

The Principle Ghost: Thoughts on Loudon Wainwright III's "Surviving Twin"

By Mark Perry, Dramaturg/ PlayMakers Repertory Company

A solo piece many years in the making, *Surviving Twin* is what singer-songwriter Loudon Wainwright calls a "posthumous collaboration" with his writer father. Part concert, part dramatic reading, part family slide-show, it is a hybrid theatrical form consisting mainly of songs written by Loudon III, magazine columns written by his late father, Loudon Jr., and photographs that span four generations of the Wainwright clan. Despite a troubled past in this father-son relationship, Loudon III has carefully chosen, arranged and rehearsed these pieces, taking the best of his own and linking them with samples of his father's best self, then bringing them to a polish with the help of Joseph Haj and Playmakers Rep, and yet as the evening unfolds one begins to wonder whether this is a tribute or an exorcism.

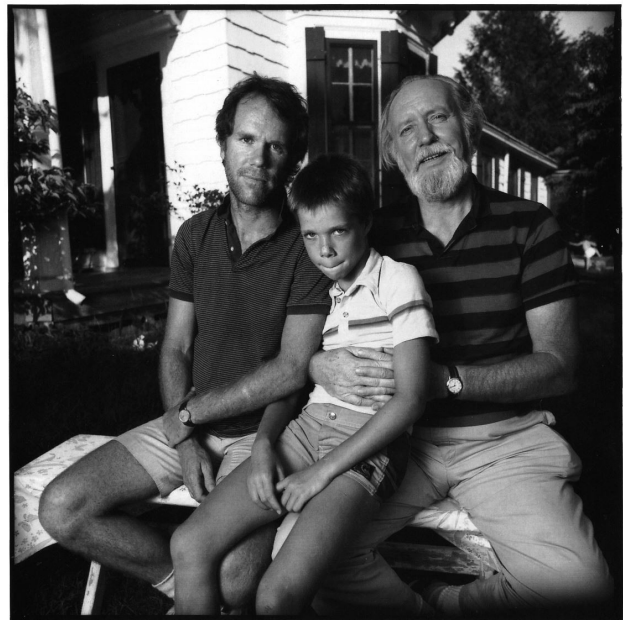
If the former, it is not the ordinary sort that airbrushes away faults and glosses over rifts. The opening song all but demonstrates an early oedipal urge in Loudon to undo his old man. Then to hear the number of songs he has written about his own Laius, one might venture the latter. The title of the show suggests a person who has lost half of his whole and struggles to continue despite. This is not often the way we frame father-son relationships. The very name Loudon Wainwright III presumes an insistence on the part of not just one, but two generations of forbears that he should carry perpetually something of them with him.

This notion of an exorcism is borne out by the first written piece chosen by Loudon from among the hundreds his father had penned over the decades as an editor and columnist for LIFE magazine. It is called "Life With and Without Father," and in it Loudon Jr. speaks of a kind of haunting by his then-late father, Loudon Sr. The first Loudon was his "principle ghost", his "lifelong "éminence grise"—that is, the man behind the man, a decision maker who operates behind the scenes, the expression originally referring to the Friar Tremblay, Cardinal Richelieu's influential and revered advisor.

The fraught relationships of sons and their fathers make up a considerable proportion of the world's dramatic literature and, particularly, American dramatic literature, with its persistent echo of this nation's struggle for independence and its attendant pushing off of a paternalistic yoke. The story of the Wainwright family is not told through traditional dramatic means. Here the form is largely lyrical. Songs spin out stories differently than plays, as do short non-fiction prose. The full picture must be gleaned in fragments of stories and song lyrics. There are dramatic elements, of course, including acting. Loudon delivers the excerpts of his father's writings as monologue and not just as readings, therefore taking on himself something of the character of his father.

