
THE SQUEAK

The drama in dysfunction that inspires Joan Bigwood



What inspired your upcoming play, *Or Current Resident*?

I had a date with a guy, a fellow writer, who then disappeared for over two years. One day, I got an email from him asking me where I thought he had been all that time. "Prison?" I responded. "How did you know?" was his reply. He had been implicated in an embezzlement he hadn't committed and his lawyer failed him in the due process. I took him out for his first steak dinner in a very long time and learned everything I could about life 'inside'. We remained close friends until his untimely death from cancer, but he lives on in the character of Teddy Finch.

Joan in the zone with her muse, Brenda.

Tell us a little bit more about your observations of a dysfunctional family and household?

I've made a lifelong study of households, starting with my own and branching out into grade school friends' family systems, and beyond. I was always mesmerized by the range of dynamics I witnessed over my childhood: parents who overdrank, siblings who fought with fists and teeth, dinnertime performers, sulkers, debaters...kids who assaulted their parents,

parents who belted their kids...mothers who simpered and bel-
lowed in the space of an hour; I positively feasted on the unbri-
dled exuberance of dysfunction that thrives behind closed doors.

**What makes for realistic and impactful writing about a dys-
functional family?**

Humor. If you can figure out a way to make dysfunction funny, you can help others find the moments of connection, which is, in my opinion, the point of theater. If life is improv, which of course it is, I make the decision a majority of the time to see the humor in it, and share that with others. Humor defangs dysfunction and transforms it into eccentricity, which is a much more forgiving lens through which to view our collective downward spiral as a doomed species.

“If you can figure out a way to make dysfunction funny, you can help others find moments of connection...”

Is the Finch family based on your family?

The Finches are modeled after a family I never met: the three generations that had inhabited my home in Palo Alto. They were ultimately forced out by rising rents and failing employment, but left

behind a bedroom ceiling in the garage, a makeshift bathroom carved out of a storage area, two random door bells on the side of the house, and a sad, desiccated lawn. I was haunted by that multi-generational family, knowing through local gossip that one of the grandchildren had had a rough time in school...all of this crept into my story of a guy coming back from a long stay away to a town transformed in his absence.



Is there a character you particularly resonate with in *Or Current Resident* and why?

I relate well to Mason. Even though this is very much an ensemble piece, the play is ultimately Mason's journey to

manhood. He is a people pleaser, whose art consumes him, but whose family distracts him one hundred percent of the time. I always felt growing up that I had so much to express but no way to rise above the din. My British father always used to say to me, "You talk the most incredible amount of piffle in a limited amount of time." It has taken me a lifetime to turn that piffle into art.

I have often been told, "write what you know." What are your thoughts on this?

I like to say, "plausibility is a fiction writer's best friend." My creative world is dominated by the question "What if...?" From that place of playful curiosity, I come up with my ideas. Then it is a matter of finding out about what I need to know, though honestly, only enough to fool my audience. I can write about four people living on a weather station not because I know the first thing about life on a weather station but I am fascinated by people in relationships. Thank God for the internet, because I can get way more than I need to convince you that my characters are legitimately on a weather station while we explore everything but their actual work there.

What are some of your favorite plays?

I love plays about families. *The Seagull*, *A Doll's House*, *Saturday, Sunday, Monday, You Can't Take it With You*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Little Foxes*, *Master Harold and the Boys*, every musical I have ever seen, Shakespeare's comedies, anything by Caryl Churchill...the list would extend to the end of the page if I had more time to recall all the great shows I have seen or read. Theater is the best way I know to live lives we have not been privileged enough to be born into.

What would you like your audience to take away from *Or Current Resident*?

That stories can change, to quote a line from the play. That everyone needs a home of some description and no one should be deprived of the right to a warm place to sleep, preferably in the company of people who care. That as long as people are needed, have a place to go, or a thing to do, they stand a chance.

Who will this play appeal to?

When someone in a family changes dramatically— say, when an addict gets sober, or a felon turns over a new leaf— the entire family must adapt. That dynamic is rich for dramatic tension, misunderstandings and maladjustment. That is where theater is at its most gripping. When the ecosystem is thrown off balance, certain types of behaviors and relationships simply die off as new ones are forged. Darwin would have a field day with the Finches, and I think anyone who is enamored with the idea of *possibility* as a catalyst for change will get something out of this play.

Or Current Resident

February 3 to 25, 2018

Theater for the New City, 155 First Ave. (at E., 10th Street)

Presented by Theater for the New City and Squeaky Bicycle Productions

Thursdays through Saturdays at 8:00 PM, Sundays at 3:00 PM. Added Monday performances Feb. 5 & 12 at 8:00 PM. \$18 general admission, \$15 seniors & students. Pay what you can at Feb. 12 performance.

Box office (212) 254-1109, www.theaterforthenewcity.net

Running time: 90 min