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Celebrating Friendship (and Befriending a Celebrity): An Interview with Brooke Johnson on *Trudeau Stories*

by Lydia Wilkinson

Brooke Johnson and I sat down at Toronto's Epicure Café in early June 2009 to discuss her play, *Trudeau Stories*. Derived from letters, journals and memories, Johnson's solo show, in which she plays both herself and the former Prime Minister, chronicles the pair's friendship following their 1985 meeting at a National Theatre School gala. Since premiering at Toronto's Summerworks Festival in 2007, the play, directed by Allyson McMackon, has been part of Theatre Passe Muraille's 2008 season, and continues to be performed at festivals and theatres across Canada.

Lydia Wilkinson: *Trudeau Stories* was written years after both Trudeau's death and your initial relationship. What made you return to the material?

Brooke Johnson: When I was at theatre school and Trudeau and I were friends, I wrote journals. I knew that this was important stuff that I'd want to remember, but I never thought that I would make it into anything.

When I learned he died I was actually here—well, Epicure then was actually a couple of doors over—but I'd come to see a show at Theatre Passe Muraille, and I had just written him a letter, which is the last letter in the play. I was coming here in the streetcar and wondering if he'd gotten it. I got off the streetcar and came into the Epicure, and there were some colleagues here, who said, "Did you hear? Trudeau died. Trudeau died. Trudeau died." I was so shaken by it. I'd lost a friend, and nobody knew that because it was private. I had this experience of being all bottled up with all of these memories and half memories. I knew I had to rediscover it. I had to find out what that time was like fifteen years prior when we met.

Photograph of Brooke Johnson and Pierre Trudeau dancing on Nov 1st, 1985 at the 25th Anniversary of the National Theatre School of Canada.
Archives of the National Theatre School of Canada

So I started to look at my journals, and found all these things that I'd completely forgotten about. I started writing stuff down in story form—monologue form. I wrote it in third person because at the time I didn't want to say "I this" and "I that;" I wrote this character named Maude. She was the one who was Trudeau's friend not me. That ended up being completely false and it didn't have any resonance whatsoever. So I turned it back into my story.

I didn't really think of it being a public thing until I read one piece at a fundraiser. People said, "This is good. It's not just the subject matter that's intriguing, it's the writing." That made me feel challenged enough to go forward with it. It was still four or five years later that my partner, Adrian, suggested I apply to Summerworks, and it wasn't until Summerworks came through that I realized I needed to write more than two stories. I wrote the rest in the three or so months leading up to the Festival.

LW: It must have been difficult as Trudeau's friend to traverse certain territory while writing this.

BJ: A lot's been cut. There's stuff you whittle back, but it was important for me to have certain themes explored. I don't like salacious tell-alls though. I'm not interested in them.

LW: That's Margaret Trudeau territory.

BJ: I was thinking of Liona Boyd. It just makes me cringe. It's one of the reasons why for so long I kept our friendship to myself. I didn't want people to suspect I was being self-aggrandizing or opportunistic. So the stuff in the play is the heart of it, the heart of any relationship: what is the connection, and why were we friends?

LW: And how do you maintain that friendship despite the

fact that the person is a celebrity?

BJ: There's a certain amount of responsibility with that. And what happens to a friendship when you drop the ball, which is what I feel I did when I moved to Toronto? You can say the same thing about him, but I always think that the friendship was more important for me than it was for him. It's my own responsibility to have maintained it, to have gone to Montreal to visit, but I didn't. I got caught up in my own career and my own other relationship—my love relationship.

LW: In the Playwright's Notes you write: "I like to think of the play as alive and present the way memories are or seem to be." As an artist you must have relied upon your journal entries but also your memory, which can be faulty at times. How did you counter that?

BJ: One faulty memory that I found was from the latter part of the 1990s: I believed that Trudeau either wasn't interested in me anymore or had forgotten me. I'd write a letter and I wouldn't hear back, or I'd invite him to a play, and I'd get a response from his secretary saying he was out of the office. I figured that he didn't really remember me anymore.

Then, after his death, I went back into the journals and letters and found things like the story in the play about "lost souls." I'd written his words to me in one of those journals: "You know, my old great friends, Pelletier and Hébert—and maybe one or two others—have known me long enough to know when I am 'in my shell.'" Maybe someday you will recognize it too, although I think you already have a handle on it."

There were little reminders that he did think of me as someone who mattered to him. My memory was faulty, and it had tricked me into thinking: "I'm not going to maintain this because he doesn't remember me or doesn't care about me."

I think probably what was happening in the late nineties was that he was struggling with his own memory and he was not well. It's quite likely that he didn't remember me, but

He said during the discussion about masks that friendship requires an intimacy. It's not the intimacy of a sexual relationship; it's the intimacy of being able to remove the mask, and feel confident enough in the other person to talk on a personal level.

maybe not because I wasn't important, but because he was aging poorly.

