian. Produced by the Canadian Stage Company, the show starts previews at the St. Lawrence Centre in Toronto on Jan. 8, opens on Jan. 11 and runs until Feb. 3. Besides the normal risks that accompany any new show (mainly, no well of familiarity for audience or performers), Ouzounian also feels the pressure because the subject of *Larry's Party* is very close to him.

The last two shows he wrote, *Dracula* and *Emily*, were about, respectively, a vampire and a girl, two things Ouzounian says he's never been. Born in New York, Ouzounian has lived in Canada for about 30 years, working as a director, playwright, critic and artistic director. *Larry's Party* is about an average white man named Larry Weller, born in Winnipeg, whose ordinary life is lifted into the realm of the extraordinary by Shields' skillful narration. Like Larry, Ouzounian was born in 1950, lived in Winnipeg for a few years and appears to be an average white man, with regular, clean-shaven features, glasses and short hair.

The parallels don't continue forever – Larry is married twice and has one son, while Ouzounian has been married for 25 years and has two daughters – but the writer, nevertheless, says, "This work has become very personal; there is so much of me in this." One of the most extraordinary qualities of the 1997 novel, which won the Orange Prize, is Shields' ability to explore the way men think about everything from their clothes to their penises (a chapter which becomes a quick, funny male chorale in the musical).

Initially he and his collaborator, composer Marek Norman, were several years ago considering a few modern Canadian novels that could form the basis for a musical. They discussed Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version* and Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*, but settled on Shields' work which, on the face of it, would seem to be an unlikely subject.

In 15 chapters, from "Fifteen Minutes in the Life of Larry Weller" to "Larry's Party," the man tells the story of his life – his marriages, his parents, his son, his cities, his houses and his work. He is a floral arranger who runs his own shop and develops a particular obsession with garden mazes after a honeymoon visit to Britain, where he encounters the magnificent hedge maze at Hampton Court Palace.

He becomes fascinated with maze design – "the path to a maze's goal is always shortened by turning away from the goal, and this perversity, every time he thinks of it, brings a shiver of pleasure." As Larry makes green labyrinths for various clients, he follows the turns of his own life, moving toward a luminous understanding and true self-awareness by the time he invites the important people in his life to a dinner party when he is in middle age.

Artists for centuries have used the garden and the labyrinth as metaphors for human existence and the subject of *Larry's Party* also carries a personal meaning for director Phillips, whose parents lived in the town of Hampton Court and whose father was a gardener. An incident reminded him of the subversive humor throughout Shields' novel, he said. "The day my father died, my mother was devastated. She came back from the hospital and saw the hedge in our garden in Hampton Court. It needed trimming and she said that he would be so upset to see that hedge, so my sister and she started to trim it and then they just lost it," laughing uncontrollably at the thought of the father coming along, astonished at seeing the two of them on ladders, absurdly struggling with the hedge trimmers.

Phillips, who is 58, finds the show hits home because he, too, is at a taking-stock point in his life. Nearly two years ago, he underwent triple-bypass surgery after it was discovered he'd had a series of heart attacks. "You feel extraordinarily lost and strange. You count your blessings – all the corny things. Before the operation, you are left with a partner and you have to make a

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speech because you may not be here tomorrow to make it. Love is the hardest thing to say," he recalled. One of the aspects of *Larry's Party* that Phillips finds most poignant is that much of Larry's character development comes by way of the women who love him and whom he loves.

Although he still has a pretty active schedule – last year, he directed Jessica Lange in *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* in London and *Otello* for the Canadian Opera Company – he said he now only does projects that he really wants to do, and *Larry's Party* is clearly one of them.

The show has changed since it went into rehearsal, said Phillips. "There are so many adjustments, little rewrites – the script has developed tremendously. One of the difficult things, for instance, was hitting the humor around the beans. (Larry's mother inadvertently kills her mother-in-law by serving her botulism-tainted beans, a tragedy that contains a deeply comic undertone.) One sentence shorter, and it's Carol Burnett," he said.

Ouzounian and Norman have been very open to change, which is "not to say it hasn't been bumpy," said Phillips. "At the end of that, there's been a respect for everyone, but we battled," he added. Brent Carver, who won a Tony for his performance as the gay Molina in *Kiss of The Spider Woman* and recently drew raves for his Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* at Ontario's Stratford Festival, brings a "deeply spiritual" quality to the party of Larry Weller, Phillips said.

Having just dealt with the lacerating view of human relationships that Eugene O'Neill brought to *Long Day's Journey*, Phillips said he appreciates how optimistic *Larry's Party* is, how Carol Shields is "so generous about how human beings can support each other and come out in the end."

The show bears a passing resemblance to *Company*, in which the life of the main character, Robert, reflected the social neuroses of the 1960s. Although *Larry's Party* is more introspective, both Phillips and Ouzounian believe it illuminates who we were and how we lived, at the end of the twentieth century.

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