

Introduction

Gene Collier

The most successful single play in the long and distinguished profile of Pittsburgh Public Theater began among the far-flung little wildfires of oral history. Art Rooney Jr., the second of the Chief's five sons, was chewing the fat with two of his writer buddies, Baltimore newspaper legend John Steadman and later Mort Sharnik of *Sports Illustrated*. Both urged him to commit the rich American stories of his father to a journal, if not as aspiring literature, than as a precious gift to posterity. That was 30 to 40 years ago, or something like a decade before Art Jr. actually got around to it.

Though stories of the Chief, by the Chief, and for the essential understanding of the Chief had long been part of the oral tradition of western Pennsylvania, and often far beyond, the most

critical conversation didn't happen until the new century. It was in the winter of 2001, on the campus of Carnegie Mellon University, and we dare say it was between us, the would-be coauthors, who had no clue they would be coauthors when the conversation started.

Had one of us not been the director of education for Pittsburgh Public Theater, and had the other's son not been preparing for the theater's annual Shakespeare contest, and had the former not arranged for some coaching sessions on that particular wintry Saturday in Oakland, this conversation would be part of no one's oral history and the play would likely never have happened. But in just a few short minutes, it was somehow revealed that Rob Zellers, who was in possession of a tribute titled "If The Chief Asks, We're Not So Good Today" that he'd been holding since 1989 written by a young columnist from the *Pittsburgh Press* named Gene Collier, had a long-held idea for a one-man play, and that Gene Collier had a long-held ambition to write a biography, and that their subjects were the very same Arthur J. Rooney.



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In our separate cases, “long-held” meant, literally, “I’ll never get this done, but I’m thinking about it.” But at the introduction of potentially complementary “skill” sets — those of a long-time sportswriter who knew the Chief and the Steelers and a veteran theatrical presence who regarded Rooney’s very aura as a kind of dramatic phenomenon, opportunity seemed to be pounding on the door with a shovel. Or was it a football helmet?

“Maybe I’d like to collaborate with you on that,” said the sportswriter, who immediately heard that voice in his head reply, “What the hell are you saying?”

Neither of us had time to write a play, a problem verily dwarfed by the other problem: neither of us knew how to write a play. That second part would eventually be confirmed by some pretty impressive people. Tom Atkins, the great American stage actor whose stentorian voice we actually had the nerve to imagine would speak these lines some day, read through our first draft and said, “This will never work.” Ted Pappas, the decorated director and producing artistic director of



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Pittsburgh Public Theater, validated those instincts by burying the script in a towering stack of other unread scripts. Subsequently, an all-star cast of extra-theatricals, including Dan Rooney, the Steelers' chairman and the Chief's eldest son, Jim Rooney, the Chief's politically astute grandson, the aforementioned Art Jr., and Roy McHugh, the brilliant former columnist and sports editor of the *Pittsburgh Press*, all found the original script by various degrees underwhelming.

At that point, we could almost hear the sometimes-scathing monotone of Hall of Fame coach Chuck Noll, who might have said of this theatrical project, as he once did about a troubled running back, the play had many problems, and they were great.

One was wrapped up in the unorthodox nature of the collaboration. With full-time jobs and families, the writers rarely wrote from the same room. The play was not so much written as conjured from a seemingly endless, manic game of e-mail ping-pong. Rob would serve a scene or an anecdote to Gene, Gene would swat it back, or fail to do so. Gene would slice some monologue



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swatch to Rob, Rob would serve it back, a promising volley would ensue, until someone swatted the thing into the crab dip. Then we'd throw the whole scene out with the crab dip. Once, we lined up page-by-page the typed versions of months of literary spasms on tables in the theater's rehearsal hall so we could literally walk through the play reading it aloud to each other. We ran out of rehearsal hall.

Another of the play's great problems was the Chief himself, whose story is little less than the sprawling epic of an American century. Arthur J. Rooney was a gem, by general agreement, but displaying all of the bright and dark facets to their full polish in anything approaching the correct proportions is a rather monstrous undertaking.

Every once in a while, Gene would ask the exceedingly reasonable question, "Tell me again why we're doing this?" Since Rob did not have anything resembling a reasonable answer, we just kept going. When it was more or less completely rewritten the tenth time, Ted Pappas gave it a read. Even more notably, he came back with some suggestions that did not include a wastebas-



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ket and a match. Apparently, the collected stories, characters, and events were compelling—in fact, so compelling that Ted thought some of it must have been fictitious. These things couldn't have actually happened. The Immaculate Reception? C'mon.

