Ayad Akhtar

by Joey Stocks

final performance of The Who & The What at LCT3/Lincoln Center – the same off-Broadway theatre where Disgraced premiered almost two years earlier, ultimately winning the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. He was about to begin rehearsal for the Broadway production of that play and, yet, seemed remarkably calm. He was a perfect host, introducing me to the crew and management of LCT, and the cast (two of whom, pointing to a restroom in the best equipped dressing rooms I've ever seen, gleefully exclaimed "Heated ocillating bidets!"). At the closing night reception, his voice gentle, almost shy, he humbly thanked everyone by

I first caught up with Ayad last summer at the

Two days later, I had a question for him.

JOEY STOCKS: It's July 29, 2014. You just closed a new play at LCT3/Lincoln Center. The first preview of your first Broadway play begins two months from now and you have another show opening at New York Theatre Workshop mid-November. Will you describe the view from where you sit right now? How do you feel?

AYAD AKHTAR: I am feeling rested after having had a week and half to recharge. There's a lot of work ahead: a piece I have to finish for *Esquire* in



name.



for The Invisible Hand opening at New York Theater Workshop later in the fall. I know I need to pace myself, especially as the newness of having my first show on Broadway is going to take a lot of out me. I just know that I will be feeling all kinds of worry, and I'm doing my best to push the worry away until I can't any more. Of course, above and beyond everything else, I feel very lucky, very blessed. And oddly calm right now. There is a lot of work to be done in the next five months.

In March, two days after Disgraced ended its Broadway run, he answered some more questions.

JOEY STOCKS: What do you wish you'd known before heading into your first Broadway production? What, if anything, about the experience surprised you?

AYAD AKHTAR: I wish I'd known how grueling the preview process was going to be. It's a quantum leap to go from show that's only been played for 100-150 people a night to one being done for 900 people a night. The sense of anxiety and anticipation, the

sense of vulnerabil-

AYAD AKHTAR

ity was so much

higher. It was the most exhausting three weeks I've ever experienced and I wish that I would have known how much it was going to require of me. As far as surprises, I think I was delightfully surprised by how welcoming the Broadway community was of me and of the work, a real sense of positivity and support.



the August Wilson or the Lorraine Hansberry lens." Based on your recent success, your work could be the lens through which the next generation of playwrights of middle-eastern heritage will be viewed. What are your thoughts on that?

AYAD AKHTAR: I would hope that writers writing about Muslim experience would be assessed on their own merits, and through the lens of their own work. And I do believe that there will be many more voices to come.

JOEY STOCKS: What theatrical work has inspired you this season?

AYAD AKHTAR: I was so taken by Diane Lane and Tony Shaloub in the Mystery of Love and Sex, their extraor-

JOEY STOCKS: It's March 3, 2015. You just closed your first Broadway production. Will you describe the view from where you sit right now? What do you want to do next?

and truly awe-inspiring craft.

AYAD AKHTAR: It's been a very busy hectic year filled with extraordinary gifts. Three shows in New York the course of six months. My Broadway premiere. I am already hard at work on a new play but I think it's really important for me to make the space to disconnect for a little while and fill my head with new images and ideas. And to get a little bit of vacation!

by Matt Minnicino

isa D'Amour's plays swell with life. Airline Highway, her latest, nearly bursts with love for its characters, the down-and-out denizens of New Orleans' Hummingbird Motel. After a run at Steppenwolf, Airline Highway lights up Manhattan Theatre Club's Samuel J. Freidman Theater on Broadway April 23rd, adding the Great White Way to her wide-ranging resume. On her break before a preview performance (opening night a week hence) Lisa and I wedge ourselves into a booth at Westway Diner, between a glass case of desserts and the pervasive white noise of the midtown dinner hour. Even in the hustle and bustle, Lisa is bright and collected, twinkling with the daring spark that runs through all her work.

MATT MINNICINO: You're in a very crazy, sensitive time [right now], so how are you? How's it going?

LISA D'AMOUR: Good! It's going great. We're in our last couple of rehearsals for *Airline Highway*. It's been a busy couple of weeks because we've been rehearsing in some new ensemble members and I've been making some changes to the play, and so it's very full days. It's very full days.



MATT MINNICINO: Do you have a lot of crossover from the Steppenwolf production in terms of cast and crew?

LISA D'AMOUR: Yes. I would say, like, threequarters of the main characters have come with us. There are nine main parts and three of those actors are new. And then there are seven smaller roles. One of those actors came from Steppenwolf and the rest are all new. So, when you look at the whole thing, it's about half and half. Half new, half old.

