

Banana bread. Green tea and banana bread. It's late December, not even Christmas, not even New Year's. Too early for any resolution to be in effect, and Daniel MacIvor is at one with the baking universe.

"S-P-E-L-T," he offers. It's an ingredient in the banana bread. A grain flour. Only a writer would be attracted to a recipe like this. If prose was a whole grain, he'd add it too. Irony, to be sure, but not as much as MacIvor would have spooned in had he been cooking a decade ago. Besides, he believes irony is only good if it is "protecting the heart. If it isn't, it's just something bitter, like Letterman." More emotion now in what MacIvor creates in the kitchen and elsewhere, more compassion, but always, always seasoned with wit.

This baking jag MacIvor is on goes beyond his doctor's wheat-avoidance advice. It's becoming a metaphor for the overall trend his work is taking—collecting, blending and building. Prior to turning 40, a watershed moment in his life, Daniel MacIvor was a deconstructionist. He was reflexively inclined to observe, dissect and pull behaviour apart. He seemed to be possessed by the spirit of the American conceptual artist Jenny Holzer—the best way to understand something is to do violence to the facts. In MacIvor's case, because he has a grand generosity of spirit, the scrutiny was invariably welcomed.

MacIvor is keenly aware of how his work is going to stand up against other writer/directors. Having just seen Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris* on the weekend (not his usual mid-week afternoon avoid-the-often-misguided-group-think-audience-reaction viewing preference), he is captivated by the exchange between George Clooney's character, Chris Kelvin, and his wife, played by Natascha McElhone. She has just woken him up. He turns in shock, since she has been dead for quite a while. They look at each other, and then she says: "Don't blow it." And he says: "OK, you start." And she says: "I already did." "That's great dialogue," proclaims MacIvor. "Great film writing."

This is delightful conversation, but there is more going on here than clever moments of repartee. MacIvor is a man in a state of moving his emotional allegiance from stage to film. Usually, this shift is accompanied by a great deal of giddy chatter about finally having control of a vision, particularly when an actor is directing his first film. Or, when speaking to a director who has just launched himself on the scene from out of nowhere, there is a great deal of wringing of hands about coping with the intensity and luck of it all. In the case of MacIvor—an award-winning veteran of the theatre—control and fame and acceptance have already been won. This is an internal journey.

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DANIEL MACIVOR: "Genius. Writer. Insanely prolific. Incredibly consistent. Constantly evolving. He sets the bar high and never rests on his laurels."

— JEREMY PODESWA

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The suggestion is made that the dynamic of cooking is a novelty because it's all about putting things together. Edibly. "That's good," MacIvor observes, puckishly. A split-second pause and then—theft. "I said that!" Immediately you want to steal his line about him stealing your line. But he gives his lines away. Once a week, he ritually calls Janet McKellen, his best friend who lives in Halifax, and provides one for the chalkboard in her kitchen. This week's edition: "Feelings will get you closer to the truth of who you are than thinking." If life is a series of moments, MacIvor is a series of lines.

With his feature-film directorial debut, *Past Perfect*, released by Mongrel Media in February, and the opening, in April, of Wiebke von Carolsfeld's *Marion Bridge*, for which he wrote the screenplay, again released by Mongrel,

All sorts of indicators trumpet that a metamorphosis is taking place, and there's a *Where's Waldo* glee in spotting them. On this day, MacIvor is just shy of two months of being on vacation. The Weather Channel might as well have reported hell freezing over, because he usually never takes time off. Ever. The beard is another clue. It's gone come January because of a theatre commitment to a character who is definitely not bearded, but at this point it seems to be a visual vacation clock, as in "I've been off for 'this' long." And there's the cooking. It's all there.

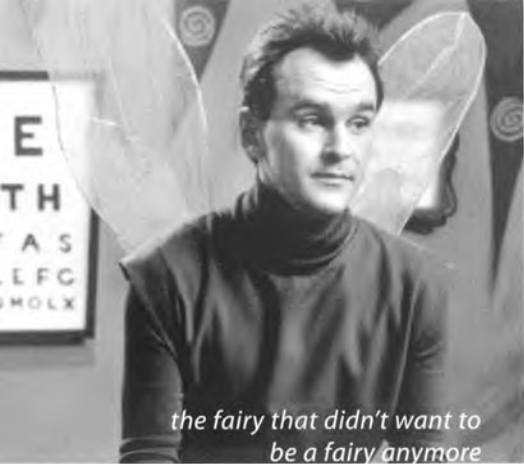
For MacIvor, the bridge between theatre and film is words. There's a folkloric tale about two lovers who live apart, but at certain times, flocks of birds would spread their wings and form a bridge over which the lovers could cross and meet. In the same sense, words grant MacIvor



the increasing l i g h t n e s s of being  
**danielmacivor**

Photo credit: Ted Amsden.

