

An Interview with ELAN'S Guy Rex Rodgers

Interview by Barry McCullough

Back in the spring, the Morrin Centre's executive director, Barry McCullough, sat down virtually over a beer with Guy Rex Rodgers, the outgoing executive director of the English Language Arts Network (ELAN), to talk about his work with ELAN, how he made it to Montreal from Australia, and what his future holds. Here is an edited version of that conversation.

Barry McCullough: *I know you were born in Canada and then went to Australia. Tell us a little bit about your path from Canada to Australia and back again.*

Guy Rex Rodgers: I was a very shy child and as I was getting to the end of elementary school, I decided that I was not going to be shy anymore, that I wanted to be outgoing and gregarious. But the pecking order had been established. And people didn't want me to be anything more than I was. I realized, in a naive way—I hadn't yet studied pecking order psychology—that, I'm going to have hard time redeveloping my personality with the same gang of people that I'm going to go off to high school with. So, I started asking my parents, "Can we move somewhere?" Then a series of remarkable things happened that summer. When I was an infant, my parents had bought a large piece of land in Burnaby, which had become quite

valuable for sub-dividers. Somebody made them a tempting offer on the piece of land and they accepted. My father had always wanted to go to Australia for some weird reason. So out of the blue, my parents sold the piece of land and the house, and they bought tickets to Australia. And I thought, "My prayers have been answered. There is a God!"

I got to go to Australia and completely reinvent myself. It was extraordinary.

BM: *That's an incredible opportunity that most kids don't get. Where in Australia did you settle?*

GR: We started off in Sydney, but my parents wanted something more exotic. They got a chance to move out into rural New South Wales. Not quite the outback, but out on the dry western tablelands. I spent my last three years of high school there. My parents loved it. My brothers loved it. I hated it.

BM: *And so from there you went off to university? Where and what did you study?*

GR: Sydney was the capital city, so that's where I went. I was always interested in larger-than-life questions. I wanted to study science, because I thought that science could explain a lot of things, like the origins of the universe, the origins of consciousness.



Guy Rex Rodgers with his family. Burnaby, B.C., 1959

So I went off to study science, and in first-year science all they want to do is teach formulas about mathematics. Nobody wanted to talk philosophy. The subject choices did not even touch on questions that interested me. So, I found some friends at university who were interested in metaphysical and religious issues, and then I had a crisis of faith with science in that I had a feeling that it couldn't answer the questions I was most interested in. The answers lay elsewhere.

After my first year of university, I went home to the country. And I was on a different planet than everybody else since everyone there was still interested in drinking beer and hanging out. And I was really asking these questions about the meaning of life. One night I couldn't sleep. I had a car because I used to drive back and forth from Sydney to the country, and I decided just to go for a drive just to clear my head. I got in the car, drove for a few miles and saw these two hitchhikers in the shade of a gum tree. They both had really long hair and dreadlocks. I stopped and said, "Where are you going?" And they said, "Perth." That was on the other side of the country. I said, "I've got about five bucks in my pocket, enough to take you to the next town, buy some gas, and go back."

But we got to talking and I took them all the way to Perth. We arrived there just before Christmas. And all of their family was there. And they were puzzled, as if a taxi driver invited himself to stay for the holidays. They asked, "What's with this guy?" I had no money to buy any gifts. I didn't know anybody. I felt completely out of place, but I didn't want to go back to New South Wales. So, I drove south along the Indian Ocean coast until I found a totally isolated beach. I decided I was going to sit on the beach until I discovered if there is or isn't a meaning to life. The family in Perth had given me some provisions to make the trip back to New South Wales: canned food, dried biscuits, etc. I had enough food for about a week, and some tobacco and a few beers. I figured I could survive on this remote beach for about a week.

