

1) What was the genesis of *Tree*?

A lifetime of attempting to have honest conversations about race... and running into minefields of confusion, hurt feelings, and unintended consequences. When I grew up in south Louisiana the Jim Crow laws were still in place and I have vivid memories of a so-called "separate but equal" culture and its humiliations. At the same time, our white family lived down the block from several black families and there were many friendships and intimacies that transcended the boundaries between black and white. Despite the interweaving of our lives, I learned early on that to discuss race openly was explosive and dangerous... consequently, I was drawn to the subject.

Was there a specific experience that led to the creation of the play?

I have a friend, Rosalind Bell, an African-American writer who grew up near me in south Louisiana, and is my age. We have so much in common, culturally-- memories of geography, language, recipes, religion, music-- and yet her experience as a black child was so different from mine. We sometimes refer to ourselves as sisters, just to make people take a second look. Originally, I started the play about two sisters, one white, one black, but it never quite took off. When I had the idea to make the other sibling a brother, the play ignited.

2) You describe your writing as having “a strong sense of place, a love of the strange in everyday life, a tendency toward flawed, [and] difficult characters who somehow still charm.” *Tree* is set in both in Chicago and Louisiana. How do these locations shape the narrative of *Tree*?

Many black families left the south and headed either west to Los Angeles, or north to Chicago, giving rise to pockets of Southern/Creole culture and neighborhoods in these cities that persist even now. I am interested in that, how we hold to familial traditions in new environments. I've spent some time in Chicago, have family and friends here, and have always loved this city. My daughter's great-grandmother had a small house on the Southside that inspired the setting for the play. As for Louisiana, I have lived away

from home for decades, and yet I feel I carry that landscape with me in a settled, interior way. I was interested in evoking that experience, theatrically.

3) You started in theater as a director. What made you branch out into playwriting?

The birth of my daughter. I held writers and writing in such esteem that I felt nothing I wrote would ever measure up. Then when Alexis was born it gave a timeline to my life that I had not grasped before, and I thought better start now if I want to get better before I die.

4) *Almost Asleep*, one of your earlier plays, is described as a “whispered opera of the mind” in which 5 characters represent different aspects of the same person. *Tree*, though grounded in realism, takes us into the mind and memory of Jessalyn Price. Does this manifesting the internal life of your characters figure prominently throughout your work?

Yes. I have always been fascinated by the interactions of a person's internal world with the external world. Representing a character's inner mechanisms is as important to me as showing what actions they take.

How do you think your playwriting has evolved since those first plays?

Perhaps structure is better, and I have more faith in leaner writing.

5) Andi Dymond, who is directing the VG production of *Tree*, observed that questions about family and memory --and perhaps the failures or limitations of both-- recur in a number of your plays. Is this connected to your observation that you “fall someplace in the Southern tradition as a writer?” What drives this exploration of flawed family?

My beloved flawed family! We are a big, wild bunch with profound differences in our belief systems, our politics, our ways of life... and yet we find a way to sit at the same table. We keep each other honest. Sometimes it's funny, sometimes painful, but the inescapability of family-- of being

known over time, of recognizing yourself in others, of continuing relationships after betrayal and suffering-- gives us a chance to learn the big lessons. And if you don't learn it the first time, they just keep coming at you! I feel like I'm trying to understand my life by writing, and my family and closest relationships are the teachers and inspirations. My mom has asked me not to put her in any more plays, but I told her I can't promise that.

6) While we all covet that world premiere, it often seems that the second production is the one that is most difficult to land. What are you looking forward to about the opportunity to revisit *Tree*?

I am thrilled to see new interpretations of character and the visual world of the play. It's only in subsequent productions that we understand the elasticity of the story, what it can hold, how it can change and still be true. I am so looking forward to learning about my play through Andi's eyes and the prism of the actors.

7) In addition to such honors as the PEN award, you are an accomplished television writer and director. What is it about the act of making theater that keeps you involved in plays?

Freedom to imagine. There is no template in theatre like there is in television. I've learned a lot about structure and economy of language in television, but I come home to the theatre for strangeness, for contradictions, paradoxes, absurdities, flights of theatrical weirdness... that more aptly reflect real life.

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