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THE BRIEF CHRONICLE



WT
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WRITERS' THEATRE **WORDPLAY** GALA 2013

Saturday, April 27, 2013 at the Four Seasons

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WordPlay Gala 2013 co-chairs Gillian Goodman and Stephanie Sick



February 10, 2013

JOIN US FOR A BEHIND-THE-SCENES BRUNCH WITH THE DIRECTOR'S SOCIETY

On February 10, 2013, Director's Society members will have the opportunity to go behind-the-scenes of one of Writers' exciting productions with an exclusive in-depth conversation with the artists.

Events such as these are among the many benefits offered to members of the Director's Society, a group of Writers' Theatre's most generous supporters. Director's Society members provide a secure financial foundation for the theatre through annual contributions of \$1,000 or more.

For information on becoming a Director's Society member, please contact Carly Magill, Manager of Individual Giving and Special Events at 847-242-6012 or cmagill@writerstheatre.org.

IN CONVERSATION WITH PLAYWRIGHT **JOHN LOWELL**



Bobby Kennedy, *Producing and Literary Associate*: How did you first develop an interest in theatre?

John Lowell: I was born and raised on Long Island so I lived close to New York City. My parents were both theatre-goers and they started taking my sisters and me to theatre when I was very young. The first show I ever saw in New York was the original production of *You're a Good Man Charlie Brown*. I very clearly remember enjoying the show, but as I was a very strange little boy, instead of concentrating exclusively on the cast, I spent a good deal of my time watching the audience react. As much as I liked the show, I was equally fascinated by the effect the material and the performers had on the audience.

BK: When did playwriting become something you were interested in pursuing?

John Lowell: When I was in junior high I started employing my modest musical gifts to write musicals, one of which was produced at my high school. I was sufficiently emboldened and encouraged by my adolescent success to conclude by the time I went off to college that I was destined to be a composer/lyricist for Broadway. Broadway had better judgment than I had, and by my late 20s, after having my work greeted by magnificent indifference, I realized I could write un-produced plays with twice the speed I could write un-produced musicals, and I started dedicating myself exclusively to playwriting. My first play, *Leo Tolstoy*

Is *In The Next Room Dying*, came to the attention of actor/director David Ogden Stiers (by which I mean I handed it to him when I was a clerk at Tower Records, and he was a genial, kind customer). To our mutual delight, he loved the play, and immediately said, "I want to get a production of this going." And he did. And it went so well that I decided that maybe this playwriting enterprise was the one to pursue.

BK: What prompted you to write *The Letters*?

John Lowell: Two things came together for me in the late 1990s: the Monica Lewinsky scandal was unfolding just as I was reading a biography of Tchaikovsky in which the author asserted that the Soviets had employed editors to remove any hint of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality from the man's letters and private papers. Both things represented a scary, insidious reality: the State felt it had a right to intrude into the most private of private matters. I did not want to write of Henry Hyde and Bob Barr and Lindsay Graham, but I did wonder about the people who had tried to re-write history to hide Tchaikovsky's sexual orientation. And as I wrote, the play came to be about the interests of The State vs. the interests of those who wanted to keep the record straight, so to speak. And all through the writing, I tried to keep the great quote from Napoleon in my mind: "History is a set of lies agreed upon."

BK: And how did the play come to Writers' Theatre?

John Lowell: About the time I finished the first draft of *The Letters* in 1998, my friend Marilyn Shaw, who ran the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco, was starting something called PlayBrokers which was

to encourage San Francisco playwrights. Though I was not an SFer, Marilyn, a huge supporter of my work, chose to start the PlayBrokers off with *The Letters*. One of the PlayBrokers got the script to a former San Franciscan, actor/adaptor Dakin Matthews, who liked it and wanted to help get it around. Happily, Dakin had just had his translation of Agustin Moreto's *Spite for Spite* produced at Writers' Theatre, and he said, "You must get the play to them! They do great work!" Which is when I first learned about you guys. After Dakin produced the world premiere of *The Letters* at his theatre company in Los Angeles in 2009, I came back to New York and brought it to Austin Pendleton's attention. Austin had just finished working on *A Minister's Wife* in Glencoe. So I submitted the play in 2008 and mentioned the Dakin and Austin connection and here we are.

BK: Why do you think a play about 1930's Russia is still relevant to today?

John Lowell: For one simple, disturbing reason: they did stuff like that; we still do stuff like that. The young sailor who's in prison, Bradley Manning, is going to become an unperson because he provided the material for Julian Assange and Wikileaks. For the rest of his life he will be behind bars because he shared information that may or may not have been "classified." But what I find incredibly troubling is that he has no recourse. There will be no public trial; there will be no chance to have his day in court. And then there is Guantanamo Bay, filled with unpeople. In short, though *The Letters* takes place in the Soviet Union, it is not about the Soviet Union. It is about what happened this morning and what may happen tomorrow. ■



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