



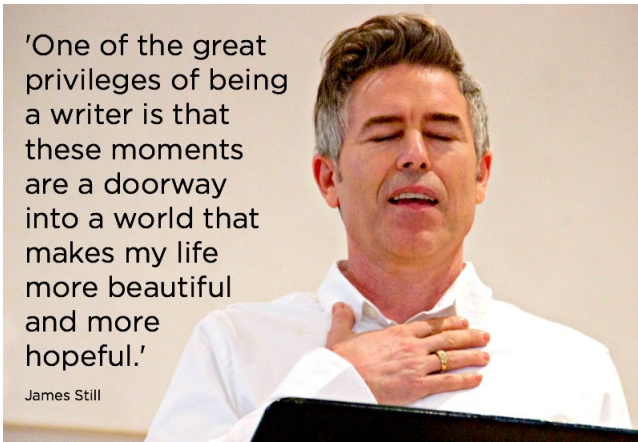
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Appoggiatura's James Still is running to catch up to himself

by John Moore | Dec 11, 2014



'One of the great privileges of being a writer is that these moments are a doorway into a world that makes my life more beautiful and more hopeful.'

James Still

Photo by John Moore

James Still was asked at Tuesday's first rehearsal to explain his upcoming world-premiere play *Appoggiatura*. All of it: The title. What it's about. Where it came from.

The pained look on his face was not terribly revealing because Still pretty much always has a pained look on his face. He is a three-time Pulitzer Prize-nominated playwright, after all.

The title, he's got covered. An appoggiatura is a musical note. It refers to that point in a musical piece where tension builds up just before leaning into a satisfying release. Think of it as being pulled back from the cliff. To Still, the word isn't nearly as scary as it might sound at first.

"When I send text messages on my iPhone, auto-correct does not recognize *Los Angeles*," he said, "... but it does recognize *appoggiatura*."

The storyline is pretty straightforward, too. *Appoggiatura* is the whimsical story of three Americans, each grieving the loss of the same man in very different ways. They travel together to the romantic city of Venice seeking escape, understanding, solace ... and, yes, appoggiatura. Like those chaotic musical notes, these three are caught up in a moment of profound dissonance - just before the resolve.

It's identifying the origin of the play that presents a problem for Still. Because does anyone really know, exactly, where any play comes from? What Still did offer cast, crew and staff at their first gathering for the play opening Jan. 16 at the Ricketson Theatre were fragments from his life that help explain how the play came into being.

Still took us to Central Park in New York City, where he has often jogged throughout his life. "A few years ago, as I was running, I saw this guy run past me," Still said, "and I was convinced that it was me 20 years ago, when I was a young guy who had just gotten to New York.

"It was like I was running to try to catch up to myself."



Darrie Larence, who plays Helen, is returning to the DCPA Theatre Company, where she was an original member for the first several years of its existence, along with Tyne Daly. Her past Denver credits included 'Night of the Iguana.' She is shown here with castmate Rob Nagle (Aunt Chuck). To see our full gallery of first-day rehearsal photos, [click here](#)

To fully understand where Still was going with all of this, you should know that *Appoggiatura* takes on a magical, time-bending quality in Venice. Is it still modern day? Or has it somehow become 1951? Is it possible to run into a living being from another time in our lives - like Still being passed on a jog by his 20-year-old self?

Back in Central Park, Still noticed other men jogging who were also in their 40s. And with that came a monumental epiphany. "When I was in my 20s, I never saw any men in their 40s running with us in Central Park," he said, "because they were all dead. They had all died of AIDS in a time when it felt like everyone was dying."

Still then realized that he had now aged into "that thing" that didn't exist when he was in his 20s - a generation before him wiped out. "And so now here I was both myself in my 40s, and myself in my 20s - running in Central Park together."

The revelation overwhelmed Still with feelings of sorrow and yearning and love.

"I remember hoping that someday I would be able to capture that sensation," he said. "And that was the beginning of *Appoggiatura*." And while the play is not directly about AIDS, he said, it taps into the abyss of our collective grief.