MATT MINNICINO: And is that, what is predicating some of the changes? Are you changing it for people, for new audiences or are you just realizing things with the script?

LISA D'AMOUR: I would say it's a combination of two things: things that we learned from the Chicago production that we wanted to change. You know, it's a new play, it's a big play, so once we'd rehearsed as much as we could and started watching it after we couldn't make any more changes, we're, like, oh, we think this, this and this. Then the other thing is the Steppenwolf stage is not really a proscenium stage. It's almost a thrust. The Steppenwolf stage is really expansive, and you can kind of feel the hotel and the blue sky, and the play was actually a fair amount longer and I would say a little bit more raggedy at Steppenwolf.

MATT MINNICINO: What do you mean by raggedy?

LISA D'AMOUR: Some of the monologues went on more tangents, and I knew it. There were some details that maybe didn't seem like directly related to the plot. And somehow in the Steppenwolf space, you could really hold that experience because you kind of felt like you had pulled up at this motel and were hanging out spying on people. It's a really different feel than the Manhattan Theatre Club space, [which is] a proscenium. You're focused in on this motel, and something about that makes you want to focus on the plot a little better. And weirdly, I don't think it feels less ragged in MTC, even though it is. It's much tighter at MTC, but there's something about what your expectations are about that space that couldn't hold everything that I had in it. There



were some things where I'd be, like, "Oh my God, we can't cut that line." And then we cut it and I'd be, like, "Oh." And I kept [thinking] it's going to feel like a regular play. It's going to feel too neat, and then I'd go, "Oh, it still kinda feels like a raggedy mess, actually 'cause it's Broadway." You don't expect it to be that way.

MATT MINNICINO: But do you - you kind of like that?

LISA D'AMOUR: I like the raggedy mess, yeah. And what I'm going to do on the published version is take a note from Suzan-Lori Parks and put those lines in italics and parentheses and say "Do 'em if you want; don't do 'em if you want."

Because I love 'em. They're not exactly texture, but they're just part of the play that's not directly related to plot. There are a lot of things that come at you from obtuse angles in this play. They're unexpected, so-

MATT MINNICINO: I'm excited to see it. Are you conscious of the Broadway-ness? That's the big question, I guess.

LISA D'AMOUR: To be perfectly honest, it hasn't really crossed my mind much until yesterday or the day before because we've been working so hard. Every day I'm in the theater like, "What can we do? What needs to stay? What needs to go?" But now that I don't have to do any more work, oh my God, oh my God. Yeah. It's not so much the Broadway-ness. It's a show in New York, which is not really officially my hometown anymore, but I've lived here for years. I also feel a little like I don't yet understand the community of Broadway or how this show is fitting in with the other Broadway shows because I don't really go to Broadway shows. I saw Fun Home when it was downtown, but I haven't seen anything else around me, so I don't even know what I'm in conversation with. It's a weird feeling. Yeah. So I don't feel - I've never known which way my plays are gonna go in terms of critical response. It's always been a wild card, so I'm not holding my breath about that. It's just a weird feeling of, "We've done everything we can do. Here we go."

MATT MINNICINO: It's interesting that you mentioned Fun Home. That's something that we've been discussing, looking at stuff like the Kilroys and the Lilly Awards we were very conscious of this being your first Broadway show, you're also, I guess, technically the only living woman with a straight play on Broadway right now. Do you have thoughts on that?

LISA D'AMOUR: I keep forgetting that detail. I think I'm really proud of that. I'm proud not just that I'm representing my gender, but also this play takes place over the course of one day, but it's got an unusual musical structure that is not your typical linear play, which you often associate with men. Not that only men write those plays.

The world of commercial theater, and even some bigger nprofit theaters, is pretty fickle and predictable. But when you take the work into your own hands, find that community to work with, you have the power to make a life for yourself.

MATT MINNICINO: It's true, though. There's a kind of Aristotelian something to a lot of male plays.

LISA D'AMOUR: Yes, so it feels like a big risk for me to be bringing this play to Broadway with this kind of unusual and expansive structure. My whole career has been built on taking wild risks, so I feel like I'm staying true to my personality and my aesthetic by doing so. There are some ways that we have tailored the plot a little that may be a bit more for a Broadway audience, but not much. Not much. You still have this feel of this ensemble that's bursting out of the proscenium. And I'm really proud of that. I don't know which way it's going to go critically.

MATT MINNICINO: I think you should be proud! My first reading of your work was Detroit, as is, I guess, a lot of people, they have that kind of baptism. So knowing I was going to interview you, I ended up reading all about your expansive background in devised work and stuff that I had no idea about. You've probably gotten this a lot, but you talk about taking risks. Is this your biggest risk or do you think one of your other projects was more risky in terms of its structure or what you were doing with it or what you were saying with it?

