
Holding court

By Don Aucoin

Globe Staff / April 29, 2011

CRANSTON, R.I. -- Standing backstage at the Park Theatre just minutes before showtime, Nancy Auerbach Collins glanced dubiously at an actor who was wearing a bald wig, holding a zeppelin-size cigar, and preparing to walk out onstage to play her legendary father, Arnold "Red" Auerbach, in a one-man show titled "The Auerbach Dynasty."

"He's bigger and younger," she observed quietly. "So it's a bit weird."

Julie Auerbach Flieger, Nancy's daughter and Red's granddaughter, agreed, after sizing up the tall, sturdily built actor Jeff Gill, who wore a tentative smile. "It's a little surreal, seeing somebody pretending to be him," she said.

They aren't the only ones likely to be a bit jolted by the idea of someone pretending to be the man who was the larger-than-life maestro of the Boston Celtics for more than half a century. What's next: "Belichick: The Musical"?

After all, Red was an icon back when that word still meant something. As coach of the Celtics from 1950 to 1966, he infuriated rival teams, coaches, and fans by lighting up a victory cigar on the bench when he thought the Celtics had a game in the bag. As general manager and president, he so routinely outfoxed his foes that it was often said that he was playing chess while the rest of the NBA was playing checkers.

Now comes "The Auerbach Dynasty," a solo play written and directed by Ken Dooley, an author and longtime friend of Auerbach, who died in 2006 at age 89.

In an interview at the Park Theatre in Cranston, R.I., before opening night of "Dynasty," (the final performance is this Sunday), the 79-year-old Dooley said he wrote the play to clear up "misconceptions" about Auerbach. "Red was no shrinking violet, but he wasn't the arrogant s.o.b. people think," said Dooley. "Red did more kind things on a Tuesday than most of us do in a lifetime."

Still, "Dynasty" showcases Red's relentless competitive streak ("A lot of people accuse me of being a sore loser. I plead guilty."), his view of sportswriters ("Asking a coach how he feels about sportswriters is like asking a lamppost how he feels about dogs."), and the team-motivating strategy behind all those victory cigars ("No one wanted to suffer the humiliation of losing a game after I'd already lit up.").

"The Auerbach Dynasty" takes full note of the racism that once prevailed in the NBA, and the fact that Auerbach was instrumental in shattering the color barrier, starting with his decision to draft the first African-American player in the NBA, Chuck Cooper, in 1950. He did so with the full support of then-Celtics owner Walter Brown, as Gill's Auerbach character recounts in the play:

" 'I think you should know one thing,' I warned Walter. 'Chuck's black.' "

" 'I don't care about the color of a ballplayer's skin. They can be black, yellow, white, or green if you want, as long as they can put the ball in the basket. That's the kid I want,' Walter said."

Auerbach went on to field the first all-black starting team, in 1964 (one of those former players, K.C. Jones, attended opening night of "The Auerbach Dynasty"), and to name Bill Russell as his successor in 1966, making

Russell the first African-American NBA coach.

But "Dynasty" also includes a passage where Auerbach candidly admits he was wrong in the early 1960s to urge his black players to play scheduled games, rather sit them out in protest, after the players were denied restaurant seats in Marion, Ind., and hotel accommodations in Charlotte, N.C.

"In both places I took the position that my black players owed it to themselves to stay and play their hearts out and let the fans see how great they were," Red says in the play. "I guess I thought this would help knock the barriers down a little faster. Walter Brown said I should have taken my team out of those towns and told everybody down there that they didn't deserve to have men like that in their midst. Now when I look back, I think that Walter was right."

"The Auerbach Dynasty" is not the first solo play about a Boston icon: Dick Flavin's "According to Tip," starring Ken Howard as former House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, had a solid run at the New Repertory Theatre in 2008. Nor is it the first play about a singular sports icon. In fact, "Lombardi," a play about Vince Lombardi, the fabled coach of the Green Bay Packers, is currently running on Broadway.

Dooley (who also serves as the artistic director at the Rhode Island Center for the Performing Arts, of which the Park Theatre is a part) says he was inspired to write his play three years ago when he saw "Nobody Don't Like Yogi," a one-man show about former Yankees catcher Yogi Berra. It occurred to him that Red warranted a solo play, too.

He first got to know Auerbach in 1984, and their relationship began on a (fittingly) stormy note. Dooley arrived at Auerbach's office for the first day of filming for a business-oriented motivational film in which he had persuaded Auerbach to participate. No sign of Red.

"He was supposed to be there at 10 o'clock. He got there at 1 o'clock. No apology," recalled Dooley. "He sat down and took out a cigar. He got ready to light up the cigar. I walked over to him and said: 'You're already three hours late. If you smoke that cigar, we won't be able to shoot today, because the smoke will go into the lights.'

"I took that cigar and put it in my pocket. He just glared at me. I heard [Red's secretary] say 'Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.' The next day she said to me, 'Ken, I thought you were dead. I thought he was going to throw you right out the window. But after you left, Mr. Auerbach looked at me and said, 'He's a tough little son-of-a-bitch, isn't he?' "

They became friends, and met often for lunch or dinner at Legal Seafoods in Park Square or at one of the Chinese restaurants Red loved to frequent. They teamed up for a book, "MBA: Management by Auerbach," which was published in 1991 (one of 38 books, mostly business-oriented, Dooley has written).

While many of the tales told in "The Auerbach Dynasty" will be familiar to longtime Celtics fans, the show provides a few behind-the-scenes glimpses of pivotal moments in Celtics history, drawn, Dooley says, directly from stories Auerbach told him during hundreds of conversations they had over the years.

For example, "Dynasty" describes Red's wounded pride when the new team owners named Rick Pitino head coach of the Celtics in 1997 and promptly gave him the title of team president, which had belonged to Auerbach. "If [Celtics' play-by-play radio announcer] Johnny Most had still been around, Rick probably would have taken his title, too," Red says in the show. "When Paul [Gaston, then team owner] told me that he had given my title to Pitino, it really hurt."

Then there were the contract negotiations in 1978 with a rookie named Larry Bird and Bird's agent, Bob Woolf: "I offered him \$500,000, more than any rookie had ever been paid in the history of the league," Red says in the show. "Woolf pulled out a list of 'extras,' including a bonus if Bird made the all-rookie team. 'You think I'm going to pay a guy the highest rookie salary in the history of the game and not expect him to make the all-rookie team?' I shouted at Woolf. Then I turned to Larry. 'I offered you what I think you're worth.' Bird nodded to Woolf

and the negotiations were over.”

As soon as the performance of “The Auerbach Dynasty” was over — a performance for which Gill received a standing ovation — Dooley walked quickly through the crowd, heading toward Red’s daughter, Nancy Auerbach Collins, who had traveled from her Maryland home to attend opening night. From 20 feet away, he called out to her: “The most important person here. Thumbs up or thumbs down?”

Collins flashed a thumb up. Moments later, she said: “You can tell he did it out of love, which means more than anything.”

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