I had a burlap sack for a makeshift tent. I didn't have a sleeping bag, but it was summer, so it was plenty warm. I just sat on the beach, watching the tide come in, watching the sun go up, watching the tide go out, watching the

moon go up for days. And at the end of the six days, I had a phenomenal religious experience. Now whether it was induced by the environment, the situation, I don't know, but I had this profound religious experience that there actually is a God, that there actually is a meaning to life, that there actually is a purpose. And this life is a great opportunity, if you know what to do with it. And so that was the beginning of sending my life in a whole different direction, one that ultimately ended up bringing me back to Canada, that ultimately led to me working in community development, inspired by questions about how communities work together to create something that brings out the best in human beings.

BM: *How did you make your way back to Canada and to working in the arts?*

GR: By way of Germany. Berlin at the time seemed like a really cool place. It was counterculture. It was all the things that I was interested in. Since I was born in Canada, I planned travel to Germany via a visit to Canada. I flew into Vancouver. My mother has eight siblings, so I had a lot of relatives to visit. On the very first day that I was in Vancouver, there was an ad in the *Vancouver Sun* for a brand new playwriting course at the National Theatre School of Canada, which was situated in Montreal. Because I had done music and poetry, the idea of writing using music, poetry, and musical theater seemed like an interesting transition towards some sort of a literary adventure. As I was visiting my relatives in Vancouver, Calgary, Regina, etc., I worked on a portable typewriter and wrote a play. This was pre-laptop days, of course. I zipped across to Montreal for the deadline, and I came up to the office of the theatre school on Saint-Denis Street. I presented my play, and they said, "You never thought of just putting a stamp on it?" Nobody hand delivers their script!

There were hundreds of people applying. The school was only going to only see a shortlist of a few people and they wanted to know where they could reach me should I be among the chosen few. I didn't have an address. I didn't have a phone. I didn't have anything stable. So, I looked through their schedule. They were going to be in Manitoba three or four weeks later. I had skipped over Manitoba in my rush to meet the deadline and I

had a lot of relatives there. I gave the school five phone numbers in Manitoba and said, "If you call me during this period, we should be able to connect."

I went back to Manitoba to visit my grandmother and some of my aunts and uncles, and lo and behold, I got a phone call from the National Theatre School wanting to interview me. I met them in Winnipeg. We had a very good conversation and they liked the play. Although, oddly enough, they were fascinated by the "voice" I had adopted for the characters. The attention-grabbing voice was simply the way they talk in Australia. It was nothing particularly fresh, but it was enough to get their attention. And they told me that my writing reminded them of Chekhov, which I thought was pretty interesting considering I was writing about a hardscrabble outback environment, not the genteel café society of Moscow.

This was April 1980, and, since they had other people to meet still, they asked where they could reach me over the summer. I had no idea where I would be, so they asked me to call them at the end of June. I continued on my trip, spent my summer in Europe, and phoned them from Dublin on the appointed date. Remember, in those days you had to put money into the public phones. I had about five pounds worth of coins. The person on the other end said, "We don't know the answer to that question. We'll go find someone who does." So, I was sitting there, feeding money into the machine until they finally found someone who said, "Yes, Mr. Rodgers, you've been accepted to the National Theatre School." I was down to my last two shilling coin.

And that's how I ended up in Montreal.



