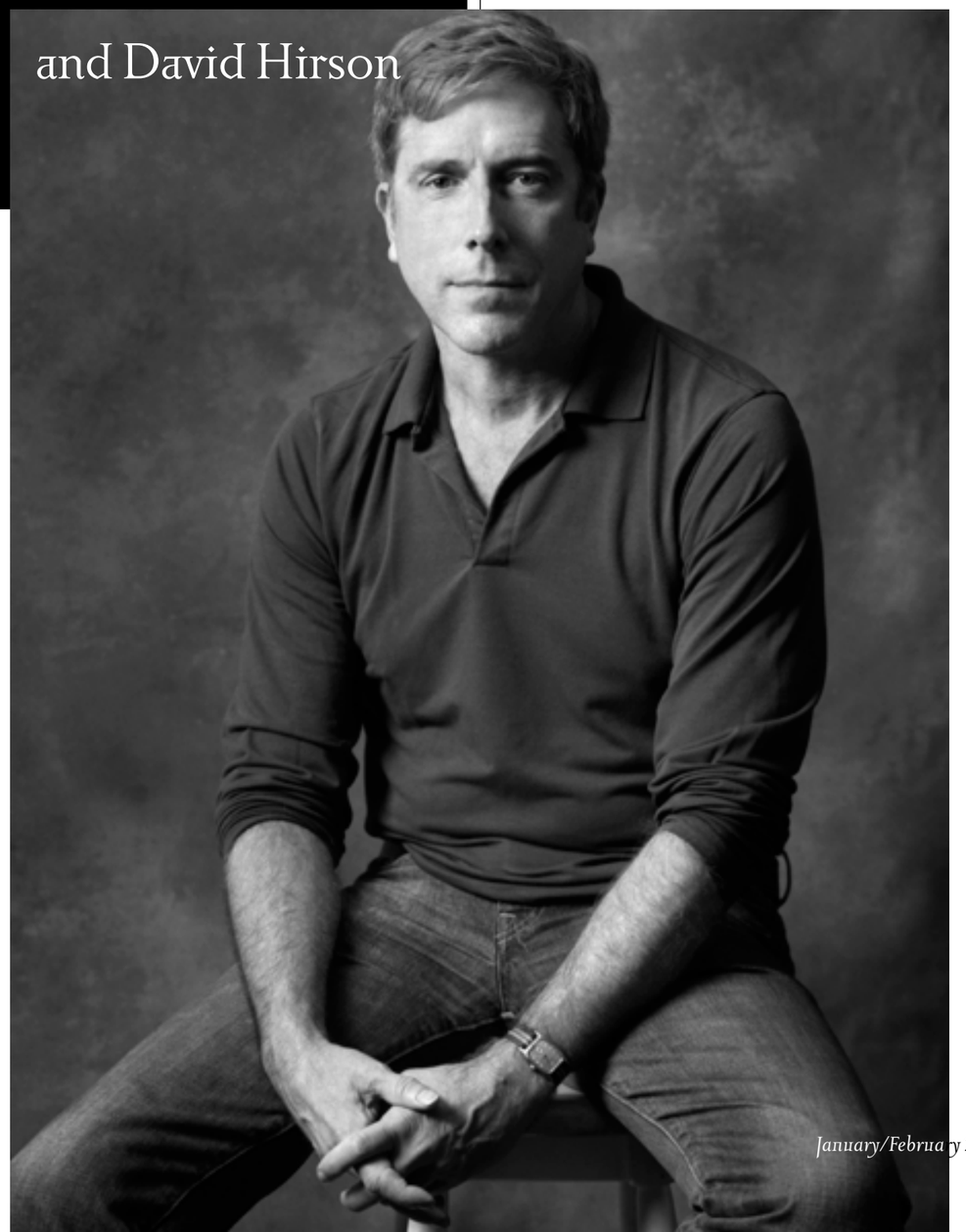
Writing Verse

with Johnna Adams and David Hirson

The following is an excerpt from a roundtable discussion held October 14, 2015.

Photos by Walter Kurtz



Joey Stocks: Do you begin specifically wanting to write a verse play? If not, how does verse find its way into the play?

