Tribute

A look back at the ever zany, never lazy, world of playwright Scott McPherson

January 1, 1997 By Mark Schoofs

Until his play *Marvin's Room* hit the big time, which was just shortly before he died in 1992, Scott McPherson never made more than $10,000 a year. Even more amazing, he didn't care about his poverty, because he always found a way to have a good time. Among the jobs he took to make ends meet was screenwriting for the television show *Bozo the Clown.* Scott would get together with his cowriter and friend Marla, smoke a few joints and giggle a lot. A few hours later, a madcap script would emerge. Their genius, alas, went unappreciated; a memo from a producer criticized their humor as "too dark."

Scott also worked as a clerk at the Chicago Historical Society. He and his buddies would frequently hijack the freight elevator, stop it between floors and earn their $8.00 an hour laughing and gossiping. As one of his many friends put it, Scott McPherson was the kind of hanging out.

None of this was laziness. Anyone who labored over *Marvin's Room* the way Scott did-with each production he revised and tightened the play-couldn't possibly be called lazy. No, his carefree attitude was wisdom: Render unto Caesar only as much as you absolutely have to, then devote the rest of your energies to joy.

This philosophy permeates *Marvin's Room*, Scott's masterpiece, which won critical raves, numerous awards and two nominations for the Pulitzer prize. The play-and now the movie, to be released in 1997, starring Meryl Streep, Leonardo DiCaprio and Diane Keaton-is about how a woman finds joy while caring for her dying father and braving the discover that she herself has terminal cancer. But fear not: *Marvin's Room* is neither lachrymose nor sentimental. It is hilarious.

Inevitably, critics are mesmerized by the play's humor. How, they ask, did the playwright wring so much laughter out of so much pain? And how did he do so without trivializing sickness and death, without being flip?

I, too, marveled at Scott's sense of humor, not only in his art, but also in his life, for he was a close pal. I don't recall many conversations word-for-word (which is a pity, because a lot of great jokes are lost). Instead, I remember the feeling talking with Scott invoked, which almost always was a rich combination of amusement and astonishment. Scott's humor didn't just make me laugh-which of course it did, uproariously-but it also made me see life in a new way. Hence the astonishment.

Scott would make these offbeat one-liners, putting both of us in stitches, and it would be like a camera had suddenly zoomed in or switched angles, and the same everyday experience would suddenly appear lit up and enlivened.

At some point, I read the script for his first play, *Fat Lady.* I alternated between chuckling and cringing as, on the pages before me, the adolescent main character tries to grieve for his dead grandmother. He finally takes the desperate step of burying her in the backyard. And then I completely lost it when I read the horrified reaction of the boy's mother to that burial: "You go outside and dig up your grandmother *this instant*!"

Even now, four years after Scott's death, I laugh out loud at that line. And on every occassion I've recalled that joke, I hear two voices speaking-the voice of the mother, with her own full-bodied personality, and Scott's voice, his humor and mind seeing the world in that crazy, hilarious, but ultimately gentle way.

Gentle. If I had to choose just one adjective to describe Scott's humor, that's the one, for he never laughed at, only with. He understood the boy's need to bury his grandmother, just as he understood the mother's need to have the boy dig her up. Indeed, they spring from the same source, are in fact the same need-the need to do soemthing, anything, to fend against death. Scott understood, felt not sympathy but empathy, and enfolded his characters like friends in his generous, easy compassion. It's one of the things I cherish most about having known Scott: His humor that was more than human, which was, finally, love.

During a visit not long before he died, Scott and I stayed up talking until the wee hours of the morning, like kids at a sleepover. At one point, the conversation turned to his deteriorating health. "I'm losing things so quickly now that I can't even make an inventory of what I still have," he lamented. "But I don't want to settle for marking time, for hollowness. I still want my life to be joyous, and joy is in a person's character. It is not subject to circumstance. That belief has gotten me this far."

Which was quite far indeed. At that point, Scott's lover, Danny Sotomayor, was freshly dead. Scott's own muscular body had withered to a 100-pound skeleton, and God knows what opportunistic infections were circling him like wolves. But as we lay there in the dark, Scott added, "I want to demand more from my spirit."

Later I visited Scott in the hospital. We said a goodbye that we knew was final. But I was so distraught that I left my luggage in his room and had to come back. When I walked in he smiled up from his bed and joked, "You again? I thought you'd finally gone for good."

People say artists live on through their work. But that's wrong. Scott's play is here, but Scott is gone for good.
