

Rodney Robbins Fun Autobiography

Contact Rodney Robbins at Rodney@MyNewPlay.com or by calling 828-461-1306.

Rodney's Cool Theater Stories

You've done plays for years. Do you have any fun theater stories?

I wrote "House of Many Rooms" in 20 years, 3 months. The basic story, characters and setting had been in my head for 20 long years, but I didn't know how to make the story work. I kept wondering, "Who would ever watch a play set in one room?" I've seen farces and sitcoms set in one room, but this story was a drama, maybe even a mystery. Then, I watched a local production of Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap." Here was one of the longest running, and most successful, plays of all time—and it all takes place in one room! When I saw how Lady Agatha kept the action moving with all those doors and characters and comings and goings, I understood how to make my play work. Three months later, "House of Many Rooms" was done. I'm proud of it.

My musical "Big Feet, Big Love" came about from re-imagining the life of a departed friend. In college, I knew a young man who was a Larger-Than-Life kind of guy—good looking and charming but troubled. After he died, a funny thought popped into my head: "He would have been better off to live his life as a porn star, rather than to die in a senseless car accident." Suddenly, and very clearly, I saw a Life That Was. As I wrote the play, I often thought of lost friends, missed opportunities and how, sometimes, doing the totally wrong thing is exactly right.

As a sometimes actor, I do have trouble memorizing my lines. In my first role, as the 6th grade lead in "The Little Drummer Boy," I hid my lines in my tambourine. Now, I just write the lines and let someone else memorize them.

Did you ever dream you were walking around naked? I went through that in real life while playing the lead in "The Robber Bride Groom." My college theater director got it into his head that I would look "dashing" in tights. I was very happy when he finally came to his senses during dress rehearsal. "Hey, buddy! My eyes are up here."

I have so many stories in my head; I have to keep a list. There are a dozen musicals from wild comedies to heart warming dramas, a grand Shakespearian tragedy (to be written in rhyme), a series of dinner theater mysteries, plus a thrilling science fiction trilogy written for the stage and more.

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College Daze

What are some of the crazy things you did as a college student?

My first assignment in my first ever college class was to meet some friends in a bar, share a few laughs, and then write about what happened. Like the pompous young fool I was, I thought this was ridiculous. I was thinking, “What kind of a class is this anyway?” By the end of the *next* semester, I finally realized how very much I had learned. Having something to write about and having to actually write it down on paper improved my writing and thinking skills. So, going out drinking with your friends really can make you a better student.

At Greenfield Community College, I was a Recreation Leadership major. Our motto was, “Let’s park and recreate!” What do you think was my first class in my chosen major? Yup. Basket weaving! Actually, it was an arts and crafts class, and we just happened to do basket weaving that first day, but still ...

Ten years later, I attended Lenoir-Rhyne University and made my own major. I chose Music Video Production at LRU primarily because they would let me use the student cameras and editing equipment any time I wanted. I shot an award winning student film in a cemetery—at night—with a Russian supermodel (well, maybe not a supermodel, but she was Russian and very good looking) and the owner of an outlaw biker bar. We had no problems in the cemetery, but almost got robbed when we were shooting in the school parking lot.

World Traveler?

Tell us, Rodney, have you traveled much?

I’ve traveled mostly in the United States. As a child, I lived in Walpole, Massachusetts: Home of the Walpole State Prison and Bird Park. The prison is now politely called the Massachusetts Correctional Institute at Cedar Junction. It’s a supermax facility and once housed Albert DeSalvo—the Boston Strangler—till he was found stabbed to death under mysterious circumstances. Francis William Bird Park is a much cheerier place with a charming rhododendron pathway, ball fields and a fountain. As a child, my mom would take me and my brother to Bird Park after church, and I’d do my best to jump in the fountain and ruin my cute-little-boy suit.

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Then my parents moved us to Phoenix, Arizona because my father and I had asthma. In Phoenix, I used to climb on Camelback Mountain and the super cool red rock formation called Hole-in-the-Rock. I also sang in the Phoenix Boy's Choir, but didn't go with them when they toured Europe. Now, I would recognize my boy's choir "burn out," as an attack of Periodic Paralysis. (I have a rare muscle disorder that leaves me weak or paralyzed at times.) Every summer, the schools in Phoenix would send out a warning against keeping alligators in backyard pools.

