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The Interviews:

Conversations with Acclaimed Playwrights, Critics, Librettists, and Lyricists

A Series of Master Classes

I felt it was important to have different perspectives, so I reached out to a number of playwrights, critics, lyricists, and librettists from varying backgrounds and ethnicities to share their thoughts on the craft. My favorite part of writing this book has been doing these interviews. When one sits alone all day staring at a computer screen, it is often difficult to have a sense of community. Doing these interviews reminded me that I am a part of a unique and special tribe: the clan of theatre-loving wordsmiths. It reminded me that there are many brilliant scribes out there who go through the same angst, the same joys, and similar struggles when they face the blank page or the blinking cursor. Knowing this takes some of the mystery out of it (not to mention the sting) and reminds us that deep down we are all the same.

One of my favorite quotes about artists (which really applies to all human nature) is from Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*. In a dialogue between two actors (and forgive me for paraphrasing the great Mr. Stoppard), the very seasoned actress tells the junior member of the company how

nervous she is on the first day of rehearsal. The younger actor replies, “Why would you be nervous? You’re an experienced professional.” She answers, “Every time I start work on a new project, I say to myself, “This is the one where I get found out.”” I think we all feel that way. It’s the ultimate imposter syndrome. I shared this quote with a number of the writers in this section and every single one of them said, “Yes, absolutely! That is *exactly* the way I feel!” It’s both comforting and disconcerting to know that even after winning Tonys, Oliviers, Oscars, and Pulitzers, that feeling never goes away.

While each interview lasted over an hour, I have included some of the highlights broken down into different topics: “On Starting Out,” “What Should I Write About?,” “On Structure,” “A Writer’s Process, Readings & Development,” “On Taking Advice on Your Script,” “On Collaboration,” “On Writing Musicals,” “The Writer as the Outsider Looking In,” “On Critics & Theatre Criticism,” “Advice for New Writers,” and I ended each interview by asking, “What Do You Love About the Theatre?” Each of these conversations was exciting, revelatory, and tremendously fun. In fact, I left each interview in a state of euphoria, feeling like I had just attended a master class. This was not only because of what I learned from these brilliant people, but in addition to the aforementioned fear of “getting found out,” there was also a sense of, “Look, if I can do it, *you* can do it!” Each section contains pearls of wisdom, but feel free to jump around to a topic that is of particular interest to you. A bio on each person interviewed is included at the end of the book.

On Starting Out

Beth Henley

My mother performed at the community theatre in Jackson, Mississippi. I fell in love with the theatre and playwriting in general when I used to cue her on roles like Blanche DuBois. She was very specific about every pause, and the exact wording. Tennessee Williams was a huge influence. And his dialogue, the poetry of it. Really, she was right. If there was a comma, it needed to be a comma. If there was a period, it needed to be a period. If there was a long, long sentence, you needed to do it all the way through. He had such a fine ear. In this way, she showed me her love for the thing that she cared about. It wasn't that the play was being done in the amateur theatre for local people. For instance, when she was playing Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, she would go around the grocery store with a limp, and her commitment and courage and care really informed me, because I really think there can be beautiful theatre anywhere.

David Zippel

I was in New York, and had little, part-time jobs, and was trying to make my way in the theatre. And at that point, and even today the advice that I would give to myself or to people starting out is to write as many songs as you can, with as many talented people as you can. And encourage your talented friends who are cabaret singers to sing them.

Charles Busch

I was writing full-length plays at age eleven. It's odd that my teachers all thought me so completely unexceptional and invisible because I was always writing. Often, I'd write the lead role for myself and it would be a fantasy version of me if I'd been born in some exotic setting. It didn't occur to me as a teenager that I

would be a writer, like a lot of kids or people who become writers. I saw myself as a performer first. And I became a playwright really to create roles for myself to be on stage.

Peter Filichia

In 1987, I was walking along the streets of New York. I passed a newsstand and I saw this thing called *Theater Week* and I looked at it. On the cover, it said, “Volume One, Number One.” And I know that when a magazine is just starting out, they need writers. So, I went to my girlfriend’s house, and I said, “I saw this thing called *Theater Week*. I’m going to call them tomorrow.” She said, “Don’t, don’t do that. That’s crazy. You know they’re not going to pay any decent money. Call *The New York Times*, give them article ideas, they’ll give you articles.” And I said, “Yeah, but the thing is, this is *Theater Week*. And that means I can get in every week. The *Times* might give me an article or two a year that they’ll throw me. And I won’t get a reputation. This way every week people read me, and it might lead to a better job,” which indeed it did.

Samuel D. Hunter

In a weird way, I didn’t start writing plays because I thought I’d be a great playwright, it was because I wanted to be a writer, but I wasn’t very good at prose. And something about the messiness of the language of playwriting really appealed to me. It wasn’t about constructing beautiful sentences, it was about pulling together a ton of common, everyday, messy lines of dialogue and letting them add up to something beautiful, something that exists outside of the language itself. And I didn’t know it at the time, but the collaborative nature of theatre really agrees with me—it becomes about something bigger than me, it’s about an entire community of artists coming together to tell a story.