



AN AWARD-WINNING PLAYWRIGHT NAVIGATES FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

An Evening with Annabel Soutar

By: Anne Maggisano

In May 2017, the Women of Burgundy were honoured to host an evening with Annabel Soutar. An award-winning Canadian playwright in documentary theater, Annabel navigated the co-management of her family's investment portfolio and philanthropic efforts following her father's passing in 2016. The highlights of the discussion follow.

Anne Maggisano: Your father was very well respected in the investment community. Did you ever think that you would follow in his footsteps?

Annabel Soutar: I was very inspired by my father. I remember him coming home from work or a business trip where he had visited companies

all over Canada or the United States. What I remember most was how excited he was to tell us about the people he had met, the ideas that they were talking about, and the big investment opportunities that he saw. I learned from my dad that investing was not about financials; it was about people and ideas, and I loved that zest for life. I was quite good at math, I loved economics and I was proud of my father, and though I could see myself heading towards a career like my father's, that was not where my fate was heading.

AM: *You chose to pursue a career in theatre. What did your parents think of your choice?*

AS: They were surprised and deeply concerned. When I was on campus at Princeton University in the early '90s, the investment banks arrived on campus with their booths and said to us, "*We don't care what you studied. You have a place on Wall Street.*" Many of my friends ended up there. In retrospect, this was kind of scary and made me wonder, what is the expertise that they are looking for on Wall Street?

It was at Princeton University that I met some theatre artists who made me realize that theatre was not just a space for performance, but a space for dialogue. When I finished Princeton, I felt quite deeply in my heart that I wanted to embark on a theatre career, but I was too afraid to announce that right away. Instead, I went to Asia and took a teaching job in Singapore. It was a way to get enough distance from my parents to make my own decision. I knew if I came back to Montreal and got into conversation with them, I might lose my nerve.

There was a lot of tension between my parents and me at that time. My father's credo has always been: "Do what you love and don't let anyone tell you otherwise." He could not really contradict himself and yet I felt the anxiety of: "What is going to be our daughter's financial future and, really, does she have any talent? Does she have what it takes? And if she is going to

go into the entertainment business, why not at least something like film, where she actually has a hope of making some money?" It was an interesting time in my mid-20s, that conversation.

AM: *Can you trace your beliefs about money to what you learned from your parents?*

AS: My father is of Scottish descent and my mother is Estonian, two nationalities known for their frugality, and frugal they were! I should add that my mom grew up in post-war Britain, and was a refugee from Estonia. Given their backgrounds

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and experiences, my parents had a solid relationship and they had a similar outlook when it came to money.

My father tried to talk to us about the dangers of credit, about how easy it is to spend money and how hard it is to make it. But we were living in an age of indulgence and excess. In the '80s, leverage and the use of credit was a way to win big. Because I went into a field where I didn't often have a lot of income, I relied on my credit cards a lot, especially at the beginning. My dad didn't know the half of it and sometimes I was too proud to go to my parents. I didn't want to ask them for help, so I would say,

"Oh, I'll just put this on the credit card."

My father bought, never leased, any of his cars. His mortgages were all paid off. My dad thought it was folly to only pay the minimum on your credit card. I was very impressed by their example, but I can't say that I learned the lesson deeply. Though I do believe it is the right way to save, sometimes when you take a risk by borrowing money, you can also win. I took some risks and I'm still alive.

My father was deeply generous with his time and his money, and spent little on himself. The only thing he may have spent excessive amounts of money on was golf, because he loved it so much. He only had one car, an Acura, and he always wore the same pair of chinos. He made money so that he could give it away, or so that he could provide for his family. He just loved to provide for his family and for his community.

AM: *How much of what you learned about investing was by osmosis, just through conversations with your dad?*

AS: So much, and yet now that he is no longer with us, I wish I had listened even more because there was so much wisdom there.

My dad was a value investor. When he and Pembroke went in to hold a company, it was for the long term, making it a big decision. My dad used to always talk about spending time with the people who were building the companies, how important it was to trust them and know they had a clear idea of what they were getting into, and feel that there was sound financial wisdom behind the business.

