

education

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The Understudy Lecture Series

On October 31st, 2009, as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's ongoing Lecture Series, Ted Sod, Dramaturg for the Education Department interviewed Theresa Rebeck, playwright of *The Understudy*. A question & answer session with the audience followed.

Ted Sod: We love it when we do a new play and the playwright can come and talk with our audience. The playwright is obviously the generative artist – the actors, the director, the producer, designers -- none of us can do our work without the playwright. So we're thrilled to have you here, Theresa. I wanted to start by talking a bit about your career as a playwright. You were born in Ohio and you were educated at Ursuline Academy, correct?

Theresa Rebeck: Yes. I'm a Catholic girl from Cincinnati.

Ted Sod: That explains a lot...

Theresa Rebeck: I actually did some of my undergraduate work at Notre Dame and went to Brandeis which was a better place for me.

Ted Sod: You have a lot of degrees, right?

Theresa Rebeck: Yes, I have a masters, an MFA and a PhD from Brandeis. The PhD is in English and American literature.

Ted Sod: Tell us a little bit about your desire to write plays. You also work in television and in film, but you have said in your heart you are really a playwright.

Theresa Rebeck: I am. It's difficult to remain a playwright and I don't think there are many of us left. I have to say – and I write novels now too – that I am a career playwright. I don't know if it is an affliction or an addiction or a calling but it is certainly how my brain works. I think it's a really beautiful form and I consider it a privilege to work in the theatre.

Ted Sod: One of your first successes was in Boston – probably because you were at Brandeis – entitled *Sunday on the Rocks*. I've also read that you have pretty much written a play a year since 1992. Is that true?

Theresa Rebeck: I don't know. That might be true – it's probably true. Really?

Ted Sod: I wanted to talk to you about how your work incorporates your knowledge of film, television and the stage. It captures some of the bad or bizarre behavior that can go on behind the scenes. Is that something you were interested in because you experienced it yourself or because you wanted to let the audience in on something?

Theresa Rebeck: I write about artists a lot. I have a couple plays about novelists now. I have one play called *The Novelist* and another play that is a new play called *Seminar* about fiction writers. I also write about actors a lot. I think people have a calling – if you are lucky enough to have a calling -- and I think writers have a subject that just keeps returning to them. I actually think my subject is actors because I am very moved by the complexity of what they do, how they use their whole selves to express the mysteries of humanity and survive in a very difficult, battering environment. I find acting and theatre in generally a redemptive act. For me the mystery creates community and at its best allows grace into our hearts. So I am very moved by actors, especially the three in *The Understudy*. I think they are extraordinary. I think Shakespeare wrote about actors all the time. Chekov wrote about actors all the time. That's what I'm going to do.

I am also interested in questions of how art and commerce collide and what happens to the self in those collisions. I was in my twenties when I wrote for a sitcom and I wrote a play about the shenanigans that went on there. I went out to Los Angeles and really by freakish chance I got on this sitcom. It was the most neurotic environment and I was like, "Wow, growing up in Cincinnati did not psychologically prepare me for this!" I was just completely stunned by the behavior. So I did the only thing I know how to do, I wrote it down. That play is called *The Family of Mann*. That was a play I wrote very differently from most of the work I do. I was writing scenes. I didn't know what it was or what to do with it so I just kept writing scenes of stuff that happened. Like there was one day when one of the guys in the office, he was like the golden boy of the sitcom I worked on, and I came into my office and my couch was gone. He had taken my couch; he had had people come and take my couch. So I went into his office...I actually went into his office to say "Hey, someone took my couch" and then my couch was in his office. I said, "What is my couch doing in your office?" And he said, "Oh, I wanted it." I was like, "You took my couch?" It seemed so peculiar to me. He kept saying that I was going to get a better one. But it was so mysterious to me, like why would you take my couch? And it turned into a truly bizarre circular conversation and he was sitting there playing guitar. We were supposed to be writers on a sitcom and this crap was going on. So I lost my couch, and then I went back to my office and wrote it down. I know it's really peculiar. I had a bunch of scenes like that of stuff that had happened and I didn't know what to do with them. I was actually driving around Los Angeles and I thought, it's *King Lear*, it's a history play. I realized that the executive producer was like a demented king and then there were all these people who were around him that were like ministers and everyone was stabbing each other in the back. So then I knew how to write it and took the scenes and I filled them in. Actually, the couch scene never made it in or it got cut, during previews. I thought that scene was pretty funny though. So, for me, I actually find that it's often the human behavior I'm exposed to that inspires me. The thing about that play is that people liked it and all the critics called it "a biting satire" and I was thinking, "No, this really happened." It is cinema verite, you know?