David Hirson: I don't think I've ever sat down and said, "I'm going to write a verse play" or "I'm going to write a prose play." Plays are very insistent about the form in which they will allow themselves to be written, and the language that's appropriate to them.

I was certainly aware, from an early age, of verse plays as a category. And, given the allure of their specific challenges, not to mention their scarcity in the modern age, the prospect of writing one had its appeal.

But no suitable idea ever presented itself to me. Then, in my late twenties, my imagination was seized by what was to become the subject matter of my first play, *La Bête*. And when I began to engage with it in earnest, I thought, "Oh, this is a play that wants to be written in verse. And in rhyme, as well!"

Johnna Adams: I had the same impulse. Richard Wilbur's plays were deeply inspiring to me. In college I worked on the crew of his *Phaedra*, so I saw like 40 performances of our college production backstage and the rhythm, the cadence, and the beauty of the poetry was inspiring. About ten years after college, I saw a production in California at A Noise Within. And it inspired that same, "I want to climb Mount Everest" feeling about wanting to write a verse play.

It took me years to find the right idea. But definitely I did start with the idea that I want the challenge of writing a verse play and Richard Wilbur was a huge inspiration.

David Hirson: I, too, was inspired by Wilbur's work. Less significantly, though, by his superb translations (to which Johnna refers) than by his original lyrics to the musical *Candide*, which he co-wrote with John Latouche. There was a particular vivaciousness and intricacy in his words-for-music that I found to be compulsively arresting.

The same, of course, was true of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics. And I became consumed, at a young age, with the verbal brilliance of a few tour-de-force, tongue-twisting arias from musicals ("Ya Got Trouble" from *The Music Man*) and opera ("Largo al factotum" from *The Barber of Seville*.) I began thinking about how the linguistic dazzle of these pieces might be able to assume a stand-alone thrill. So I came to writing *La Bête* less from an interest in verse plays *per se* than from an impulse to translate into the spoken word the energy and excitement of song.

Joey Stocks: Why aren't more verse plays written today?

Johnna Adams: People don't think verse plays are going to get produced is one of the reasons, I guess.

There is almost a living newspaper quality to straight plays right now, and ideas that don't fit into a broader national conversation on some sort of issue, have a harder time getting produced.

Verse plays are more nostalgic and imaginative than straight plays, generally. They don't seem to fit this modern theater landscape, subjectwise. I see that with *La Bête* and David Ives' verse plays. They follow the Maxwell Anderson rule that verse plays should be about an historical subject or time period. His philosophy was you couldn't necessarily write a verse play about a middle manager at an office vying for a promotion.

My verse play was set in the Napoleonic wars and I also did one that was about the first Christian martyr in Roman times, *Hripsime*. You know crazy, ridiculous ideas. I don't know that we go there in the modern theater for straight plays. I wish we had crazier ideas in straight plays.

David Hirson: I really can't tell you. They're probably thought of as being too archaic. After mine, maybe people decided enough already!

Joey Stocks: What are the joys of writing a play in verse?

Johnna Adams: One of the reasons I write verse plays, when I get that itch to write one, is the energy. David, you were talking about translating the energy of the opera into spoken word. I find there's some sort of perpetual delight machine in rhyming verse.

David Hirson: Yes.

Johnna Adams: It can infuse the entire production. On my *Lickspittles* play I didn't think anybody was ever going to produce it. It's a large cast, rhyming iambic hexameter because I didn't know what I was doing and still don't. It's a Napoleonic period piece; no one was going to produce this. So I did the stage directions in rhyming verse to go with it. The energy that gave every reading of it and the energy that brought to every cast was amazing. The audience didn't see [the stage directions], but the cast and the crew and the producers did. And they appreciated the care and energy that went into it. The productions are always infused with something so joyous because of that playful decision.

It's like when actors play the energy game and throw an invisible ball of energy around in a circle, the whole production had that feel because of the rhyming. It put energy in the air.

David Hirson: I like that you say "perpetual delight machine"! My introduction to Molière was in French, in high school, where we were exposed to audio recordings, from the 1950s I think, of his plays performed live at the Comédie-Française. The sound of histrionic, wildly voluble actors declaiming at breakneck speed, interspersed with metronomic eruptions of laughter from an audience feasting on language, represented a kind of rapture that was totally new to me. It was a contagion. In writing a rhyming comedy, this headiness, of course, is an ideal devoutly to be wished. And the peculiar geometric arrangements of words, unique to the form, that can give rise to it, are in themselves a rapture to explore!

