

**First Three Chapters of**  
***Rebel Without A Clue – A Way-Off Broadway Memoir***  
**By Steve Hrehovcik**

**Chapter 1**

**Damn You, Rodgers and Hammerstein?**

“... You got to have a dream,  
 If you don't have a dream,  
 How you gonna have a dream come true?”  
 From *Lyrics “Happy Talk” in South Pacific*  
*Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II*

In 1954 when I was a sophomore in high school in Linden, New Jersey, I joined the dramatic club. The acting bug bit me early. That year, we voted to see the long-running Broadway hit *South Pacific*. This would be my very first Broadway show, so it was all very exciting.

*South Pacific* had been breaking theater records with awards and captivating audiences since it opened in 1949. I knew most of the songs. “Some Enchanted Evening,” “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair,” “Bali Ha’i,” “A Cockeyed Optimist” and “A Wonderful Guy” were all popular hits on the radio since the show opened. As a teenager dealing with coming-of-age issues, the one song I recalled with special meaning was “There Is Nothin’ Like A Dame.”

While the short bus ride into the city was fun, I failed to realize the full impact of that journey. The magic began the moment I entered the theater. Unlike some of the other students, all I could afford at the time was a seat in the back row of the highest balcony. As I climbed the steep stairs, settled into my seat and looked down to the stage so far below, I wondered how I could make sense of anything.

That worry disappeared when the house lights dimmed. A spotlight shown on the conductor in the orchestra pit, and the audience applauded. This was all new to me, so I joined in with proper enthusiasm. The conductor bowed in appreciation, turned to the orchestra, waved his baton and the overture began.

From that moment, hearing the highlights of the well-known Rodgers and Hammerstein songs, I was transported to a mystical place that affected me through the years.

When the curtain rose, my “suspension of disbelief” took me to an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. World War II was raging and the actors became military personnel, nurses and South Sea Islanders dealing with their personal and actual war. My imagination transformed theater sets into real barracks, hospital rooms, the officers’ club and island locations.

I must admit I was not prepared to appreciate the heart of the love story that dealt with racial prejudice and gave such power to the play. The full meaning of the song “You’ve Got To Be

Carefully Taught,” that portrays how bigotry passes from one generation to the next, escaped my awareness at the time.

I grew up in a section of Linden that was filled with immigrants from several European countries. My parents, my brother and my sister were born in what was then Czechoslovakia. My family migrated to Canada, where I was born, and then to the United States. All my playmates were first generation, hyphenated Americans: Hungarian-Americans, Italian-Americans, Irish-Americans, Scandinavian-Americans, among others. It would take many years before I came face-to-face with the ugliness of racial prejudice.

As the play unfolded, the music, characters, production numbers, costumes, settings, lightings and all the other theatrical trappings enveloped me in a way I had never experienced before. I was hooked.

After seeing *South Pacific* on the Broadway stage I discovered the allure of the theater would keep tugging at my thoughts and dreams.

The power of the show was so strong I went to college to study theater. After graduating, I pursued theater work in earnest and my resume included a variety of professional jobs in regional theaters and Off-Broadway.

Could a starring role on Broadway be far away?

As it turned out, that career dream was very far away.

So, was *South Pacific* a curse or blessing? Do I damn Rodgers and Hammerstein or thank them? Did my ambition for a theater career help or hinder me? Perhaps a little of both.

If I didn't take that high school drama department visit to Broadway, I may have been spared the agony of some painful catastrophes. But I would have missed the bliss of the pursuit which had its own rewards. It kept alive the idea that the dream might come true and inspired other dreams that did come true.

## Chapter 2

### Pinball – The Roadmap of My Life

“Will you walk into my parlor,  
said the Spider to the Fly;  
'Tis the prettiest little parlor  
that ever you did spy.”

