

ARTS & STYLE

SUNDAY, MAY 22, 2022 · SECTION E



ALLA DREVITSEV/WASHINGTON POST ILLUSTRATION; DICK DARRELL/TORONTO STAR/GETTY IMAGES

Jesus made them comedy legends

An oral history of the improbable 1972 Toronto production of 'Godspell,' featuring Martin Short, Eugene Levy, Gilda Radner, Andrea Martin, Victor Garber and Paul Shaffer

BY ZACHARY PINCUS-ROTH

They all still remember when **Gilda Radner** sang “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah.” ¶ It was the final callback auditions for a 1972 production of “Godspell,” and the **Stephen Schwartz** musical about ragtag, hippie disciples of Jesus was the most sought-after gig in Toronto, hot off its off-Broadway success the year before. ¶ **Eugene Levy** sat in the auditorium near his college buddy **Martin Short**, whom he introduced to his friend **Andrea Martin**. **Victor Garber** brought a guitar. **Paul Shaffer** was there to accompany two auditioners on piano. ¶ This improbable lineup of ambitious 20-somethings would all end up onstage at the June 1 opening night, before they became famous through Second City, “Saturday Night Live,” “SCTV,” movies, Broadway and more. For several, “Godspell” at the Royal Alexandra Theatre was their first major job, the moment that nudged their life’s trajectory toward show-business stardom. They formed relationships that have lasted 50 years — all while in a musical that is literally about exuberant comedic strangers learning to connect with one another. ¶ At that callback, many felt bad for Radner, onstage in pigtails and singing a children’s tune. But the creators weren’t looking for polish. They were looking for raw talent. “It was the cutest thing in the world,” Shaffer says now, “but she knew exactly what she was doing.” ¶ Many of them did not. This is an oral history of that production, in interviews that have been condensed for concision and clarity. SEE GODSPELL ON E11

The 1972 Toronto “Godspell” starred Victor Garber and Jayne Eastwood (foreground), Gilda Radner (second from left), Eugene Levy (third from left) and Martin Short (far right). As Garber recalls, “I knew then how special it was.”



CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

For Carol Burnett, the Sondheim award is personal

BY PETER MARKS

When Stephen Sondheim asked his friend Carol Burnett years ago if she would come to New York and sing “I’m Still Here” from “Follies,” she instantly agreed. Though somehow, Burnett had failed to absorb one crucial detail: She would be required to belt the number for, gulp, an audience of 2,700 Sondheim freaks in Lincoln Center’s Avery Fisher Hall.

“He said ‘a recording,’” Burnett recalled, laughing. “I’m thinking we’re gonna be in a booth, and I’m gonna have a microphone and the lyrics in front of me. I flew back to New York, and I’m having lunch with my darling Beverly Sills. And she said, ‘Well, we’re going to see you when you do “Follies.”’ I said, ‘Oh, you’re going to be in the booth?’”

That 1985 concert — with the likes of Barbara Cook, Mandy Patinkin, Elaine Stritch, George Hearn and Lee Remick — is a milestone in the Sondheim annals. Burnett could still chuckle at the memory of her misapprehension as she reminisced last Sunday in an elegant meeting

SEE BURNETT ON E14



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Carol Burnett is the last person handpicked by composer Stephen Sondheim to receive an award given out in his name by Signature Theatre.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

‘Margarita diplomacy’ for a U.S. on the rocks

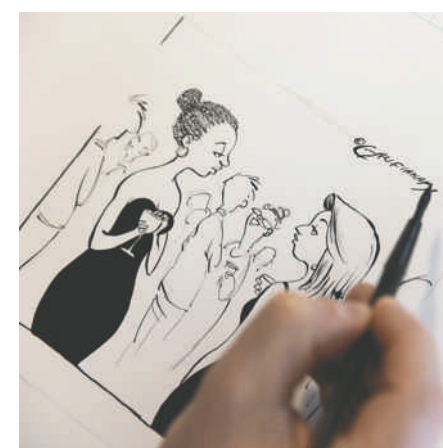
BY ANN HORNADAY

José Andrés is Zooming from New York City, where he and Ron Howard are doing publicity for Howard’s new National Geographic documentary “We Feed People,” about Andrés’s emergency food relief organization, World Central Kitchen. Sitting on a hotel couch next to Howard, fresh from getting a rapid coronavirus test, Andrés explains why he’s running late.