Johnna Adams: Yes. I feel like the playwright's job is to be the boat that everybody's dreams float in. If your script can't inspire, firstly, the practitioners—the actors and designers and directors—to want to be something more than they are, or to find the greatest moments in their career, then you're not quite living up to your job. And something about the verse play, to me, I felt like I was putting out a call for likeminded crazy people who wanted to try a Mount Everest climb.

David Hirson: It's funny that you say, "Putting out a call." When the original director of *La Bête* gave a copy of the play to a friend of his, a composer, and asked him what he thought of it, the composer said, "It's like a message in a bottle where the message reads, 'If you like this, get in touch.'"

Johnna Adams: Yes, yes.

David Hirson: So the people to whom it speaks tend to feel spoken-to profoundly.

Johnna Adams: Yes. And I'm not exactly sure why.

David Hirson: It's part of the mystery!

Johnna Adams: I've read a little bit how nostalgia is based in uncertain times as a harkening back to safety and security and this is sort of an ultimate nostalgia play in a way even though it's completely original. *Lickspittles* wasn't really based on any myths or any historical sources, although it was historical, but there's something about that sense of familiarity that's so comforting in theater and so delightful.

It definitely is a throwback genre. We're like the dinosaurs of the dinosaurs in the theater.

David Hirson: It's a "throwback genre" only if it's limited to imitation or pastiche. But a traditional form can also offer unique opportunities for subversion! You can use familiarity to lull an audience into a *false* sense of security before pulling the rug

out from under their feet.

Johnna Adams: Yeah.

David Hirson: Maybe you meant strictly in terms of a recognizable structure?

Johnna Adams: Yes, they are responding to form. A form that has lasted and may last because it explores new possibilities within the language.

David Hirson: Yes.

Johnna Adams: You talked a bit about musicality, which is fascinating to me because I'm tone deaf. I have no sense of rhythm. I am the most unmusical person on the planet. I think that when people read my verse plays that probably shines through a bit. I imagine any musician in my cast cringes through the rehearsals, because I don't do fantastic meter, but I love it so much and I don't know exactly why.

David Hirson: You don't do fantastic meter deliberately or because –

Johnna Adams: Because I suck. *[Laughter]* Yeah. It's a mixture of both sometimes. I'm definitely more fluid with meter for the punch lines sometimes or to get the line right or just because it's the wrong rhythm, but it's a rhythm I like for that particular line. I'm a little all over the place with how many iambs I actually do.

David Hirson: Okay.

Johnna Adams: Now I remember you saying before you're not like that.

David Hirson: I'm not. I'm maniacal when it comes to meter. A strategy that's discouraged, incidentally, by Wilbur in the introduction to his translation of (I believe) *The School for Wives*. I came across this when, after having been at work on *La Bête* for some time, I suddenly realized I had no model for the length of a play in couplets! As it turned out, *The School for Wives* was about 1800 lines. "Excellent," I thought! "We're off and running! I've written about 1200 so far!"

Johnna Adams: *[Laughs]*

David Hirson: But then I glanced at the introduction. In it, Wilbur said, basically, that while pentameter presents no problems for a reader, in the theatre it's essential to break the line with some frequency to avoid stupefying the audience.

Mischievously, I put a version of that very edict into Valere's mouth in *La Bête's* play-within-the-play: "Pentameter, though pleasing on the page, / Is SO moNOtoNOUS upON the STAGE!"

Johnna Adams: *[Laughs]*

David Hirson: The comic irony being, of course, that not only those lines, but every line of the play, are cast in pentameter iambs of almost perverse rigidity.

Johnna Adams: Yes.

David Hirson: So, it's funny we both have a rather different relation to this aspect of things.

Johnna Adams: Yes and I love the actual writing of the verse plays. To me it feels like a cross between doing a crossword puzzle and writing a play. You know it really has a gaming feel which I try to incorporate because I like word games and I like games. I guess most people do. I try to incorporate that in my writing sometimes. I'll make up some sort of game to get myself to write the play.