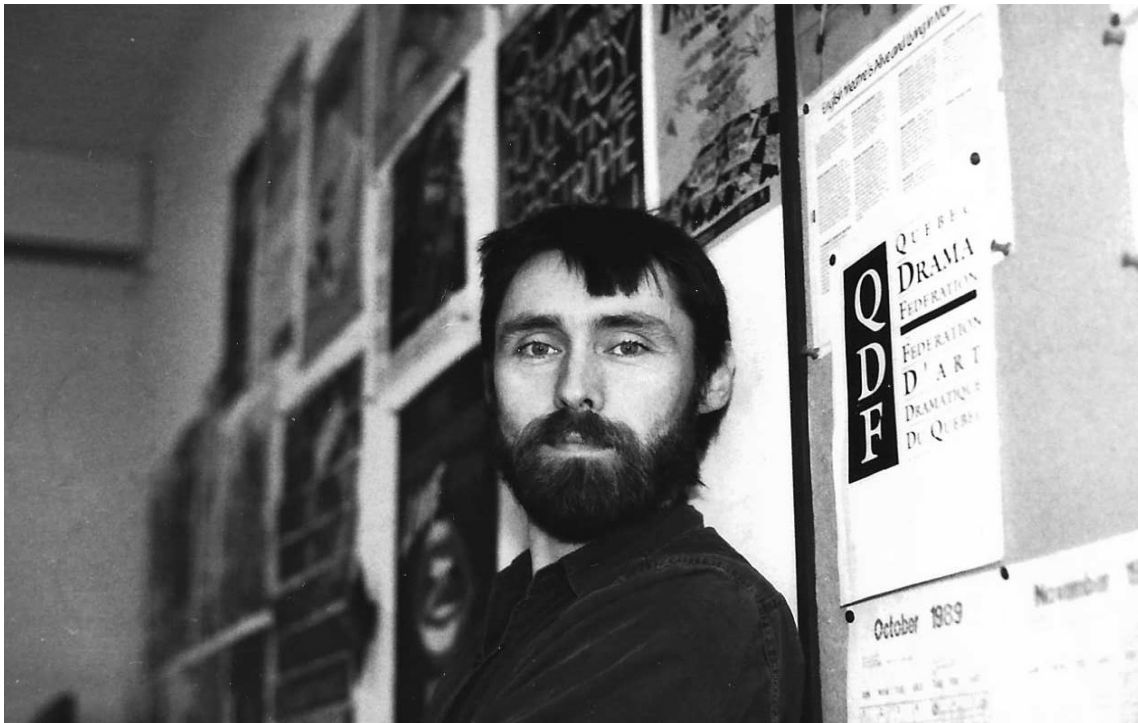
Guy Rex Rodgers, Montreal, 1980

BM: *You have been involved with so many arts and culture groups over the past 40 years, including being at the helm of ELAN for nearly 17 years. What would you say is the thing you're proudest of during that time?*

GR: The thing that I'm proudest of is creating a community. And more than just the artistic community, ELAN went to great lengths to build regional connections with organizations like the Morrin Centre. I made great personal efforts to connect with all of the regional associations that are part of the English-speaking community. Building those links doesn't happen naturally, but by creating an environment where information can flow and people can trust one another, positive things happen. That's significant. And that goes right back to my initial vision of why I wanted to do this work.

It was not about the arts, *per se*. The arts is something that is personally important to me, but had I been interested in social work, the focus could have just as easily have been that. I have worked at building this community and also knocking down some of the walls between the old anglophone and francophone solitudes, undoing some of the myths.

The *Waves of Change* project that I'm currently working on now is all about identity and belonging. ELAN is a very large, demanding organization, and I really didn't have the time during my last year as executive director to personally direct the project, but it was important to me to do it because of the stories people had to tell. We hit upon the idea of analyzing waves of immigration, because clearly, if your family has been here for generations or centuries, you have a different sense of belonging than



Guy Rex Rodgers, Executive Director, Quebec Drama Federation, 1989

if you've been here a decade or two, or a shorter period of time. We stratified the English-speaking community by waves of immigration, and then broke it down into where those waves came from: Asia, South America, Europe, Africa. It gets down to a level of granularity that no one's ever done before. It's not just statistics; it's *real* people telling *real* stories about their lives. This is turning into my post-ELAN project, and it's becoming almost a full-time job. We're finishing off the six videos, but then there's a feature-length documentary to create. There are many places where we can screen episodes in order to engage a public discussion about them. There will also be versions with French subtitles so we can stimulate a dialogue between the two communities.

What I'm proudest of, though, is engaging in a meaningful dialogue between people, a dialogue that has actually changed the environment over the years. Not so much because of specific projects, although I could point to specific activities as building blocks, but it's more of an energy.

