

Reading Jim Houghton's tribute to Romulus Linney, I was moved by how often Jim alluded to Rom's courage. For it is courage that I remember most when I think of him and our friendship over twenty-four years.

One of the ways that Rom refreshed his courage was to be part of the Ensemble Studio Theatre's Playwrights Unit. Indeed, he was a member of the Unit until the final weeks of his life. He sought the community and fellowship of writers, and honest but supportive feedback for his work. For Romulus knew that with every new piece we write, we are all essentially beginners.

There was always a frisson of danger around Rom and the Mondays that he attended. He did not suffer fools gladly as he sat there in his baseball cap, sipping from a can of coke. However, beautiful writing moved him. I remember his message to one playwright after she sang and read her musical to us, hands shaking, eyes half shut with her own longing to solve the piece. "Well, of course, you're having trouble. You're trying to do something utterly original. There's nothing harder than that." Or how he consoled another playwright when she and a director disagreed: "Human beings have three basic drives, my dear: eating, sex and rewriting other people's plays. Stick to your guns." And then, of course, there were his dreaded words when a play wasn't working: "Now let me be absolutely candid...."

But if Romulus could be candid with us, we could be candid with him, and most of all, he was candid with himself. He was protective of very young writers because he said that when he started, his own work was "God awful." And he could still admit when a story went off the tracks. After one reading of a new play shortly before he was to begin rehearsals, he said: "It don't work. That's clear." And boy could he laugh at himself: "The worst thing about people criticizing your plays is when they're right!"

Four weeks before Romulus was diagnosed with cancer and two months before he died, Rom brought us his latest full-length play. He'd been coming less often to the group as he now lived full-time upstate, but still he kept coming. His final play was called *Over Martinis, Driving Somewhere* and it was inspired by a book written by Eleanor Cooney, the daughter of a former lover. In the play, as in the book, his former lover suffers from dementia, but he conjures her again in their bittersweet youth. The play contains hard but illuminating truths about old age, disease and dying. It was deeply affecting but there was still plenty of work to be done—not the easy kind of work, not a few nips and tucks, but a reconsideration and possible restructuring of the script. Romulus left that night with a sheaf of notes. He thanked us all. The next week he e-mailed to tell everyone how helpful the comments had been. He was 80 years old. And then he began again, as he always began again, the hard work of re-writing.

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& the Members of the EST Playwrights Unit**