LISA D'AMOUR: Well, this is a pretty big risk within the context of straight theater. You know, because I have this career in sort of regular theater. I have this career that happens maybe more outdoors or in galleries - or theaters that I turn into galleries, so...I feel like maybe the biggest risk that I've taken is a show that I did when I was quite a bit younger called Landmark 24 Hours on the Stone Arch Bridge. It was a piece that I created with five collaborators in Minneapolis. There was a bridge that I fell in love with across the Mississippi River. It used to be a railroad bridge and now it's a pedestrian walking mall, just across the Mississippi, and so I invited a dancer, an installation artist, a videographer, my collaborator, Katie Pearl, who's a director, and a composer to create basically 24 hours of interlocking performances from sunrise to sunrise. And some of them were very obvious, like a dance that took two hours to traverse the bridge. Others

were almost hidden, like people painting pictures with water on the bridge. There were musical compositions that happened on boats that went under the bridge, but they were all designed to make you look at the landscape in different ways. You would pick up a guide to the performance so you knew what was going on when. But it was giant, and we produced it on a very small budget, and I bet there were, like 150 performers when all was said and done. And I had no idea what I was doing, and I was doing it with these people.

MATT MINNICINO: So Airline Highway with fifteen [actors] is nothing compared to that.

LISA D'AMOUR: Yes. And then years later, Katie Pearl and I did this eight-hour performance How To Build a Forest, which premiered at The Kitchen. And that was, for a regular theater, kind of a risk too because the only real words that you hear in the piece are actors that are in the audience. And then the people in the audience can come up on stage and go inside this forest as we're building it, so it's this durational piece. Now we've presented it four or five times at universities. We're presenting it in New Orleans also. It's kind of amazing. And also, I have to say, those pieces, I raised the money for them myself, so that's a whole other thing. So it's funny, I mean, this feels like a risk, but -

MATT MINNICINO: Different kind.

LISA D'AMOUR: It's different in that I'm not having to produce it. I'm not having to literally raise the money and market it, which I've had to do for a lot of my pieces, and because I make so much of my work on my own, the stakes are high with this piece, but it's not like if, for some reason, the critical response doesn't go well, that it's going to end my career because a lot of my career is based on work that I make happen myself. I think that's really important for playwrights to hear. The world of commercial theater, and even some bigger nonprofit theaters, is pretty fickle and unpredictable. But when you take the work into your own hands, find that community to work with, you have the power to make a life for yourself.

Please visit the Tumblr page for The Dramatist for the full text of this interview: http://dramatistsguild.tumblr.com

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DPS PROFILE

by Stephen Karam

hen the Guild asked me to have a conversation with Terrence McNally, it was a full circle moment for me. When I was fifteen years old and living in Scranton, I fell in love with Terrence's play Master Class (I'd seen a clip of Zoe Caldwell on the Tony Awards). That play

was not only an introduction to Terrence's incredible body of work, but also to the world of opera and the triumphs and trials of a life in the arts. My first play was a parody of *Master Class* called "Master Ass" (don't ask). When I finished it, I did the kind of thing only a weird teenager from Scranton would do. I put it in an envelope and mailed it to Terrence c/o the Dramatists Guild. Some kind soul at the Guild received this package and forwarded it on to Terrence McNally in 1996. Terrence wrote me back:

Years later, we met at an opening, and I learned he'd seen a play of mine. I told him about the letter he wrote me. He had no memory of it, likely because, for Terrence, this act of remarkable generosity was second nature to him. For all his astonishing success, Terrence remains a fierce champion of new talent and aspiring playwrights. I was honored to be able to sit down with him to discuss the incredible year he is having, with his 21st and 22nd Broadway plays all opening in 2014-15.

Dear Stephen Karam.
Thanks for your letter & the generous words about my work.
They meant a lat.
Denyoyed the forody. I think it's my first.
Hood luck to you with your work.
I look forward to seeing a fley of yours.
Veneral helpy





THOM KAINE

STEPHEN KARAM: You are having an incredible year. It's not the first time you are having an incredible year, but what has this been like? You are entering the final stretch of previews for *The Visit* at the Lyceum and at the same time you have *It's Only A Play* at the Jacobs. Did you think that these two shows would be running on Broadway at the same time? And less than a year ago *Mothers and Sons* was at the Golden.