He was supposed to get into New York the night before, “but I didn’t,” he says. “Because I hosted — for two hours that became five hours — 13 senators in my restaurant.” In the Brillat-Savarin room at Andrés’s restaurant Oyamel, he convened a bipartisan discussion on issues including the conflict in Ukraine, where World Central Kitchen has been a presence since February; immigration reform; and the upcoming White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, which Andrés has been instrumental in resuscitating (the last one was held in 1969).

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DICK DARRELL/TORONTO STAR/GETTY IMAGES

GODSPELL FROM E1

At an earlier audition, Levy showed up prepared to sing an a cappella song but was told he had to sing a song with the piano.

Levy: While I was outside waiting, five or six people have gone in before me and virtually every one was singing "Aquarius" from the musical "Hair." But I didn't really know the lyrics — by the time of "harmony and understanding," I couldn't quite follow. So at the last second I said, "All right, 'Aquarius.'" And I got to the chorus: "This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius, the age of Aquarius! Aquarius!" But they stopped me after I sang the high note: "All right, that's fine, thank you very much." Now, oddly enough, I went back for the callback, I picked the same song, "Aquarius," never bothered to learn the lyrics. So I went in thinking, I hope they stop me. That's how dumb with a capital D I was.

Garber showed up to the callbacks just off the tour of something called Canadian Rock Theater, where his role happened to include the perfect audition song for the role of Jesus: "Save the People" from "Godspell."

Garber: I accompanied myself and I was very confident, and it was in my range and I could sing it effortlessly.

Levy: It's just gloriously beautiful and he hits an extremely high note at the end of it. And a hundred people auditioning give him a standing ovation. And then I hear my name called. And I thought it was over. So I went up, they said "what are you singing" and I said "Aquarius." I sounded pretty good, I hit the high note, and then started the chorus and they said, "All right, thank you." And I went, "Perfect!"

Levy had gone to McMaster University in his hometown of Hamilton, Ontario, where he was theater friends with Short and future "SCTV" star Dave Thomas — who would join "Godspell" later.

Levy suggested "Godspell" to Short, who was majoring in social work but had decided that after his imminent graduation he'd give himself a year to try acting. Just off a commercial as a talking credit card, he showed up to the callbacks to sing "My Funny Valentine," and as he wrote in his memoir, "I had never seen so much patchwork denim and rampant bralessness in my life."

Auditioners had to improvise one of the show's parables, which were adapted from the Gospel of Matthew. Levy and Short's group got the Parable of the Sower, and Levy remembers shooing away the self-assigned "platoon leader" and stepping in.

Levy: I said, "Okay, I'll narrate the first half, and Marty, you narrate the second half and I'll do my Ed Sullivan and Marty you can do your Richard Burton." [Ed Sullivan Show, "I kind of did that, "and we have all these starving people and they're on our stage."

Short: Eugene kind of took over. Our parable killed because of Eugene. I think I got in because of Eugene.

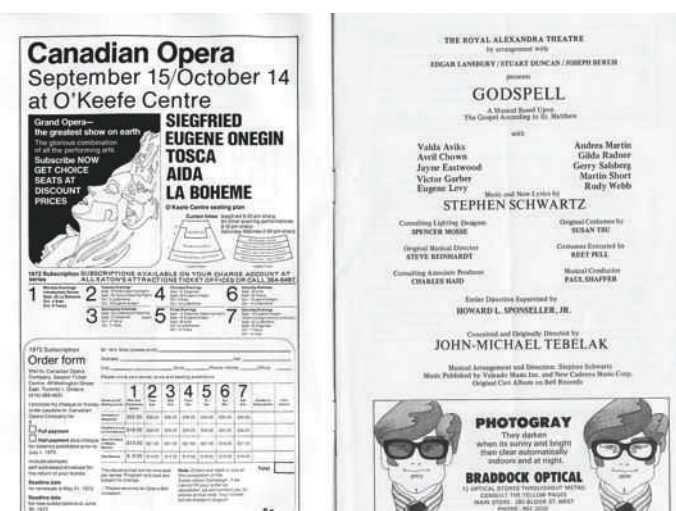
Levy: They called me over to the desk and they said, "Congratulations, you're in the show." And I was going crazy. [Later] Marty walked to the back of the room and I stood up and looked over to him as if to say, "Are you in?" And he nodded excitedly, yes. And then I nodded yes for me. Then we screamed.