Then the family moved back to Massachusetts, to the Pioneer Valley (where, as a high school student, Barack Obama was secretly initiated into the Global Progressive Cabal). I won first *and* third for my singing in our school version of the Gong Show. I also did plays, sang in chorus and madrigals and played electric bass in the jazz band. At one point, I was told by my English teacher that my senior thesis (about karate) was, I quote, "... virtually *unreadable*." Then my Drama teacher nicely accused me of plagiarism because my paper (on modern dance) was almost unbelievably *well* written. Go figure.

Finally, my new wife and I moved to North Carolina where airplanes were invented at Kill Devil Hills, where a whole colony of people disappeared from Roanoke Island, the Cherokee Nation was forced to march the Trail of Tears and God invented NASCAR racing.

Living with Chronic Illness

I understand you have some medical problems. How's your health?

I live with three chronic illnesses: Classic Migraines (with aura), Celiac Disease and Periodic Paralysis. The Migraine headaches are the worst because they really hurt, they slam my moods around and they can't be stopped—not really. Celiac Disease is an "allergy" to wheat, barley and rye grains. It is the easiest to manage—I just have to check every single thing that goes into my mouth. It's a real pain when I'm driving along, starving hungry, trying to find a "safe" place to eat. Periodic Paralysis is a rare muscle disorder where the muscle cells run out of electrical energy and freeze up. I have attacks of weakness *every single day*. I have *near paralysis* several times a week, and every month or two, I'll really screw up (or it will be cold, or I'll do too much, or the moon will be full on a Tuesday in Rio) and I'll end up almost completely paralyzed. Nasty. Long lasting. Troublesome. Damned inconvenient.

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I've only had a few bad attacks in *public*. Once from a dentist visit where I had to call my wife out of work to come get me because I couldn't possibly drive home. I had another attack after a busy day at work pushed me into an attack outside a Laundromat. That was embarrassing. I literally couldn't make it from my car to the building and collapsed outside on the sidewalk. The scariest attack was while riding my motorcycle through the Blue Ridge Mountains. We'd had a busy morning and the attack just snuck up on me. With nowhere to pull over on the narrow, curvy, mountain road, I suddenly lost 90% of my muscle strength. We coasted along on fumes till I found a store, pulled in and slid off the bike.

I've been told I was crazy, lazy, faking, had a "conversion disorder" or had a "borderline personality"—this from doctors who missed all three chronic illnesses. I understand that Periodic Paralysis is rare and Celiac Disease has vague symptoms, but two dozen doctors and therapists heard my story and literally could not recognize the symptoms of a migraine headache. Quacks! Doctors in hospitals kill more than 100,000 people every year due to "medical misadventure." In my experience, most doctors don't listen; make massive leaps in logic based on little or no actual evidence, and couldn't diagnose their way out of a cardboard refrigerator box. What's wrong with the medical establishment in America? Hubris.

Motorcycles

What can you tell me about your passion for motorcycles?

At age 9, in a backyard in Arizona, I crashed a friend's brother's mini-bike. He was scared. At age 17, in Massachusetts, I crashed a different friend's street bike. He was mad. A couple years later, I crashed my own street bike. I was hurt. Years later, coming back from a long ride with my mom on the back on my motorcycle, I slipped in the new gravel in my driveway and we both took a tumble. We were both fine, but my mom made hay from that incident for three months—bless her heart!

My coldest motorcycle ride was 20-degrees. My hottest motorcycle ride was over 100-degrees with 90-percent humidity. I've owned everything from a giant dirt bike, to a cruiser, to a standard, to a full dress touring bike. Right now, I'm riding a Suzuki Burgman 650cc scooter. That giant scooter is perfect for commuting, running errands and weekend trips for two. Next bike? Probably a Goldwing or BMW, but maybe the 2300cc Triumph Rocket III Touring bike.

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Yes, I have had one speeding ticket, and it was on my 750cc Honda motorcycle. I had just put a new exhaust pipe on the Honda and wanted to see if it gave the bike any more power. It didn't. But I did learn that Massachusetts State Troupers have absolutely no sense of humor.

Rodney's Rules

You've been kicking around longer than dirt. What have you learned?

- Never exit for gas, unless you see a gas sign.
- If your life sucks, it's usually because you suck.
- You can never have too many guitars.
- Sing it like you mean it.
- Some things will never work—never, Ever, *EVER!*
- It helps to look as far down the road as you can see.
- There is a difference between pain and suffering.
- First you dream it up, and then you write it down.
- Every morning, ask yourself, “What can I do *today?*” This is especially important when you live with three chronic illnesses.
- The only thing better than good food, good friends and a good night's sleep is the love of a good woman—although, making love to a bad woman is pretty close.