BY CYNTHIA AMSDEN



*the fairy that didn't want to be a fairy anymore*

passage from one side of his creative psyche to the other. Initially, of course, he's a lot less romantic about it, summing it up with, "It's my time, sister, it's my time."

Jeremy Podeswa, who took time out from shooting in Los Angeles to speak to me, added this stream-of-consciousness appraisal of his friend: "Genius. Writer. Insanely prolific. Incredibly consistent, considering how prolific. Constantly evolving, constantly challenging, constantly inventing. Extremely rigorous with himself and with others. Sets the bar very high and never rests on his laurels." And then Podeswa takes his first breath. The two men met during casting sessions for Podeswa's first feature, *Eclipse* (1994). Their respective circles of film and independent theatre overlapped. Podeswa brought MacIvor in on the workshops. "He's a complex person on a personal level, and that complexity is who he is and it's fascinating. I think people are drawn to him."

Camelia Friedberg, producer of *Past Perfect* (part of Halifax-based imX's *Seats 3A and 3C* low-budget six-film series) and also producing partner on Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* and Jeremy Podeswa's *The Five Senses*, knew it was his time as well and she was in the position to open the window of opportunity. His interpretation is characteristically humble. "She took a chance."

That inner complexity, combined with the challenge, is the subversive drive underlying *Past Perfect*. On the surface it's a story about two people, taking place over two days, two years apart. On an overnight flight (which fulfills the *Seats 3A and 3C* requirement that 25 per cent of the film takes place on a plane), a woman (Rebecca Jenkins) on the verge of abandoning her dreams of marriage and children, meets a professor (MacIvor) who is just ending a long-term relationship with someone who didn't want a family. Intercut is the day, two years later, when these two people, no longer strangers, confront the end of their relationship.

Where exactly was the risk? MacIvor walked away from New York with an Obie Award for his two-man play, *In On It*, which he wrote and co-starred with Jim Allodi (*The Uncles* and *Men with Brooms*). And the path from stage to screen has already been walked by David Mamet, who brought with him a signature style, and *American Beauty*'s Sam Mendez. Plus, MacIvor writes only about what he knows, and in the case of *Past Perfect*, it's all about dialogue. And the echoes.

*MacIvor*: "That's what we do.  
That's the way we talk."

*Take One*: "Just like this?"

*MacIvor*: "Just like this."

"I'm really interested in the poetry of the way we speak," he explains. And it shows. The MacIvor Effect. It's in everything he touches. It was in *The Five Senses*, for which he did the story-editing. It's in his stage plays. It's half-rhythm, half-sentence length.

Not quite rhyming couplets, but there's couplet behaviour. Yes, it's coming from natural speech. "I love Mamet, but Mamet doesn't take it into natural speech, which I like. If we could hear ourselves, if we were recorded speaking when we didn't know we were being recorded, I think we'd find there's a real poetry, especially in highly emotional situations. We echo our heads off in arguments."

rebecca jenkins as charlotte, daniel macivor as cecil



"I like the fact that we're watching these two characters and thinking they're just miserable. You make this judgment about them being a bad couple, not being good together and not liking them. Then slowly you come to understand there's something specific going on and you go, "Oh, that's what's going on," and you have to revisit it all again. Then you have to question whether you are being too



rebecca jenkins as theresa, stacy smith as louise and molly parker as agnes

judgmental. That's the kind of engagement that I really like." This is the precise reason MacIvor goes to movies on weekdays. It annoys him how audiences jump, lemming-like, to incorrect conclusions. So, is *Past Perfect* some kind of payback, deliberately jerking the audience around? "Well...", he pauses. "Yes, but lovingly." And while it's true, it's not the whole truth. It's really about the fourth wall.