Ted Sod: Let's talk a little bit about how this play came together. I think you mentioned that you wrote this at New Harmony, which is an artists' colony.

Theresa Rebeck: Yeah, the first draft of it.

Ted Sod: In eleven days, which is remarkable. But you are a fast writer, right?

Theresa Rebeck: I am a fast writer, but I hadn't done anything like that and I haven't done anything like that since. It is exciting to do it and challenging and sort of weird. So maybe I'll do it again someday. It ended up being a very raw and quite structurally sound – basically this play. Then for a year I kept working on it and adding things. There was something about the play, it was very responsive to re-writes, you know, where you throw something at it and it will blossom. We kept adding things. Obviously the mercury poisoning joke just got added. On the day of the invited dress – which was really only a few weeks ago – we finally got Mark-Paul to say “get in the truck”. He has done those movies. So in one of our rehearsals we were like, “Do it, do it for us.” Then I said, that should be in the play. It wasn't in there until like the first performance. There is great fulfillment in watching Mark-Paul do that line so well.

Ted Sod: There are so many wonderful ideas, moments, or themes in your play. You have the actors' vulnerability, what the actors put up with and then you have this romance in the middle. But I want to know about Kafka. Did you read a lot of Kafka and just decide it's time to put his work in one of your plays?

Theresa Rebeck: I have read every word that man has ever written. I read his diaries, I read his letters. When I was at Brandeis there was a comparative literature class where we studied quite a lot of Kafka. When you go through the kind of academic training I've had, you go through periods of being utterly fascinated by one artist. So I have an ongoing Dickens fascination. Then I was reading Trollope – he has written a lot. And then there was a Kafka phase. He was a real fan of the theater, a great, great lover of theater. He was a tender-hearted guy and he also was neurotic as well. It's very dark his work. I have a real affection for him and a real affection for the beauty of his work and the yearning for expression that this man who was in a tremendous amount of pain had in his heart. That's where our affection for Kafka really gets expressed, especially by the designers. The designers almost lost their minds at one point, putting Kafka play on stage made them so happy. And the lights flickering was pretty cool.

Ted Sod: It is possible that Kafka could have written a play that got lost. He loved the Yiddish theatre I understand. He used to write plays for his three younger sisters when they were children.

Theresa Rebeck: Well, he didn't write this one. But he could have.

Ted Sod: That's an interesting question. The play within the play – did you have to plot that out separately.

Theresa Rebeck: Yes, I very much did. That's actually the bones of the structure. That's another thing Scott and I kept looking at through successive drafts. How much Kafka is enough? Earlier drafts had a lot more. Basically, the first scene that the two guys never play with each other, the one they are sort of practicing when they are alone onstage, is the bedroom scene where Karlsman comes to Inspector K and says: "I want you do arrest this guy in this bar." Then he goes to the tavern to arrest that guy and it's all a ruse for him to be brought to the law. You don't need to know what happens in this play; read a little Kafka and you'll know.

Ted Sod: I see elusions to *The Trial* and *The Castle* and...

Theresa Rebeck: Yeah, there's the trial scene and the castle in the window, and "I've been to Prague on a pub crawl."

Ted Sod: Tell me about the romance because this is very moving for me when Roxanne has to deal with being abandoned. It is true that Kafka never really consummated any of his relationships...well, he may have consummated them but never got married, he always ran away.

Theresa Rebeck: I have read a lot of his letters to Felice and his diary entries. He talks at great length about how much he loves her and how he's terrified of this. There is also something in it about his fear of the bourgeoisie life style. He got real nervous about pieces of furniture. He could never fully articulate why he abandoned her. For her it was 17 years they were together, writing letters back and forth. She did finally go off and marry someone else. The story about her is that she was boring and bourgeois. But I think she stuck by him for a long time.

Ted Sod: You finished the play within a play with a somewhat happy ending. If Kafka had written a happy ending it might have looked like the ending to this play, wouldn't you say?

Theresa Rebeck: Sometimes I think he was more of a miniaturist. In *Metamorphosis*...do you guys know *Metamorphosis*? The one where a man gets turned into a giant bug? He wakes up and has been turned into a giant bug. His family is horrified. There is a lot about what he is going through trying to communicate with them. There is one scene where he actually comes out of the room and his family is horrified and he sister does actually throw an apple at him and he ends up dying. Then there is this incredibly redemptive moment at the very end where they all go out and have a nice lunch. Kafka wrote things where the relief of death finally gives rise to something exquisite. It is actually a peculiar happy ending.