We see contrast in the controlled focus of the father's prose and in the son's iconoclastic impulse in songwriting, the tearing and kicking of language, lines of lyrics spilling over into restful measures. Loudon's style of performance is animated, grueling even. The songs are in his body, the stories come alive on his face. Conflicts, whether specific to the song or intrinsic in the man, play across his features. In his lyrics, pure poetry erupts alongside more mundane matters. In his guitar playing, there is dynamic range and time-earned concision. A renowned singer-songwriter for over four decades, Loudon is a joy to watch as he provides such a wide open channel to the Muse. With the mastery he brings, we find a comfort in the room and take an interest in him coupled with a willingness to follow him in his explorations.

We meet a cast of colorful characters along the way including the gin and tonic drinking Nanny Wainwright, the cuttingly-mannered tailor Mr. Perry, and the beloved retriever-setter John Henry. During the show, layers of complexity in relationship are added, not so much by narrative development, but by the poetic means of repetition of images and accretion of concepts. A "half-fist" stands for a patrilineal legacy of latent aggression. A



Clockwise: Loudon Wainwright III, Loudon Wainwright Jr. , Rufus Wainwright

custom-tailored suit starts out as possible midlife-crisis ego-gratification, but turns surprisingly into a disguise for a perceived character flaw. A dog's ceaseless search for an owner's affection blends into an athlete son's scanning the stands for a father's approval. A fog lifting in a coastal New England town holds within it the prospect of a benevolent afterlife.



Loudon Wainwright III in Surviving Twin

Both our Loudons conceal even as they reveal. You will not be getting the shocking secrets or fully explored motivations we are accustomed to seeing in gritty realism and well-made plays. Details of divorce and family quarreling are passed over. People in the public eye often choose which parts of themselves to share and which to shield, and who can blame them? It is a zombie fetish of modern life to dig so deeply into the psychological viscera of celebrity. In the end, we see how father and son similarly train the mirror of their reflection on the process of seeking in everyday experiences vantage points on universal questions and pursuits.

One of the central questions of *Surviving Twin* is the scope of mortality. Death is scattered over this piece like water off a stinky, wet dog.

Themes of separation, disembodiment, and

terminal disease abound. The sheer repetition of phrases such as “dead man” and “handful of dust” makes it feel as if this may be protesting too much, as if there were lingering doubt about the finality of death and only a pessimist's mantra could divert the rational faculty from seeking some sprout of faith in a continuance hereafter. Say what you will, but the man who sings that “Man is a handful of dust” is no mere handful of dust. Loudon's vital and resilient presence before us belies something of the despair inherent in the song's words. We are not simply dust, but breath too, and dust returns to dust, so where does breath go? Such questions are inherent in our shared life, and we have institutions such as theatre, music, and literature in which to explore them. Despair is no friend to the heart, but it is a legacy. Even as the name was passed on, and the boarding school, and the signet ring, the bleak outlook on the magic of LIFE is a heavy, spectral inheritance indeed. Perhaps this is what is being exorcised.

Committing himself to memorizing these substantial passages of his father's words and striving to embody them not as a reader of another's thoughts, but in a first-person monologist way—that is, in the way we know the theatre works at blending two identities into one—this feels like the greatest of tributes to his father. He is working not to clarify established territory or reinforce the individuation he no doubt sought in younger years, but to blur distinctions, to merge individualities and to create a space where he might, night after night, step into his father's shoes—or suit, as the case may be—and bring his father back to life, to use his own breath to resuscitate the man who gave him his. In those moments of embodiment, he gives voice to words that resonate throughout the Wainwright line over time, breaking down the separation, calling out the man from behind the scenes and to the fore, perhaps not to exorcise an individual but to acknowledge and celebrate a relationship.

Our performer begins the evening by claiming that the two Loudons, while they fought and disagreed on just about everything, are much the same person. The intermingling of songs and written pieces starts as a kind of out-of-time dialogue between the two, but seems to become more a monologue as the show progresses with it meaning less and less who the particular author is. At a certain point in the evening, given the four generations of Wainwrights being discussed, you may begin to get confused who exactly is speaking and to whom. Which father is this and which son? Perhaps this confusion is not a bad thing. Perhaps the individuals in the immediate roles become less important than the timeless interplay of the generations, merging together like single strings played as a full chord on Loudon's guitar.