U.S.1 Princeton's Business & Entertainment Newspaper

Reprinted from the February 9, 2005, issue of U.S.1 Newspaper

Roebling: The Man in the Window

by Fran Ianacone

Mark Violi author of the play *ROEBLING: The Story of the Brooklyn Bridge*

Considered a brilliant feat of 19th century engineering, the Brooklyn Bridge was the first suspension bridge to use steel for its cable wires. It was the first bridge to use explosives during construction, in a dangerous underwater device called a caisson. When built in 1883, the 3,460-foot Brooklyn Bridge was crowned the longest suspension bridge in the world.

While it took 15 years to build, more than 100 years later, it took playwright Mark Violi, a Hamilton Square resident, just eight months to create a play about it. The play, "Roebling, the Story of the Brooklyn Bridge," is based on actual events surrounding Trenton's most famous family. Out of 60 plays submitted to the Villager's Theatre New Playwright Series in Somerset, it is one of only four selected for a staged reading, which takes place Sunday, February 13.

The play had its first staged reading at the Kelsey Theatre in August, 2004. The Roeblings of Trenton are well known for designing and building the George Washington Bridge, the Niagara Bridge, and the Brooklyn Bridge - often called the "seventh wonder of the world." The town of Roebling, New Jersey, was named for the family 20 years after the Brooklyn Bridge was built, when the family gained international notoriety by providing the steel for the Golden Gate Bridge.

Violi initially became interested in the story while watching a program about the bridge on the History Channel. He says he was inspired to dramatize the Roebling's story: "I don't think people understand the adversity the Roeblings faced and the tremendous effort put forth to construct the Brooklyn Bridge." He adds that in addition to the circumstances of building a great bridge, there is also a greater human story. "That is really what appeals to me and what appeals in all drama. It is a local story when you consider New York and Trenton, but I think the human story carries a universal theme of man overcoming obstacles."

To fuel his imagination, Violi relied on the plethora of books written about the Brooklyn Bridge, including "The Great Bridge" by David McCullough. At his neighborhood library, he accessed microfiche articles by the New York Times reporting the daily progress of the bridge's construction, as well as papers from Rensselaer Polytechnic University, where Washington Roebling, the eldest son of John Roebling, studied.

The play begins in 1869 when - after 60 years of political, financial, and technical discussions about how best to cross the dangerous waters between Manhattan and Brooklyn - the New York Bridge Company is finally formed.

John A. Roebling, the genius behind the design of the Brooklyn Bridge and the owner of a Trenton-based wire-cable factory, presents his vision for the bridge. The play traces the many dramatic and even tragic turns the family endured while the bridge was being built, and ends with the dedication of the bridge 15 years later.

For all of their many successes, tragedy seemed to stalk the Roebling family. In January, 1870, before construction on the bridge even began, John Roebling was struck by a ferry at the water's edge while he and his oldest son, Colonel Washington A. Roebling - who had served as a military engineer for the Union Army for four years during the Civil War - were locating the site for the Brooklyn tower. The boat crushed the older Roebling's foot, causing tetanus poisoning. He died before the towers had even been erected.

At the time of the father's death, the bridge had already been approved, the money spent and allocated. "Somebody had to build this bridge," Violi says. "Washington didn't really want the burden of it. He was only 32 years old. But his wife, Emily, who was a sister of Washington's commanding officer during the Civil War, convinced him that it was the right thing to do for the bridge, for their family, and for the precedent that would be set by this bridge.

"The really interesting part about this story to me," adds Violi, "was the passing of the torch that had to be done, out of necessity."

In 1869, Washington Roebling reluctantly stepped forward to take over the building of his father's bridge. But, misfortune continued to strike. Roebling could often be found inside the caisson - the pressurized area where men worked between the footing of the bridge and the ever-deepening river bed - instructing others and many times doing manual work himself. Violi says: "Roebling was very much hands-on and didn't leave anything to chance. He may even have been overly dedicated, due to the fact that the bridge was his father's legacy."

In 1872, while fighting a fire in the caisson, Washington suffered from Caisson disease, commonly called "the bends." "He had suffered from the bends before," explains Violi, "and had been warned not to go down again. They didn't know what caused the disease back then. They knew it was caused by working down in a pressurized environment but they didn't know it was the rate of escalating to the surface that was fatal."

On a warm, sunny summer afternoon, Washington Roebling had to be carried out of the caisson. From then on, he remained painfully paralyzed and never returned to the site. Instead, he watched through a spyglass from a townhouse rented nearby on the Brooklyn bank of the East River and became known as "the man in the window." Rather than turn over the supervision of the bridge to an outsider, he relayed his instructions to his foremen through his wife, Emily, supervising every step in the building process.

"To do that properly," says Violi, "his wife had to learn a lot about engineering as quickly as possible. And she did. Emily was a very bright woman and very strong - especially when you consider the time period."

On May 24, 1883, with schools and businesses closed, Washington Roebling watched from his window while President Chester Arthur and the citizens of New York attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony opening the longest suspension bridge in the world. A total of 150,300 people paid one cent each to cross the bridge on opening day. Later that day, 1,800 vehicles were charged five cents to cross. Fireworks were held that evening.

"This is a great human story; one I thought deserved a dramatic telling," says Violi, who earned a BFA in illustration and graphic design from Rowan University in 1996. After the staged private reading at Kelsey, Violi made edits to the script based on audience responses, including adding more scenes with the villain, Haldis Dickey, a composite of several characters who opposed the Roeblings' plans for the bridge. He sent the revised script out to contests, directors, and producers. "A lot of times it takes up to a year for people to get back to you.

But I heard back from Villagers in two months' time about the play's inclusion in the New Playwright Series."

Violi, who has been acting at the Kelsey Theater for the past six years, has appeared in "The Foreigner," "Dracula," "Guys and Dolls," and other shows. He also does murder mystery comedy shows that tour the area between New York and Philadelphia. He recently completed his second play, a World War II drama set in German-occupied France, "Riding the Comet." While writing the Roebling play after hours, by day he continued running the company he started in 2000, Web Hound Studios, which designs web sites, brochures and other printed work.

Violi hopes that one day the play will be produced professionally. He says he wouldn't care if it had a run of two weeks, two months, or six months. "I just hope it has a chance to have a more broad appeal. "As proud as I am of the local ties to this play, this is a story that can be appreciated by everyone. When interesting characters tackle overwhelming adversity, ending in ultimate triumph - that's a story we all love."

"Roebling: The Story of the Brooklyn Bridge," staged reading, Sunday, February 13, 2 p.m., Villagers Theater, 415 DeMott Lane, Somerset. 732-873-2710.