Ted Sod: Well, the dance is quite exquisite. And it's just lovely to listen to that music.

Theresa Rebeck: I think it's great...I just can't praise them enough.

Ted Sod: I just want to backtrack for a second and talk about the romance. You have a lot to say about silence, which really hit a chord for me. Do you see silence as a weapon?

Theresa Rebeck: . I've been through situations, and I think everyone has, where suddenly someone ceases to speak to you. You don't know what happened or why and you ultimately find out from other people that it is mostly cowardice or fear. I see cowardice as defeat and that we can do better, honestly. Language is gift for all of us. I think that silence in literature is overrated at this moment. If you look back at what was coming out after WWII, there was very serious vast devastation of the spirit. And nihilism rose out of the events of WWII, which I think warranted that expression in literature. I think we are not there anymore. I have issues with postmodernism because, frankly, I don't think it grows into anything or creates community, which is something I'm more interested in.

Ted Sod: Tell us a little about working with Scott Ellis. How does the relationship to the director influence you when you are writing?

Theresa Rebeck: You know, I have nothing but praise for him. I have really enjoyed working with him. He is dedicated to the play and he worries about every choice, but it is all about the play; it is all in service to the play. A lot of directors that I have worked with on and off over the years have been trained that they are supposed to be making their own statement. Scott really believes that the playwright and the director need to completely in synch and that he is in service to the play. That's why his plays are always delightful to watch because they are clear and fierce and emotionally realized.

Ted Sod: He directed the version up at Williamstown and there were a few readings. Now that had a completely different cast. Do you sense what the actors have to bring to the show, besides a comic sense? What were you looking for in casting your actors?

Theresa Rebeck: You know that there is a kind of specific thing that actors have to do in my plays which is an emotional availability. That's actually why I work with Julie White so much because there is enormous emotional vulnerability there and completely whorish dedication to finding as many laughs as you can. Those two things standing next to each other are really interesting to me. I do see comedy as a response to being wounded and a sort of fierce need to survive. What's tragedy? For me tragedy is about death and comedy is about resurrection. And also the language in this play is harder than you think, with all the sentences collapsing and you have to talk really fast. I love Justin because he talks really fast. I love everything about him but I really love it when he gets out there and sails through that opening monologue. That is technically difficult. Those are the technical demands.

Ted Sod: We can take questions from the audience now.

Audience Member #1: You have worked in TV, movies and theater. In which discipline do you feel that you have the most control?

Theresa Rebeck: I started writing fiction and my second novel comes out this spring, and it was really hard to write. What I realized is that when you are working on a novel you are completely in charge and you can zoom around in amazing ways. It is a new experience for me. I'm like, "Look all of a sudden you can be Paris." It is sort of like extraordinary how much power you have and you don't have to go into political situations where you are begging producers. Mostly I work in the theater because it is where I feel my voice in the clearest and that is my form. Film and TV is always –you gotta love 'em cause they pay us a lot and you get your health insurance points. I've had some great experiences in film and TV but there are a lot of people involved. There's this thing that they do – they make you write these things called treatments and outlines and you are describing what you are going to write before you've written it. Then all these people want to have a conversation on tone and you are taking these phone calls with eight people giving you notes on this thing which is about something you haven't written. It seemed so surreal to me. I'd say: "I don't know about that, I haven't written it yet." And they all go, "Well, we really need you to explain." Sometimes they'd say, "It isn't funny." It isn't funny because I haven't written the jokes yet! What are you talking about? Or sometimes they'll say, "The characters aren't clear." How can they be clear? I haven't written it yet. So it does seem like everything's backwards there.

Ted Sod: It's a bit Kafkaesque.

Theresa Rebeck: Yes it is.

Ted Sod: Theresa is probably just going to roll her eyes, our maybe she won't, but I have been shilling her book everywhere. I just got to the last chapter, it is called *Free Fire Zone*, and it is about her experience writing for film and TV. It is truly horrifying and sobering when you see what writers go through in some of the mediums. It has got a lot of good advice. I particularly like the chapter entitled "Mendacity." Would you tell us the titles of your novels?

Theresa Rebeck: The first one is called *Three Girls and Their Brother* and the one coming out this spring is called *Twelve Rooms with a View*. It is real estate porn. Someone describe it to me that way. It is centered around a big apartment on Central Park West.

Audience Member 2: I was curious about how the three characters became a theatrical ménage-à-tois after their initial hostility. Can you elaborate on this theatrical ménage-à-tois?

