

Treepress Interview:

Play of the Week - A Mother's Song

A bit about me :

Presently I'm a full time playwright but previously, like so many others who write for young people I was a drama teacher and youth theatre director; my last full time teaching post being as Director of Drama at the City of London Freeman's School in Ashted, Surrey. I wrote my first play at Kingston University where I studied Drama and Education. It was my good fortune that Olwen Wymark was writer in residence at the time and under her tutelage I wrote a play that became a finalist in the Evening News Student Drama Festival. Since then I have written a great many pieces for schools and youth theatres and have had performances of my work in London, Paris, Edinburgh and Milan, with nine premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe since the year 2000. Along the way I have had the opportunity to work with a number of young actors who have gone on to have careers in theatre, film and tv including four National Theatre actors : Andrew Garfield, Kelly Reilly, Stephanie Hyam and Laurence Belcher. I have written work packs for the National's Education Department and as a teacher I've worked with young people across the whole age range from infants to post-graduates. In 2006 I gained an MA in Dramatic Writing from Sussex University where I was taught by Richard Crane, once Literary Manager for the Royal Court during the time of Max Stafford Clark.

I live in East Sussex with my wife and our cat.

More info at www.theatredreams.co.uk

A bit about the play - A Mother's Song:

The play is a reimagining of the Japanese folk tale, 'Sansho' and is set in a time after the Third World War. The play follows the epic struggle of two young people in their quest to be reunited with their parents after they are separated by the cruel forces in power at the time. The world has returned once again to a feudal state and the play explores the battle between two different ideologies; those who advocate the cruel imposition of autocratic power and those who would rule in a more humane manner, respecting the dignity of all life. This is a play where the characters are forced, at every turn, to confront important truths in their search for redemption. Whilst the context is very different, many of the issues seem to have relevance for the decisions being made in politics in this country in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond.

What inspired me to write A Mother's Song?

It has always been my experience that young people want to confront the big issues of life in drama and enjoy exploring the consequences of making decisions about these things. So writing this play grew out of a desire to create something that would challenge the moral compass of both my cast and the audiences we played to. It was also written at a time when I had a huge number of students wishing to get involved in drama in the department and so I wanted to create a vehicle that had a number of sizeable roles. My concern was to give as many students as possible the opportunity to

create a role on stage and to avoid banks of 'chorus' and 'spear carriers' who get to do little more than react to the action of others on stage. This, in addition to the nature of the fable, gives rise to the episodic structure of the piece. (Something that greatly eases the organisation of rehearsals for such a large cast.) I also had, at the time, a number of students who were considering the possibility of going on to professional training as actors and so I wanted to provide them with roles that would challenge them, and at the Edinburgh Fringe, give them the flavour of life as a professional performer.

How would I describe my creative process?

As a writer I am often reminded of Harold Pinter's description of beginning to write the play 'No Man's Land' where he describes only having a sense of two men sitting in a comfortable drawing room and an opening line of dialogue. He wanted to find out who said what next. As a teacher enabling students to develop their own writing I have often described my own process as finding the moment I want to write about and then listening in the dark to the voices in my head. One of the things I learned from Richard Crane at Sussex was to allow my intuitive self more licence in the initial draft and then to use the craft of the playwright to fashion the piece through judicious and careful editing once the piece had materialised. Certainly I find it an exciting way to work; becoming the play's first audience. In the end I think you have to learn to trust yourself as a writer. You have to be confident that when you start a play you know something about making drama happen and try to get rid of the 'fear' and 'what-ifs' early on in the process. Only in that way can the play can come to life. After that I begin to edit, and that process is as long as a piece of string. Essentially I approach the new play as if I was a director who was going to have to stage the piece. This involves the sort of interrogation of the text and the characters that Katie Mitchell so wonderfully articulates in her book, 'The Director's Craft'. Consequently, I then rewrite scenes, characters or even re-order the play's events and I carry on until I have no further questions to answer. Finally I simply address the dialogue, trying to find the most economic form possible to convey the thoughts and feelings of the characters. That clearly is not the end of the process because once you introduce actors and a director into the process they have their own perspectives and questions to bring and that often involves further changes. I suppose I think of a play as a living thing that is constantly undergoing change and that any version you finally alight on is simply a snapshot of the play at that particular time. Adaptation though is a different process in that before I start my work on what I need to do with the characters and the dialogue I map out the structure of the piece, trying to find the best way to tell the story theatrically. That structure is never a rigid framework, but it does help me to work out what I need to include and what I need to leave out in the play. The great thing for me though to remember is that there are no rules about what works and what doesn't; these suggestions have served me well but in the end I have to trust to instinct. If it doesn't pass that test it doesn't go into the play.

