

TARI STRATTON: My first question for you is a little selfish: are you as mad as I am that it's taken so long to get you two on Broadway? It ticks me off. Obviously, I'm so happy it's happening now, but hello. That's probably rude, sorry.

PAULA VOGEL: Well, you know, I'm looking at the experience as being fun and funny, because the truth of the matter is to sustain ourselves—for how long? How many decades? You can't think about Broadway. You have to get up every morning and be thankful for the artists you're working with. You have to be happy that you write the next first draft. You have to be happy that the artists you love are working with you and going forward as well.

And if we stop and think about Broadway, what we're going to feel is exclusion and bitterness. There is, I think, nothing worse than feeling *bitter* to extinguish the creative spark.

LYNN NOTTAGE: I was going to say something similar: we can't let bitterness be our guiding light because, otherwise, we'll accomplish nothing. And so, like Paula, I don't spend my days thinking about Broadway as the end game.

Of course, throughout the season I will go to Broadway and experience little fits of frustration and anger, but on a day-to-day basis, I'm really focused on my work: trying to generate interesting plays, trying to reach an audience that I want to engage with.

In Conversation:

Lynn Nottage

A lot of times [that audience] is not necessarily the audience that's on Broadway. But now that I'm *there*...[Laughter]...I'm sort of giddy and excited to be making art on a larger scale.

Today, sitting in Studio 54 rehearsing the play and looking at the number of seats, I was thinking about the rich history of that space—it was a television studio, then a very infamous nightclub, and now it has been reclaimed as a theatre. I just felt there's so much life that has moved through that theatre, and I feel proud to be part of that history.

PAULA VOGEL: That's right.

LYNN NOTTAGE: And that was really exciting to me.

PAULA VOGEL: I don't know about you, Lynn, [but] for me the significant moment was getting the Pulitzer. It was significant, but not in the way that people think. I mean, I think it made the people who love me happy. They were always proud, and they always loved me. The thing that the Pulitzer made a little easier to do was go into the next faculty meeting and say, "We have to raise money for fellowships for emerging playwrights." I mean, what I think it gave me—I don't know if this is true — was the ability to have people think a little more, "Well, maybe she knows what she's talking about."

LYNN NOTTAGE: I think this is true of Broadway, and I also think it's true of getting a prize like the Pulitzer. It gives you a certain level of visibility, because, as female artists, we're often grappling with our relative invisibility, though we're writing at the same level as our male counterparts but, somehow, we're not seen

& Paula Vogel

by Tari Stratton



and valued in the same way. And I think the Pulitzer Prize allowed me to step out of the shadows and into a little bit of the light. Suddenly, my phone began ringing in ways that it hadn't rung before. I was invited to sit on panels. I was invited to speak at universities. And subsequently, theaters were much more interested in producing my plays. So, Broadway and the Pulitzer Prize translated into exposure and access to new stages, it amplified my voice.

PAULA VOGEL: Absolutely. But I would – and it sounds really corny – I would say that being able to be in a joyful process is actually more important, because I then want to keep writing.

LYNN NOTTAGE: I think that we're really fortunate that we're entering Broadway at a key moment, because we're entering it with trusted collaborators.

PAULA VOGEL: Yes.

LYNN NOTTAGE: I'm working with Kate Whoriskey, who has been my collaborator for many years.

PAULA VOGEL: That's been phenomenal.

LYNN NOTTAGE: And it's really important that we're taking this journey together. And I think it's true of you and Rebecca [Taichman].

PAULA VOGEL: Seven-year process, yeah.

LYNN NOTTAGE: It's relatively scary to enter into a commercial space for the first time, but I feel sup-

ported because I'm entering it with someone who I trust absolutely.

PAULA VOGEL: Same for me. I don't know what people expect when they go to Broadway the first time. I don't know that I have any expectations. I do know that I'm happy when the rehearsal begins. I'm happy when I see my cast members. I love that we all came together and that we're all going together. And who knows what it means?

LYNN NOTTAGE: It's true. And I also think there's this daunting moment when you take your first step over the threshold into this big, famous space and think, "Oh, my God. How am I going to fill it?" And then you immediately get to work. You begin rehearsing, and you think, "Oh, I know how to do this. I've been doing this for the last 25 years, and I'm really prepared to do it."

You realize it's not any different than putting on theater in any space from community theatre to an off-Broadway theatre to a regional theatre. It's just a larger stage. And I feel like we have been preparing for this for many years. So, in some ways, I don't think it's as daunting and scary as it would be if I were a younger playwright. I feel as though I'm arriving at the exact moment I'm prepared to meet the challenge.

PAULA VOGEL: You know, I can't remember who told me this, like 35, 40 years ago, but a woman in our field

said to me, “You always get prizes when you no longer need them.”

LYNN NOTTAGE: That’s true.

PAULA VOGEL: It really is true, which is like, you know, this is nice or as we say, Dayenu. This would be enough. This is nice. But I’m not risking my entire life on this one roll of the dice. It’s nice that I got it. And it’s funny that it feels like a combination bat mitzvah and wedding...in that it’s really the first time. It’s, like, how can you say to everybody that you’ve loved over 60 years, “Come and see me at the Vineyard.” I mean, you can’t fit those people in the Vineyard Theater. So, for the first time, we could actually be in the same space.

LYNN NOTTAGE: That’s true. You can have everyone.

PAULA VOGEL: Yeah.

LYNN NOTTAGE: But my family’s very small, so the Vineyard Theater’s actually very perfect. *[Laughs]* I honestly don’t have that many people. *[Laughs]*

PAULA VOGEL: My family’s dead, but we say family in that other way.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Yes. It’s the extended family.

PAULA VOGEL: Yes.

LYNN NOTTAGE: You are right. It’s about the gifts that arrive at the most unexpected moments and when you don’t necessarily need them. But, I do feel that on some unconscious level, there’s a part of me that needed to take this step.

PAULA VOGEL: Yes.

LYNN NOTTAGE: And I can’t speak to why, because I’ve spent so much of my life saying it wasn’t important. But now that I’m there, I feel like it’s somehow filling some little hole *[laughs]* that always existed in my playwriting journey.

PAULA VOGEL: I might look at it a different way as

someone who—it’s a strange thing—screamed more when *[hearing]* that you won the Pulitzer than I did for myself. I got much more pleasure out of it. And I feel that the theatre needs to take this step of having Lynn Nottage on Broadway because, otherwise, Broadway is not worth the price of the ticket.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Well, you know, it’s funny, because I feel the same way—I think about my journey in theater and who I believe belongs on that main stage, and it is astonishing to me that Paula Vogel has not been there. It *feels* as though you’ve been there. *[Laughs]*

PAULA VOGEL: Do people do that to you? They assume that you’ve been on Broadway?

LYNN NOTTAGE: *How I Learned to Drive* was a Broadway play in my mind. It occupies a large space. Without it *[moving]* uptown, in my mind it still occupies that space in terms of its importance.

PAULA VOGEL: Right, likewise. And I’m sure people must come to you and go, “Lynn Nottage, the Broadway playwright,” in introducing you all the time, right? “Pulitzer Prize, professor at Columbia, Broadway playwright...”