*Mary Howitt*

When I look back I think of how often I let chance become my guiding force. Not unlike a pinball bouncing off the rubber cushions and ricocheting around the pinball machine. While bouncing around, three significant events turned out to be very fortunate for me. I wish I could say I had the insight to plan them.

The first event occurred in my senior year of high school. My good friend Tom asked me, “What are your plans for college?”

“College?” I wondered. Oh, yeah, that might be a good idea. What should I do about it? Tom said, “You need to send in an application.”

“Send an application,” said I. “How do you do that?” Tom saw I was at a loss, so he helped me fill out the application to the college he attended, Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Then he made sure I mailed it.

My grades were good enough, so I got admitted. At Rutgers I stumbled around as I adjusted to classes, campus life and even got accepted into Theta Chi fraternity. My fraternity brothers were an eclectic group of academics, jocks, party types, even some interested in theater. My close encounter with their varied backgrounds helped broaden my view of college experiences as well as give me some idea about life after college. We also had a few traditional frat socials, including a Roman style toga party.

I loved my French class and did well my first semester. How ironic I failed my first English class.

This had a sobering effect on me. I didn't have a problem with grammar or language. But I realized I just was not prepared for the analytical thought that my professor expected of me in my writing exercises. I retook the class in the summer and aced it. I must have learned something.

In my junior year my parents moved to Florida for health reasons, so I transferred to the University of Miami in Coral Gables. Since I was required to take Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) at Rutgers, I continued the advanced training at Miami. This critical life-changing event happened quite by accident. During orientation week at Miami I passed tables set up for new students to get an idea of activities on campus. One of the tables was manned by ROTC cadets, so out of curiosity I stopped to chat.

Amazed I had already completed half of the requirements to receive a commission in the Army, a cadet said, “You'd be a fool not to sign up for the rest of the course.” Not wanting to appear the fool, I signed up.

While joining the Army was the farthest idea in my head, I hoped I could get into the USO group that put on shows for our fighting soldiers. Someone had to do it. With my interest in theater and performing, why not me?

As an ROTC student I received an immediate benefit. The Army paid us a small allotment while we maintained our grades. Being strapped for cash became an ongoing ritual with me, so this seemed like a good short-term solution. I also got to use some surplus Army furniture which I needed for the off-campus apartment I rented.

With my ROTC courses completed, upon graduation, the Army sent me to Fort Benning, Georgia for basic military training. It didn't take me long to learn the Army life was not for me.

Staying optimistic and having gone so far, I received a commission as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Ordnance Corps.

Next, the Army transferred me to Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland for officer's training. After the training I received there, the Army expected me to become an ordnance “expert” on weapons systems, ammunition, as well as procurement and maintenance of all wheeled and motored vehicles. With as much enthusiasm as I could muster up, I prepared to fulfil my two-year obligation of active duty.

The third event occurred when I finished this training. To find out where I would complete my active duty, I met with an assignment officer.

“Lieutenant Hrehovcik reporting as ordered,” I gave the smartest salute I thought the moment deserved, which the captain returned as if brushing away a fly.

“Sit down, lieutenant, we’re pretty informal here.” The captain sat behind his report-laden desk as he waved me to the upright wooden chair opposite him. The office had a cramped, grey feel which seemed appropriate from all the war movies I had seen.

I settled into the chair eager to learn the location of my first assignment. This would be a major moment in the military career I had drifted into. I felt a little out of place. Not just here looking into the stern face of the captain. The whole idea of serving in the Army still seemed like a bit of a surprise. But I figured, if the United States Army believed I was ready to receive my first assignment, I’d go along with the idea.

The captain opened a folder that I scanned upside down. I saw my picture and several sheets of paper which must have documented my progress so far. He glanced at another folder. Reading upside down I managed to make out names of military posts around the world.

When other new officers from my unit came out of the captain’s office, most had smiles and said they got plum assignments - Germany, England, even a few welcomed stateside locations like California and Florida.

