

Julie Hebert

Graduation Tribute

By Todd London

There's something comforting about Julie Hebert winning an award called "In the Spirit of America." There's something comforting about thinking about Julie's spirit as the spirit of the country we live in. More than comforting—thrilling—to think that this woman of restless intelligence, capacious heart, and muscular compassion embodies the spirit of our place on this earth.

Julie's is the spirit of the America I want to live in—courageous, probing, humane, politically activist, ferocious in her pursuit of truth, uncompromisingly tender. She has brought this spirit to our village for these past seven years, and to all she does. It is the spirit that has made of her an example and role model to so many of us.

I always think of Julie in cities—New Orleans, San Francisco, Los Angeles, places where she’s made her mark as an artist. But Julie comes from a town called Berwick, Louisiana, in St. Mary Parish about as far down in South Louisiana as you can go without ending up in the Gulf of Mexico. (While we celebrate Julie’s seven years at New Dramatists, Berwick is celebrating its own centennial. So, I’m extra proud that Julie has chosen to be here today.) My tribute to Julie has an epitaph from another Louisiana writer, from up at Lake Charles, the singer-songwriter, Lucinda Williams. Williams sings to someone who has recently died:

See what you lost when you left this world,

This Sweet Old World

What you lost when you left this world

This sweet old world.

The breath from your own lips, the touch of fingertips

A sweet and tender kiss

The sound of a midnight train, wring someone’s rings

Someone calling your name

--Lucinda Williams

I quote Lucinda Williams, because of the way she uses the death of a loved one to illuminate the beauty of the living. Similarly, Julie's plays are haunted by love—lost love, dead love, the ache of love for a family that never happened.

They are ghost stories in reverse—the ghosts haunt us with a vision of living. In *The Knee Desires the Dirt*, a biology professor, living with her terminally ill mother and her newly sexual adolescent daughter, gets derailed by loving visitations from her husband, who died young in a fire on an oil rigger. In *St. Joan and the Dancing Sickness*, a 15-year-old girl who has been continually raped by her father, has visions of a French speaking old nun, who urges her to dance herself to life. *Tree* reconstructs family from a cache of love letters between a white marine and a black high school student from Martinville, Louisiana in the 1950s, a dream

of love that, for a short moment, before it was buried, made the world a sweeter place.

“The long line of the dead stand guard behind me, watching every god damn move I make,” Mrs. Price says in *Tree*. She is no longer the college-bound high school girl, but a retired school principal, a grandmother in Chicago in an advanced stage of dementia. “And the unborn children in front, begging, ‘Do it, do it for me.’ Everybody’s awake except the living.”

“You’ll never be without me,” the dead husband says to his living wife in *The Knee Desires the Dirt*, “Put your head on my chest, I am your father. Fold me into your arms, I am your child. Twist yourself around a lover, I am the snake that makes you arch. When you come, I am the water, spilling down your thigh. I am the water.”

The dead teach the living how to live. The opposite is also true: Life teaches us to die. Julie's gorgeous, sweeping St Joan play opens with a girl Jeannette lying "on her stomach, only her face visible, expressionless. She is being fucked by someone behind her in the dark." She whispers a phrase that will be a refrain heard throughout this powerful play: "I am not dead."

The ghost nun who appears to this Joan, who will stand behind her through a host of soul-murdering human evils—political corruption, environmental pollution, sexual violence and exploitation—urges resistance.

NUN

Hopelessness is your god. Give it up[....]You love your god.

You are comforted by hopelessness. It is a familiar blanket on a cold, harsh light. Surrender is seductive. Surrender is a liar.

Resist her.

She schools her in this resistance, inciting her to action with a phrase in Cajun French that translates: “Dance like a turkey on hot coals.”

NUN

Everyday you dance for your life.

JEANNETTE

Every day I dance for my life.

NUN

‘I am a body.’

JEANNETTE

(starting her dance)

I am a body.

The camera crew angles in on her.

NUN

‘I am a spirit.’

JEANNETTE

I am a spirit.

NUN

‘I am two.’

JEANNETTE

(overlapping...)

I am two.

NUN

‘I am one.’

JEANNETTE

I am one.

NUN

‘Body and spirit meet in my breath...’

JEANNETTE

Body and spirit meet in my breath...

NUN

‘And in my dance.’

