

CHAPTER 33 Paint Your Wagon: the full text of Strohman's recollections about auditions, the trials of coaching schoolboys and the backstage romances

Michael 'Rusty' Strohman, a matric pupil in 1971, took a prominent role in the school's production of Paint Your Wagon. Some years later he joined the staff of the school, specialising in the teaching of English. He responded to a request to submit some of his thoughts about the production some fifty years before.

The Muir stage musical period of the last quarter of the old century (hell, it's fun writing that - it makes me feel like Lawrence Green) owed its conception, birth and development to the creative energy and drive of Neill Hoare. Some of my perspectives cannot help but be influenced by the fact that Neill and Mike King and I became friends as well as colleagues in later years and shared recollections of the earlier productions from time to time - but I'll try to separate the Young Strohman impressions from the later views...

I remember Neill sounding us out during science classes as to whether we would be prepared to sing on stage: I am pretty sure that this was happening towards the end of 1970, although it might have been early in 1971. I don't remember that the response was wildly enthusiastic, but nevertheless some time later there were auditions of sorts in the hall. We gathered in small groups (so I imagine we were called or invited in) and gathered around the old piano down at the front of the hall below the stage and put through a singing trial by Mike King. "Can you sing this note?" 'Plink' on the keys. "Now do this: la la la LA la la laa" scales - you know the sort of thing. We progressed to "Moon River" from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*: a ten-year-old song at the time and very close to being our parents' sort of music. However, probably precisely for this reason and because it was a big number, I knew the tune pretty well, as did Robert (Sharman) and we were able to sing along off the song sheet quite easily. It was quite fun and we did a bit more singing than was immediately required - and the prospect of singing on stage began to look more attractive. I confess that I cannot remember the progress of any of the other fellows, like Hennie Coetzee, Tony Kaplan, Mike Flynn and Ian Milton, although I have a vague recollection that Ian may have had a voice designed for the silent movie era. Mike King was pleased, perhaps pleasantly surprised, with the little grin and twinkle that I was to come to know better in later years. I guess, then, that the stock-taking proved encouraging.

We did not know of any particular show that Neill had in mind at that time - perhaps he hadn't decided on one yet. Sydney Hart (of whom more from me later, I am sure) told us that there had been conversations about doing something more ambitious than the One-Act festival entries that Neill's super productions had begun to dominate...

In later years Neill told me that he needed a show that would suit a crowd of Muir boys - given that he had to have a big cast and there would be singing and dancing required. So, whatever shows he considered for that first production, *Paint Your Wagon* fitted the bill well - rowdy choruses and a bunch of rough miners stomping about. The refined comedy of Gilbert and Sullivan was not for us. I am not sure exactly when it became known that a musical was indeed to be put on the boards and above all that it was to be in collaboration

with Riebeek. Once this latter news was out, though, the appeal of being in the show rose exponentially – especially among the inmates of N.C. Dugmore House.

Auditions and casting were early in the new year of '71. The question of the time demands of this, or any of the shows I did while a schoolboy was never one that troubled me. I wasn't particularly committed to academic performance and was lucky enough, I suppose, to be good in a couple of areas that came naturally and appealed to me and able to do enough to get by in those that didn't. (I know what sort of things Mr Strohman, the teacher, would have written on Young Strohman's report had the two encountered one another in a dimensional warp!) This was not true of everyone - my good friend Tony Kaplan was initially forbidden from taking a part in *Paint Your Wagon* by his father, Myer, who felt it would be too much of a distraction during his matric year. That Tony ended up in the production was the consequence of the sad death of Sydney Hart as a result of the motor accident on the way back to Uitenhage, shortly before we opened...

A tradition of backstage romances started among cast and crew in that first show and continued unabated through every show that followed. Hennie Coetzee went into the show in a "steady" sort of relationship with someone who was also cast: was smitten by the female lead and as the smiting was mutual found himself in the delicate situation in those days of having to wiggle out of inviting the party of the first part to the school dance in order to clear the field for inviting the party of the second part. Fortunately he was aware that I was somewhat taken myself by the party of the first part and he prevailed upon me to invite her to the dance. I say prevailed because I was not at that time the school dance type - but made my first exception in view of the circs... I remember Mike King telling fruity tales of encounters in the Muir corridors during rehearsals over the years, and we chuckled about that sort of thing from the lofty perspective of the staff room, later.

Mike King toiled away at getting the chorus to deliver something close to respectability... Boys, especially, have a tendency to turn anything into a drinking song with a good, tub-thumping rhythm and swooping transitions from note to note. I remember Mike going through as many repetitions as the market would bear of the saloon song "*Hand me down that can of beans*" and "*There's a coach comin' in*" looking for the crispness and articulation he was after. He'd get it - and a few rehearsals later, as the spirit built with increasing confidence, it would have regressed somewhat.

At the time everyone had enormous fun doing the musical and it involved boys who would probably not usually have taken part in the smaller-scale Dramatic Society activities. That set some of its own posers for Neill and the choreographers. My remark about stomping miners applies here: choreography had to deal with an uneven distribution of left and right feet. I cannot recall who the overall choreographer was, but Lin (Gubb) choreographed Ben Rumson (Strohman) in his dance with a chair and showed immense patience - I am persuaded that she must have been muttering dark oaths under her breath. I chuckle at it to this day. There was also the need to coach everyone to get into and stay in some sort of character, even when they had no lines or songs. One straight-faced Muirite, a non-speaking miner who shall remain nameless, seemed incapable of smiling in a way that would be recognizable to anyone other than his mother. Neill solved that problem by grouping him always with his back towards the audience, or facing three-quarters upstage.

It was rather fine having staff members in the cast. Neill played a small part himself and was the lead voice in one of the songs ("*They call the wind Maria*"). As I've said, Tony Kaplan was prevailed on to come in. Of course, staff members were involved in all the backstage and front-of-house management and it was part of the almost organic spread of the shows that as they neared performance more and more pupils had opportunities to participate: construction, props, make-up, backstage crew... all very sound educationally, I think. Having been a long way away from Uitenhage for a long time I've been to precious few Founders' weekends, but I'd not be at all surprised if Old Boys from any given year who were involved in that year's (or those years') musicals are still able to rattle off some of the chorus numbers. The musicals built a tremendous team spirit.

The last couple of weeks heading into the run were always demanding. Rehearsals by then would be the entire show, and with the inevitable repeats and the director's notes would see us getting home quite late. There'd still be the full programme of sport and academic work and in hindsight that was probably good training in dealing with multiple demands. The final week, when rehearsals moved out of the College hall and into the Town Hall was very demanding, but also very exciting. Suddenly we were on the real stage, with the dark backstage areas (put to good use in the tradition alluded to earlier) the sense of the void above the lights and the damp, musty smell of the under-stage storage. We had to be there early for make-up and get away late after cleaning up. I think we did a long run for *Paint Your Wagon*...four or five shows rather than the usual three.

For the second time I encountered one of the disadvantages of being a 17-year old redhead cast as a grizzled mature character - stage beards, heavier make-up and silver hairspray. After the dress rehearsal and each performance it took me three hair-washes back at home to get all rid of all the colour so that I could be back to normal for the following day. At the end of the run you'd be properly tired and I think that was when I gave myself the concession of taking the day off school on the day after the last night. There never seemed to be any difficulty - it wasn't something I continued into my teaching days, though.