I always wanted to visit Paris, so wouldn’t it work out great if Uncle Sam sent me to deal with ordnance in some post in France. My imagination kicked into high gear. We weren’t at war. It could be fun.

The captain looked up from my folder. I’m not sure, but I think he felt a little uneasy. “Would you mind if I sent you to South Korea?”

That’s just how he said it. Like he asked my permission. This was new to me. The Army asking someone for permission. But that’s the exact way he presented this new idea to me.

South Korea. I only had the vaguest clue where South Korea was located. Somewhere in the Far East on the other side of the world. Of course, I remembered the Korean War and all the misery it caused. But who thought of that now?

In a flash, a thousand ideas raced through my mind. So long Paris. So long Europe. So long cushy stateside posts. I made an effort to think of the upside. I’d probably never get a chance to go to the Far East on my own. Maybe it could be an adventure. My thoughts came to a stop. The captain waited.

South Korea. Why not? I made a decision. “Sure.” I managed a smile.

The captain looked surprised and a bit relieved. I think he had a quota to fill and this might be the toughest one on his list.

So off I went to South Korea. There remained a Demarcation Military Zone at the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel we had to protect. It divided South Korea from North Korea. It’s still there.

Lucky for me we weren’t at war at the time. I’m sure I would have been shot. No doubt by my own troops. The Army expects you to do more than show up. You have to be a soldier. This may have been my best acting performance.

I got a good indication Army life did not fit into my future during a Christmas party in the officers' club near the end of my tour in South Korea in 1962. Food and drinks created a relaxed atmosphere. I listened as officers shared "war stories" of their assignments around the world. Pretty soon the group broke into an energetic version of the "Caisson's Song," the Army's theme song. It was then, as they got into the spirit of the song I realized how much these officers loved what they were doing. I could tell from the intensity of their singing, they felt a great pride in the important job they carried out and the honorable tradition they revered. Their singing came from their deepest, personal feelings, from their hearts.

I felt sad and a little envious that I could not become a part of their world. My heart belonged in a different place. I knew deep down I could never share their love of the Army. I knew I didn't belong. All I could do was do my best until my discharge date. When it came I could not have been happier. Yet, I also knew I left behind a group of men I admired and felt honored to have them as a part of my life.

When my two years of active duty ended and a recruitment officer asked me if I wanted to pursue a military career, it took only a split second to say, "No, sir."

An excellent decision for both me and the Army.

I wish I could say I made the decisions to go to college, sign up for the ROTC course and take a military assignment in South Korea were a result of conscious goal setting and realistic future planning. Instead, it had all the folly and senselessness of a spinning pinball in its aimless trek hoping to rack up some points. Pinball became a metaphor of my life. All too often I'd get mesmerized by the flashing lights and distracted by the deafening sound effects. Sometimes I'd get a decent score, but all too often the game ended up: "TILT."

### Chapter 3

#### Lulla-Goodbye of Broadway

"... the dream is the theater where the dreamer is at once scene, actor, prompter, stage manager, author, audience, and critic."

*Carl Jung*

The span of the Hudson River between New Jersey and New York City measures about a mile and a half. One short distance for a man, one giant chasm for the clueless faint of heart.

Growing up in New Jersey, I had dreams of becoming an actor. My older brother Mike asked me, "Why don't you just cross the river and audition for a part in a play on Broadway?" My brother had lots of helpful advice. He could be very annoying.

With a degree in theater arts from the University of Miami and a couple of theater jobs on my resume, you'd think a visit to Broadway would seem like a logical approach to fulfill my dream.

But crossing the Hudson River in the 1960s to find an acting job never occurred to me. Perhaps, deep in my heart I never thought I had the talent to compete with the likes of Dick Van Dyke, Robert Preston, Richard Burton and other experienced actors performing at the time.

So instead, after I got out of the Army in 1962, I traveled to Chicago to audition for a series of regional theaters that held joint tryouts once a year. It gave actors an opportunity to present their talents to at least twenty different theaters from across the country.