There are times within the play when I put things together: I might put this lunch discussion together with that lunch, or content from this letter into that letter, and squish the reality that way. I really have to think now to remember that they were different times. I've tried really hard not to embellish though. I've tried really hard—except for compressing time like that—to make what happened the truth. That's important to me.

LW: When you first observe Trudeau at the NTS gala you remember that your parents' television news always seemed to appear in black and white, while your children's shows were in colour. This juxtaposition seems to depoliticize your meeting with Trudeau—it takes you back to a time when you weren't so interested in the political event or Trudeau as a political figure.

BJ: That makes sense in terms of our relationship, because it was apolitical. Nevertheless he was the leader of the country from when I was six until I was twenty-two. So this is now me at twenty-three, and here comes the Prime Minister. He was very much a part of my life because I saw him all the time. Maybe I'm insanely egocentric, but I wasn't so shocked that he should still be in my life—albeit in an entirely different way.

I certainly wanted to know more about politics. Some material on politics has been cut out of the play. In the previews at Theatre Passe Muraille I was trying out a story called "Brecht, Lobsters and the Just Society." It was about a lunch we had, eating lobster and talking about Trudeau's work. He said that the senior partners would come to him and ask his opinion on whether to appeal cases that they'd lost. He talked about nuclear disarmament and about the Lawyers for Nuclear Disarmament, and about that whole trip that he'd

done. I talked about the play I was rehearsing and how I had to wear a fat suit. Then after lunch he had to take Justin and Sacha to the dentist and I had to go get fitted for this fat suit at the theatre. What made it a heightened story for me was the juxtaposition of that: eating lobster and discussing nuclear disarmament with this world statesman, and then wearing my sweaty fat suit while he took the boys to the dentist.

LW: Do you think the media affected your impression of Trudeau?

BJ: Well at that time there wasn't a lot of media about him. Tommy Schurmacher at the *Montreal Gazette* would say, "Trudeau has been at such and such a place" or "visiting a set with Margot Kidder..." but there wasn't really anything about him otherwise. Every once in a while, though, memories of his accomplishments would smack me in the back of the head.

Also, at the NTS dance I had the sense that I knew him. I thought, "I know this guy. I know this playboy. I'm not going to let him do his playboy thing on me."

LW: By focusing on Trudeau's intellectual and artistic sides your play disputes the depiction of him as just a playboy. Was that a goal?

BJ: There are just so many facets to him. We all have a lot of different—Trudeau would say, masks. There's a Yeats poem, actually, called "The Mask." I'd earmarked all of these poems that I thought he would like and that was one of them. They're not necessarily false fronts.

They're just different aspects of one really interesting person. He wore those masks or personae to achieve certain things, but he was also genuinely multifaceted.

I can't dispute that he was a playboy because I imagine he really was, he just wasn't with me. He might have tested it out at that NTS dance to see if I was a conquest, but I wasn't interested in that. That doesn't dispute the fact that he might have acted like a playboy, I just didn't know that side. It didn't interest me.

Brooke Johnson in *Trudeau Stories*. The floor of the set was created by Scenic Designer Lindsay Anne Black based on the design by Ernest Cormier, architect of Trudeau's house.

Photo by R. Kelly Clipperon

Brooke Johnson in *Trudeau Stories*.
Photo by R. Kelly Clipperton

LW: I'm interested to hear that Trudeau talked about masks, that he believed that we use different personalities for different situations and different ends.

BJ: He said during the discussion about masks that friendship requires an intimacy. It's not the intimacy of a sexual relationship; it's the intimacy of being able to remove the mask, and feel confident enough in the other person to talk on a personal level. There were many times that he wore one mask or another. I couldn't say that I knew intimately who he was. He was so many different things, and different things to different people. But there are many people who have seen the play, and relate having spoken with him—a few even worked with him, and they share similar opinions about him personally as opposed to publicly. To me he was a shy, quiet, low-speaking person. He wasn't the great extrovert.

LW: The performer.

BJ: The performer.

LW: To some extent Trudeau seems to have had more interaction with the public than many other Canadian politicians. People can actually remember meeting him.

BJ: Well, there's something about these guys lately. There's no seeming interest in the people, in what we might want the country to be, or in the Just Society. Just Society: what the hell does that mean anymore? We don't have a great human rights record, but we're not even striving for it these days.

Lloyd Axworthy was talking about this after a fundraiser we did at Passe Muraille. Trudeau's "peace tour" after leaving office was extremely important in what ultimately led to nuclear disarmament and the international treaties that we

have now. The media didn't give it its due, but in fact, if I understand Mr. Axworthy right, it laid the groundwork for what became the disarmament treaty.