Sometimes it's selecting scene titles. I wrote a play based on a Keats poem, *Sans Merci*. In order to get myself through it, I didn't let myself pick the next scene title until I was done with the previous scene. It sounds ridiculous, but it got me through the writing of that play, because I was playing a game with myself.

Joey Stocks: Right.

Johnna Adams: And writing verse, the game is finding that correct rhyme and counting syllables. And the fun and the joy of finding the surprising rhyme every second line of the play.

I found I wanted to focus on the rhyming word and not the set-up word when I wrote my verse play, because to me it's more fun to have a surprising word come on the rhyme, rather than using a strange word that is a challenge to rhyme.

I wish David Ives was here, because when I hear his plays I feel like he has the opposite approach. He often puts a weird word out there and then rhymes it with something. I kind of do it the opposite way, because I love the surprise of completing it. It definitely will take me in different directions.

David Hirson: Working in a form with such clearly defined boundaries narrows the overwhelming, potentially crippling chaos of infinite possibility. And that, paradoxically, can be very freeing to the imagination.

Johnna Adams: Yes.

Joey Stocks: Going back a moment, David, you were talking about being inspired, in part, by musical theatre lyrics. Kirsten Childs asks if either of you have ever written lyrics for a musical? If not, is it something you want to try?

David Hirson: Yes, I would love to write lyrics for a musical, and I've come close a number of times. With amazing composers! But for some reason I've always held back. I'm not sure why. It remains something I would dearly love to do.

Johnna Adams: I have not tried it. I worry a little that I am not musically-savvy enough to write lyrics. But I would love to try it.

Joey Stocks: What are some of the challenges of the process?

Johnna Adams: I find that it takes a lot of time mentally and a lot of mental space. When I'm writing a straight play I can write for two hours and that would be fine. If I'm writing a verse play I need to have the entire day cleared for some reason. If I'm sitting to write at 8:00 AM and I've got a dinner date, forget it, my mind is too cluttered to write.

I mean I don't really need that time, but I feel like I do. I feel like I should approach it like a child running to the sandbox on a playground and that takes a feeling, a mental freedom that requires space.

It's also hard to come up with an idea that can support the verse and that is also stage worthy, so sometimes I stumble there.

I don't have a whole lot of appropriate verse ideas. When I do get ideas, they tend to be European-influenced because those plays are the verse models. Molière-type plays. I sometimes have a hard time mining for the right ideas that fit the form.

Joey Stocks: Tina Howe asks "Who's in charge of the verse, you or your character?"

Johnna Adams: Sometimes rhymezone.com is in charge of my verse as much as me or the characters. *[laughs]* I've definitely had rhymezone or rhyming dictionaries suggest monologues to me. If it's not the rhyming dictionary it's probably the character that is more in charge than me most of the time. That's hard to say. That's a tough question.

David Hirson: I'm not really sure. Neither, really. I guess I would say the music is in charge.

Johnna Adams: Yes.

David Hirson: The music of the language tends to dictate where things are going to go.

Joey Stocks: While writing or during rehearsals or in performances, did you find yourself rhyming in casual conversation?

David Hirson: We're doing it right now, Joey! It's a plague! It's an inevitable condition of living in a verse universe. It's not dissimilar to the manner in which a play's dialogue quickly begins to invade the everyday chatter of the company working on it.

Johnna Adams: Yes.

David Hirson: With a play in rhyme, however, there is the added temptation to improvise hilarious couplets in mundane situations, which, while amusing to the perpetrators, succeeds mightily in trying the patience of outsiders.

Johnna Adams: It's really fun to watch audience members at intermission. They'll all be trying to rhyme as much as possible.

Joey Stocks: When your verse play is in rehearsals, what are rewrites like?

Johnna Adams: Rewrites can be very painful especially if you try to do the rhyming stage directions on top of dialogue *[laughs]* and are trying to keep up. But it's not different than a normal play. Not process-wise. You're still using the same dramatic principles to understand if there's a problem. It requires dramaturgy and structural analysis like any play revisions.

But then the time spent doing rewrites is triple, quadruple the time I would spend on a straight play usually. Habits of perfectionism kick in and you don't want the rewrites to stick out because you were lazy about the verse because you were doing rewrites under time pressure. So I definitely try to get the script in as good of a shape as I can before rehearsals. Or just make the cast live with things they don't like.

