

BILL W. AND DR. BOB IN AKRON

Steve Bergman, co-author of Bill W. and Dr. Bob

I arrived in Akron on June 10, 2006, the day celebrated as Founder's Day, the day in 1935 of Dr. Bob's last "drink and goofball" that Bill gave him to help him get through a surgery he was about to perform. Our play BILL W. AND DR. BOB had had a three week run at the New Repertory Theatre in Boston in March, and the Stan Hywet Hall Foundation had asked if we could bring the play out for the Founder's Day weekend, a time when tens of thousands of 12-step people come to Akron to see where it all began, make friends, and hold meetings. We had arranged to bring the actors who played Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith to come out to Akron and perform three scenes from the play, including the scene depicting the first time they met, "the meeting scene."

Stan Hywet is a mansion, a gatehouse at the front. The meeting between the men had taken place in the gatehouse on May 12, 1935. Now a stage had been set up on the lawn in front of the gatehouse. A hundred or so chairs were set up in a semicircle in front of it.

I got out of the car and looked. The gatehouse was small, a brick and ivy Tudor. From it a grand driveway and lawn swept up to the mansion. The grass shined in the bright sunlight. The two actors were just about to begin the first of their performances that day—they were doing the segment six times that day, every hour on the hour, with audience discussion in between. I stood in the back and watched, waiting for the show to begin. The chairs were mostly filled, the audience a mixture of young and old, people of many races, ethnicities, classes and colors. As I waited, several motorcycles roared up and stopped. The "bikers" parked, and wandered over to the stage. At first they seemed reluctant to sit down and watch, but as "Bill" and "Bob" began, they were drawn in, and then they sat down, and as the scenes progressed, from my seat I could see tears streaming down some of their cheeks. The audience was still, focused on what was going on between these two men. As Bill tried to make contact with a reluctant Bob, you could have heard a pin drop; when the tension was relieved by the humor between them, the audience roared with laughter.

The meeting scene neared its end. I found myself looking past the stage to the gatehouse behind, and I had the sudden realization that I was watching this meeting replayed in front of the very place where the two men had met, 71 years before. A chill went through me.

Once before with this play I had felt that chill: my wife (and co-author Janet Surrey) and I were working on the script on a vacation in northern Maine, and went to an AA meeting in an old one-room schoolhouse. It was packed, with rough lumberjacks and people of little means, people recently out of jail and people who were doing better. The topic was “Forgiveness.” There was as much wisdom in that room as in any group I have ever been in. My wife and I left and walked away and then turned and looked back. It was a dark, chill night in the middle of the woods, and the doorway was lit by a single bare bulb overhead. It was as if the spirits of the two men, whose meeting had just been repeated in the wilds of Maine over half a century later, were there, right there, again.

That was the feeling I had on that bright June afternoon in Akron.