

Style Plus

Party of Two

By THOMAS M. BOYD
Special to The Washington Post

A year ago today my daughter turned 30, and on the night before Thanksgiving, we had dinner together at Tosca, an Italian restaurant on F Street fittingly named after the co-founder's daughter.

That marked the 25th straight year that Brooke and I have set aside an evening to share dinner. Just us. She always picks the restaurant, and I always pick up the tab.

It is a birthday tradition we started when she was 5 years old. That first time, Brooke and her mother spent an hour primping and when I arrived home from work, there she was, ready to go out to dinner with her dad. Her long blond hair was pulled into a pigtail and tied with a pink bow. She wore a pink smocked dress with lace around the waist, white stockings and black Mary Janes. We walked a few blocks down the brick sidewalks of Old Town Alexandria, hand in hand. Her first restaurant selection: the McDonald's on King Street. We each had a Big Mac and fries, followed by a stop at Baskin-Robbins for ice cream.

Other early choices of eateries wouldn't make the Michelin Guide. For me, the toughest stint was Brooke's Chuck E. Cheese phase, which lasted a painful three years. She loved it, while I tired of trying to hear her above the din of mechanized cartoon characters and screaming swarms of high-octane kids competing for free games and pizza. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

As Brooke entered her teens, the restaurants improved and our dinner conversation often became more serious. We were the only English speakers in a Chinatown restaurant one night as Brooke confided to me the stress she felt from the escalating pressures of adolescence. On another evening, we

A Quarter Century Of Birthday Dinners With My Daughter

sat in a secluded corner of the Capital Grille on Pennsylvania Avenue as she outlined her hopes for college and her fears about the intimidating prospect of college entrance exams.

After she left home, our dinners had to be scheduled more carefully, and they tended to drift closer to Thanksgiving vacation. But one year we did manage to share shrimp and grits at Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill, N.C. She told me there how thrilled and fortunate she felt that she was to be a student at the University of North Carolina. She had found friends there who she felt genuinely appreciated her. That close-knit group of young women she met at UNC were to join her teenage chums as lifelong friends.

On her 22nd birthday, her mother joined us and about 40 strangers who squeezed into an intimate restaurant named Bucca dell'Orafo, tucked into an old cellar just next to the Arno River in Florence. Brooke was studying abroad that fall, and after our meal, the two brothers who owned Bucca came out of the kitchen as if on cue and led the entire room, including two young Chinese women sitting next to us, in singing "Happy Birthday" in broken English.

The fall after Brooke graduated from North Carolina, I spoke at a conference in the Marriott at the Twin Towers in Manhattan. Brooke had moved to New York, where she shared a one-bedroom apartment on the Upper East Side with her college roommate and two other college friends. The evening before my talk, she proudly showed me around

the law offices of Sidley Austin Brown & Wood, where she worked as a legal assistant. She included in her tour her cubbyhole of an office on the 57th floor of Tower 1. That night we dined at Windows on the World, sipping champagne cocktails and overlooking the glittering expanse of her new adult life.

A year later, Brooke told me in a phone call about a meeting to be held at work the next morning, Sept. 11, 2001. When the first hijacked plane hit the World Trade Center building just a few floors above her office, her mother and I feared the worst and tried to prepare ourselves. But Brooke was late to work that morning, in a train stopped below the towers. She and others forced open the doors, walked back along the tracks and climbed up toward a morning sky filled with smoke and falling debris. We didn't know that; cellphone networks were down, and it wasn't until three hours later that our telephone rang. Brooke was on the other end of the line, and it was as though the clouds had suddenly parted. Hearing her voice that terrible day was the happiest moment of my life.

In the years since, Brooke has embraced New York City, and we have continued our tradition of an annual dinner together. Though I feel very much the same now as I did on the day she was born in 1977, each morning when I look in the mirror, I am reminded that I am very different. But when I look at my daughter, a quarter-century of dinners melt away and merge into a mental collage of 25 yearly snapshots of her life. And instantly, that little girl's laugh and incandescent smile seem absorbed into the beautiful woman she has become, seemingly overnight.

We both still look forward to that quiet November evening together, when we can talk about what is important and unimportant in our lives. This year, Brooke will pick the restaurant, and I'll pick up the memories.



That Little Voice: My Conscience, My Kid

By CARY CAMPBELL UMHAU
Special to The Washington Post

"Your worms will be delayed two to three weeks, we are sorry to inform you," read the e-mail that jostled me out of my midlife complacency. My college-age daughter immediately came to mind as a potential source, as she had been trying to convince me that worm composting would not only help to save the environment but would be fun besides.

The worms arrived (all 1,000 of them) in time for my daughter to get them acclimated in the composting box she had thoughtfully bought for us before she set off to help clear a new hiking trail in Siberia. Always one to back up her convictions with action, she was off to Ulan-Ude, and I was the proud guardian of 997 worms (three were lost in the grass when the box was opened).

