

Books

Toronto's Jewish community history was rife with colourful and often shady characters

Davey the Punk

By BOB BOSSIN

Published by The Porcupine's Quill

Erin, Ontario 2014

186 pages

Reviewed by BERNIE BELLAN

I first heard Bob Bossin sometime in the 1980s or 90s when he was the leader of the popular folk band, "Stringband", and when he appeared on Peter Gzowski's CBC Radio morning show, "Morningside". I remember how intelligent Bossin sounded and how clever the lyrics of his songs were.

This past July I had the chance to watch Bob Bossin perform live during the Winnipeg Fringe Festival, when he came to town to do his one-man show "Davey the Punk". I had previewed Bossin's play in our July 9 issue – along with nine other plays that had some sort of Jewish connection - tenuous as it may have seemed in certain cases.

By chance I ran into Bossin prior to the beginning of another very clever and entertaining play titled "Confessions of an Operatic Mute". Just like any other Fringe performer Bossin was handing out cards for his show, inviting people to come and see it. I introduced myself to Bossin as the guy who had printed a preview of his show in our paper and immediately discovered how congenial he was. Bossin also introduced me to his partner, Elizabeth Shefrin, who, she confirmed to me, has several cousins in Winnipeg by the same name.

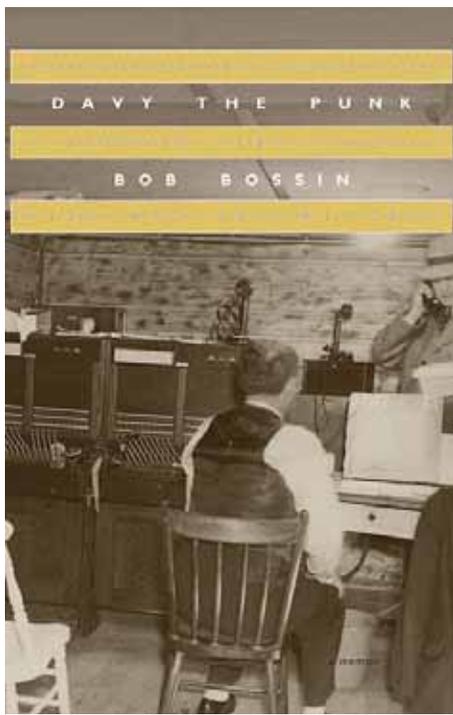
Then, after I actually went to watch his show which, to my mind, was the best of the 12 or so shows that I saw during this year's Fringe, I decided to buy Bossin's book of the same name as his play. I also said to Bossin that his play would be perfect for the Winnipeg Jewish Theatre to present – were that theatre company ever to come back from its present uncertain status. His one-man show was so oriented toward a Jewish audience, laced as it was with Yiddishisms and stories about bubbies, zaydehs and other familiar characters to whom almost anyone of a certain age could relate that I told Bossin I would do what I could to see him bring his show back to Winnipeg.

When I began to read the book *Davey the Punk*, however, I realized almost immediately why Bossin decided to write a book in addition to penning his play. The play essentially tells the story of Bossin's father, Davey Bossin, and his murky past living on the edge of the law. The book does far more than that. It offers a comprehensive view of a segment of Toronto's Jewish community in the first half of the 20th century which has likely never received much exposure prior to this book.

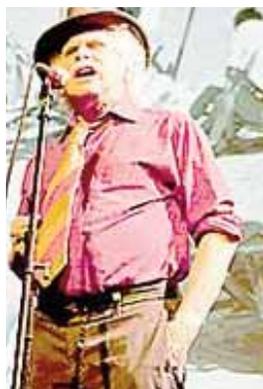
That segment consists of the myriad of dubious and shady characters who exist within every group in the world and who make their living through whichever illicit means they can develop. In Davey Bossin's case, that living was earned through association with the horse-racing industry, not as a gambler or bookie, but first as a "layoff artist", then later as the conduit whereby gamblers and bookies could obtain immediate race horse results over the phone.