Each company was a story. It wasn't just an idea; it was a narrative. I think there is some connection there between what I do and what he did. But, really, his principles of investing were that you had to be patient and you don't follow the herd. You often run against the herd and you stay in for the long haul. You have confidence that even though there are difficult cycles, staying fully invested was important.

FEATURE

I realize now how much courage that took because the markets present a very volatile environment. It takes a stable temperament to ride out the ups and downs. Growing up, I didn't realize what it took for him to come home after a difficult day in the stock market and still be present as a father. That's very impressive.

AM: Did you know that you were going to be the executor on your dad's estate?

AS: I did, primarily because I have two brothers who are older than me, but both live outside of Canada. We often spoke about the fact that we needed someone on the ground to look after things. My father was suffering from multiple myeloma, a cancer of the white blood cell, for eight years before he passed away. At a certain point,

who loved life so much and was clinging to the possibility that he could somehow keep going.

In the last year-and-a-half of his life, he started to introduce me to the people who were his close advisors including tax lawyers and accountants, and started to explain some of the practical matters about his assets. That's when I got hit by the jargon for the first time and realized that even though I had grown up speaking about the investment business with my father, the mechanics were quite foreign to me and quite difficult to understand as concepts.

He put me in touch with people and we started having conversations with them, conversations that my dad started with that terrifying phrase: "*When I die.*" I knew I

their relationship. She was in charge of the household, and though she knew a lot about the investment business, she didn't manage the financials in the family. This meant that she and I both were on a steep learning curve.

I didn't see myself as receiving an inheritance. I was being asked to become one of the next stewards of some valuable assets. I kept asking myself, "How can I avoid making huge mistakes? How can I ensure that I leave the next generation in a position to be good stewards?"

I sit here today, not an expert, but as someone still finding my footing and learning something every day.

One thing that has been easy about it, is that most of the assets are in pooled

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he had to travel a lot to the United States for his medical treatment. I was his power of attorney for the last few years before he passed away and I understood that my mother would need some help to manage things. Although my brother in Hong Kong works in the investment business, and actually has much more expertise and experience than I do, because I was the only Canadian resident of the three children, I was the one to take care of things. I was prepared, not in terms of my knowledge, but in terms of knowing that I would be the person.

AM: Did your dad do anything specifically to help you prepare for this role?

AS: Only towards the end were we able to have that difficult conversation because it was about his mortality. He was someone

was supposed to listen very carefully, but as soon as he said those words, my brain went numb because all I was thinking about was him dying. I think I spent a lot of time in those meetings just nodding, taking notes, but not really absorbing as much as I would have liked.

AM: After your dad passed away, was it just you and your mom in the meetings with the financial advisors?

AS: No. My brothers, James and Adam, who live in Hong Kong and New York respectively, were very involved in those discussions from a distance, however, often my mother and I had to handle things on the ground on our own.

My mother was grieving. Although she lived with my father her whole life, there was a strict division of labour in

funds run by people whom my father really trusted. Therefore, I don't feel like there is any huge demand to trade stocks every day and really watch the stock market. Instead, I got in touch with the people who my father trusted and tried to understand their investment philosophy, as well as their long-term vision. What I learned in speaking to them is that their philosophy is very similar to my father's; stay fully invested, don't worry too much about tomorrow, be patient. If you want to build, you can't just spend that money, you've got to keep that nest egg intact.

My father also made a lot of philanthropic commitments and now it is my responsibility, with my mother and my brothers, to honour and to manage those commitments because he made it clear that we were to give back



Original painting by Joanne Tod, "The Assembly," co-written by Annabel Soutar

to the community. More important than being the beneficiaries of his hard work, we were to figure out how to keep those assets growing so that we could keep giving.

AM: *When you think through those initial meetings and your experience over the past year, is there anything you wish your father had done differently to prepare you?*

AS: I think it's very hard to learn anything in the abstract. It's not enough for someone to tell you what you should do or think about. You have to learn by doing. Sometimes I wish I had benefited from more direct experience, such as a pool of funds that I was responsible for where I had to make the decisions. Without that concrete experience, it was hard to absorb some of the concepts and apply them.

It was interesting that even though one of my brothers went into the investment business, my dad never encouraged any of us to come and work with him. In fact, just the opposite. He didn't believe that it was good to have family members in the business, so I never had any direct experience in the family business.