LYNN NOTTAGE: Yeah. It’s an assumption.

PAULA VOGEL: I mean, you are in the canon.

LYNN NOTTAGE: I don’t think I’m there yet.

PAULA VOGEL: Well, let me redefine canon, because I think that that’s what this moment is doing: redefining what canon means. And I would say that, for me, as a teacher, and I’m sure this is true for you, canon is the writers who excite and influence emerging playwrights to write.

LYNN NOTTAGE: And it evolves.

PAULA VOGEL: Yes, that’s what it does.

LYNN NOTTAGE: It really does evolve, because I think—

PAULA VOGEL: And you're in the canon.

LYNN NOTTAGE: –you probably had this experience teaching, is that every eight years, I would say, the canon rotates. And there's a whole other set of writers who excite young people. And I feel like sometimes I have to play catch-up, because I'm still back there holding onto the saints of my past, and there are new saints replacing them. It's true. It's dynamic.

PAULA VOGEL: Right. And at some point, I think I decided that because I was doing that, it's not that I don't want to catch up. I'm hungry. But I decided that the thing I can do is I can give young, emerging writers the writers that no one talks about anymore. I want to make sure that Irene Fornes stays in the canon. I want to make sure that *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is read frequently. It's those plays that –

LYNN NOTTAGE: That have to remain in circulation.

PAULA VOGEL: Exactly. Like Jane Bowles, *In the Summer House*.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Well, it's remembering the ancestors and sort of continuing to pour that libation and not let them be forgotten.

PAULA VOGEL: I love that. It is remembering the ancestors.

LYNN NOTTAGE: I think that as women, it's really important for us to do that.

PAULA VOGEL: It absolutely is.

TARI STRATTON: You two are amazing. May I throw you another question? Both of you have taken real people, but then sort of fictionalized them, you know, or taken real circumstances but then have created characters out of the circumstances. I was just interested in hearing more about that part of the process.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Sure. You know, what I think we're doing is somewhat different in that I began my process by interviewing a lot of folks in Reading, Penn-



Will Pullen and Khris Davis (top);
Johanna Day, Alison Wright, and
Michelle Wilson (middle); and
Michelle Wilson and Johanna Day in
the Broadway production of
Sweat

PHOTOS: JOAN MARCUS

sylvania, which is a city that caught my attention. It was the poorest city in America in 2011, and I really was very interested in the way in which poverty was reshaping the American narrative. And I found myself gravitating to that space and wanting to interview as many people as possible. I had a need to understand.

I was not specifically looking for someone to write about, but looking for people who represented what I felt was happening to folks who lived in these post-industrial cities throughout the country. And so that's where I began. My characters are really composites of many people, as opposed to being based on individuals, which I think is slightly different.

PAULA VOGEL: Right. It's interesting, because when you describe that process, the last play that I worked on, I was making composites, particularly of women veterans. So that thing that you're doing, I think, with *Sweat*, of trying to make composites, I think I'm in a different stance here in that I'm trying to resurrect the dead. And I do think that is a different process. I had to let go of worrying that they weren't alive and able to defend themselves – do you know what I mean? And that I wouldn't ever know them, because I would never meet them.

LYNN NOTTAGE: They weren't going to knock on your door and say, "Shame on you, Paula Vogel. That's not what I said."

PAULA VOGEL: That's right, exactly. It was – like, I'll never forget I went to the first reading of [Anna Deavere Smith's] *Fires in the Mirror*. And standing in line was everyone she performed.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Oh, interesting.

PAULA VOGEL: And it was such an amazing experience to hear the Jewish leader turning to the African American leader saying, "Oh, I thought she performed you much better than she did me." [Laughter] And there was this harmony in the line, and I can imagine in *Sweat*, that all of these people –

LYNN NOTTAGE: We had the interesting experience after we closed at the Public, of bringing *Sweat*

to Reading, PA for a command performance—a very stripped-down production—for about 500 people. The actors were incredibly nervous. They knew that they weren't necessarily portraying individuals who would be out there in the audience, but portraying individuals that the folks in the audience might recognize on a deeper level.

PAULA VOGEL: How was the response?

LYNN NOTTAGE: It was an overwhelming response. I think that the actors were so giddy when it finished and so stimulated by the questions and the responses, that it reinvigorated this next stage of production, because they knew that this play was supported by people in Reading and that it is truthful to the experience.

On some level, they thought they had been performing a fiction. Now they understand that they're performing something other than fiction, which is different. And it was fun. And then afterwards, they all went to the bar that it was based on and stayed out much too late. [Laughter]

PAULA VOGEL: See, that's wonderful. I'm getting more of a kind of piecemeal response, running into people, having people see the show who are survivors, who come forward and say, "My mother lived in Lodz," or, "My grandmother was sent to the camp," or—and this was terrifying—on three different occasions, Sholem Asch's family has come to see it.–

LYNN NOTTAGE: I just was going to ask whether he had children and family that...

PAULA VOGEL: He has a granddaughter, who came to see it from London, and a great-grandson. We've had every remaining member come.

LYNN NOTTAGE: But they must be so thankful that you've resurrected this play. There'll be a whole generation of people who will go and pick up *God of Vengeance*, because they saw your play.

PAULA VOGEL: Well, that's what we want. Right. We want it to be taught.

LYNN NOTTAGE: And read. I think it is product placement. My first impulse after seeing the production, was, “I’ve seen that text, but I’ve never read it, and I feel like I have to sit down and read it now.”

PAULA VOGEL: It’s great. We wanted it back in the canon. Initially, people did come [see it and say], “I’m sorry. You got him completely wrong.” But these people belong to them in a very emotional way. And the same, you know, with the Yiddish. I don’t speak Yiddish.

LYNN NOTTAGE: You know, once I was listening to my brother describe my parents, and I thought, “Who are you describing? I don’t recognize those people.” We grew up in the same house, but we both have very different recollections and different relationships. [That] is what I think gives us permission to improvise when we’re writing. We all have a different perspective and point of view that we bring to our experiences.

PAULA VOGEL: I do think there’s a basic level of love that we’re both expressing, which is these people should be on stage in the light.

LYNN NOTTAGE: In the light.

PAULA VOGEL: Visible in the light. And I guess that’s the greatest demonstration of love we can give.

LYNN NOTTAGE: I think that’s true. I mean, I know that audiences—New York audiences in particular—are used to seeing certain kinds of folks represented on the stage. And I think that what both of us are doing are bringing people to the stage who don’t often get to tell their stories, because the powers that be haven’t deemed them worthy. I want to open up a new conversation with audiences, offer them a view of our culture that folks don’t often see on the stage. That’s part of what excites me. I know there are going to be people who think, “We don’t want to see these people.” And I’m like, “Fine, then don’t come.” But I think it’s very, very important.

Particularly—and I’m talking about politics now—in this day and age in which we have a president who’s really invested in dividing us, and who’s also invested

in pushing people back into the shadows and creating a country that is not a country I necessarily want to live in.