Filmmaker/writer/actor and friend Don McKellar (*Last Night, Twitch City*), thinks MacIvor hasn't quite got the fourth wall—a theatrical expression that separates the actors on stage from the audience—out of his system. "What we've come to refer to as postmodernism is the questioning of the fourth wall," says MacIvor. "I am the camera. I am the eye. I represent the audience. I choose what the audience will see. I have to move out of my head in order to really do that. It's hard to talk about. It's part of my journey." McKellar, who co-founded the Augusta Company with Tracy Wright and Daniel Brooks, recalls performing at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto years ago and being terrified when he heard MacIvor was going to be in the audience. So much for any protection from the fourth wall. "Alternative theatre meant something quite clear at the time. It was creating a theatrical language and performance in a way that more traditional theatre was neglecting. Daniel is open to new ideas. He's got a restless spirit, I think, and that's great. Whatever the reason is, it works for him," and, pausing with what is now known as

classic McKellar timing, he adds, "He was doing the only other good stuff in town."

His "stuff" is usually in the form of the one-man play. His "stuff" involves the audience—sometimes willingly, but sometimes kicking and screaming. His "stuff," in particular *House*, which first was a play and then a feature film directed by Laurie Lynd, was what blew actor Rebecca Jenkins (*Bye Bye Blues, Black Harbour*) out of the water. "My friends knew his friends in the late 1980s, early 1990s. I had not met him yet, really. I remember the first time I saw the theatrical version of *House*, I simply could not believe that anyone who lived here in Toronto was writing and performing anything as brilliant as that. It was shocking. He was so incredible on stage."

McKellar regards MacIvor's plays as stylized and very theatrical. There is an acknowledgment in his work that he is very much in the room with people, "like at a rock concert," he explains. According to some, around the time of McKellar's television series *Twitch City*, director Bruce McDonald (*Highway 61, Hard Core Logo*) said Daniel MacIvor was the missing link between himself and McKellar, but that quote has never been validated. Confirmation notwithstanding, it was McKellar who suggested that the implication was only alphabetical. McDonald, MacIvor, McKellar. Throw in a Bruce McCulloch (*The Kids in the Hall*) for good measure and you almost have the Highland Mafia. "That explanation is

so Don,” MacIvor says. So was the iconoclastic inspiration to cast MacIvor in the role of Nathan, the man who kills the “King of Kensington” (Al Waxman) with a bag of cat food in the first episode of *Twitch City*. That clip was shown at Waxman’s memorial tribute. What MacIvor wasn’t prepared for was a phone call from a Toronto newspaper after Waxman died. “They wanted a comment. I’m thinking, ‘You’re calling the guy who killed him on television. Whaaaaaaaaaat?’ I didn’t call them back.”

The characterization of stylized theatre is fair enough. It was in the early 1990s that Laurie Lynd was taken to see MacIvor’s play, *Never Swim Alone*. “I’d never heard of him, but loved the play and was riveted by him,” says Lynd. “Daniel came to audition for my short, *RSVP*, but I already knew I wanted him in it. He’s got incredible presence and energy. In *RSVP*, he played a guy whose lover had died, but what was significant was he had long, long scenes with no dialogue.”

No words. Lynd has always wondered if MacIvor’s play *Jump* and then the beginning of *Here Lies Henry*, which both are wordless, had been inspired by his experience on *RSVP*. They were, although MacIvor qualifies it as being not a forebrain response. “*RSVP* helped me to understand how words work, and how they aren’t a necessity.” The collaboration was a productive one. Together, along with producer Karen Lee Hall, the three worked on the Genie-winning short, *The Fairy Who Didn’t Want To Be a Fairy Anymore* (1993), and then on the film adaptation of *House*.

In retrospect, *Twitch City* and *House*, both shot in 1998, made for a pivotal time, the kind of time when life can be divided into before-and-after terms. “Before, I was more interested in being sardonic and cynical, and now I’m more interested in dealing with emotional stuff I think I was afraid of before,” he says, with an apparent delight in being able to sum himself up so well. Many of MacIvor’s colleagues say that the word that comes out of his mouth most often is “whatever,” but he disagrees. He says it’s, “Ah ha!” “I love the look of surprise on his face when something makes him laugh,” says Lynd. “And when he laughs, he makes me laugh. Even though he’s such a dark soul, he has a wicked sense of humour. And he has fearlessness. He’s willing to look at anything and everything with intelligence and wit. He’s brave.”

Sherrie Johnson, who has been MacIvor’s business partner in their production company, da da kamera, since its inception in 1993, regards him as a passionate man. They met at Toronto’s legendary Theatre Passe Muraille where she was working as a publicist. MacIvor was gnashing his teeth about the audience reaction to his play, *Never Swim Alone* (the same play that Lynd saw). He was actively contemplating quitting theatre. Johnson said, if he did, so would she, because without MacIvor there was no hope. It was a proposed career suicide pact that led to a prolific, award-winning production partnership. A decade later, *The London Times* hailed da da kamera as being “currently at the forefront of English-speaking Canada’s dynamic theatre scene.”