In both cases Davey Bossin found himself constantly evading relentless police investigations of his activities, but through one clever means after another, he always managed to stay one step ahead of the law. Space does not permit a full exposition on just what it is that Davey Bossin used to do to earn his money. Suffice to say that the gambling world has so many permutations within its environs that a clever and quick-thinking individual can find a way to make a lot of money without risking anything at all.

Into this world stepped a host of well-known characters, many of whom crossed paths with Davey Bossin at one time or another. Among those perhaps the two names that would be best known to readers would be the legendary Arnold Rothstein, the man who allegedly "fixed" the 1919 World Series and who "was the model for Meyer Wolfsheim in *The Great Gatsby*", according to Bob Bossin; and Frank Costello, who was the first gangster to unite the disparate Mafia clans into one unified organization (and who was later succeeded by the far more ruthless Al Capone).



The book's cover features a picture of Davey Bossin seated at a desk in his home, from where he transmitted horse race results over 56 different phone lines at one time. Bossin was never found guilty of committing any illegal acts despite many attempts of various Ontario authorities to do so.



Bob Bossin on stage performing his one-man show "Davey the Punk" - a story laced with a colourful cast of characters, including several Jewish "mobsters" among others



The Bossin family sometime in the 1940s. Young Bob Bossin with his parents, Marci and Davey Bossin (The book reveals a surprise about Marci toward the end.)



Legendary gambler Arnold Rothstein - the man who allegedly "fixed" the 1919 World Series and who was a hero for young Davey Bossin and many other young Jews who had criminal aspirations

Bossin not only creates a world rich in tapestry, he displays a tremendous amount of research into the subject of how the criminal underworld operated. As well - as he explains during the course of the book, he had to piece together his father's past – which was kept well-hidden from him as he was growing up, and which largely remained a mystery to him until he was well into his 40s, through a series of interviews he conducted with relatives, friends of his father, and other individuals who happened to have dealings with Davey Bossin through the years.

Bob Bossin's writing style is clear and erudite. His descriptions of life in the tenement area of Toronto where his father grew up are shocking in the degree to which they convey just how abject was the poverty of the Toronto immigrant Jewish community in the early 1900s. As well Bossin documents the rampant anti-Semitism that suffused government attitudes at all levels of society in Canada during that period, especially within the federal Liberal government of Mackenzie King.

Here is one excerpt from *Davey the Punk* that provides a clear illustration of Bossin's writing style, along with his scholarship: "From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is hard to imagine the extent of anti-Semitism in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. From 1920 on, Jews were effectively barred from immigrating. Those who had come earlier and established themselves, like the Bossins, found that apartment buildings would not rent to them. Banks, insurance companies, and other major employers would not hire them. My uncle Hye was turned down for a newspaper job because, they told him, they already had a Jewish reporter. Jews could attend university (though the University of Toronto Medical School kept racial quotas into the 1960s). However, when they graduated, Jewish doctors could not find internships. Schools would not hire Jewish teachers. Davey took up the gambling business because it was one of the few white-collar jobs open to him."

Interweaving stories about his own family with expositions on the gambling industry and such things as the Kefauver Commission hearings on organized crime (which were dramatized in "The Godfather II" so brilliantly), Bossin delivers a book that will at times leave you laughing, at other times perhaps crying, but at all times royally entertained.

Davey the Punk is available at McNally Robinson bookstore. By the way, Bob Bossin himself is thoroughly approachable and can be contacted directly at bob@bossin.com

I'm sure he'd love to hear from anyone who might take the time to read his book or who may have followed him during his career in "Stringband".



Mobster Frank Costello - a friend of Davey Bossin's, and who unified various Mafia clans into what became an organized group. In this picture Costello is testifying before the Kefauver Commission into organized crime, which was later dramatized in "The Godfather II".