I think that it’s incumbent upon us as artists to really push back, to resist. We talk about being produced on Broadway, well I see this moment of being on Broadway as part of my resistance. I am occupying this large space for voices that are marginalized and need to be heard.

PAULA VOGEL: Yes. The other thing that I want to bring up, which I feel is in both of our plays and in both of our concerns, I don’t know if this is true for you, but my entire life—in theater, film and, television—I’ve been watching stories where I’m looking at the set, and going, “How do these people afford to live? What do they do for work? How did they come up with all of that money? How did they afford such a nice apartment as five friends? How did they end up living near Lincoln Center?” I can’t get over it. I just stare at the clothing. I’m like, “Oh, my God. That person is wearing clothing that would cost me a month of a salary.”

LYNN NOTTAGE: Wearing, like, \$1,000 boots. [Laughs]

PAULA VOGEL: Yeah. How is that possible? And I remember—particularly in the 1970s—it felt like every play off-Broadway and on Broadway was about an elegant cocktail party that happened in a wonderful Manhattan apartment. And it’s not that I begrudge people having wonderful Manhattan apartments, but I just kind of sat there.

It was a reason that in my youth—I’m trying to get over this—I’ve never been able to really encompass opera. As I was working my way through college, someone took me to an opera. And I looked at the stage, and I realized in a single ten-minute segment, \$40,000 flashed across that stage, which would have paid my tuition for four years back then. And I got physically ill.

LYNN NOTTAGE: That’s not a good thing—

PAULA VOGEL: It’s not a good thing.

LYNN NOTTAGE: – to go to an opera and become ill.

PAULA VOGEL: Right, exactly, and be paying attention to *that* instead of... So, I struggled to get through it. But we're in an interesting time right now, where we are presenting these plays [and] how much money does it take to do a Broadway production? Where is that coming from? Because right now, I feel like *Sweat* is making me pay attention to what is the cost and price of money. And that's a different question when you [ask] what is the price of money for the people in this bar. That's a very different question.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Well, my characters have a different relationship to money than some of the people that you see portrayed on stage in Manhattan. All of the plays are about survival on some level, but in many plays it's about emotional survival. But in *Sweat*, it is also about the fundamental survival. It's like, "Will we be able to feed ourselves in two weeks if we lose our jobs?"

PAULA VOGEL: Right. And in *Indecent*, it's how many bodies do we have to get into the room, right? Ten bodies, twelve bodies, how many bodies can you squeeze into that space? Yeah, exactly.

LYNN NOTTAGE: But *Indecent* also is very much about censorship. What can be seen on the stage? You know, you look at the history of that play [*God of Vengeance*] and how something so simple and pure can be deemed dangerous—

PAULA VOGEL: Yes, that's true.

LYNN NOTTAGE: –and how we, as artists, have to be really careful in this day and age, because these moments can return. We always say, "It can't happen," but it can happen.

PAULA VOGEL: Right. It absolutely can happen.

LYNN NOTTAGE: It can happen, and it can happen very quickly, as we're seeing that the revolution – and when I use the word revolution, I'm not talking about a sort of a certain kind of rebellion, but a shifting of the sensibility and –

PAULA VOGEL: The turning.

LYNN NOTTAGE: – the turning of –

PAULA VOGEL: The turning of the wheel.

LYNN NOTTAGE: – a wheel, which is what is happening right now. And, unfortunately, it's turning backward. So we have to be careful, and we have to protect the word.

PAULA VOGEL: Yeah, absolutely. It's terrifying.

LYNN NOTTAGE: It is terrifying. You know, that list of what the president wants to cut out—National Endowment of Arts, National Endowment of Humanities, squeezing the EPA and squeezing out the state department and a lot of the programs that are really about servicing the poor and about enlightenment and what I feel represents the best of what America has to offer. It is who we are and these are the gifts that we can give, and you squeeze that out, and it's like, then, who do we become?

PAULA VOGEL: The ability to have a long life is going to be something that only the ruling classes have.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Yeah, only the very wealthy.

PAULA VOGEL: That's right. You know, all of the stories that we have of our parents and grandparents, where people died early and young—crushed at work, caught in the machinery, whatever—all of those regulations are being undone right now.

LYNN NOTTAGE: They're going to be slowly stripped away, and you'll see workers dying again. We'll see women struggling to get abortions in back alleys. All the things that we take for granted will disappear, which is why we have to write.

PAULA VOGEL: Right. It's an ironic thing: right at the moment that we're finally reaching visibility, the field is endangered and it's also the moment where it's most important to write for theatre. Kind of funny.

LYNN NOTTAGE: It is kind of funny. And I think maybe that's why we're on Broadway now. Maybe it's finally prepared to receive certain voices, because they're necessary...

PAULA VOGEL: Yes.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Which is the optimistic view.
[Laughs]

PAULA VOGEL: It's also interesting. I think the past several decades, I've been feeling a kind of benign optimism that time was on our side, that demographically, the United States was shifting.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Well, it was shifting.

PAULA VOGEL: And that white nationalism was going to die out.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Now it's panic. What we're seeing is panic. And white panic is...a recognition that power balance is going to tip in the other way, and folks who've really enjoyed the white privilege are going to have to let it go. And, you know, you've probably heard me describe how white privilege has been the superpower, and the kryptonite is diversity.

PAULA VOGEL: Yes. That's absolutely right. So, you still think time is on our side?

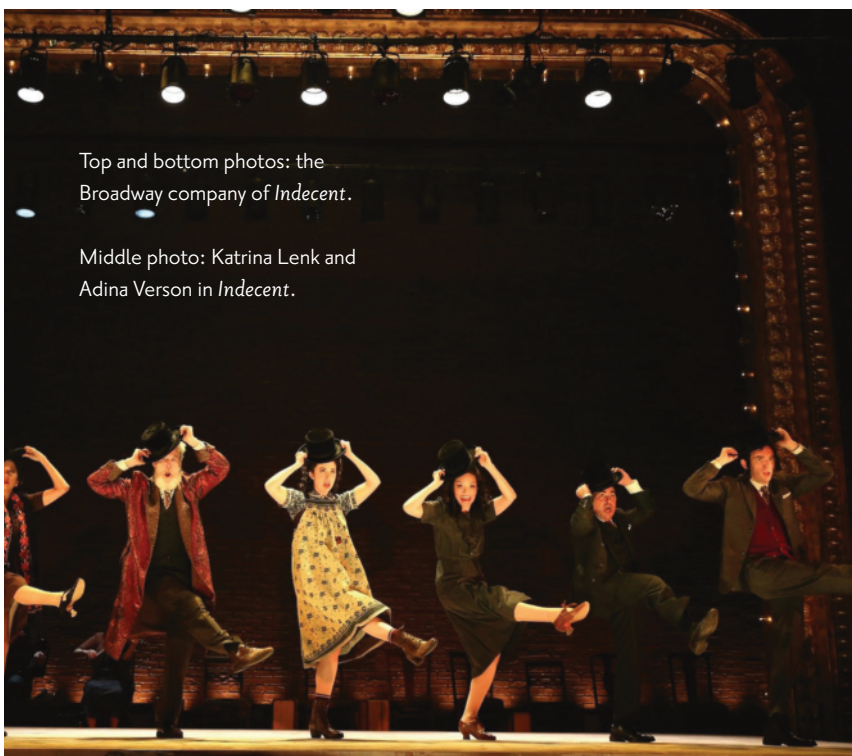
LYNN NOTTAGE: I do think it's on our side. I think that this is the last gasp.

