



# STEPHEN KARAM

by Terrence McNally

In last year's *Season In Review* issue, we featured Stephen Karam's interview of Terrence McNally who, within a twelve-month period had a new play (*Mothers and Sons*), a new musical (*The Visit*), and a hit revival (*It's Only A Play*) all on Broadway. This season, Stephen Karam made his Broadway debut with his acclaimed play *The Humans*, so we thought we'd turn the tables. When we asked Terrence to interview Stephen, he said, "I'd love to do this. I always like bookends in the theatre." So do we.

TERRENCE McNALLY: I vividly remember becoming familiar with your work the first time. The play was *Speech And Debate* at the Roundabout Theatre's black box theatre in the bowels of the Laura Pels. I knew within minutes I was in the presence of a real playwright as opposed to a writer or a playwright: someone who knew what his characters were doing, not just what they were saying. By the end of the evening, I knew Stephen Karam was a playwright whose work I would be following eagerly for a long time. That doesn't happen often but it's lovely when it does. I realize that's a compliment, not a question. Nevertheless.

STEPHEN KARAM: This is a great opening question be-

cause I don't have to answer it! I wouldn't mind if they were all like this...

TERRENCE McNALLY: From *Speech And Debate* to *Sons Of The Prophet*, upstairs at the Laura Pels on the main stage this time, to *The Humans* currently playing on Broadway at the Helen Hayes, it's a great trajectory. Would you have had it any other way? Did it seem a long time coming or was it overnight?

STEPHEN KARAM: I try to just look at things project by project, but yes—looking back now, it's incredible that I was able to start in the basement black box theater and three plays later arrive at The Helen Hayes. I'll admit it's a nice narrative, because it really is. But the truth is, the highs and lows don't have anything to do with the size of the theater I'm in—it's really all based on whether or not I'm proud of what I've made, did we get to the finish line with something that I believe in. Am I pushing myself to be a better writer. And it definitely didn't feel like overnight success, but again, I say that realizing I've been fortunate. I had to work very hard from the minute I got to NYC, and for nine years was working at various law firms to give myself the security and bravery to get out my first three plays. I realize nine years of a day job isn't that long before finding some success and being able to quit (that's when I left), but to any writer who's worked 30 hours a week at a law firm...they'll know what I'm talking about—let's just say, it's doesn't go by *quickly*.

TERRENCE McNALLY: When I meet someone I like and

admire, I'm eager to know as much about them as they care to tell.

STEPHEN KARAM: Ha, buy me a beer and I'll tell all (most) but if anything I feel like I share more about my psyche in my work than I'd ever be comfortable sharing in a public conversation. In other words, I'm going to let you down, I don't care to tell much...but it's probably why I'm a writer. I like putting it on the page.

TERRENCE McNALLY: When that person is a fellow playwright, I'm very interested in the writers, thinkers, artists, events that have shaped their own vision and craftsmanship.

STEPHEN KARAM: My influences are too numerous to mention—I can honestly trace influence from the first play I remember seeing (*Little Shop of Horrors*) to every play, poem, dance, person, event since...including the fact that I'm probably just as influenced by art I don't like. The stuff we reject says a lot about us, right? It all gets processed and influences, I think. My syllabus is probably some indicator of this, it bounces from Chekhov and Maeterlinck to Williams to Fornes to Freud to Hansberry and Wilson and Churchill and Wallace Shawn to lots of theory and writing that has nothing to do with theater at all. That's probably the most important, really!

The list goes on and on and on...my colleagues are deeply inspiring, but again—too many to mention!

In terms of *The Humans*, I'll try to be more specific. I was inspired by Lorca's writings when he happened to be visiting New York City during the 1929 stock market crash. He manages to capture a downtown NYC we all know but manages to make it all feel strange and new—he's seeing it through a stranger's eyes, it becomes unfamiliar, and it's utterly uncanny and terrifying. Initially, I was searching for a way to explore the way people cope with this weird and modern incurrent of fear and terror and anxiety via a play that was actually...a little scary?—a play that might actually conjure the kind of fear it was exploring. So the thriller genre was a big influence, including psychological

**DRAMATISTS  
GUILD OF  
AMERICA** is the  
professional association for  
playwrights, composers,  
lyricists, and librettists. DPS  
was founded by the Guild in  
1936.



thrillers by Hitchcock and Polanski (*Repulsion*) and even stage thrillers like *Wait Until Dark* (I mean, at the end of *The Humans*, I literally have a man going up a dark staircase which is a twist on the classic trope in which audiences watching a horror film might want to yell to the beautiful young virgin—don't go up the stairs!)—I became interested in making it a genre-collision, making a family thriller. The more the play became about the family itself, I realized how deeply I was influenced (aren't we all?) by the great American family plays that are embedded in our psyche—*Long Day's Journey*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Raisin in the Sun* and more ghostly modern plays like *The Piano Lesson*. But none of it was conscious; *The Humans* wouldn't exist in its genre-mashed form if I started out to just write a family play. It was a winding journey to find its present form, where, essentially it's a family play deeply infected and inspired by my love of the horror/thriller genre.

TERRENCE McNALLY: I started writing plays in the early 60s. It seemed like it was fun all the time. It still does, looking back after more than 50 years. Your generation seems to have a much more difficult time being heard, getting produced and making theatre relevant to the American culture in general. I know it's the work that matters the most but is your generation

of theatre artists having a good time as well? I hope so. We sure did.

STEPHEN KARAM: Oh man, I am having a good time, but you're right that putting on a play—getting a greenlight, it's very difficult and I've had to negotiate several situations to avoid development hell. The hurdles that must be jumped—and I say this realizing I have had the fairy-tale version of this story—are hard because the fear is the result of how expensive it is to now produce a play at the various non-profits.

That being said, some of the most exciting theater is happening off the beaten path, not just downtown, but all over the country, outside of NYC. It's always been that way, and is no different now. If I had a magic wand, it would be amazing to be able to give each major arts institution magic grants to fully fund one production a year with the following criteria: they choose the play they love but are most terrified to produce, because they are worried it will fail. I think amazing things would come from that!

TERRENCE McNALLY: Congratulations and bravo. We're all looking forward to the rest of your life.

STEPHEN KARAM: Thanks, Terrence.



The Broadway production  
of *The Humans*