She left me with detailed instructions about adding each day's kitchen waste (though no onion skins) to the corners of the box and working it in with a handy trowel, and she promised to be back before it was time for the regular task of harvesting. Harvesting involves dumping the worms out on a tarp and watching them scramble from the sunlight, thus separating them from mounds of castings, or worm manure, that I could use for rich, beautiful mulch for my garden. Never mind that I don't actually have a garden; it died while I was raising children.

I truly want to do my part to save the world. But I'm a middle-aged woman in the throes of laundry, hormonal changes and rediscovering myself as my nest empties; sometimes it's enough just to get through the day.

Enter the clash of cultures — mine and my children's. Products of the liberal, socially conscious education we have proudly paid for, their generation came home from elementary school berating parents for smoking. They participated in "Clean the Stream" events, competing for the biggest haul (my daughter still revels in the monster-truck tire she pulled out of Rock Creek). They were raised on community service requirements and are almost jaded when talking about summer jaunts to do Katrina relief or to save the rain forest in Quito. My genera-

tion believes change is imperative, but we were raised on canned food, gas-guzzling vacations and the joy of disposable everything. We're learning, but we are slow to adapt.

One of my children presented me with a handy Pocket Seafood Selector from Oceans Alive that would help me determine which eco-friendly fish I should buy in restaurants or at the grocery store. I truly want to buy fish that are not farmed, that are not caught by methods that kill seabirds, and that are not endangered — all while being sure to get enough omega-3s. Yet I would need a PhD to decipher the chart on sustainability, and without my reading glasses, I can't handle the fine print.

And I want to buy organic and local, but when I have to choose one over the other, I just don't know where to put my money. If I buy organic from Alice Waters's California sources, I am practically dumping jet fuel on the heartland; if I buy local — we may eat only kohlrabi all summer. I've become a connoisseur of kohlrabi recipes in an attempt to not waste any of what my CSA (community-supported agriculture) farmer provides in my weekly food basket. I almost yearn for the canned Le Sueur peas of my childhood; all I had to do was find the can opener.

Yet my thoughtful children jostle me out of my complacency, challenge me to care more, to do more. Tomorrow after I take my calcium tablet, start a load of laundry and go to the gym, I'm going to revise my midlife to-do list. It will include driving my Mini downtown to lobby my senator on universal health care, working on my Spanish vocabulary

so I can speak more meaningfully to newly arrived immigrants, checking out some media sources with which I don't already agree, shipping my unused bicycle to Guatemala, deciding which microfinance company I like best, making sure I take my children to Busboys and Poets and not the shopping mall, eating in neighborhoods that get less disposable income spent in them than Georgetown does and changing all my light bulbs to compact fluorescents.

It might sound like too much, but it's not nearly enough.

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Mariinsky Orchestra: Ballet Music Minus the Dance

MUSIC, From Page C1

The program was at once heavily Russian and determinedly innocuous, both artistically and politically. The political part is worth noting, since Gergiev, who has led the orchestra for 20 years, took a determined pro-Russian stance in the conflict with Georgia this summer: He performed with the orchestra on the steps of the bombed-out parliament building of South Ossetia — he is himself of Ossetian heritage — in memory of those who had died in the five-day conflict, while Georgian villages literally burned in the background.

On Friday, the Russianness was restricted to the playing style — thick and rich, and a little nonchalant — and the nationality of the featured composer, Prokofiev. The only message to be read in the programming of the "Cinderella" Suite No. 3, Op. 9, and Act 3 of "Romeo and Juliet" is that New York's Lincoln Center is in the midst of a Prokofiev festival, and the orchestra came to Washington between appearances there. As often happens, Washington got a rather defanged encapsulation of the New York programs, which included more challenging pieces such as the "Scythian" Suite and excerpts from the seldom-played ballet "Le Pas d'Acier." By contrast, Friday's program yielded another, inadvertent message: This much ballet music without the Mariinsky dancers, however idiomatically played, is an awful lot of ballet music.

Leavening the mix was Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto: It, too, had a Russian accent, the heavy flow of the orchestra supporting the firework fingers of the soloist, Alexei Volodin, a frequent Gergiev collaborator. The piano, which



Mariinsky conductor Valery Gergiev.

appeared to be an American Steinway, produced a jarring metallic tinkle in the top notes, though Volodin did his best to turn it into something more malleable. The result was enjoyable, though more as a showcase for the players than for Beethoven.