PAULA VOGEL: Oh, God, please.

LYNN NOTTAGE: But I think not only time is on our side. I think numbers ultimately will be on our side.

PAULA VOGEL: Yeah. That's what I mean. The demographic change cannot be stopped.

LYNN NOTTAGE: It can't be stopped. And they're trying to stop it. I mean, with a, what was it, \$35 billion to build a wall to protect their whiteness? And that's really—I mean, I wish they'd just come out and



Top and bottom photos: the Broadway company of *Indecent*.

Middle photo: Katrina Lenk and Adina Verson in *Indecent*.

PHOTOS: CAROL ROSEGG

say it. Because it's not about empowering the working class. Donald Trump really doesn't give a shit about the working class, if you look at his hiring practices and his labor practices.

PAULA VOGEL: Yeah, terrible, terrifying time.

TARI STRATTON: It is. You know, Robert Schenkkan sat down and wrote his new play in something like six days in response to what's going on. Have either of you been inspired to do something like that, or you're just so enmeshed in what's happening with your current shows right now?

PAULA VOGEL: I feel like I *am* doing something.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Yeah. I feel like I was doing it five years ago.

PAULA VOGEL: Yeah. I feel like that's what *Indecent* is.

LYNN NOTTAGE: I feel like I was proactive and not reactive.

PAULA VOGEL: And, you know, the truth of the matter is it's been in the air for some time.

LYNN NOTTAGE: For some time, yes.

PAULA VOGEL: So if we say, "Oh, my gosh. We're shocked," the truth of the matter is that the failing of that working class has been going on –

LYNN NOTTAGE: It's been coming for decades.

PAULA VOGEL: The emptying towns, and the anti-immigration has been with us. It's been stinking to high heaven for some time.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Yeah. And *This is Reading* is also my response to what is happening. I have the play, and it's great that it's going to Broadway. But I feel as though there is a whole demographic of people who cannot come to New York City and pay. We do have \$32.00 tickets, but even a \$32.00 ticket is too expensive for them after a long journey.

So, I'm trying to figure out different models and paradigms for making theatre and taking it outside of the proscenium and taking it outside of these institutions, because one of the things that I found when I was in Reading and speaking to people is that they're very intimidated by the arts. And I thought, "Well, that should not be the case. The arts should be the thing that gives you comfort. You should feel welcome." But they said they go into galleries—into these pristine white spaces—and to theatres, and they don't know how to dress. They don't know how to respond, because no one has ushered them across the threshold. Our project called *This is Reading* is trying to bring people into an art space who are not necessarily used to being in art spaces and then putting those people in dialogue with each other, people who are not used to talking across racial and economic lines.

I'm going to take the art to the people who really don't have access to it. So, we're trying to raise the money, because no one's going to get paid. It's free. If you give, you're giving because you're invested in this sort of notion of art making.

TARI STRATTON: So how about one last, nuts-and-boltsy kind of question. I just want to know if the plays have changed at all. You both had many productions, but at least from the Off-Broadway production, then when you found out you're going to go to Broadway, to now. That's interesting to me, because I saw both plays, and loved them.

PAULA VOGEL: We're still finessing. There are all of these little technical crafty things in the writing, where I stood in the back and I went, "I could make that a little tighter." We started in La Jolla, [went to] the Yale large theater, crunched it down at The Vineyard, and now we have to bring it back out.

So we're looking at the running time, how do we make it flow – all of that kind of stuff. You have to make it the best you possibly can until the last second that you have. For me, I think this comes down to—especially as a woman artist—I'm not going to get very many shots like this. I'm going to work to the very last moment.

LYNN NOTTAGE: I feel the same way. It's some real

tweaking, but a couple of bold shifts, rearranging of scenes, which felt a little scary, but I felt like I have to do it, because it always bothered me a little bit, and we didn't have time to do it before. And now, this is the opportunity.

We want to squeeze some time out, and at some point, I realized I'm not going to be able to squeeze enough time out, and I just have to ask the audience to be patient. Everything can't happen at a break-neck pace. I feel like audiences have become so impatient and restless, and you think of plays in the past in which people sat and they listened, and there were moments in which it was slow, but the slow moments were necessary to help elucidate a character and to create some of the suspense that then would pay off in the end. And so part of this process has been forgiving myself and saying, "It's okay for this moment to take the time that it needs to take."

PAULA VOGEL: Here's the good news for me, and I don't know if you're going to agree with this, but being this age when I get the Broadway opportunity—after all of those years, I know how to get myself out of the way and listen very hard to the play. And I feel like that's what you're doing. Listening.

LYNN NOTTAGE: I agree with you and feel the same thing. It's the little nagging things, which, you hear. It's like, ugh, you know, that transition isn't quite as smooth as I'd like, or I know that that word was always a placeholder until I found the right word, but it's still there, because I still haven't found the right word. Now, I'm really pressing myself to try at this moment to find the right word rather than being a little lazy, which sometimes I have been.

PAULA VOGEL: Well, I do that and I use the same word. I've said to people, "This is a placeholder. I'm going to come back to it."

LYNN NOTTAGE: And sometimes you rush into production, and you don't have time to get back to those little things because you have two weeks of rehearsal, or you have other concerns, you know.

PAULA VOGEL: That's right. Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

TARI STRATTON: Do you have any last thoughts you'd like to share?

LYNN NOTTAGE: For me, it's just always an honor and a delight to sit in a room and have this much time with Paula Vogel. I think over the years, because we've both been in such different spaces, we haven't had the luxury to have this kind of conversation. So I just—I profoundly appreciate it, and I really look forward to sort of sharing this journey on Broadway with you.

PAULA VOGEL: I feel the same way and just want to say, because, you know, life flies by quickly, but I do want to say I love you, and I love your work. And your work makes me a believer every time I encounter it.


LYNN NOTTAGE: Well, you created this believer.

