

# **Writing With Our Feet**

By Dave Carley

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Writing With Our Feet was first produced as a one act play – consisting of about the first twenty minutes of the full-length work – at Alberta Theatre Projects’ playRites 90 Festival. It was part of January’s Brief New Works showcase series. It was later given a staged reading by New York City’s Theatre North Collective in March, 1990, and then a full production by that same theatre, in June 1990.

Writing With Our Feet – in its full-length form – was workshopped by Vancouver’s Dark Horse Theatre in April 1990, and given a staged reading as part of the new Play Centre’s SpringRites Festival. Participants in the workshop were Don Thompson and Nicole Robert. Robert Garfat, Artistic Director of Dark Horse, directed. In June, 1990, the play was given a reading at the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on the-Lake, Ontario.

On October 12, 1990, the full-length version of Writing With Our Feet opened at Hamilton’s Theatre Terra Nova, with the following cast:

JEAN-FRANCOIS – Nigel Hamer  
SOPHIE etc. – Suzanne Belanger

Directed by Kevin Land  
Set Design by Michael Adkins  
Lighting Design and Dramaturge – Christopher McHarge  
Stage Manager – Barb Wright

Writing With Our Feet was published by Blizzard Press and nominated for the 1992 Governor-General’s Award for Drama.

## **Writing With Our Feet**

### Characters

Jean-Francois  
Sophie, Aunt Zenaide, Alphonsinette, Lucy Cormier, Father Rocky and Raymond Loewy.

### Time

About now, or soon, and in the past, mostly after the death of JF’s parents and the recent death of his sister Sophie.

### Place

Ostensibly a garage underneath an access ramp in Montreal.

## Thanks

I am indebted to a great number of individuals and institutions for their help in bringing this script to maturity. Thanks first of all to Robert Garfat, who directed the Dark Horse Theatre workshop, and to its participants Nicole Robert and Don Thompson. I'm grateful also to Theatre Terra Nova's Chris McHarge and Kevin Land, and to the original cast: Suzanne Belanger and Nigel Hamer. Thanks also to Lesley Ewen, Ellen Rae Hennessey, Tanja Jacobs, Annie Kidder, Jackie Maxwell, Patricia Ney, Stephen Ouimette and Allan Zinyk.

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Special thanks to Pierre Peloquin.

## **Dedication**

My sister and I really did learn how to write with our feet. It was 1964 and the recent, unexpected death of a President was weighing heavily on our minds. If Kennedy could be bumped off so easily, what horrors awaited two youngsters living in Camelot's northernmost suburbs? At the very least: the loss of our hands. We were not impressed by our school insurance forms, which promised us a windfall \$500 for each off-lopped extremity. We knew this wouldn't be enough. We knew we had to develop competent backup systems. The entire neighbourhood could play at being outdoors children, but my sister and I huddled in the dark, practicing our toes for an inevitable physiological Armageddon.

Nearly three decades have passed.

Neither my sister nor I have yet to lose a body part.

I'm beginning to think that footwriting in a darkened room while the rest of the world romps in the sun is some kind of metaphor.

Jean-Francois, my footwriting hero, eventually realizes his feet are best used for walking out into the world. My sister and I? We gave up footwriting and went into theatre. My sister found theatre first, but then again she was always a much better footwriter. This play is dedicated to her.

For Jan Carley

## Writing With Our Feet

*(Jean-Francois (JF) is in the garage, writing. He's wearing black. At the very least, he has pinned a black ribbon to his shirt or jacket.)*

JF: Sophie and I were eight and ten when we began writing with our feet. Our tender minds had been deeply affected by the tragedy of our cousin Alphonsinette. After passing a long evening in disreputable company at the Arthabaska Hotel, she stretched herself across an abandoned rail-line and slid into deep sleep.

SOPHIE: *(Entering.)* Daddy's on the phone to Arthabaska! A rare train came and clipped off the legs of Alphonsinette!

JF: What!

SOPHIE: Her god-given legs! It's a one-in-a-million tragedy!

JF: Cousin Alph moved to Montreal and settled into the big wingchair in the front room. She sat there and waited for her new legs to be made.

SOPHIE: Today's quote: "I drank to forget, now look what I've got to remember: a goddamn waist that ends in mid-air!"

*(JF and SOPHIE laugh.)*

JF: She crabbed for the three months it took a master carver from St. Jean-Port-Joli to do the legs. In the meantime, Maman dug up our old baby carriage and Papa cut off the sides and the canopy. So it'd look less like a pram and more like something you'd push an angry, legless, twenty-three year-old cousin in. The carriage worked so well, and Sophie and I were such obliging pilots, that when the wooden legs finally arrived, Alphonsinette rejected them on a technicality.