TERRENCE MCNALLY: You just have to do your work in this business. Every day is different and it's one day at a time. The best-laid plans in the theater usually go awry anyway and unexpected things like "Hey, let's do *The Visit* in Williamstown" last summer turn into something else.

Nathan Lane always said, "I would like to do *It's Only a Play* one day." Suddenly he was free and all these other wonderful actors were also free. If we had planned any of this, none of it would have happened.

STEPHEN KARAM: When did you learn *The Visit* was coming to Broadway?

TERRENCE MCNALLY: After we did it in Williamstown, the producer Tom Kirdahy said, "I think this show should be on Broadway and I'm going to get it there. And I just say to you all – I can't promise you – please don't take a job without calling me first." And people trusted him and turned things down.

Tom would say, "I really think I can make this happen."

Inside he must have been terrified and made of steel too. Because that's a big commitment to make to people: don't take another job hoping that this will come through. And then getting a theater in a very busy season. He made it all happen. And John Doyle and Graciela Daniele reinvented a way of making this musical work as it never had before. I always believed in *The Visit* and John Kander and Chita Rivera always believed in it, too. The older you get, the better you get at waiting.

STEPHEN KARAM: The first production was what, 2001?

TERRENCE McNally: Yes, with Frank Galati [directing] and Ann Reinking [choreographing]. And it was a terrific production. But the time has to be right and things just didn't come together after the Goodman Theatre production in Chicago. I would never belittle the wonderful work Frank and Ann did. But because the show had been done before, John and I were more willing to look at in a different way when a new director and choreographer came aboard. Fred Ebb died shortly after [we did it in] Chicago. John and I always "check" with him first before we make a change. We think he would love the new energy and vision and interpretation John Doyle and Graciela Daniele have brought to our material. There has been some rewriting, of course, but it's a different way of interpreting the story and we were more open to change because we had seen our vision of the show when it was first produced at the Goodman. And this incarnation all started with a student workshop production at Pace College two years ago in downtown New York. John and Grazie showed us their intentions and we were thrilled at this new take on by now very familiar material.

The Visit was good before but it wasn't great. Now for me, it's great. Whether you or anyone else agrees is something else. I'm proud of it. I really think we have all done something special and I think New York is lucky to see it. Chita is giving an unforget-table performance that will be talked about forever.

I'd put it up there with Merman in *Gypsy* and Lansbury in *Sweeney Todd*.

STEPHEN KARAM: Does it feel special to have a year that seems reflective of your body of work – a year where you have a new play, then a new musical opening alongside a Broadway revival of a play that you wrote years ago?

TERRENCE MCNALLY: It's Only A Play closed out of town ignominiously in Philadelphia almost 30 years ago. And now it's playing in the same theater where my first play, And Things that Go Bump In the Night, opened ignominiously in 1965. So that's kind of a wonderful reversal of fortune. I get to say some rather rude things about critics eight shows a week and then live to tell the tale.

STEPHEN KARAM: I have a grey acting edition of *It's Only A Play* play from, was it from a Manhattan Theater Club revival?

Terrence McNally: It's essentially the same play, but 80% of the dialogue is new. But it's the same situation. The playwright's prayer and the review are the main things that have not changed.

I always wanted to do it again on Broadway. A play about Broadway should be done on Broadway. We didn't do it with the right people the first time. If you don't have the right people, and assuming your script is good (and sometimes our scripts aren't good), if you don't have the right actors and director and designers the play is doomed. I always say Shakespeare had great actors. He wouldn't have written great parts unless he had actors he knew could play Hamlet and Lear.

And then you know, there's a young man in It's Only a Play, Micah Stock. I am so glad there's someone in my play making their Broadway debut who got his part the old fashioned way. And I don't mean sleeping with anyone.

Two years ago, I was commissioned by the Pearl Theatre Company off-Broadway and wrote a play called And Away We Go. And Micah came to an open audition and I just said, "This guy is great. He hasn't done anything yet but so what? He's great" And then I said to [ack [O'Brien] and Nathan [Lane]. "Do you



JOAN MARCUS

remember that young man in that play?" "Oh my god, yeah." And now he's on stage and opens the play with twenty minutes with Nathan Lane. Nathan is a genius actor and very generous, but if someone is not playing at his level – off with their heads. He loves working with Micah. What a lesson Micah is getting about what it means to be a stage actor. Eight shows a week opposite Nathan Lane! Just as a young dancer, actress, singer, Michelle Veintimilla in *The Visit* who plays young Claire is having a similar "wow" debut. I said, "You are learning more being on stage eight shows a week with Chita Rivera than you would ever get at any conservatory."

STEPHEN KARAM: Who gave you your first shot on Broadway? Let's also establish this is your...what? How many Broadway shows have you had? Do you even know at this point?