I've had very good luck because the productions attracted the kind of actor that can do anything and sell anything. Get Shakespearean actors, trained actors, really exciting actors or it's not worth doing. We cast people in my *Lickspittles* production who could read the phone book aloud for two hours and make it work and make it funny. That really helped. So I got to cheat a little bit I think in that regard. But the rewrites I did were definitely late and painful.

David Hirson: Didn't Neil Simon say, "Hell is being out of town with a Broadway musical"? Well, I was in the not-unrelated hell of being out of town with a Broadway-bound play for which rewrites had to be produced, under pressure …

Johnna Adams: …In verse…

David Hirson: …in heroic couplets.

Johnna Adams: *[Laughs]* Yeah.

David Hirson: There were evenings when I would return to my hotel room after a preview, watch the snow falling on Boston Common, and wonder "Gee, am I on a high enough floor that if I jump from here I can end my life right now?" It was a fearsome thing to go through. Many, if not all, writers for the theatre are well versed (no pun intended!) in this brand of terror. But the terror is redoubled when the technical demands are so unforgiving.

Johnna Adams: Yes.

Joey Stocks: Speaking of the level of difficulty, can you talk about the challenges of actors interpreting verse? I feel like verse plays also require more of an audience than a work of prose.

Johnna Adams: I feel like it takes a certain kind of actor to do the verse work. If I'm invited to go sit and watch auditions and help with the casting on a verse play, the actors require a certain—I don't want to say a level of training, because that's not right. People can be highly trained and still not be any good at verse.

Joey Stocks: Yes.

Johnna Adams: It requires a certain sense of fun and playfulness and inner joy. The kind of actors I like best are the ones who would be good at clowning or who are in touch with child-like qualities. To me they make the best verse actors and they have the best approach, because there's a fearlessness there and there's a joy that infuses their dialogue that complements the energy of the verse and the lyricism.

Verse plays tend to be fun productions. At least my productions were really fun because of the people we had in the room. I mean the cast bonded really well. You know we had a great time putting it together.

It requires a definite facility with language and rhythm and comic timing and maybe even musicality. Some of the better actors also had a sense of musicality, much better than mine.

It also seems to demand more of an audience in a way that's fascinating to watch.

It's like when you pay for something—it's worth more to you. If I sign-up for a class that's free, I don't care as much about it but if I pay $1,000.00 for a class, I'm more likely to actually attend. If you're in college and you're using your own money rather than your parents you're more likely to attend. There's something about a verse play that requires more from me as an audience member, so I get more invested and more passionately attached to it. I think if you're someone who likes verse plays or likes musicals, the cousins of verse plays, it's because of how much they require from you. The investment required heightens your appreciation of it somehow.

I think the opposite can also be true. There can be people who feel like they're walking into a wall of words and they don't like it. Shakespeare can feel that way, we all know. If it's not handled very creatively. He's a verse playwright too. I can be as boring as Shakespeare *[laughs]* to some audiences with my verse plays.

David Hirson: Based on what I've seen, a sense of playfulness is not enough. A significant level of training makes a huge difference, and the more comprehensive the better! Physically, certainly. And vocally most of all. The demands are similar to those of opera. You can have the greatest intuitive actors in the world, but if they're not technically equipped, the text is bound to languish. It will never spring fully to life. It will never sing!

Johnna Adams: Yes.

David Hirson: With respect to what it asks from an audience, verse differs from prose partly in the kind of listening it requires, and also in its dependence on receptivity to a high degree of artifice. Some people love it, almost innately, and wrap themselves in it like an eiderdown; others are repelled as though being assaulted by an alien invasion. Reactions tend to be polarized. A deaf man wrote to me once and said, "I couldn't hear a word of your play, but I like the cut of your jib!" Which is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the guy in Boston who punched me when he found out I was the author!

Johnna Adams: Oh God.

David Hirson: And during one particularly riotous preview in New York, I saw some theatergoers actually confronting each other!

Johnna Adams: Wow.