What advice would I give to new writers?

My advice to new writers is, if something stirs you enough to want to write, then do it. Don't listen to all the hundreds of thoughts that will immediately tell you to abandon the idea. As I've said earlier I think the process of writing plays is one that has different components and it's important not to allow them to overlap in the early stages. I think it's important to give free rein to the creative

part of the process first. If I start editing too early I can stifle completely the creative impetus that is giving life to the play in the first place.

Also never show your work to anyone until you are happy with it. In the early days I was so keen to have approval that I showed things too early. If you do that it can be difficult to take onboard the feedback positively. It always feels like criticism. If you are happy with the piece you can then use the feedback to determine your next steps with the play and it becomes part of the positive development of your work.

What are my literary influences?

The first writer to make an impression on me as a new writer was Harold Pinter. I loved his spare dialogue and the way in which the meaning in any scene was often contained by what was not spoken by the characters. Edward Bond became a huge influence because of his political perspective, as did David Hare and Trevor Griffiths. These days I'm drawn to the work of Simon Stephens for the material he gives voice to and Martin Crimp who really interests me in the way he works with the formal qualities of a play; likewise Katie Mitchell, although technically not a writer I enjoy her approach to reimagining texts. At the moment I'm enjoying exploring the work of Abi Morgan and Rona Munro. Really, I think reading other people's dialogue as a playwright is a great privilege and something I take great pleasure from. None of us are ever too old to learn.

Why do I think theatre is important?

Everyone probably remembers the first time they went to the theatre. For me, certainly, it represented the first time I discovered that dreams could be made solid, real; it legitimised the daydreaming I used to do all the time as a child and along with football and popular music lifted my world on a daily basis. These are the things that still do it for me. But as a teacher in the state sector in the late eighties and early nineties what I came to realise was that drama in secondary schools, in particular, gave a voice to young people and allowed them to express things about their lives for which they had little other outlet. Theatre like the other popular arts enables people to hold a mirror up to the world and begin to ask questions, to demand answers and to interrogate solutions. That seems to be at the very heart of education in an open, equal and democratic society and seems a fundamentally important voice to have shouting from the rooftops in a culture that sometimes resists being questioned too closely. Early in my career I had the privilege to work with Chris Vine, Director of Greenwich Young People's Theatre, and he used to talk about 'problematising' situations when beginning to create work; asking questions to which there were no easy answers. That is why theatre is so important and why we need more of it, certainly in schools.

What's next for me?

I'm trying to write a piece at the moment which has 'The Domino Drop' as its working title. It's a piece about the break-up of a family, about our right to happiness in this life and about the way in which memory seems to cut across the rules of time and impose our past smack in the middle of our present at the drop of a hat. It began with an imagined conversation between a mother and her twenty something daughter, took an interesting turn when I went to see an exhibition of modern

European Art about 'fractured narratives', which in turn reminded me of somethings I'd read about Martin Crimp's work and now I'm 70 pages in and at the end of Act Two. I think. Dorothy Heathcote used to talk about the fact that there are somethings you know, somethings you don't know and somethings you don't even know you don't know. Being a playwright is a bit like sending out a search party for those things that you don't even know you don't know. It's endlessly fascinating.