

Grace notes in Venice by way of the plains

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Playwright James Still in rehearsal for the world premiere of Appoggiatura.

Venice, Italy and Holt, Colo. Who knew such seemingly disparate places could share so much?

Perhaps only the folks at the Denver Center Theatre Company, who this month are mounting world premieres of "Appoggiatura" and "Benediction" — set in those places respectively. And even they may not have seen all of the connections between Italy's famed canaled city and the fictional Eastern Plains town that is home to the novels of Colorado native son Kent Haruf.

Yet it doesn't take long chatting with "Appoggiatura" playwright James Still to realize that, like Haruf, his imagination was shaped by the plains. And that upbringing instilled a special grace that finds its way into his work, whether it's set in the city or the country.



Playwright James Still during rehearsal for the Denver Center Theatre Company's world premiere of Appoggiatura.

"I was born and raised in Kansas," Still said on the phone recently. He was in Washington, D.C., where he is prepping the world premiere of "The Widow Lincoln."

Still said "raised" with the gentle emphasis of a soul still tenderly rooted to place.

The playwright, 55, grew up in a tiny Eastern Kansas town. His father was the high school basketball coach. His mother was a banker. He slung newspapers on its quiet streets from his bicycle. His family still resides

there, and he visits often.

"I went to school at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. My little town is maybe 30 miles from Lawrence. There was a lot of space where I grew up. The sky is very big, and the horizon beckons as well as pushes you away."

That last comment carries the kind of melancholy that comes when you love a place yet feel destined to depart.

"I knew I was gay from the time I was pretty young," he continued. "And I knew — and I look at this kind of sadly now — I knew I would have to leave."

"And it's a burden growing up knowing you have to leave a place before you need to know that."

Even so, he credits this tiny town and the vast sky for giving him "room to imagine a life. I've always felt really lucky that I came from a small town and then lived the rest of my life in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles."

Growing up in Kansas helped him imagine travel and the world. "It helped me imagine the world was big, and that has helped me as a writer. Because I feel pretty fearless both as an intrepid traveler and as a writer, following my story wherever that story is leading," Still said.

"I once left a place and went out without any proof I could make a life for myself. And that's what a play has

to do, what a story has to do, every time. It has to start in a place and move beyond that. Go on and risk something unknown."

"Appoggiatura" and "Benediction" were both commissioned by the Denver Center Theatre Company. And each received workshopped readings at the 9th Colorado New Play Summit last February.

Summit aficionados had every expectation that Eric Schmiedl's adaptation of Haruf's elegiac novel "Benediction" would be chosen for a full production on a Denver Center stage this year. It is the third installment in the trilogy that includes "Plainsong" and "Eventide."

After summit readings that moved some attendees to tears, there was every hope that Still's play would claim the other slot.

Which doesn't keep Still from admitting that readings are not his favorite thing.

"I'm kind of a grump about readings. They're so hard, and sometimes they misrepresent the play. I have a suspicion about readings — because I've experienced this as an audience member — that plays that make great readings are not necessarily great on stage," he said.

"In a very stubborn way, I wrote it thinking 'this is a play that can never have a reading: It's anti-reading,' " he said with a bit of mischief. "Then of course, we get the call to do the summit."

About to celebrate its 10th anniversary, the Denver Center's Colorado New Play Summit is becoming one of the city's go-to events. Audiences are invited to a mini-festival of readings. Some of the plays were commissioned, others submitted for consideration. Next month for the first time, the summit will take place over two weekends to give playwrights more time to hone their work.

"I think what the summit does — at least my experience of it — is it creates a relationship between the community and the play, the audience and this play. And that's different somehow from other new plays gatherings."

"Appoggiatura" means "to lean" "to support." It is also a musical term — referring to "a note of embellishment preceding another note and taking a portion of its time." It is a note the roaming character Vivaldi sounds as he serenades American tourist Helen. In her 70s, Helen has journeyed along with Aunt Chuck (a man) and Sylvie to the famously romantic (and perhaps a bit rundown) city.

This trip has special meaning for each of them. But it's nicer to discover how so as "Appoggiatura" gently reveals their relationships to one another.

So, let's just echo Marco, their charmingly inept Venetian guide when he says with the profound wisdom of the fool: "They're related by devotion."

Plenty of movie people are well-versed in doing publicity for a movie that is being released at the same time they're in production on a new one. Reaching two world premieres simultaneously seems particularly daunting.

"I won't be coy — it's intense. There is literally no room, no additional room in me. Everything is taken up. I also want to be really clear: It's a wonderful thing," he said.

"It sounds like a cliché, but wherever I'm at is where I'm at," he added. "When I'm working on 'The Widow Lincoln,' I'm there. It doesn't mean I'm not checking e-mail on breaks to see if there's anything on the phone

about 'Appoggiatura' in Denver. Risa (Brainin) the director is in constant contact with me when I'm not there."

Even if he weren't doing two plays at the same time, he says he would come and go.

"I think everyone needs a break from the writer. So I always try to make it a practice. You learn the hard way that going away is good for me and everyone else," he said.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of President Lincoln's assassination, and "The Widow Lincoln" is being mounted at Ford's Theater, where John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln.

"Have you ever been in Ford's Theatre?" Still asked. "It's pretty chilling. It's hard not to meditate on that. Then you have my play on Mary Lincoln and the assassination in the theater where that happened. That was obviously a traumatic event for the country but also for the wife of the president. And she relives in very splintered fashion that night in the theater in the very theater where it happened. So yeah, It's meta, meta, meta, meta."

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"APPOGGIATURA." Written by James Still. Directed by Risa Brainin. Featuring Darrie Lawrence, Rob Nagle, Lenne Klingaman and Nick Mills.

Through Feb. 22. At the Ricketson Theatre at the Helen Bonfils Theatre Complex. 14th and Curtis streets. Tickets \$41-\$58 via denvercenter.org or 303-893-4100.