David Hirson: A woman in a heavy mink coat stepped out of her seat into the aisle during Valere's long monologue and wheeled on the audience, bellowing, in protest to their every roar, "It's not funny! It's not funny!" The brave actors plowed ahead and the audience continued to howl and she continued to rage. It was scary, but also thrilling! You don't get to witness that in a Broadway theater very often!

Johnna Adams: No.

David Hirson: Because the style of the play seemed difficult to categorize, and since it was written in verse, there was a constant sense of disorientation in the air, and a clear division in the audience between those who enjoyed the experience and those who felt provoked by it. Sometimes, people even struggled to understand what kind of animal it was. "This isn't an original play, you know," I overheard a woman say once, at intermission. Her friend said, "Yes, it is!" She said,

"No, it's a translation of an adaptation by Molnár." *[Laughter]* I thought, "Well, that just broke the record for most wrong things said in the fewest words!" The point is, if you write something that's considered so outré, you should prepare yourself for just about anything! Or, rather, brace yourself!

Johnna Adams: Oh God no.

Joey Stocks: It seems to me verse plays are the most theatrical. The language is so compact—the action happening right on the line—it creates a momentum. There's no delay. It's immediate. A director from Alabama Shakespeare Festival once told me that acting verse should be an athletic event. I think an audience can watch verse play and simultaneously enjoy the plot, marvel at the playwright's deft use of language, and relish in the virtuoso skill of the actors with a similar appreciation we have for outstanding athleticism. The stakes are high in the language *and* the performance, so when it all succeeds, we succeed. And then of course, when an audience anticipates the rhyme, there's the delight of the payoff. You're always aware you're watching theatre.

David Hirson: It's true that surprisingly launched rhymes can, to extend the athletic metaphor, offer a release not unlike driving a well teed-up golf ball down the middle of the fairway! But it's a vulgar tactic that should be deployed only sparingly. Rhymes that call attention to themselves for purposes of cleverness or comic effect are also, in some sense, guilty pleasures, and, if overplayed, run the risk of cheapening the surrounding material.

Joey Stocks: Yes.

David Hirson: However delightful the "payoff" might be, writers and actors are well advised to exercise restraint!

Johnna Adams: I like what you're saying about the immediacy that it brings to the experience for both actors and audience. I think that may in part be the source of the joy that we feel in these plays so strongly. We live in a time when there are no incentives for communal entertainment. We're all on our iPhones engaged in solitary pursuits. Theater is that quintessential place we come together for communal experience.

When theater is as intimate, immediate and in-the-present as it can be, that's its greatest strength and its greatest source of joy. That's a key element of what makes verse plays so fantastic. It is a huge demand on the actors to stay in the moment on every level—acting-wise and just memorization-wise. It's harder to memorize rhyming lines and deliver them.

David Hirson: Do you think so?

Johnna Adams: I've had actors say so.

David Hirson: Really?

Johnna Adams: For a lot of actors it is harder, because you can't adlib. There are ad-libbers out there who like to approximate. But if you miss the rhyme it's immediately obvious and it throws both you and the audience.

That kind of energy of, "Am I going to remember these lines," for an actor can make it feel a bit like a prize fight. You've got the actor in one corner and the lines in the other corner throwing punches at each other sometimes. That can make for high drama.

David Hirson: I think actors have an easier time remembering lines in verse, actually. For the same reason that people tend to recall poetry more readily than prose. There's a lapidary, structural quality. That's true of song lyrics, too! Once they're in your head, they're often stuck there forever! Whether you like it or not!

Joey Stocks: Yes. Since we're talking about actors, talk a bit about character and writing dialogue in verse.

Johnna Adams: That can be very challenging because everybody has the same rhyme sometimes when you're writing verse. I had to come up with broad characters with very distinctive speech patterns and language choices. Language choice becomes a very big deal to show characterization when you don't have pace and rhyme. You can't vary that. You can't have anybody talking monosyllables effectively.

The broader the character the more easily I could handle variation in my verse plays. It is a challenge to make everybody distinct when all characters have the same driving rhythm and need to rhyme every other line. But that's part of the challenge of it and part of what makes it fun.

David Hirson: It's incumbent upon the dramatist to locate places in the potentially straitjacketing gallop of meter where characters can expand emotionally and breathe.