PAULA VOGEL: [Laughs]

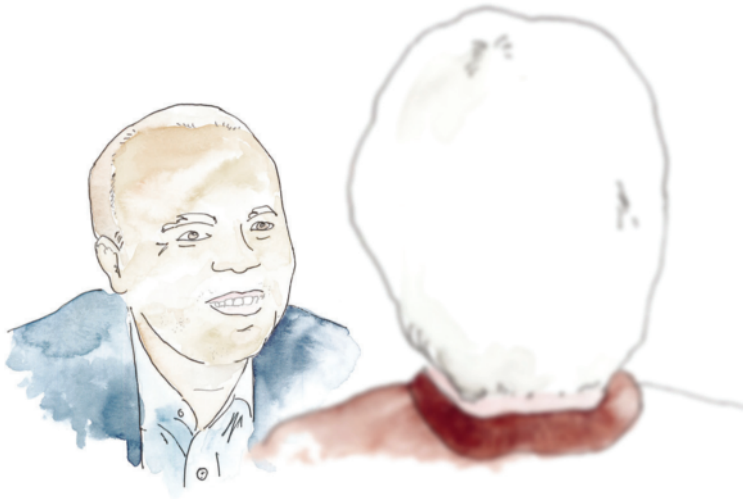
LYNN NOTTAGE: But it's true. I mean, Paula Vogel at one of the most important moments in my life—at that crossroads when you're deciding who you're going to be as an adult—pushed me in a direction. She was the first woman who I encountered who was writing plays and said, "You can do this." And those words were so important to me at an age when I didn't think that I could do it. To have someone say, "You can do this." That's everything.

PAULA VOGEL: Yeah. Well, you didn't hear me scream when you won the Pulitzer. But you're going to hear me scream on opening night. It gives me so much happiness.

LYNN NOTTAGE: Well, thank you.

TARI STRATTON: This was an honor for me, too, just to sit in the room and listen to you two. Thank you so much. 

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



J.T. ROGERS: John Guare and I are both currently in previews.

JOHN GUARE: You with *Oslo* at the Vivian Beaumont.

J.T. ROGERS: You with *Six Degrees of Separation* at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre.

JOHN GUARE: Let's toast those two great ladies.

J.T. ROGERS: Vivian.

JOHN GUARE: Ethel.

J.T. ROGERS: The marvelous serendipity is both plays had the same trajectory, starting life in the Mitzi Newhouse and then transferring upstairs to the Beaumont.

JOHN GUARE: What's your experience so far in *Oslo*'s transfer upstairs?

J.T. ROGERS: I'm fascinated watching how the spatial relationship the architecture of the 'large theater' to the play actually changes the play. It's epic. The actors have to learn to speak out of the back of their heads, as that great director Garland Wright used to say. Physically, the stage is a little

In Conversation:

J.T. Rogers &

higher than the stage in the Mitzi, so the audience is on more of an eye level with the actors. While you lose some intimacy upstairs, somehow the ideas of the play are lifted. All of a sudden the play becomes more Shakespearean in the sense that the language and the actors have to rise to that epic size. And they are. We're very happy there. For decades, it's been the great church for seeing a play.

JOHN GUARE: Don't forget the Beaumont was once considered unworkable, closed for years, marked a tear down. The opera and ballet and Philharmonic needed a garage.

J.T. ROGERS: It's hard to imagine that.

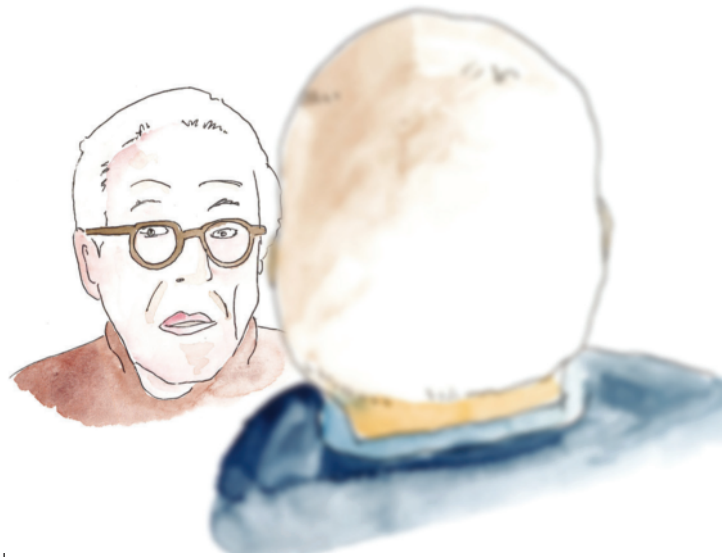
JOHN GUARE: Thanks to vocal board members like Andrew Heiskell and Linda Janklow and Elizabeth Peters, Lincoln Center gave the building to Gregory Mosher and Bernard Gersten for a one year trial. Their first production in 1986 was at the Newhouse: David Mamet's *The Shawl*. For the second, they revived *House of Blue Leaves* with Jerry Zaks directing Stockard Channing, Swoosie Kurtz, John Mahoney, Ben Stiller, Julie Hagerty and Christopher Walken. It got a dream reception. It would have to transfer. Should Bernie and Gregory move it to the dread Beaumont?

J.T. ROGERS: Which they did.

JOHN GUARE: At the first performance on that ill-starred stage, Stockard Channing made her en-

John Guare

edited by John Guare



trance, got her first big laugh, the audience roared. Hearing that sound was ice cracking. The Beaumont was liberated. It was one of the great events of my life. No one ever talked about eradicating the Beaumont again.

J.T. ROGERS: What had happened?

JOHN GUARE: Tony Walton. His set for *Blue Leaves* was a disc that thrust the play far downstage into the audience's lap. He expanded the disc for the Beaumont; the relation between stage and audience was electric. Peter Brook had said the Beaumont could be the best stage in New York if they ever found its center. Tony had found the center of the stage.

J.T. ROGERS: Did you ever have any problems with it?

JOHN GUARE: Stockard Channing said the only secret to playing the Beaumont is learning to do triple takes. House Right. House Center. House Left.

J.T. ROGERS: That's a good note.

JOHN GUARE: You and I got to know each other doing the *Oslo* issue of the *Lincoln Center Theater Review*.

J.T. ROGERS: – of which you're editor.

JOHN GUARE: Co-editor. But we only talked

ideas. I know nothing about how you were raised or are from. You went to the University of North Carolina but you're not from North Carolina.

J.T. ROGERS: I went to the School of the Arts at North Carolina as an actor. It was immensely valuable. They had no playwriting department.

JOHN GUARE: Where did you come from?

J.T. ROGERS: I came from central Missouri but my mother moved to New York in the East Village in the late 70s. She would take me as a ten year-old to see everything, most memorably, Charles Ludlam at the Ridiculous Theater. I got to see La MaMa and Joe Papp's Public. And then at the Beaumont and Newhouse. I got to see what I wanted to do—to come back here and do things like that.

JOHN GUARE: You've carved out a whole area for yourself. I don't understand how you take real events—ripped, as they say, from the headlines—and make them not docu-dramas but real human dramas. *The Overwhelming*, *Blood and Gifts* and *Oslo* are factually based but they don't have the feeling of being docudramas. You said Shakespearean before. How do you take real events and turn them into theater? How do you determine the point of view that allows the audience into the historical

event, that gives us the information we need to continue?

J.T. ROGERS: I think it's two-fold. I think that it's sort of in the nuts and bolts of our craft—the tension of matching up a character's personal story against the larger event. You've got to have a great event but you have to focus on the personal drama that's happening against the big event.

Often it takes me a while to figure out—to use the Josh Logan phrase—who is the “learning character” the audience is going to learn with and also who is the point of view that the audience will go with so that they can be taken into a situation that they would be interested in or would be put off by but then, in fact, find interesting.