TERRENCE MCNALLY: I don't count them, but I'm told this is Number 22. Broadway, off Broadway, off-off—they're all theatre and they all demand the best of us. I felt every bit as much pressure at the Pearl as I do at the Lyceum. Right after college, I got a job as a stage manager at The Actor's Studio and I wrote a play called And Things That Go Bump in the Night. And they did it at The Playwrights Unit. And in the audience was someone from the Rockefeller foundation. I always tell people, you never know who is out there. There is always one person in the audience

IOAN MARCUS



who can help you. And they were trying to find two plays to launch their new American plays series at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

In the early 60's the theater and new American playwrights were really hot. Sam Shepard, Edward Albee, David Mamet, they were all on the cover of Time and Newsweek. To be an American playwright was sexy. It seemed everyone wanted to be a playwright and plays were just getting picked up and produced without today's development and workshops. My play was chosen. We did Bump in Minneapolis to interesting, controversial, mixed reviews. Ted Mann and Paul Libin of Circle in the Square had been so successful downtown with their O'Neill and Williams revivals, they wanted to do Circle in the Square uptown on Broadway and I was going to be their calling card, so we did the play at the Royale, now the Jacobs. My first play went from The Actor's Studio to Minneapolis to Broadway.

I was so nervous and green. I think with playwriting you have an instinct for it or you don't and then it's self-learning.

Stephen Karam: But everybody doesn't have the instinct that you have to go from creating your own original plays to the kind of collaboration that you have to accept to write a musical. Do you find that you can work with a variety of different kinds of lyricists and composers? Are there certain qualities in the ones that you like to work with?

TERRENCE McNally: I have to like their music. The music trumps everything, including the book. We have to see eye to eye on the "sound" of the show. The lyrics have to sound like the same character when they sing as when they speak But I have been really lucky. I worked David Yazbek on his first show and I think David is so wonderfully talented. I learned a lot from Kander and Ebb. Lynn [Ahrens] and Stephen [Flaherty] are just joys to work with. I choose my collaborators on a musical as carefully as I choose a life partner. It's a long haul from first day of work to opening night.

STEPHEN KARAM: It seems like you are invigorated by the people whose work you are drawn to, but you don't seem fazed by taking a chance on new talent, which is inspiring. It was Yazbek's first big, Broadway show, right?

TERRENCE McNally: People took a chance on me. You have to. People ask, "Where do you get your amazing casts?' I go to the theater! I have friends who are very successful playwrights and they don't go off-Broadway. They don't go off-off. And they seldom go to Broadway either. You find Nathan Lane and Micah Stock before they are Nathan Lane and Micah Stock.

STEPHEN KARAM: You see lots of things off-Broadway. I mean, that's how I met you.

TERRENCE MCNALLY: Yeah. But most of my theatre friends don't even know about that room [Roundabout Underground] where Speech and Debate was done.

STEPHEN KARAM: You have to go down a lot of stairs.

TERRENCE MCNALLY: I found an elevator when it was over. I "discovered" Tracee Chimo there a year or two ago. I discovered you there. I mean, why else

IOAN MARCUS



live in New York unless you go to the theater a lot. I mean, like every fuckin' night. I'm serious.

STEPHEN KARAM: So do you still get excited and thrilled? You don't sound remotely jaded.

TERRENCE McNally: I'm not jaded, but I think the first time I really took it in was during Mothers and Sons last spring. I suddenly saw the marquee as if for the first time, It said, "Terrence McNally's Mothers and Sons" and I suddenly let my shoulders drop a foot or two, "Yes, this is what I wanted to do with my life." It only took me 75 years.

STEPHEN KARAM: What was it about that moment?

TERRENCE MCNALLY: I don't know. I didn't take it in when Master Class was in the same theater. Which was certainly a bigger success.

And then the other day, and this was like a scene from a movie, I left a preview of The Visit and slipped in during a matinee of It's Only a Play. It was sold out. The audience was laughing and they were really moved where I wanted them to be moved. The play is much better now than when it opened in September. It's deeper and richer and more nuanced. And just as funny. I think it's being heard as a play and not just a comedy. And the audience was happy. And it made me happy that I had made 1,000 people happy and I felt proud of that. I was proud of the actors work. I was proud of our work. But for the first time I was really proud of me and I felt good about it. I think that's the polar opposite of jaded.

DRAMATISTS GUILD OF AMERICA is the professional association of playwrights, composers, lyricists & librettists. DPS was founded in 1936 by Dramatists Guild of America. www.dramatistsguild.com