Short: Eugene and I ran back and made phone calls to relatives and friends. It was surreal that two close friends would get this. I was still in university, I still had exams. I thought I would struggle for a year. I didn't think I would have this dream job in three weeks.

Levy had dated Andrea Martin a bit, and they co-starred in the erotic horror comedy "Cannibal Girls," directed by a young McMaster alum, Ivan Reitman. Martin had grown up in Portland, Maine, and was obsessed with the circus, even training with the influential mime teacher Jacques Lecoq.

From one stage, 50 years of lasting relationships

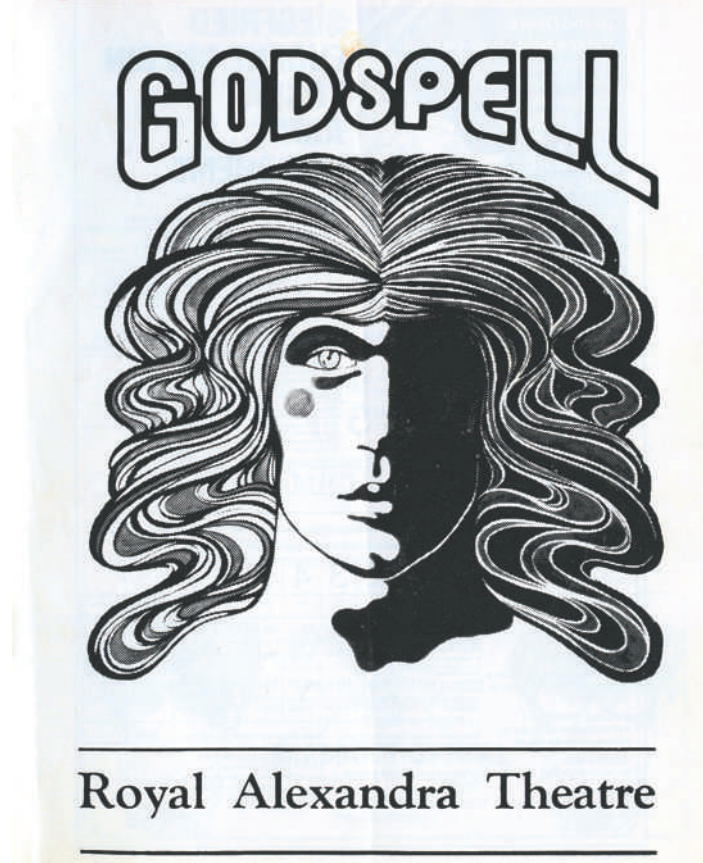
ABOVE: The Toronto "Godspell" players in May 1972. "I don't think that I made them any better — it wasn't anything that I did," recalls Howard Sponseller, the show's supervising director. "It was just I was very good at picking people."
BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: Some inside pages and the cover of the program from the Royal Alexandra Theatre.
BOTTOM LEFT: The original Toronto cast included, from left, Avril Chown, Victor Garber, Valda Aviks (in front), Gilda Radner, Gerry Salsberg, Martin Short, Eugene Levy and Rudy Webb.



COURTESY OF BRIAN GEDCKE WITH PERMISSION FROM MIRVISH PRODUCTIONS



STÉPHANE CARRET



COURTESY OF BRIAN GEDCKE WITH PERMISSION FROM MIRVISH PRODUCTIONS

Martin: I knew that this was a vehicle for somebody with my talent or personality or clownship or whatever it was. So it meant a lot to me. So with that in mind, I picked the entirely wrong song to audition with. I picked a song [that went], "At 20, man, you've had it." They wouldn't even let me finish. I was too slick. I had thought that that's how you audition, you do it with your best card and your showmanship, but that's not what the show is about. The show is about innocence. And what do you bring to the table just as who you are.

Short: I remember seeing Andrea's face when she didn't get picked. She was devastated. She wanted it so much.

So Martin went to the gym every day for two weeks, and one day she was in the sauna when she got called to the phone — it was Levy, who said one actress had dropped out.