At approximately the same time, Roy McHugh got back to us with some notes on the original script, some bright red marks that led us straight to another level of authenticity. “The Chief,” McHugh wrote, “would never say this.” Or this. Or this. He might say this. Soon after that, Art Jr. mentioned that the newest script had the feel of the exact cadence of his father, the right phrasing, the right places for elaboration and reflection.

By now, the play was developing its own oral history. Myron Cope and Ed Kiely contributed stories and observations, as did Dan Rooney. Jim Rooney met with us for the third or fourth or fifth time at a North Side sandwich place, and explained that we still didn't quite have it, particularly as the script attempted to reveal how the Chief would explain the relationship among his greatest teams, the city, and the fan base. Atkins



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was doing his own research, turning up at Steeler headquarters on draft day, 2003, huddling with Ed Bouchette, the authoritative Steelers beat writer for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, about what the Chief's habits were around the office. Atkins interviewed North Siders and acquaintances, and searched his own memory of having met the Chief when he was a young boy.

Among the rapid-fire aspects of this project that were finally becoming clear was that the people closest to the Chief wanted what wound up on the stage to be correct, and they did not want it whitewashed. As the Patriarch himself had said, "I touched every base."

Though the project had clearly established its own inertia, and to some extent its own little buzz, the coauthors were only slightly closer to real validation than when they started. Then one day, Pappas decided that this was a worthy project and that the theater would present *The Chief*. That meant the serious rewriting could begin toward an actual production on the stage of one of America's great theaters. It was like being informed that you are officially an astronaut, and



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that the countdown has begun. *The Chief* would follow *The Mikado* in fall 2003. Gilbert and Sullivan followed by Zellers and Collier.

In a series of intense sessions during the summer of 2003, the play was workshopped in a conference room overlooking Penn Avenue, where its 19th nervous rewrite was fueled primarily by the line-by-line analysis of the people who would bring it to dramatic life: Pappas, Atkins, and dramaturg Kyle Brenton. A team of exquisite designers were engaged for set, costumes, lighting, and sound, and we were on our way.

The Chief debuted that November and has now been on The Public's stage for five emotionally charged runs. Sometimes men cry at it, which is often a surprise to women who might have wandered in indifferently but get caught up in where all the laughter is going. It is perhaps the one Pittsburgh arts entity on which the reliable theater crowd joins Joe from Munhall in his Bradshaw jersey for the same joyful purpose. To say the coauthors have been gratified beyond imagination by Pittsburgh's response to *The Chief* would only begin to explain things.



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The families and descendants of many of the characters Atkins reminisces about on stage are often seen in the lobby afterward. Some 30 members of Billy Conn's family have seen the play. Franco Harris brought groups. Jim Leyland could be heard laughing uproariously from the balcony. Rocky Bleier and many of the Steelers from the '70s have been spotted, and Andy Russell, who handed the Chief the game ball after the club's first Super Bowl championship, joined Dan Rooney on stage to present Atkins with a ball on the night of the show's premiere. A woman e-mailed us to say that the best time she'd had in years was going on a "date" with her husband that included some tailgating in a lot across the street from the theater. The children of Art Rooney II, the club's president, told their dad that being at *The Chief* was like getting to know their great-grandfather. Two guys drove in from California. Not California, Pa., the other California. Ernie Accorsi, then the general manager of the New York Giants, flew in expressly to see *The Chief*. The late Myron Cope, seated ringside, was surprised to hear Atkins divert from the script (as



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he did often and to great effect) to give him a big, “Oh, hi Myron!”

Ultimately, there is no escaping the conclusion that while the play works for many, many reasons, it works mostly due to one person, Art Rooney. All of the complex social and cultural elements that defined Pittsburgh in the first part of the 20th century produced a singular metropolitan character, and that city’s greatest most enduring character was Art Rooney. That still undersells him in a way, as no combination of time and place can fully explain his humor, his way, or his humanity. In a place that sometimes has a hard time feeling good about itself, we like to think that maybe the Chief came back to remind us that not only was that OK, but that it was right.



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