Gergiev projects a sense of spontaneity, even informality, especially in GMU's shallow, modern concert hall, standing among his musicians without benefit of podium or baton. Certainly "Cinderella" kept making unexpected turns, the lacquer-rich strings suddenly going bright and glassy; the percussion offering, in cartoonlike slow motion, the ticking of the threatening clock. In "Romeo and Juliet," the playing seasawed between mastery and routine. The winds' entrance with the love theme at one point sounded like a yawn, and the concertmaster, far from embodying the romantic ideals about Russian violinists, played peremptorily in a couple of his solos. Offering a whole act of this piece, rather than the more familiar concert excerpts, is a mixed blessing; you get the dramatic integrity of the work but also fewer highlights and slower pacing. Even Gergiev's right hand was subdued, by the end, into something approaching conservatism.

'Frost/Nixon': New Nuances in the Famed Faceoff

THEATER, From Page C1

TV personality David Frost, whose television sit-down with him in spring 1977 sensationally and unexpectedly shattered the crust of Nixon's vanity and denial.

It's a nifty you-are-there kind of evening, smartly staged by Michael Grandage, that takes us into the head space occupied by the politically exiled Nixon, who was anxious for a way back after the traumas of Watergate that culminated with his 1974 resignation. The psyche of Frost — regarded at the time as a glib lightweight and, in his own way, as desperate as Nixon for some new measure of respectability — is similarly laid bare.

It comes across as an easy-to-digest Anatomy of an Interview. Morgan, the screenwriter of the Helen Mirren biopic "The Queen," directs much of his labors to pumping up the drama of the encounter, in ways intended to make the stakes and negotiations seem like those attending a superpower summit. Sometimes this becomes overkill. The secondary characters in both men's camps who address us directly throughout the show again and again underline the historic nature of the event — not to mention the potential media coup.

Even the former president buys into the conceit of may-the-better-man-win. As Stacy Keach's Nixon forecasts the outcome for Alan Cox's Frost: "The limelight can only shine on one of us. For the other, it will be the wilderness."



Alan Cox, left, draws out Frost's assertiveness, while Stacy Keach shows Nixon's shrewdness.

Lost in the play's cat-and-mouse construct is that the series of interviews Frost was to conduct with Nixon about his time in the White House was more a game of gotcha. No doubt this Darwinian plot makes the story more palatable, particularly for those who didn't live through the Nixon years. (The play originated in London.) More to the point, Morgan's focused narrative provides a vigorous lens through which to examine two men engaged in a sensitive, public pas-de-deux, redolent of politics, personality and commerce.

The script also yields up two humdinger parts. In London and on Broadway, the role of Frost was played by Michael Sheen and Nixon by Frank Langella. They reprise their roles in the movie version, directed by Ron Howard, set to open next month. Sheen was grand on the stage, and Langella even grander — for his Tony-winning performance, he sculpted a Nixon of exquisite mythic disturbance, a man of unsettled emotions and unsettling flaws.

In a more just world, Keach, an actor of accomplishment, would not have to contend with the mystique of another man's work. But in the Eisenhower, you sense an absence of some magic; the Nixon of the physically smaller Keach is more compressed in every sense. In the crucial scene in which an intoxicated Nixon attempts in a late-night call to seal a bond with the stunned Frost, what once felt like a tragic purging now seems a mere letting off of steam.

Still, vocally, Keach has down Nixon's sonorous arpeggio. And perhaps he's truer to a notion of Tricky Dick; a modulating of Nixonian temperament gives the character's shrewdness more effective camouflage. In providing a Frost with his own hidden resources, Cox is an able successor to Sheen. The matching of this pair of actors makes it seem now as if the interviews were on a more level playing field, and therefore a fairer fight.

When the tide turns in the sessions, and an emboldened Frost finally compels Nixon to stop filibustering and answer for his actions, there is a more compelling uptick in this version of Frost's assertiveness, of how he achieved his triumphant moment. You understand a little more clearly how he got the better of his subject.

The look of "Frost/Nixon" has not been altered for the road company. (Some members of the Broadway cast, such as Stephen Rowe, are retained, too.) The dominant feature of Christopher Oram's set remains a giant video screen, on which we see close-ups of Nixon's features as Frost, at last, bores in. With the voices of Frost's assistants still echoing in your head, urging Frost to go for the kill, you see Keach's features on the screen, the camera moving in on him ever more tightly.

In Keach's worried gaze, the thought is conveyed to a theatergoer of some great lumbering beast of the jungle, conscious of his own sorry end. It is Nixon, of course, who's consigned to the wilderness at the conclusion of the stimulating "Frost/Nixon." No matter how many backs are patted or champagne corks popped, sending him to such a desolate place offers little cause for celebration.

Frost/Nixon, by Peter Morgan. Directed by Michael Grandage. Sets and costumes, Christopher Oram; lighting, Neil Austin; composer and sound designer, Adam Cork; video, Jon Driscoll; associate director, Seth Sklar-Heym. With Bob Ari, Meghan Andrews, Noel Velez, Antony Hagopian, Roxanna Hope. About 1 hour 50 minutes. Through Nov. 30 at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater. Call 202-467-4600 or visit www.kennedy-center.org.