JOHN GUARE: You're not Norwegian or Jewish or Palestinian. How did you come to *Oslo*?

J.T. ROGERS: I was doing *Blood and Gifts* here with Bart Sher. We had a tremendous time together and were thinking about what to do next. I had something else completely in mind and was talking to journalists and spies to find a context for that play.

JOHN GUARE: Where do you find spies?

J.T. ROGERS: Often in the Whole Foods down on 59th Street. For me, one of the pleasures of writing plays is that you write about things and people come and they enjoy it and you say, “Oh, can I take you out for coffee and ask you what you do?” I'm always more interested in the lives of people who don't do what I do. For example, when I was doing research for a play I ended up not writing for the National Theatre, I was writing a play about black box. Secret torture. And so I was meeting all of these people who had been tortured in Cairo.

JOHN GUARE: Did you have a contact when you went to Cairo for that abandoned play?

J.T. ROGERS: A school friend from North Carolina had married a journalist who knew journalists in Cairo. I asked her to call them and I ended up

staying on someone's couch. They knew someone who hired a ‘fixer.’ So I hired this woman to introduce me to people.

And it turned out that Lawrence Wright, the great writer for *The New Yorker*, was there and we had the same fixer. I asked if he and I could have a drink in a bar in Cairo and it turned out that he wanted to be a playwright. So we talked about politics and playwriting and it was off to the races.

JOHN GUARE: What happened to that play?

J.T. ROGERS: It was traumatic and fascinating but ultimately there wasn't a play. Because a play should be an argument between two sides. Torturing people is horrific but not an argument. I let that play go but I met all these interesting people.

JOHN GUARE: Did you do the same kind of research in Rwanda when you wrote *The Overwhelming*?

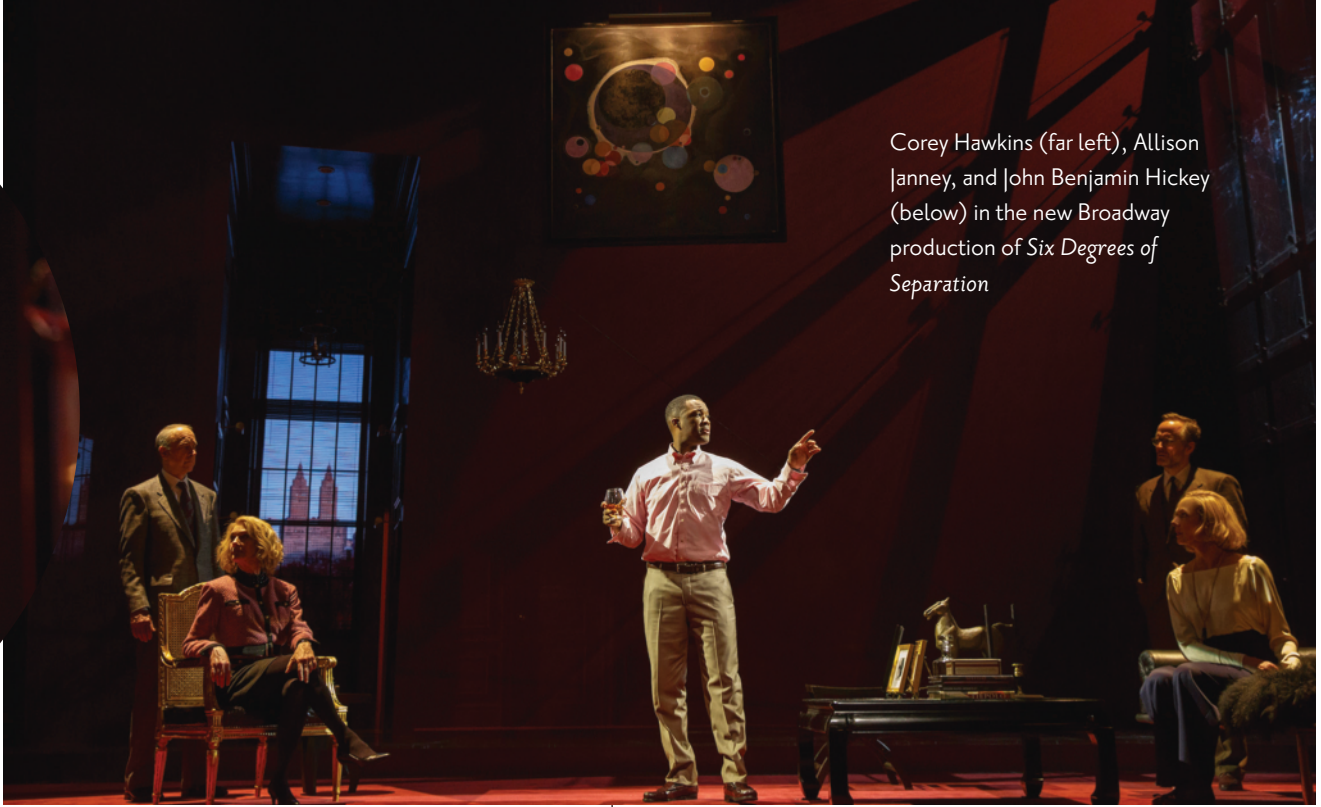
J.T. ROGERS: No. It was a steeper climb because I didn't know anyone.

JOHN GUARE: Did you go there?

J.T. ROGERS: I didn't go until I had written the play. I was sent by the National Theatre to basically do field research. I was going with great trepidation to see if the play could pass muster when confronted with reality. It did. It became an unintended twelve hours a day listening to the most Edward Bond-like stories of horror. People would read it and say “Yes, your play is good. Now I want to talk to you about how my children were murdered in front of me.”



Corey Hawkins (far left), Allison Janney, and John Benjamin Hickey (below) in the new Broadway production of *Six Degrees of Separation*



PHOTOS: |JOAN MARCUS



JOHN GUARE: Did those scenes end up in the play?

J.T. ROGERS: No. The play ends before, showing all the causes. Maybe the most crucial argument I have with myself is where in the slipstream of

history do I put the brackets around what's most interesting and what gives the most dynamic personal possibility? So for *The Overwhelming*, the first *Aha!* moment was realizing the end has to happen right before the genocide because otherwise you get into Grand Guignol.

JOHN GUARE: Just to go back—London is such a closed shop. How did an American end up at the National?

J.T. ROGERS: I couldn't get arrested before that play. I couldn't even get workshops in theatres. I was completely unknown; I'd been doing it on my own for years. Then I wrote this play. I had written a couple of plays that I thought were quite good and had small productions. But they were three character/no set plays that you'd think would be the ones that would get done. So, I decided to write *The Overwhelming*—an eleven actor play, eight have to be French speaking Africans, with endless scenes set in Rwanda.

And I thought no one is ever going to do this. I wouldn't even show it to my agent.

I did the play in Philadelphia. I never showed it to my agent. And finally he said, "People went to that reading." So I gave him the play and he said you're a fool, this is the best play you've written. In a fit of exuberance I said, "You should send it to the National Theatre."