Flash forward to about five years ago. Still had moved to a small town in Italy called Lucca -- Puccini's hometown. It's a carless city best known for a 5-kilometer wall that lines the town, where modern-day people run and walk and ride their bikes. Still would get up every morning and run there. And every morning, he would see an old man walking toward him. Someone he knew.

"I was sure it was my great-grandfather," said Still, who grew up in a small town in Kansas. And whose great-grandfather died when Still was 22.

"But it was him," Still said matter-of-factly. "Every day, I would go running because I couldn't wait to see my great-grandfather. I would make up something to say, like, 'Multa grande, papà!'" He would look at me and think I was strange and say, 'buongiorno,' and keep walking. But I am telling you: This happened every morning for months."



JAMES STILL'S 'GREAT-GRANDPA OF LUCCA'

Still had a photo taken of himself with the man, and when he returned to his native Kansas to visit his mother, he showed her the picture. I said to her, "Who is this?" And she said straight out, "Well ... that's grandpa."

That pretty much made writing *Appoggiatura* an inevitability.

"This kind of thing happens to all of us, I am sure," Still said. "But one of the great privileges of being a writer is that these moments are a doorway into a world that makes my life more beautiful and more hopeful. It allows me to return to a place that I want to go to. It allows me to visit people that I miss."

Appoggiatura focuses on Helen, a childlike woman in her 70s who knows this might be her last trip to Italy; her wayward granddaughter, Sylvie, who has just

graduated from college; and a middle-aged man they both lovingly call Aunt Chuck, who has no idea how to mend his broken heart. They are all lost -- and looking to be found in Venice.

And what better place? "You go to Venice to get lost," said Risa Brainin, who will direct the DCPA Theatre Company's premiere production. "Beautifully lost. Heartbreakingly lost.

"And James has captured the feeling of Venice perfectly. His plays are passionate and full of what makes real people tick. His plays are authentic and genuine - just like James."



The first reading at the first rehearsal of 'Appoggiatura' at the DCPA on Nov. 9. Photo by John Moore. To see our full gallery of first-day rehearsal photos, [click here](#)

Appoggiatura: Cast and crew

Helen: Darrie Lawrence
Sylvie: Lenne Klingaman
Aunt Chuck: Rob Nagle
Marco/Young Gordon: Nick Mills
Kate/Ensemble: Mehry Eslaminia
Old Man/Trio/Gordon: Paul Bentzen
Vivaldi: Julian Remulla

Written by James Still
Directed by Risa Brainin
Set Design by David M. Barber
Costume Design by Meghan Doyle
Lighting Design by Charles Macleod
Sound Design by Tyler Nelson
Composer/Musical Director: Michael Keck
Dramaturg: Doug Langworthy
Projection Design by Charlie Miller
Choreography and Movement by Bob Davidson
Voice and Dialect: Kathy Maes

Appoggiatura: Ticket information

Jan. 16-Feb. 22
Ricketson Theatre
Call 303-893-4100 or go to www.DenverCenter.Org



Castmates Mehry Eslaminia, left, and Lenne Klingaman are excited to hear the "Appoggiatura" designers explain their set, lighting, costume and video concepts. Video by John Moore. To see our full gallery of first-day rehearsal photos, [click here](#)



Darrie Lawrence (Helen) at work during the cast's first read-through of the script. Photo by John Moore. [To see our full gallery of first-day rehearsal photos, click here](#)

ABOUT THE EDITOR



John Moore

Award-winning arts journalist John Moore has recently taken a groundbreaking new position as the DCPA's Senior Arts Journalist. With The Denver Post, he was named one of the 12 most influential theater critics in the US by American Theatre Magazine. He is the founder of the [Denver Actors Fund](#), a nonprofit that raises money for local artists in medical need. John is a native of Arvada and attended Regis Jesuit High School and the University of Colorado at Boulder. Follow him on Twitter [@moorejoh](#).