Johnna Adams: Yes.

David Hirson: And it's in those places where the tick-tock of rhythm ceases to be a straitjacket, and becomes a pulse. A heartbeat. In the life of the character. And in the life of the play.

Joey Stocks: Do you have a particular section or passage or exchange of lines or something that's kind of your favorite? Like you feel like it's maybe your most successful?

Johnna Adams: In *Lickspittles* I played with different types of verse. In each act there is a different type of poetry; sestinas, limericks, sonnets. I had one character that didn't rhyme at all, Candine, the go-between. It's a world in which people self-consciously rhyme. They know they're rhyming. And my lead character, Guthbert the male go-between, really hates modern women who speak in unrhymed, free verse. Like Candine.

So at the end of the play, Candine is captured by Napoleon. Thinking she is dying, she starts rhyming and tells Guthbert she loves him in rhyme. And in response, Guthbert stops rhyming and tells her he loves her in free verse. My favorite part of the play was that reversal. So the favorite part of my rhyming play is probably Guthbert's clumsy love declaration in which he doesn't rhyme at all. It always kind of gets me emotionally.

David Hirson: I would say … no. *[Laughter]* Maybe with the play I'm writing now. But when it comes to a work from the past, where change is no longer an option, I tend to share the credo of certain film actors who say they can't stand to watch themselves on screen. It's too fixed, and therefore too loaded.

Joey Stocks: Sure.

David Hirson: I can relish the production and the performances. But however wonderful they might be, and despite feeling pride at this or that in the writing, it's always something of a relief to reach the end. And in that respect, my favorite line is the last line! *[Laughter]*

Joey Stocks: What would you say to someone who is thinking about writing a verse play?

Johnna Adams: I would love to have more people out there writing verse plays. So I would like to be very encouraging to this hypothetical verse playwright.

David Hirson: I'd ask them, "Have you ever considered law school?"

Johnna Adams: *[Laughs]* True. But, I feel like today TV is the drama of the people. Theater is the drama for artists. 80 percent or more of your audience is going to be artists most places you get produced. It's going to be other actors, other writers, other directors. Or patrons who are artists at heart. Because you have to get up and you have to go. And only the artists are willing to leave home for art anymore.

So it's very important for live theater, more so than

TV, to be inspiring. It's the food the artists are going to live on. It is how we come together as artists in our society. It's not how the masses come together anymore, that's just the reality. So consider that when you sit down to write a verse play. You're feeding the souls of some very needy people-- both the practitioners and the audience. If that can inspire you that's a good place to start.

I like to think of my plays as giving back in some ways for plays that have touched me and great experiences I've had in the theater. It's the only way I can try to give anything back. Verse plays create incredible immediacy. They do this better than other forms of theater. They fill people's hearts with a kind of perpetual joy that makes people want to keep creating theater and keep going, even when they don't feel like it. So if that kind of drama intrigues you and makes you want to write, then sit down and write your verse play.

David Hirson: Well, if they ruled out law school and persisted in their desire to write a play, I would say, "Great!" And if it happened to be a play in verse, then I'd say "By all means!" I would add, however, "If someone takes a swing at you, don't forget to duck!"

Joey Stocks: *[Laughs]* Thank you both.

Johnna Adams' plays include Angel Eaters, Rattlers, 8 Little Antichrists, Cockfighters, *and* The Sacred Geometry of S&M Porn. *Her plays* Gidion's Knot, Sans Merci, *and her verse play* Lickspittles, Buttonholers, and Damned Pernicious Go-Betweens *are published by Dramatists Play Service. BFA in Acting: DePaul University Theatre School, MFA in Playwriting: Hunter College.*

Since its Broadway premiere twenty-five years ago (Eugene O'Neill Theatre, 1991) and its Olivier Award-winning London debut (Lyric Hammersmith, 1992, starring Alan Cumming and Jeremy Northam), DAVID HIRSON's La Bête *continues to be produced on major stages, and in numerous languages, throughout the world. In 2010-11, it returned to Broadway (Music Box Theatre) and London's West End (Comedy Theatre) in an internationally co-produced, twentieth anniversary revival starring Mark Rylance, David Hyde Pierce and Joanna Lumley. His plays are published by Dramatists Play Service.*