And a few months later I'm changing my son's diaper and Nick Hytner calls me. He says, "Hi this is Nick Hytner. Can you come to London to talk about your play?" I said, "I'd love to." He said, "Can you come tomorrow?" I said, "I have a temp job, can I come next week?" I thought I was going over to have a discussion about a reading that would happen in nine months and instead he immediately launched into 'we'll do it in six months and we'll get Max Stafford Clark to do it and we're gonna open on this date.'

Then I realized I was only being flown over because they needed to make sure I wasn't a sociopath because they didn't know anything about me. They just put it in the pipeline. An associate,

Tim Levy, was going through a slush pile of over the transom submissions, found this, went to Nick and said, "You have to do this play."

JOHN GUARE: I want our DG members reading this to know that such things are possible.

J.T. ROGERS: A *Six Degrees* moment. Tim Levy is one of the producers of your current revival.

JOHN GUARE: Sometimes it's a small aquarium we swim in. How valuable was the London production for the life of the play?

J.T. ROGERS: It gave me the wonderful experience of different theaters wanting to do *The Overwhelming* in New York. I went from not being able to get a phone call from the literary manager's assistant to the actual artistic director wanting to do my play. Lincoln Center couldn't do it for a year and a half. I chose Roundabout who did it immediately.

JOHN GUARE: It wasn't your New York debut, was it?

J.T. ROGERS: It was. In the 90s, I had run a tiny theater you couldn't even call off-off Broadway where I'd write little plays and twenty people would come. *The Overwhelming* really was, in all senses, my debut.

JOHN GUARE: When did *Blood and Gifts* start?

J.T. ROGERS: The Tricycle Theater in London was doing this enormous project called *The Great Game Afghanistan*. Twelve 30-minute plays about the history of the west in Afghanistan.

Most of the twelve were British so they decided they should have one American writer. They'd seen *The Overwhelming* and basically said, "Here's what's left, what interests you?" I said, "The 80s, spies..."

I wrote a short play that was really hard because I was trying to cram an enormous story into a short play. In essence, what went up at the Tricycle was three short scenes from *Blood and Gifts*, and I im-

mediately knew I had to expand it. Lincoln Center Theater read it and produced it and Bart Sher directed.

After it opened, Andre Bishop gave me another commission for a play to be directed by Bart and this feels like what used to happen in the days of old that one hears about. I had the trust of the artistic director and the stage director. I knew the physical space the play would be in. Before *Blood and Gifts*, I had never worked with a thrust. Working in the Mitzi Newhouse was a revelation how fast you can do scene changes. Just like in Shakespeare, characters pop up and say ‘now I’m here’ and the audience goes, okay. The thrust allowed me to speed everything up.

JOHN GUARE: And that commission was *Oslo*.

J.T. ROGERS: Yes.

JOHN GUARE: But how did you settle on *Oslo* as the subject of the commission?

J.T. ROGERS: Bart knew this high up UN diplomat named Terje Rod-Larsen and Mona Juul—the main characters of *Oslo*. They were then living in New York. Their kids went to school with Bart’s daughter. Terje had read *Blood and Gifts* and was super complimentary and came to see the play. We went out for drinks at PJ Clarke’s which is a couple of blocks from where we’re sitting here. And he said I have a story for you.

And he started telling me the fact that there had been a secret back channel behind the Oslo accords that included Johnnie Walker Black and rental cars.

And it was one of those moments where the hairs go up on the back of your neck and you think this is my wheelhouse.

I went to Norway for five day with a notepad absorbing everything. Michael Yeargan’s set is based on photos I took. I spoke to everyone. I went to all the places where these meetings happened. I stalked the participants, reading everything they wrote but I never heard their dramatic voices. The

engine on stage is the metronome of the human voice so I didn’t want to hear their actual voices. I didn’t want to talk to the Norwegians anymore, I didn’t want to talk to the Israelis or the Palestinians. I had to find their stage voices.

JOHN GUARE: How did you find its theatrical structure and tone?

J.T. ROGERS: I realized the best model for tone would be an intellectual thriller. I love those Graham Greene entertainments that he used to dismiss as the books he wrote to make money so he could make his serious books.

But of course, we only read those ‘entertainments’ now, because they’re so lean and surprising and human.

Figuring out the structure? Without being artificial, I had to locate the external pressure on the characters. I went through the events, looking for the constant ticking clock, compelling the characters not only to need something from the other character on stage but to get it before the bell rings.

In *Oslo*, the pressure was on the group of people who had started secretly meeting. If anyone found out what they were doing as they’re getting ready for the first meeting—as Beilin from the Israeli side says, “If people find out, my government will fall and people will be killed.”

JOHN GUARE: One technical question: as you sift through your voluminous research, how do you find the scene? Do you build a timeline on a yellow pad and then like a truffle hound, search out your scenes?

J.T. ROGERS: Anytime I can act like a truffle hound I call it a triumphant day’s work.

JOHN GUARE: The larger question: how do you not get swamped by research?

J.T. ROGERS: You get to the heart of my preoccupation as a playwright: how do you move from re-

search and world building and attempted “expert-hood” to pivoting to tell a story where all of that is buried and all that matters is the audience leaning in, wanting to know, “Yeah, yeah, and *then* what happens?”

What helps for me is to place hard brackets around the history, politics, and world I’m exploring and then only allow myself to write about that narrow piece.

When I’m researching, I’m really looking for telling details—tastes, jokes, smells, weird images that set my imagination churning—really a spark, or building block that makes me write play dialogue, as opposed to journalism...which, frankly, I don’t know how to do.

I do at times get swamped by research. I abandoned a play I’d worked on for two years because I realized, far too late, that I’d never drawn the box around what I was going to research. I just kept reading, and writing, and thinking and interviewing and traveling...until I was completely untethered from the play’s initial impulse. For *Oslo*, I didn’t let myself start any research before I’d drawn the box.

When I was doing research for what would become *Blood and Gifts*, I interviewed the legendary US foreign correspondent Steve Coll, who told me, as an afterthought that he thought it strange that at the Irish Embassy in Islamabad in the 80s, St. Patrick’s Day was rung in with green beer. That little fact opened up an entire world for me. It’s in the play but, even more, in some ways that I can’t articulate, it set me racing down a rabbit hole that made the story I wanted to write a *play*.

JOHN GUARE: Back to structure: How did you find your first act curtain?

J.T. ROGERS: The first act curtain happens when the Norwegians tell their boss what they’re doing and he says “I’m shutting it down. You are fucking dilettantes. You work for me and this is over.” And we realize that we’ve leapt back to the first scene of the play and the play we just saw was actually happening before the first scene. We’ve done a circle and then –

JOHN GUARE:

And the second act?

J.T. ROGERS:

The second act curtain was the Israeli and the Palestinian sides realizing they’ll change the world, they’ll take a leap together. And then the third act opens with the cold water of reality being thrown in their faces and we’re down the chute.

JOHN GUARE: About your structure, I wanted to talk to you today to thank you. I’d wrestled with a play for a long time and right after I saw *Oslo* a year ago, I went out to the beach for the summer and said, “I’ve been with this play for too long. I’m going put it aside. I won’t let it torment me. I’ll have a nice quiet summer.”