Ted Sod: Wow. Do you see it as a ménage-à-tois? Well, let's see if the playwright agrees with you.

Theresa Rebeck: I think that the play traces how all three of them fall in love with each other. In theater, hopefully everyone in your cast and crew does love each other. In fact, my little cast is running around New York now going to all these events together and we often go out for drinks after the show and stuff like that. They are always using the

fullness of who they are and it runs into very, very intimate relationships that slip away when we all move on. So I think it is more about that. Although, who knows? Who knows what they do when the curtain is down?

Ted Sod: Let's talk about this idea of hostility. Sometimes the best defense against bad behavior is to become somewhat hostile. Wouldn't you agree?

Theresa Rebeck: They definitely start the play at a more hostile place. They don't trust each other. There is a lot of struggle between those two different actors and then the stage manager with her own personal stuff. I wanted there to be an emotional direction to the play where they start off distrusting each other and they fall in love as the play goes on.

Ted Sod: Through the work. A lot of that happens through the work.

Theresa Rebeck: Through the work they open their hearts to each other.

Audience Member #3: How much influence did you have in the casting, the set design, and other aspects of the play? Have you found that your influence has increased as you have gained more fame?

Theresa Rebeck: The way the contract is written, the playwright, the director and the producer all have a voice in casting. Julie was sort of with it when Todd said, "I really want to do that play." But then when we were looking at the other two parts it was very much Scott and me deciding. Scott came to me because he had been working on *Weeds*, and said, "What do you think of Justin Kirk?" I didn't know Justin's work very well, so I watched a *Weeds* episode and thought, "That guy's pretty good." And then I obsessively watched YouTube videos of him. But he had such a strong reputation as a stage actor. Honestly the director is the hinge pin in these situations, at least when you work with Scott that's what it is. He really has tremendous breath of knowledge and my impulse is always to go, "I trust your instincts." Scott's instincts are really good so if his instincts are leading him in a certain direction...for instance, a lot of people came in to read for the part of Jake and it got down to two people who I thought were both wonderful. Scott's gut was "Let's go with Mark-Paul" who I thought was brilliant. This is his first time on stage. Did you know that? This is his stage debut. I think he has been really phenomenal and really great to work with.

Audience Member #4: I have two short questions. The first is, were you thinking of any actor in particular for Bruce?

Theresa Rebeck: No, I wasn't.

Audience Member #4: After the Williamstown production what did you want to change?

Theresa Rebeck: After that production, I was very happy. I thought it was a very successful production. I think this production is more emotionally nuanced than that one

was, that there is a delicacy to the acting here that I am really proud of and that we all worked on together. To keep it buoyed up and broad with the comedy and to also find the tender delicacy of some of those moments. That entailed some re-writing.

Ted Sod: And Williamstown has a very short rehearsal period.

Theresa Rebeck: Two weeks.

Ted Sod: Which is hard.

Audience Member #5: We were wondering who Nicky Martin was.

Theresa Rebeck: Nicky Martin? Nicky is the artistic director of Williamstown and he is sort of the guru we all turn to around this play.

Ted Sod: He sent the play to Scott...

Theresa Rebeck: ...and he put us together.

Ted Sod: Also, he was the artistic director of the Huntington Theatre Company and will be directing our production of *Present Laughter* starring Victor Garber and Harriet Harris and Brooks Ashmanskas.

Theresa Rebeck: Brooks is the one who choreographed our dance.

Ted Sod: I was looking for that credit.

Theresa Rebeck: But Nicky put us all together. Like Alex Dodge, the set designer, was someone I met through Nicky.

Audience Member #6: What is the story with Laura?

Theresa Rebeck: I like that fact that there are forces in this play that the other characters have no control over. This is a comedy, so they are comedic forces. But that was part of it for me. I find that in Kafka there are so many forces that are working on the people who live in this strange universe. Who turned Gregor Samsa into a bug? Why did that happen? Who is in the Castle? Why was Joseph K. arrested in *The Trial*? I was looking for a comedic representation of who was moving the set. Julie actually thinks it's God. I think that's kind of cool. She was like, "We don't even know if she's there, right?" Julie finally figured out, Laura doesn't answer her. She's never in the booth when she gets there and when she talks to her on the headset, she never answers. Things get moved and stuff, but who knows?

Ted Sod: In her playgoer's guide interview, Julie said that she thought Laura was God because you always ask for things and you don't get them. That's all the time we have – can we please thank Theresa for joining us today? The next lecture event is on November 21st for *Bye, Bye, Birdie*.