Martin: He said, come to this party that we're having tomorrow night. And the director is going to be there and just be your zany, funny self. And I got the part from being myself.

Shaffer had grown up in Thunder Bay, Ontario, where his parents gave him piano lessons. His dad wanted him to follow in his footsteps and go to law school, but one day he told them, "I gotta try music." His dad suggested he give it a year.

Shaffer: They were secretly thrilled, I think. And I spent a year primarily playing with an avant-garde jazz musician named Tisziji Munoz. And I played bar mitzvahs and continued to play for people's auditions. Twenty bucks I would charge them and we'd learn a song together.

After Shaffer played for the two "Godspell" auditioners who had brought him, he was told that Schwartz wanted to see him.

Shaffer: I go over to him and he says, "Can you play the rest of the auditions? Just today. You seem to know all the songs, and this guy I have doesn't seem to." I said, "Absolutely." At the end of the day, Stephen again approached me and said, "Could you get a band together and conduct this show?" I wasn't even there to audition. I was there making 20 bucks. I had never conducted anything.

Schwartz: He was just one of the best keyboard players I've ever heard.

"Godspell" was conceived by John-Michael Tebelak, who was put off by traditional church services and wanted to infuse the gospels with joy and community. Eventually Schwartz joined as songwriter, and the show became part of a wave of post-"Hair" rock musicals, at a moment when a generation brought up on TV and the electric guitar were invading theater and comedy.

Shaffer: There's a lot of Elton John in there and there's a lot of Laura Nyro in there. I was totally into those two so I was right on the same page.

"Godspell's" youthful energy would help a lot of actors: Jeremy Irons, Joe Mantegna, Jane Lynch, Queen Latifah, Jon Hamm and Jennifer Lopez all performed it in high school or elsewhere. The staging evoked the improv techniques that begot Second City.

Schwartz: It was created anew around each of the companies. And that's why it was so important to cast actors who were gifted in improvisation, who could do imitations, who could bring in their own comic ideas.

Don Scardino: It's basically the parables as told by the "Laugh-In" crew. We did Nixon impressions and Agnew jokes — it was very SNL-y. Gilda had imitations of Ernestine, Lily Tomlin's phone operator. And here comes Jesus in a red nose and big floppy shoes. It reached people in a way so that when you tell the sad part of the story they're totally moved.

Garber: The message will always be desirable: It's to love one another and to be kind. I still think back to sort of things that I said as Jesus and they still resonate with me. "You are the light of the world." We're all connected and we all come from the same source

SEE GODSPELL ON E12

THEATER



ONTARIO JEWISH ARCHIVES, BLANKENSTEIN FAMILY HERITAGE CENTRE

GODSPELL FROM E11

because we're human.

Scardino: It was about Jesus in the way that it could have been about Buddha.

Radner, who died of cancer in 1989, wrote in her memoir that while she was brought up Jewish, she was "always fascinated with Jesus" — studying him in art history, singing Christmas songs and living in a Catholic neighborhood of Detroit.

Radner, from her memoir: For a whole year, eight times a week, Jesus died in "Godspell" and we all suffered with him. I suppose that's why I sometimes wondered about getting cancer. Why do I have to be Jesus? Why all this suffering in my life? Why chemo and losing my hair? Why am I marked for some kind of suffering that I see others aren't going through?

Cast members recall Short's barrage of impersonations both in the show and backstage, including Judy Garland, Katherine Hepburn and Norwegian skater Sonja Henie. At the top of Act 2, he would often do a bit of rogue shtick pretending to be Frank Sinatra singing about linoleum.

Short: I had my own imaginary world in my attic, so I was on television since I was 14 in my mind.

Jayne Eastwood: Valda Aviks was a brilliant singer, and one night she got [vocal cord] nodes, couldn't sing. And she said, "Can anybody take over the song for me?" and Marty said, "I can!" And so we're sitting cross-legged onstage, and Marty starts out, "Where are you going? Where are you going? Can you take me with you? Na na na na na."

Short: I couldn't remember any words and I started making them up.

Eastwood: And I was sitting beside him and I laughed so hard I wet my pants. Don Scardino finally had to take over.

Levy: On a Saturday night, we have a dinner in the dressing room and then for the second show we go upstairs and the lights go down.

Eastwood: We're standing in a circle, facing each other, away from the audience.