And that first day as I walked on the beach, my mind went all over the place. I thought, “What plays did I like this year and why?” When you like something, you’re saying how can I make that mine? One of the reasons I loved *Oslo* was its three act structure, the room you gave yourself to open up the play.

And I thought what would happen if my play that’s been driving me crazy was in three acts?

And walking on the beach, I found the first act curtain, the second act curtain, the sudden oxygen of a third act and I could handle the play. The play became manageable and I finished it just before we went into rehearsal for *Six Degrees*.

J.T. ROGERS: I warn you. I took out the second act curtain. I’ve made it two acts at the Beaumont. I had no intention of doing it but we’re in previews at the Beaumont and realized the audience down-



Jennifer Ehle and Jefferson Mays (far left), Michael Aronov (center), and the Broadway company of *Oslo*



PHOTOS: T. CHARLES ERICKSON

stairs loved the two intermissions but upstairs you feel the audience wanting to keep going. So we made the change two days ago. And what's amazing is after two performances I can't believe we had an intermission there.

JOHN GUARE: I'm happy I saw *Oslo* at the Mitzi where it saved my life.

J.T. ROGERS: You won't miss it.

JOHN GUARE: When did you say I don't want to

write my obligatory memory play about my mother coming with two small boys to find life in the East Village?

J.T. ROGERS: I knew about me. I wanted to find out about the world.

JOHN GUARE: The first time I became aware of you was hearing about a gauntlet of a speech you gave at a TCG conference.

J.T. ROGERS: I spoke about writing plays that pushed out internationally and looked outward in the world as opposed to what I still find about so much inward American playwriting as if what's going on in the rest of the world does not exist. Both kinds of plays are equally valid and brilliant plays are written in both of those traditions.

I started off writing little plays, truly little plays and I had all these great young actors to do them and you had all these facilities you could use. And it was before the internet so when you did a short play on Saturday night, 300 people showed up. And you had this phony idea that it would work. And then I came to New York and started a little theater company and I would write little plays. I was writing ersatz David Mamet plays. I think they were pretty darn good, but they were juvenilia and they weren't me. So what happened was I went to see a student production of *Angels in America: Perestroika*. People have it in their bios still, it was so legendary. A tiny black box—no set, no costumes, nothing.

I didn't know the first part of the play hadn't yet come to New York and it was just *Perestroika* and it was a crossing of the Rubicon for me, watching it and saying, "Oh, you can actually have smart people on stage talking." In a weird way I had been trying to write plays about inarticulate people struggling for the word "yeah, because, you know." And that's not me and that's not really what I'm interested in writing. Somehow seeing Kushner's *Perestroika* started the process where I could write plays about people who are articulate and are willing to die for what they believe.

JOHN GUARE: What's the next one?

J.T. ROGERS: I'm writing a play for Lincoln Center to be directed by Bart that's going to be quite big. Historical event. I know more, but what I'm looking forward to in that play is—in *Oslo*, everyone in the play has been my version of a real person, from a Norwegian secret service agent to the leads. The duality of holding the real people in my head and my version is so much more real to me than the real people, so when I meet them it's still jarring. So I'm looking forward to writing a play where no one in the play is still alive. I think it'll be nice.

I'm thinking and noting to myself, what have I not done already that I could learn how to do structurally? What would be a challenge and would also make this particular play better? That's interesting to figure out.

JOHN GUARE: How do you look for structure?

J.T. ROGERS: I look for plays that I really like—either a new play or re-reading old plays—and wonder what do I steal from them. We've never talked about this and you should tell me if this is actually not a true story. But I was told you taught a legendary class at Yale, years ago, that was just about what happened in the first fifteen minutes of great plays. Just hearing that sort of pulled my head off and I'm constantly looking at the first fifteen minutes of plays.

JOHN GUARE: I took something our former DG President Moss Hart had said literally to the effect that an audience will go anywhere with you for fifteen minutes, but by the sixteenth minute, they'll decide whether to continue on with you or not. We read with a stop watch the first fifteen pages of the *Oresteia*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Homecoming*, *Waiting for Godot*... studying exactly what information the playwright gave the audience in that first quarter of an hour.

J.T. ROGERS: I think now we have seven minutes to get the play started, but I'm constantly obsess-

ing over them because of that anecdote. I spend so much time on first scenes—endlessly. I love them. Like the first scene of *Six Degrees of Separation*, it's the whole play. I kind of think that it's hard to balance this because when you're working on it you don't want to be judging it. The first scene of the play is the whole play—not necessarily literally, but the themes, the arguments, the counter twists. I remember a couple of years ago, I was reading *Six Degrees* and you introduced formally the devices you're going to use and, most importantly, the audience understands this is going to be a good time and we're going to be surprised by where it goes.

I think that is so crucial. I think we have to let the audience know they're going to be in good hands. Trust me, I'll pull the rug out from under you and I'll challenge you, but know you're in good hands. You can feel the audience go, "Okay, go."

JOHN GUARE: You have to be honest right from the beginning and put your cards on the table, to tell your audience what to watch for.

J.T. ROGERS: Here's what I want to ask you: You're going back to a play after years, so what is it like seeing this play, back in New York, in the environment you're from and wrote it—technically, are you changing things or seeing things? Are you there a lot?

JOHN GUARE: I'm there every day.

J.T. ROGERS: What do you do?

JOHN GUARE: Listen. I listen to our cast whom I deeply admire. It's also out of absolute curiosity about how they hear the play, I listen to them and strangely get that very vivid, ecstatic, 1990 production out of my head and sit there saying 'I've never seen this before. I am David Bowie. I am the man who fell to earth.' Learning to listen is a very liberating experience.

J.T. ROGERS: How does the space—going back to what we were talking about with the Beaumont—

JOHN GUARE: The Barrymore has an extraordinary intimacy. Plus history. *Pal Joey*. The original *Streetcar*. *Raisin in the Sun*.

J.T. ROGERS: Good ghosts.

JOHN GUARE: We've decided Allison Janney has Brando's dressing room where Marlene Dietrich came backstage after, locked the door and gave him her favorite kind of thank you. Or so they say.

J.T. ROGERS: Great ghosts.

JOHN GUARE: One last thing about the playwright facing outward: Do you think art changes things?

J.T. ROGERS: A few years ago at a talkback, when I expressed the belief that theater didn't really change people, an audience member responded, "But the theater changed you, didn't it? It changed your entire life, didn't it?" What do you think?

JOHN GUARE: I don't think art by itself changes anything. All we as playwrights can do is hope we might be fine-tuning the audience's perceptions to a point where they say, "Yes, I see what must be done, I see what I must do." Doesn't all change start from within?

J.T. ROGERS: The time. Back to previews. Best to Ethel.

JOHN GUARE: Regards to Vivian. Don't forget to toast Mitzi while we're at it.

J.T. ROGERS: Or Claire Tow up on the roof. 📺

DRAMATISTS GUILD OF

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