



Walt's Playhouse

All the world's a stage—a pub more so. For this playwright, turning his grandparents' place into a theater was just a logical leap.

BY JOSEPH M. PAPRZYCKI



AS A KID, I SPENT MOST SATURDAYS IN A CAMDEN tavern, perched on a barstool, mingling with shipbuilders. They knocked back boilermakers as I drank Crescent orange soda and ate Slim Jims.

My grandparents, Walt and Sue Evanuk, owned the bar—called Walt's Café, on the corner of Fourth and Jasper streets—for almost 40 years. I grew up two miles away on Mt. Ephraim Avenue. My younger siblings, Matthew and Christine, and our cousins would meet at Walt's. We'd pop outside to play with other kids, but I preferred hanging out with Whitey, the train engineer, and the other regulars. They'd tell me about the docks and I'd tell them about geography class.

Grandpop got sick when I was nine. He died soon after. Ever since they left Russia, Grandpop had tended bar and Grandmom had cooked lunch. After he died, she sold Walt's, and in 1969, my father, Bronislaw (Bruno), moved us to Oaklyn, a Camden suburb. Grandmom stayed in the city until the mid-1980s.

I always wrote when I was a kid. But college, marriage, work, and parenthood led to a day job in sales management. Many times I started a novel about Walt's, but each draft wound up in the trash. Then, in 1994, I saw *Angels in America* on Broadway. It changed my life. I realized that what I had inside me was a play. I finished it in just two weeks. I always knew the title would be *Last Rites*; it represents death and life. The play had many readings and an off-off-Broadway staging in 1999.

By then we had started the South Camden Theatre Company with the help of Monsignor Michael Doyle, pastor of Sacred Heart Church, on Ferry Avenue, not far from Walt's. He let us put on plays in the basement. The company grew, thanks to Helene Pierson from Heart of Camden, a nonprofit group that has been rebuilding the Waterfront south section, and to a generous angel, Pepe Piperno, who grew up in the neighborhood.

In time it became clear we needed a permanent home. I had one location in mind. We explained to the city that Walt's had been the genesis for *Last Rites*, and we promised to remain in the neighborhood. In 2006, the city forgave an old tax lien against a long-dead owner and let us turn Walt's into a 99-seat theater.

Unfortunately, the building was in such disrepair that it had to come down. So five months ago, on Thursday, June 14, Monsignor Doyle sat at the controls of a backhoe and sent the first piece of Walt's Café crashing into the street, releasing the ghosts of long-dead shipbuilders in a cloud of dust.

If those spirits return a year from now, they will see what's become of their old haunt. The new Waterfront South Theatre will christen its new home with a revival of *Last Rites*. Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams will replace Jim Beam and Jack Daniel's on the menu.

In my heart, the new building will always be Walt's, and I hope the theatre becomes as important to residents as Walt's is to me. No matter what, the snack bar will stock orange soda and Slim Jims. ■

Joe Paprzycki has written 40 plays and four screenplays. He teaches screenwriting at LaSalle University in Philadelphia.

MAKE IT A DOUBLE:
The characters in these 70-year-old photos of Walt's Café could strut the stage that has replaced it.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF JOE PAPRZYCKI