The odds seemed good. No doubt at least one theater company producer would recognize my comic and dramatic skills.

I felt lucky that two did. With hopes high, I drove the 530 miles from Chicago to Memphis, Tennessee to the theater that seemed most promising. On the way to Memphis I crossed the Mississippi River, just to say I did it.

During the interview the producer asked, "So, Steve, what's your area of expertise?"

Eager to impress him, I said, "I just love the theater. I can do anything you need."

This turned out to be the wrong answer. He wanted specialists, like a sound designer, lighting technician or stage manager. My enthusiasm didn't impress him.

So back to Chicago I trekked. I visited another theater that showed interest at my audition. There I met with the same unhappy result. I started to get the clue that theater would be a rough mistress.

Devastated, I continued to make the rounds of theaters in the area. After a lot of searching I found a small theater northeast of Chicago, in Arlington Heights. A millionaire who made his fortune with a drug store chain had a passion for the theater. He converted the back room of a bowling alley into an intimate three-quarter stage theater. That's where the stage is positioned against one wall and the audience surrounds three sides.

It had about fifty seats, with no offstage or area for scenery. He expected the audience to use its imagination a lot. Not the theater image I envisioned, but he needed a stage manager. Ben, his current stage manager, decided to move on, giving short notice.

While it wasn't acting, it was the THEATER. This time my interview may have been one of my best performances. The producer asked, "Have you ever stage-managed before?"

"Sure," I said, and rattled off several backstage technical terms I learned over the years, like, "spotlight gels," "proscenium arch," and "green room."

Either I convinced him I could do the job or he was desperate. Either way, to my great delight he hired me.

At last I had arrived in a professional company and got paid - not much - but enough to rent a room in a private home and eat on a regular schedule.

The theater company consisted of a small group of talented actors and me. Not only did I serve as stage manager, I found props, recorded sound, designed sets and lighting and got coffee during breaks. I loved it - at first.

But something didn't seem right. I yearned for more. So I quit, even though I had no other job pending.

How many times had I heard my brother Mike tell me: “Never quit a job unless you have a better one waiting for you.” Great advice, which I seldom heeded. I got good at quitting promising jobs without a clue of what would happen next.

Once again, I went auditioning at other theaters around Chicago. When no one recognized my brilliance and money got short, I decided I needed some kind of job - any job. I broadened my search and visited an employment agency. The interviewer asked me, “Can you write? Spiegel Catalog needs a copywriter.”

Recalling college term papers and student plays I’d written, I said, “Write, sure I can write.” Another great performance.

Maybe he needed to fill his allotment for the month, so he arranged an interview. When I arrived at Spiegel I took a test to create an ad for a child’s toy. Some instinct told me to write the word “Fun” in the headline. It seemed like a logical way to describe a way to play with this child’s toy.

To this day I believe that my use of that magic word - “Fun” - got me the copywriting job. While elated, I admit I was a bit surprised. At the time I had no clue I had a latent talent to write advertising copy.

I don’t remember dressing with any particular flair, what with my limited financial resources, but for reasons known only to Spiegel’s inner circle, they placed me in the men’s fashion department. How hard could it be? You want cuffs on these pants?

It seemed to work. To describe men’s clothing I discovered two adjectives - “smart” and “handsome” - that I slipped into my copy whenever no one was looking. I’d write: Wear this smart jacket. You’ll look handsome. Or: Wear this handsome jacket. You’ll look smart. Or: Wear this jacket. You’ll look smart and handsome.

Spiegel had a lot to offer as a place to work. But, restless again and itching to get back into the theater, I quit right after they offered me a raise. Ignoring my brother Mike’s advice was getting to be a habit.

I decided if I couldn’t find a job in professional theater, I’d go back to school. Maybe I’d find a teaching job in a college theater department.

Somewhere I heard that Catholic University in Washington, D.C. had a top-notch theater department. I applied and got accepted. Perhaps my years as an altar boy hanging around the holy water helped.