Jeannette dances full force, strange, frightening.
The crowd is stunned, very still.

NUN

‘I am two.’

JEANNETTE

I am Two. I am One. Both are True. I am...I am...

She vocalizes in non-language sounds, haunting, otherworldly, on
fire.

Her dance gains momentum and peaks. She stops abruptly.

JEANNETTE

(breathing heavily)

I am not dead.

This intense, otherworldly possession makes action and image of a question central to Julie’s passionate body of work: How to be alive? I can’t phrase it better, this partial, fragment of a question to

the universe: How to be alive? How to unbury ourselves in this world? Christine, the unmoored teacher/mother/daughter of the *Knee Desires the Dirt*, puts it like this:

Can you be happy in an unhappy world? It seems some people sail above it all, smooth, joyful, lucky. Nobody knows anybody like that close up. Close up we see the scars, the wavering. Close up we are so mortal. So we smile politely, turning from the shocking reminders in other people's faces. Even so. Even though it's a fucking pit we live in and we run around with grinning face masks over our moldy corpses, even so, it seems possible to have a tiny corner of happiness.

Or in that play's fiercest image of life resisting death, Christine's mother, Althea, who has quit the chemotherapy and drugs prescribed to treat her advanced cancer, and who spends much of the play in her garden, digging and planting in angry defiance of

death, begins to plant herself in the earth, feet first. She raises two fists into the air and fiercely proclaims, “J’ai envie ma vie.” I desire my life!

I was working on this tribute to Julie when I got a cup of Celestial Seasonings Red Zinger tea. You know how they have little quotations on the label? Well mine was from Sojourner Truth, which felt like an omen, because Julie has been fascinated by and written about the famous freed-slave, who as an older woman became an abolitionist and women’s rights activist. The tea label said, “It is the mind that makes the body.” To this I would add, borrowing from Julie’s vernacular, the mind and spirit make the body.

Julie is one of those rarities in the world, an artist/woman/human being who has seemed to integrate this trinity—body—including heart—spirit and mind. This fervent wholeness of her has made her an inspiration in this community, even though she lives and

works so far away. Her accomplishments as a television and film writer and director have never diminished her presence here as a playwright among playwrights. She helped found a West Coast version of New Dramatists, continues to work with other ND writers on a playwrights cookbook of teaching recipes. She wrangled writers for our Nocturnal Commissions Auction, participating fully as a member of that benefit's committee from L.A. She has brought deep conviction to everything she's done here, from our admissions process to our PlayTime new play lab. She has been a great friend to many, me included, through times of grief and uncertainty and an example through her energy and activism, including as a volunteer with rape survivors.

Last year, in PlayTime, she led off what we call our Playwrights Studio Tour, a chance for the participating writers to share with each other and with the rest of the artistic company, their sources and process. No one who was there will ever forget Julie's recreation of her writing space, with its totems and icons of

serenity and connection, the turtle that connected her with her brother, and her own cache of letters, the letters that had passed between her father and her mother when he was in Korea—two people so different from the parents she thought she knew. She picked one and random, read it, and started crying, This is how I write, she said.

It was a moment of inspiration for all of us, pure Julie, emotional and true, body, mind, spirit all together. Emily Morse, our director of artistic development, said to me, “Julie is always who she is.” Which I take to mean also, “Julie is always everything she is.”

Every work of art speaks to a different part of us, lands in some pocket of latency in our bodies and sets up a stirring there. For me, Julie’s work aims, certainly, for the heart, but it strikes more specifically, in the breath—the shock of breath when we become aware of all that animates us, the sad swelling breath of grief, the diaphragm kick of outrage at injustice and cruelty, the inhalation

that comes with love, where you wish your lungs were larger and larger—that you had infinite capacity to take this sweet old world into your body. Inspiration takes its root from the word for breath, and we take inspiration from Julie.

Julie, on behalf of the writers, staff and board of New Dramatists, I want to thank you for the sweet privilege of working beside you for these seven years, to thank you for that everything you are, your fierceness and your tenderness. You have breathed into us, brought to us a spirit that might be America, shown us by example a little more about how to live. May all your digging and planting, all your unburying, bring up beautiful trees bearing the most delicious fruit, may the spirit you have breathed into us continue to fill you, may you have the life that you desire.