

# Call Me Kurt

A famous novelist skates into a Power play.

BY THOMAS A. POWER

**I**n the early 1980s I was directing a production of *Happy, Birthday Wanda June* by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. at USM for a December performance and discovered that Vonnegut's ending didn't work very well. I learned that one of the cast members, Mark Rogers, had a family connection with the author and provided me with a mailing address so I wrote to Mr. Vonnegut asking if he would consider making any changes to the ending of his play.

It's worth noting that *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* had already had a run on Broadway and been made into a movie but undaunted, I suggested a small change might help my production if Vonnegut was willing. I included my phone num-

ber but truthfully didn't expect a response.

This was before computer email or cell phones so it took three days for my letter to arrive at the author's home in New York but on the fourth day, my telephone rang. My oldest son, Matthew was a high school senior and coincidentally a devotee of Vonnegut's novels. He answered the phone and turned to me as I finished my morning prep for leaving to teach.

"Dad, it's Kurt Vonnegut for you."

I'm not sure who was more surprised but I will never forget Matt's voice as he delivered that simple phrase. You would have to imagine your own literary idol calling to chat without warning or preparation to envision that moment before I took the phone and said, "Good morning, Mr. Vonnegut."

"Kurt," he said. "Just Kurt."

"I see you don't like the ending of my play. I never could get that right. What do you want to do about it?"

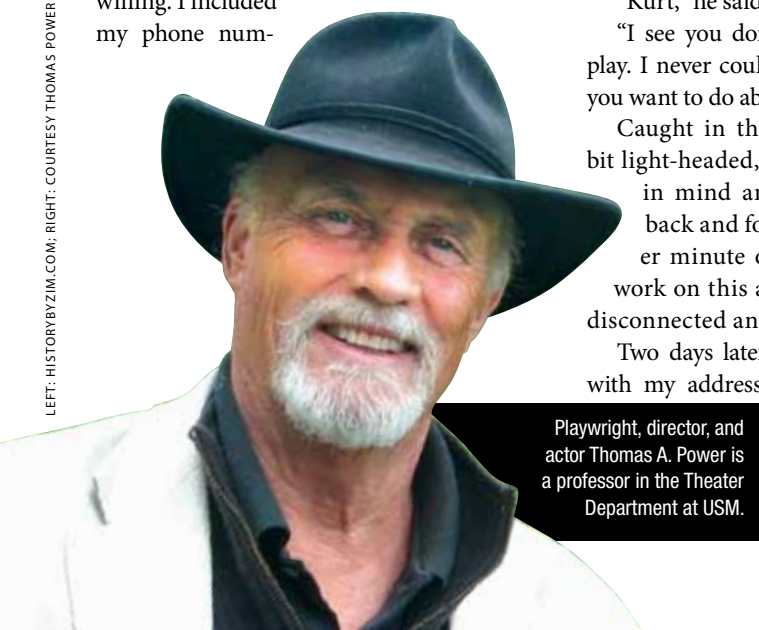
Caught in the moment and feeling a bit light-headed, I told "Kurt" what I had in mind and we threw some ideas back and forth. We spoke for another minute or two until he said "I'll work on this and get back to you." We disconnected and I headed to class.

Two days later a large manila envelope with my address hand written and Vonnegut's return address in the proper corner arrived at my door. Overnight Mail, I think they

called it then. Inside were ten typewritten pages and a brief note from Vonnegut with his phone number and the request that I call with my reaction to the new scene. I read the new scene once, twice and a third time. I didn't think it would work or solve the problem with the ending of the play. How does one say that to Kurt Vonnegut? So, I gave it a day. On the second day the phone rang and Kurt asked if I got the draft and I assured him that I did have it and then a brief pause until he said, "You didn't like it."

I beat around that bush a moment and then admitted that it didn't address the problem. Vonnegut then surprised me by saying "Okay, you write it and send it to me."

**S**o I did. I rewrote the end of the play, sent it by overnight mail to Vonnegut and he called back saying "I like it. Use your ending." And so we dumped the original ending and rehearsed the new and performed the play at USM and then at a regional festival at Brandeis University. The relationship with Kurt Vonnegut continued for another decade as we met in NYC for lunch and exchanged ideas for plays via snail mail. He sent me his script, *Make Up Your Mind*, and with the help of actors like Tony Shalhoub, we produced a staged reading of the play which was televised in Maine and later almost opened off Broadway but Vonnegut was not happy with the script and mentioned to me at the time that "writing a novel was much easier and that there was nothing quite as bad as a flawed play ending." ■



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