Levy: Jesus starts his narration, and we look up and Andrea has a dinner roll in her mouth.

Eastwood: The audience couldn't see, but we could.

Levy: When Jesus finishes, we break from the circle and get into our positions and start the prologue. Marty's first line, he couldn't get it out because he was laughing. And then it goes to the next person and they're laughing. And then the next person. And the stage manager later said he had his hand on the light switch and he was going to blackout the show and make an announcement to the audience that, ladies and gentlemen, we're going to start this show from the beginning. But for some reason, we just skated past that point and continued on.

Short, however, says the near-do-over was on a different night.

Short: We came out one night, we got in a circle, and Andrea said, "Stop doing that opening speech like an Italian." And I didn't know what she meant. And then we break apart. I say, "If this is not my teaching, then I am speaking an untruth-ah." I didn't mean to. And I started to laugh. And we all laughed. And the stage manager was almost going to blackout the show. ... I maintain I have the best memory so I'd go with me.

Eastwood: It was the dinner roll. **Martin:** Marty and I certainly made each other laugh and we were terribly unprofessional. But because it was "Godspell," you couldn't tell that we were being unprofessional. It was all under the umbrella of goofiness.

Martin continued the antics in public places.

Shaffer: She just thought nothing of flashing somebody just for laughs. But her attitude was so original. She would just pull up her T-shirt: "So you've seen these, then? You are familiar with them?"

Martin: You couldn't do that anymore. I'd be brought up on charge-



COURTESY OF MARLENE SMITH



COURTESY OF MARLENE SMITH

TOP: A review in the *Hamilton Spectator* said of Eugene Levy, top right, that the actor, "who looks like a well-fed Frank Zappa, stole scenes from others with a flip of his eyebrows or a downward tug of his bushy moustache."

MIDDLE LEFT: Martin Short dated Gilda Radner during the production.

"She was just an original, funny, hip girl," he recalls. "Everyone kind of said, 'Who's this?'"

MIDDLE RIGHT: Levy, left, and Andrea Martin, center, were among several "Godspell" cast members

who later joined Second City's Toronto theater and "SCTV."

BOTTOM: Paul Shaffer, pictured here circa 1970, discovered while growing up that he could play any song after hearing it.



LARRY HULST/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

es. It would be a little column in The Washington Post that Andrea Martin lifted her shirt and some men were traumatized. People don't have that kind of freedom right now.

Scardino had come in to replace Garber as Jesus, and later Levy was promoted to the role.

Levy: The show does open with Jesus sitting onstage in a pair of shorts and socks. And I was no question a hairier Jesus. And they said, "Would you mind waxing the hair off your body?" I said, "Yes, I would. I'm doing no waxing for this." They said, "Well, it might bother children in the matinees." So they said, "Would you wear this tank top?" And I said, "Okay, I'll wear the tank top."

The cast would often gather at Levy and Short's house at 1063 Avenue Rd.

Short: People would get up and perform. Paul could play anything — he was like an encyclopedia then. It was very natural to me. Years later, in the late '80s, I started doing parties like that at

my house and people hadn't done them. There were people getting nervous. You'd also have Steven Spielberg there.

Shaffer: I just gravitated toward them. My goodness, these people seem to be having more fun in life than I'm having. And I kind of infiltrated the group and they were nice enough to let me in. I was a very shy kid from northern Canada, but I became a little more outgoing just as a result of hanging out with them. Your vocal level has to come up a little bit just to get a word in edgewise. And I changed. My personality changed.

Eastwood: I lost a very good boyfriend because I was out with them until 5 in the morning. I had a crush on Eugene.

Other future legends lurked in Toronto, which was becoming a hub of comedy talent. Catherine O'Hara — whose brother dated Radner — auditioned for "Godspell" and didn't get it, but she has said she kissed Short's photo in the program. Dan Aykroyd and

his comedy partner Valri Broome once showed up at Radner's birthday party pretending to be her parents and didn't break character the whole night.

Short: Gilda and I started going out and I would drive her white Volvo, and Danny and Valri would be in the back, and they would be so funny that I would deliberately get lost because I didn't want to drop them off.

Everyone has a story about Radner. Short recalls that at the first cast party, she walked around with her fingertip conspicuously touching her forehead and when asked about it revealed that she was covering a pimple.