Coming from the same family background—Johnson in Chicago and MacIvor in Cape Breton—she says: “We have similar experiences with the loss of our fathers and both of us being Catholic. We have unconditional love and support for what we do. And we both have opinions, but neither of us takes them personally. It’s like we grew up separately until 1993 and since then, we grew up together.” Johnson describes the last 10 years of da da kamera as 85 per cent theatre and 15 per cent film work for MacIvor. This is now going to shift cataclysmically. “Theatre does something to your cells; it takes a lot out of you,” he says. “It’s not like a film where you pour your life into it, put a stamp on it,



daniel macivor in *house*

and it starts doing what it's supposed to do at film festivals. With theatre, you're with it, changing it, working it and you don't let go until you let go and then you move on to do another show."

When he talks about theatre, MacIvor's sentences are long, flowing and run on without running on. But, as soon as he begins to discuss film, the sentences pull up short. "I don't think I have the right to speak about film extensively. I'm a neophyte, with some short films (*Permission, Until I Hear from You*) and one feature (*House*). But I've been in love with film from the beginning. In grades five and six, I made films with my buddies. It was film that introduced me to the larger world, not theatre. That's something I fell into at university because it was doable. I know now that if I am going to continue having a career making art, it has to be in film."

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**"I can't just make a film to make a film.  
There are too many films; we don't need  
another one. My soul needs to make a film."**

— DANIEL MACIVOR

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He is becoming acutely aware of the difference in his canvases. Time. Plays are always in the present. He's familiar with this and can cope with the fourth wall easily. "But film is always in the past. Not a lot of give there. The audience is watching something that has already occurred. And time, the exploration of it, interests me." Translation: time is a puzzle he is having some difficulty putting down. It twists and turns and wraps itself around him. Time has MacIvor's attention.

He took a swing at time in *Past Perfect* and again with *Marion Bridge*. "When I wrote *Marion Bridge*, the central character of Agnes [played by Molly Parker], was the oldest of three sisters [the other two are played by Rebecca Jenkins and Stacy Smith]. I was really adamant about her being a woman where I'm at—40. It was important for that character to be looking back, behind her rather than ahead. When Molly Parker's name came up, I rewrote the part with her as the youngest sister."

Forty. "My life and work were all the same thing, and then I turned 40 and I am trying to make them two separate

things," he says. Sherrie Johnson will testify that he has clear priorities: having a life is most important, spending time with family and friends and "being the best human being he can be." MacIvor gets more cerebral and clever about it. "Immortality belongs to the 20s. It's about never stopping to ask why. Wit is often the domain of the 30s, and acquiring a state of grace is the domain of the 40s." To toy with the title of Lynd's short, he's *The Cerebral Artist Who Doesn't Want To Be Cerebral Anymore*.

Emotion. Returning to the quote attributed to McDonald, MacIvor gives his interpretation: "Bruce is so much from the gut, and Don is so cerebral, and I land somewhere in between those two places." Or, he believes he does now. "I do trust my head and I'm just learning to trust my heart. Shows like *House*, they are largely from the head. To me, the light is the heart and the head is the darkness, but with-

out the darkness, you don't see the light. My darkness is imposed upon me by my thinking. And feeling is movement, and that's light."

Is moving from head to heart coincidental with moving from stage to film, which is about moving from words to gestures? "Not coincidental," he says, shying away from the idea that happenstance could explain his life. It's much more

important for there to be a perceptible harmonic. "All these things work in tandem to help us become the person we want to be or are supposed to be. As I move into film, it's important for me to have a big connection. I can't just make film to make film. There are enough films in the world. There are too many films; we don't need another one. My soul needs to make a film."

MacIvor's soul will be making a new film come spring 2003. *Wilby Wonderful*, again starring Rebecca Jenkins, is a dark comedy about destiny in a town called Wilby. He will have more storylines than before, more characters and more themes. He wants to learn how to juggle. And then there is the script for another film called *Eugene*. And after that, maybe even a musical with the *Fairy/House* team of Laurie Lynd and Karen Lee Hall.

The cooking. The beard. The scripts. The heart. "Don't blow it." "OK, you start." "I already did."

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