BM: *Like an overall philosophy?*

GR: Yes. And that all ties back to the mystical experience that I had on the Indian Ocean in Western Australia:

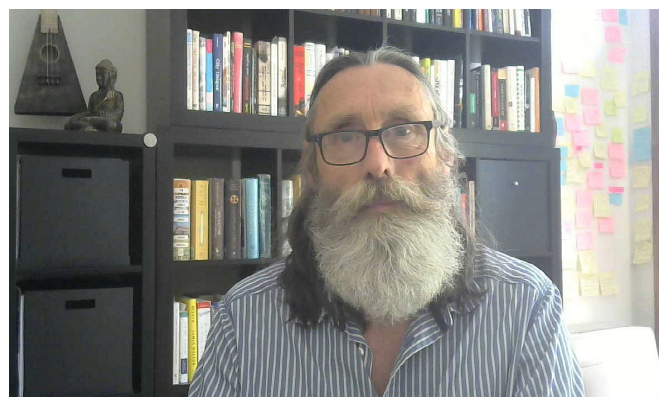
"Yes, there is a meaning to life. Life is valuable, it is important, and good things can come of it." And there have been times in my life when things have happened that were so extraordinary that I thought, "If there was a God, an intervening God, who is going to do good things in people's lives, that's exactly what he would do." Now, there are other possible explanations, but it is fact that good things can happen, and that the world can be a better place by people trusting one another and by working together and collaborating. If you look at my library back here, there's a whole shelf on human behavior: the old theories about conflict, survival of the fittest, a bunch of recent research on why cooperation actually is much more a part of successful evolution than competition and why we are a successful species because of our capacity to cooperate. And wherever we cooperate, that is where we are the most successful. So that's really what I have tried to do in my life—to put these ideas into practice and experiment with them.

BM: *Even though you're stepping down as executive director, you'll continue working on projects for ELAN on projects such as Waves of Change. How many episodes will there be in the project?*

GR: We made five episodes based on waves of



Waves of Change Group



Interview over Zoom with Guy Rex Rodgers

immigration, but if there's one thing I've learned over the years, it is that the Quebec's English-speaking community is not just Montreal. So, the sixth episode is about people living in the regions. It's really about: What does it mean to be an anglo living outside Montreal? We have people in it from West Quebec, the Eastern Townships, the Gaspé, the Magdalen Islands, Baie-Comeau, and the Lower North Shore. It's a really diverse and interesting group. Since we were doing this in a time of Covid, very few older people were willing to come into the studio, so we ended up getting mostly young people. Most of them left home because they had to for studies, but would go back if they could, although economically it's difficult. So, the sixth episode is entirely about the regional identity of being an anglo Quebecker. I think it is going to be an eye opener for a lot of people.

BM: *We often hear in Quebec City, "Oh, je savais pas qu'il y avait des anglos à Québec!"*

GR: Exactly! One of the people interviewed said that whenever she goes for a job interview in Montreal, people ask: "Well, if you're from that region, why are you English? As if there couldn't be any anglos living out there."

BM: *The Waves of Change episodes I watched were really captivating and the cinematography is very nice. It's simple, but effective. The music sets the stage and I look forward to watching the others.*

GR: They're a testimony to the power of authentic storytelling. We're not glitizing it up. I didn't layer on an editorial voice. The only editorial content is that

I chose the questions and the answers we used. We started with about two hours of interviews per group and then distilled it down to 15–20 minutes. So, there's a matter of, "What do you choose?" The storyline could have gone in many different directions. But essentially filmmaking is about finding the right people, asking them stimulating questions, and then weaving together the most interesting responses.



The [Waves of Change](https://wavesofchangequebec.ca/) videos were purchased by MATv and were broadcast on the network starting on September 21.

A French subtitled version will also be aired this winter.

The *Waves of Change* videos can be seen online at:

<https://wavesofchangequebec.ca/>