SOPHIE: *(Quoting.)* "I don't like the finish. And all this carving down the side! I'll look like a goddamn souvenir!"

JF: She said that?

SOPHIE: *(Quoting.)* "First Yank tourist to see me'll rip them off. My legs'll end up on some mantelpiece in Pittsburgh! Send them back!"

JF: Daddy must be berserk!

SOPHIE: *(Quoting.)* She's lazy! I'm showing her the golden toe!

JF: And Papa did indeed give Alphonsinette the boot, forcing the government to assume her care. They bought her a wheelchair with a converted Evinrude and, today, decades later, she's a familiar sight along Rue St. Laurent, buzzing from bar to bar, sounding like a thirsty fishing boat.

SOPHIE: We can learn from this, Jean-Francois.

JF: How!

SOPHIE: Alphonie lost her legs to teach us the big lesson.

JF: Sophie believed that horrible events occurred to warn the as yet unscathed. Even at eight, my sister was on the cutting edge of a dark theology.

SOPHIE: Look at her! Angry! A pillow of a woman! She zigzags along St. Laurent like a drunken water beetle. Trying to forget what's vanished. Completely unprepared for life's vagaries!

JF: What's your point?

SOPHIE: What if we lost a limb or two? What if we lost our hands! We can't lose our legs because of the law of averages, not when two legs are already missing from the family tree.

*(JF and SOPHIE regard their hands.)*

But these – the innocent hands of the child.

JF: Fodder for fate.

SOPHIE: Can you imagine the horror?

JF: But how!

SOPHIE: Not a train – the family law of averages is against it. But a bloody encounter with an overturned lawnmower during a three-legged race! That'd do it!

JF: Or papa, deranged by drink, attacking us with a machete as we sleep with arms upraised.

SOPHIE: Oh J-F, we've got to get competent back-up systems! What if Alphonsinette had taught herself to walk with her hands? At the very worst she could be doing bar-counter handstands for drink money! As for you and me... we'll learn to write – with our feet!

*(JF and SOPHIE regard their feet.)*

JF: Recognizing the wisdom of my sister's words, we set out on a program of foot-training, showing such determination, that the story of Sophie and myself is, in effect, the history of footwriting in the Americas.

SOPHIE: I'm going to use a typewriter –

JF: And this garage – this was our stage –

SOPHIE: God may take away our hands, but surely he'll leave us electricity.

JF: In no time at all, Sophie was up to twenty words a minute.

SOPHIE: Shit! My big toe just hit four keys at once. I was going for the L and I wrote PLOK!

JF: Eventually even the big toe hurdle was leapt, and Sophie could, with the daintiest of twitches, hit just one key at a time. Me, I let her use the typewriter and I worked up a kind of longhand. I'd hold my pen, which I wrapped with hockey tape for stickiness, between the big toe and toe two, and off I'd go.

Our pre-teen years passed. Then our teens. Then our post-teens. Sophie got faster and faster. She could pound out a letter to our Aunt Zenaide in Arthabaska, a three-pager, in less than fifteen minutes. She even learned to fold the paper and stuff it into a foot-addressed envelope. For my part, I developed a languid script; large, because footwriting is not so economical of paper, but very lovely, a source of admiration to us both.

SOPHIE: It's artistic, JF! You've got real style! That's a gentleman's hand you've got in that foot!

JF: Eventually a dilemma presented itself, as dilemmas always do.

SOPHIE: *(Groans.)* Where does this lead? I can't spend the rest of my life writing letters to Arthabaskan aunts!

JF: I don't see why not!

SOPHIE: Granted, our inheritance means we don't have to work. And this garage is comfy – who can knock a life of footwriting in the shadow of this Willys Aero Ace? But surely there's more to reach for in life.

JF: Like what?