Eastwood: She made this huge purse, this gorgeous, fun bag, and two or three times a week she would just fill it full of candy and treats and just bring it to all to us backstage. She was seriously beloved. I think we all kind of worshiped her. I remember I said, "Oh my God, Gilda, I love that top." And she took it off and gave it to me.

Scardino recalls that one night after the show, he took Radner and others to see George Carlin perform.

Scardino: We watch from the wings and they're all so excited because they're all comedy freaks. And when it's all over, George says to us, "Well, you did the show and your story about Jesus and you're here, and it's only 10 o'clock. How did you get here so fast?" And Gilda said, "Oh, tonight we shot him."

Short dated Radner for much of the run.

Short: She was four years older, so I was a little more naive. I was 22. She was more complex than I thought she was from initially meeting her. So that would lead to fights and that would lead to makeups. She had lots of psychological scarring from her childhood. And I come from a different place. My parents had just died. So I was thinking, "God, if you are blessed with talent and everyone loves you and you have family money, what's the problem?" But

I was too young to understand that that doesn't solve it.

One day Short was struck by the beauty of a new understudy, Nancy Dolman. Eleven months after "Godspell" closed, Short and Radner split. At a bar a few days later, Short ran into Dolman — who would become his wife.

Short: That was it. It happened quickly. I remember Gilda said, "We're supposed to get back together. What's going on?"

The production ran for 14½ months in two venues, reportedly the longest continuous theatrical run in Canada at the time. But Garber left after just a month do the movie version.

Garber: Gilda, we took pictures in one of those photo booths. She wrote on [one of me], "I don't care, I got the movie." I didn't want to leave. But it brought me to New York. And that's where I knew I was meant to be.

Schwartz invited Shaffer to play on the movie soundtrack.

Shaffer: I was saying, "There's so many piano players in New York, what's going on here?" But the theatrical type of piano player he was working with, he said, "They don't hit the thing hard. That's what you do. That's why I like you." My first time in New York. My first time in a recording studio.

Short: We asked him, "What are New York actors like?" He said, "I could be prejudiced but I think you guys are just as talented." We went, "Aww, that's so sweet and supportive." We didn't get, "All riight!"

The "Godspell" bonds ran deep. At one point years later, John Belushi wanted Shaffer to be in the Blues Brothers movie, but Radner wanted help with a comedy album. He picked her. Was it because of "Godspell"?

Shaffer: No question about it. I went back further with Gilda. With John, back in '78, I had put together the [Blues Brothers] band, musician by musician, and so not to get to go and be in the movie was tough.

Two years later, Shaffer was in a car accident in Hawaii and spent 12 days in the hospital, before ending up in Los Angeles.

Shaffer: I go to the hotel, but I can't get out of bed because I'm just broken and my muscles are atrophied. But Eugene came over and said, "Oh, you're coming with me." And just checked me out of the hotel and checked me right into his guest room, and he and his wife, Deb, took care of me.

Martin married Dolman's brother, making Short her ever-supportive brother-in-law.

Martin: He has a very pragmatic approach. And so if I do get nervous or scared like I always do, he'll say, "Okay, so when you were like this the last time, what happened?" "I don't know." "You won a Tony." "Okay. I don't know, but this is different, maybe I'm ..." "Uh-uh. What just happened? Were you just nominated for the Critics' Choice Award?" "Uh-huh." "Then shut up. Stop it."

Short: Andrea is still the funniest person in the room.

Garber still video-chats with Martin, who's in an "American Idol"-watching group text with Eastwood, who will drop by the Ontario vacation house owned by Short, where one of his son's weddings was officiated by Levy ... and the other by Garber. Scardino is a director on projects such as Short's "Only Murders in the Building" — which Martin joined for Season 2.

Levy: Every time Marty and Paul and I would get together, Paul would always sit down at the piano, and Marty and I would do the entire ["Godspell"] prologue doing everybody's part.

Short: When something is so important at the beginning of your career, it stays with you a great deal. You may have much better jobs. But the first thing. ... I think that group was just so happy to be in school.

Martin: This was Toronto in the '70s — it wasn't even New York in the '70s — so nobody was really thinking, "Huh, how am I going to do this so this will get me that?" I think we were terribly delighted that we were making money. That we could make each other laugh.