I didn’t have any money for tuition, but my career as a professional stage manager - even for six months - got me a working scholarship. My lack of funds also qualified me for a student loan. At the time this came as a godsend. But like so many graduates discovered, the loan became a brutal drain to repay afterward.

Not only did I meet the challenge of a strict collegiate discipline, I met a remarkable lady, Carol Dispenza. We shared a number of classes. Like me, she loved the theater, but had a much more practical view of her prospects. Carol’s goal from the start was to teach theater at a private school or college. She already had a teacher’s certificate from her undergraduate studies and already taught in several schools including dependents of Army soldiers in Germany.

We started out with a workable arrangement. She had books, which I couldn't afford, and I had a car. I borrowed her books and she let me chauffeur her and me to classes and back.

One thing led to another, then another, and before you knew it love blossomed. Soon after that we decided to elope. We drove ninety miles from Washington, D.C. to Elkton, Maryland and got married. We could have just crossed the border into Silver Spring, Maryland, but Elkton, made famous for elopements, seemed more romantic.

Both our families reacted in shock and anger. It took a while for Carol's family to accept me, sort of. My traditional parents took longer to get used to me married to Carol. I heard some gossip that said, "It'll be over in two years."

With a wife and soon the birth of a new baby, our son Joshua, to support, it started to sink in that the theater may not hold the best prospects to bring up a family.

Ever eager to point out the error of my ways, my brother Mike, back in New Jersey, again offered advice: "Come back to Jersey, I can help you get a decent job."

For once I took his advice, because with it came that magic word - a job. Mike had a career as a plastic products designer and was about to start on a new project. He needed support designers to fill out his team. Mike knew I had some design abilities. I got them by osmosis working construction with my father. It took another great performance to demonstrate I knew how to handle a T-square and triangle.

The job offered a decent pay and seemed like a promising career move, unless, of course, you had a silly notion that your destiny depended on the theater. The job was located in the Bronx. The fact that the Bronx is not far from Broadway did not escape my attention. Our work commute took us across that chasm-wide Hudson River. How ironic.

We found a rental in Lodi, then Rutherford, New Jersey. Except for attending a few shows on Broadway, I stifled my lust for the theater while the design job continued.

A short time later, while walking in New York City's theater district, I bumped into Ben, the guy I had replaced as a stage manager back in the Arlington Heights bowling alley theater. What luck I thought. Although, when I told Carol, she didn't think it so lucky.

Ben had come to New York seeking his fortune in the theater and told me about an Off-Broadway show that served as a showcase for promising talent. They needed crew members and actors for a small part.

My heart skipped a beat. Could this be my entrance to the big-time? Could this be some cosmic force at work? Could I be nuts to even consider such a long shot?

Even though the project leader of the plastic company offered me a permanent position as a designer, guess what I did? I thanked the project leader and told him I had to jump at this unexpected opportunity.

Carol did not share my excitement. Especially when I told her the job offered no pay, just potential. Carol said something to the effect, "Are you crazy?" I refused to see her skepticism and barreled ahead. Needless to say, in the tradition of theater lore, the lead of the show did not break his foot on opening night, requiring me to take his place and save the show. When the curtain came down at the end of the short run, it also came down on my brief Off-Broadway career.

This zigzag pattern between good-paying jobs and non-paying theater prospects repeated itself an embarrassing number of times. You'd think after a few disappointments and disasters I'd get a clue.

How Carol put up with all these calamities is still a mystery to me. To be fair, somehow I must have managed enough encouraging moments along the way - along with two more children, our son Noah and daughter Gillian.

It seems appropriate to describe my *modus operandi* in theatrical terms. In 1971, a revival of the musical "No, No, Nanette" became an instant hit. Borrowing from that show's title to describe the gambles I ventured, you could say I took dangerous risks like walking a tightrope with "No, No, Net!"