- SOPHIE: I don't know. Philosophies.
- JF: *(Not quite understanding.)* Ah – philosophies.
- SOPHIE: I'm going to write instructional motifs with my feet. It's a different genre than Auntie letters and, though I've no wish to diminish letter-writing, this is tougher. Especially when one must project the muse through one's toes.
- JF: I have to tell you the major difference between Sophie and me. Yes, we were related by blood and, yes, we shared many fears and aspirations. But nevertheless, there was a fundamental dissimilarity in our brains. *(Pause.)* I'm a generalist. I see the big picture. Vaguely, imprecisely, but I've got the whole ball of wax in my viewfinder. With Sophie, everything got narrowed to one precise point of accessible wisdom, and she'd see that point with perfect clarity. A reductivist Kahlil Gibran.
- SOPHIE: I have to repeat a word.
- JF: Myself, I'd repeat hundreds of the, sometimes for no other reason than I enjoyed their peculiar combinations of letters. I'd scrawl them out, add adjectives, adverbs, contractions...
- SOPHIE: I hate like hell repeating a word when I'm only using 13 of them in the first place – but when I read this you'll see the necessity, I hope.
- (SOPHIE types.)*
- JF: It embarrasses me to read my early work. Once, during an argument over something else
- SOPHIE: - You're the reincarnation of Alfred, Lord Tennyson! *(Pause.)* I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I take it back.
- JF: No – you're right.
- SOPHIE: Tennyson was too strong. Uh – Sir Walter Scott.
- JF: That's worse! Sophie, why don't you just say it! I'm bombastic and florid!
- SOPHIE: People can't cope with bulk. They don't have the attention span. And you have to have endings.
- JF: I could never finish a thought but I could always add another stanza. You see, if I finished something I'd have to let it be judged. That was scary, so I'd go and tackle giant historical movements and stay at them for a year or

more: the history of Pittsburgh, the populist wit of Adlai Stevenson, the design eloquence of Raymond Loewy. Well, why not! I'd flex the toes and that'd be it, page after page after page.

SOPHIE: Almost done!

JF: But hers: anorexic jottings, environmentally correct in their careful use of space and paper... politically aware in the preoccupation with the big themes of our century. Sophie began just after the New Deal, mostly because that's when Papa's collection of Life magazines started. She'd reached the Sixties by the time she died.

SOPHIE: - Okay! You want to hear it? (*Performs.*) I'm dedicating this one to my Cousin Terry, the owner of this car, a man who understands exile and the enduring hatred of Family.

JF: (*Catching her in time.*) Funding bodies!

SOPHIE: Oh! My thanks to the minister des affaires culturelles, and to the estate of my parents. Instruction 343.

“Medgar Evers  
Walking walking  
Moon shining  
Gun glinting  
America's dreaming  
Chews Mississippi asphalt.”

(*Pause.*) So?

JF: I like it.

SOPHIE: What about “chews”?

JF: Bites?

SOPHIE: I thought of that, but I want the image of his face grinding into pavement.

JF: It's sad.

SOPHIE: And life is happy?

JF: It's a long poem, for you.

SOPHIE: I measured it. There's a hand dryer above the sinks and I can fit it right on the side. (*Packing up.*) It's perfect.

JF: My sister, she's dead now, she's just – gone now – that's another story and one that makes less sense than anything else I could tell you. It always falls to the living to create meaning out of what's gone before... For me, it's always come from Sophie the Reductivist, out here in this garage, from her feet...

SOPHIE: *(Kisses JF on the cheek; exiting.)* I'll be back in an hour. I'll pick up a pizza on the way home.

*(SOPHIE exits.)*

JF: She'd finish a work, shoot out of the garage and off our property. She scattered her writings about the city, pinning them to trees, taping them to stop signs... her most famous ones were the God/Agog series. The entire message was God/Agog, but there were variations: God/Gagged. God/Gone. Good/God. She pasted these to churches and the Gazette ran a picture once of a sexton scraping god/Agog off the front door of Christ Church Cathedral.

Mostly she worked at the bus and plane terminals She knew that was where her words had their maximum exposure, short of publication, which she opposed on environmental grounds. People would come to the bus terminal, or Dorval; they'd see her motifs and, because they were so brief, they'd carry them in their minds to wherever they were headed – to ever corner of the province or any city of the world.

You see, we're really just two stops from anyplace else. Dorval to Djakarta, Djakarta to Kupang, Kupang to Dili. Two stopovers. All the way to Timor and such a small chain along which to pass the equally concise thought. The world can be a giant thought-chain – and it was my sister who discovered this.

Sophie's work – her last was the one she just did on Medgar Evers – it's all still circling about, taped from wall to wall, moving from terminal to terminal, but most often just passing from mind to mind. Tiny potent foot creations. Circling the planet. Sophie's reductivist ideology, everywhere.

This then is the comfort I derive. My sister has died without losing the use of her hands. You can over-prepare. Me, I still sit here and write with my feet because, Sophie having escaped that fate, the odds are higher now I'll lose mine. And I'm shortening up. As soon as I get down to a manageable length, I'll rejuvenate that chain of words my sister began. I'll leave here. I swear I will. *(Unconvinced.)* Of course I will.

And – oh yes – to return to where it all started: Cousin Alphonsinette. She met a lusty boy from Arvida who says legs only get in the way. That seems to make her happy on some level. They live above Le Vagabond Hotel and I'm told they've even found a priest who's willing to marry them. Which proves there's salvation for us all, even if we haven't spent a lifetime preparing for the worst.