I think perhaps he didn't want to mix the professional with the personal. When we spent weekends down at Brome Lake in Quebec, we did chores around the house and talked about environmental issues around the lake. We didn't discuss the family finances until much later on. At times it was hard to understand the jargon and the notions of investing, to be thrown into the deep end.

AM: *How do you see life unfolding for you as a steward of your family's*

financial assets?

AS: It's like having a second job keeping track of assets. It's a lot of reading and a lot of meeting with people. Like my father, I believe this is a people business and you have to understand the human stories behind the businesses to invest wisely. Making some of the financial decisions has increased my appreciation for what it takes to invest wisely.

Sometimes I've been tempted to ask, why should I keep working in the theatre? I really should just take this on and get more involved, but then I realize how much fun it is to have these two things happening at the same time. I hope some of the things that I am learning by being thrown into this position are going to help me gain a new perspective, hopefully run a tighter ship in theatre and be more careful with money.

FEATURE

I am in the very early stages still and I haven't quite absorbed everything, but I'm not alone in this. I have two brothers who are very involved, and my mother, who is effectively in charge. So, I'm spending a lot more time speaking to my family members. We were all living our own busy lives before, and now we are on conference calls from New York, Hong Kong, and Montreal almost every week learning as a family how to manage this together.

AM: *What does life look like for you today?*

AS: It's not as much fun without my father here. The world has changed so much politically since his passing. He was such a humble leader and such a contrast to how we are all feeling about our leaders today. Whenever I was scared about the world, I'd go talk to my dad because he had such a great moral compass and a reassuring deep sense of optimism. No matter what was happening in the world, he would find the silver lining, not in a naïve way, but he would give perspective. Despite his health issues, he kept that optimism right until the end.

Today I look at the world and wish I could ask him where he would find his confidence. It would be in the future; future generations and new technology. I also ask myself, given his example, how should I now be that steward and that rock for other people, just as he was. I am trying to feel optimistic. I am trying to feel grounded.

I have an amazing husband who had an amazing relationship with my father. He gives me that stability. Although I'm concerned about where the world is heading, I also see opportunities for renewal. When someone close to you passes away, your immediate instinct is to hold onto the past and cling to what you know. It is also an opportunity for new growth to happen. It's important to embrace the sense of unknown and find optimism going forward. I think that is where I am.

In a play I wrote recently called *The Watershed*, the father figure is quite an

important character. At the end, we have this conversation where I say to him, "I'm not as optimistic as you are," and he says, "Yeah, you never have been." He recognized that I had this darker view and a sense of doubt, but we could laugh about that. I've decided since my father passed away that

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even if I have to force it sometimes, I am going to be more optimistic. I want that for my children, because as a parent it is important for the next generation to see the hope and look forward, without leaving the past behind. They should face the future with zest and hope.

AM: *What is it you are trying to say as a woman, as a playwright, as a theatre director?*

AS: I am a documentary playwright and I work very much like a journalist or a documentary filmmaker. I choose a real-life topic where I see an interesting, meaty conflict. I interview people and I use that material from those interviews verbatim to construct the text of a play. The play that's performed in front of you is a collection of real people, who spoke those real words, living out a drama that the audience can connect deeply to because it is a drama that reflects what is happening in life. What I am looking for is not to deliver a message about that material, but to offer the audience an opportunity to arrive at their own conclusions about what is being portrayed and the chance to have a conversation with me about that conflict, what our values are, what's at stake in the conflicts I put up on the stage.

The stories have mostly been about Canada. I am very interested in having a conversation with a Canadian audience about Canadian contemporary issues and allowing the audience to engage with the artist, but also with the people that they are sitting with in the room. Often after the play we will have a talk-back where the audience can participate in that conversation and really feel that it's not a one-way delivery of entertainment or information, but a really engaged conversation where we sometimes tackle material that is awkward or unsettling. It forces us to meet each other, to confront our differences of opinion. I'm very concerned about polarization in our world today and losing our ability to find words from our different realities and ideological silos to meet each other in the middle and to have a respectful conversation. It can be a robust and sometimes heated conversation, but respectful. I've tried to write plays that invite people who think differently to enter a shared space and appreciate one another, despite their differences. **M**