That kind of interest in the world, in the globe and our place in it, in human rights and how we treat each other, and in turn, how we view ourselves, was always on the discussion table. That's what people talked about, all through those years. Whether you hated the guy, or he made you mad, or whether you were intrigued by him, we were talking about Canada. We were always talking about what was happening in this country. These guys now—they don't want us to know what they're doing.

LW: There was a belief too that Canada was important on the world stage.

BJ: We believed we had something to offer. Trudeau made a lot of mistakes, but there was openness. Maybe this is a faulty memory, but in my formative years

I remember Canada as a political idea. It was a social and political idea because of that kind of governance. I don't think of it that way anymore. It's not "a Good Idea" anymore. It's a missed opportunity.

With the Just Society we believed that we could be a conscience for the world. That has a huge responsibility as well—and it's something that we weren't always doing that well—but there was still an attempt to do that—

LW: To look at how we could help not just the country but the world, which is what Trudeau was doing—

BJ: He was a philosopher. I think it's very important to have a philosopher as a leader—somebody who thinks about culture. Unfortunately with the current global economy, people here think of culture as a frivolous thing. It's one of the first things that we give up in North America, as opposed to

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looking at culture as being really, fundamentally, who we are.

Trudeau was very interested in the Arts, personally and publicly, and he made policy about it. He funded it. These theatres wouldn't exist if it wasn't for what was happening during his government. Theatre Passe Muraille wouldn't exist. Tarragon wouldn't exist. Factory wouldn't exist. It just wouldn't have happened.

LW: In the play you watch Trudeau's funeral procession from outside of the basilica with all of the other mourners. Could you discuss the gap between your relationship with Trudeau and everyone's 'relationship with Trudeau'?

BJ: There was the throng outside who loved him, and those inside who knew him and loved him in a variety of ways. I could have gone in and sat somewhere upstairs, but I felt so disconnected. I wanted to walk through the leaves on Mount Royal, to remember and reflect and have my own memorial. I didn't read the papers. I didn't watch the news. I didn't listen to the radio. I couldn't stand it. It was, at the time, an unshareable loss. It was so bottled up that going inside that basilica was claustrophobic and it wasn't fitting.

I didn't really have any kind of catharsis until I started to write and share the writing. By putting it in the theatre I learned that the stories held resonances for people, not only about Trudeau, but about being human, about friendship and loss and memory and aging and grief and regret, but also, by remembering, about hope and possibility. It's also about all those things regarding our country—what we could stand for, and hopefully someday will stand for, and about the current sense of loss and guilt and regret. Whether Trudeau was a celebrity or not, whether he was a powerful person or not, connecting with somebody

and having ideas open up in your head and your mind and your memory, and relating them to your place in the world and your country, that's what's important.

LW: Do audiences often respond to the personal story instead of fixating primarily on Trudeau as celebrity?

BJ: Most of the time, yes. Some people are different. Some people are completely transfixed by the idea of the celebrity—the people who ask: "Why didn't you sleep with

him?" or, "Didn't you want to sleep with him?"

LW: People think that they can ask such private questions. If you were doing this play about a guy at NTS, I don't think anyone would be sticking up there hand to say—

BJ: What was your sex life like?

LW: Society seems to believe it has the right to know particular pieces of information about celebrities.

BJ: It's true, isn't it? Do you remember after Diana died, there was that tabloid boycott? Nobody was going to buy tabloid newspapers anymore. Well, just a couple of years later they all started buying them again.

LW: And even buying the ones about Diana.

BJ: It may be an interesting part of society, but it's not a part that I'm interested in. People can ask those questions and I'll answer

Brooke Johnson in *Trudeau Stories*.
Photo by R. Kelly Clipperton

them as straightforwardly as I can, but I can't be responsible for what they take out of it.

Part of the reason for sharing this story is to say that there's more to human relationships than what shows up on tabloid covers: there is much more to us, so let's not cheat ourselves by looking at each other that way. The different facets of this particular relationship: twenty-three year old, sixty-five year old; woman, man; student, world leader; somebody

who's just emerging into the world, celebrity—celebrated in the true sense of the word, for actually doing things. All these different lines, and others, are crossed in this relationship. We don't have to keep in our little square. We can connect with each other and goddamn it we should. So the play's not a big thesis thing, but it does have ideas in it that I think are important, about not pigeonholing ourselves or other people. There's much more significance to our relationships—with each other and our country and our world—if we get rid of those thoughts and think about what else we're capable of.

Lydia Wilkinson is a PhD Candidate at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama, University of Toronto, where she is working towards the completion of her dissertation entitled "Trudeau and the Performance of Canadian Identities."

Brooke Johnson started working in professional theatre thirty years ago as a go-fer and has worked as an actor since 1986. *Trudeau Stories* is her first written work for the stage.