

I Interview Playwrights Part 860: Wendy Graf



Wendy Graf

Hometown: Los Angeles, Ca

Current Town: Los Angeles, Ca

Adam Szymkowicz's Blog



Q: Tell me about Please Don't Ask About Becket.

A: In Please Don't Ask About Becket I write of themes I return to again and again: family, identity, home. In much of my work, these themes have played out against a backdrop of the social, political and religious landscape of our times. In Becket, the heart of the story is a young woman's journey to self-awareness as an individual, separate from her twin and from the rest of her family. Seen through the lens of upper middle class privilege, it is also the story of a family built around one member – Emily's twin brother, Becket – and how he affects each of them, both uniting and dividing them as they struggle to reconcile their relationships. Becket asks questions about nature vs. nurture, to what extent parents are responsible for their children's bad behavior, whether it's possible for parents to love a child too much, and where the line should be drawn between standing up for our kids and forcing them to overcome obstacles on their own.

Q: What else are you working on now?

A: Right now I am deep in the world of this play and find it hard to work on anything else. I have been developing a play called A Shonda, about a closeted gay Orthodox Jew and a gay Southern Baptist who struggle to reconcile their faiths and their sexuality.

Q: If you could change one thing about theater, what would it be?

A: This is a two part answer! First, what would I change nationally? I would change how theaters are so scared about their bottom line ie. putting butts in seats, that they keep recycling old standbys and are afraid to take chances on new work because they think people won't come. Theaters like Steppenwolf in Chicago and The Public in New York have done just fine taking chances and developing new work and promoting new voices. Case in point: Fun Home and Hamilton!

Okay, Part 2: Los Angeles. I would change Equity's crusade to eliminate 99 Seat Theater. Los Angeles has never gotten its due as a theater town because of the domination of the film and television industry. Los Angeles has one of the largest thriving, creative, thrilling small theater scenes around, with top artists, exciting and fresh new voices and a myriad of opportunities for playwrights who have not been lucky enough to have one of the very few Equity theaters (which by and large bring in productions from elsewhere rather than developing work of and casting local artists) as a home/place to develop and produce work. Over 400 new productions open each year, in everything from beautifully restored 99 seat venues to black boxes to garages and site specific locations. The fact that so many theater artists – actors, playwrights, artistic directors, designers, producers – have joined together, marched, shown their solidarity and overwhelmingly voted in support of the 99 Seat Plan and have now filed and served a lawsuit against Equity shows how vital that plan is to us. I would never have been able to grow and thrive as a playwright, to develop my work with top theater artists; in short, I would not be giving this interview if it weren't for Los Angeles theater and the 99 Seat Plan.

Q: Who are or were your theatrical heroes?

A: Tony Kushner, Arthur Miller, Stephen Sondheim (because his lyrics are really like little plays in themselves and I've devoured his 2 books, aspiring to "make a hat"). I'm inspired by the writing and direction of Moises Kaufman and also by the late Mike Nichols' direction. Most importantly, my mentor, Gordon Davidson, director extraordinaire and Artistic Director of Center Theater Group for 35 years, is my biggest theatrical hero. My play Lessons was the only play he directed after retiring from CTG. During that over two-year collaboration I learned so much from him - about theater, writing, character, dramatic structure, how to show rather than tell, how to be a storyteller, what needs to be said and what doesn't, how to be brave and listen to my gut. Every single day I find his words and adages echoing in my head.

Q: What kind of theater excites you?

A: I am a very visceral and instinctual writer and theatergoer. I don't have any hard and fast rules; it's about my visceral reaction. When I saw Fun Home my heart started pounding, I was completely engaged in the life of the family, I was moved to tears more than once, and I spontaneously jumped to my feet and cried "bravo!" when it ended. I also love plays that speak to me about different things and perspectives at different times of my life. I've always loved Death of a Salesman. In my younger days, I saw it as a play about a tragic guy who was over the hill and used up, struggling to maintain relevancy. When I saw Mike Nichols' production a couple of years ago, suddenly it was a play about the lies family members tell one another to protect each other and preserve their fragile existence. I am excited by imaginative work such as that of Tony Kushner and Rajiv Joseph. I love to go to the theater, become immersed in the world of the play, cry, laugh, cheer.... the best theater is provocative as well as entertaining, challenging complacency and the status quo.

Q: What advice do you have for playwrights just starting out?

A: Read plays and go to theater as much as possible! Learn the difference between a play and a TV or film script or a short story. They are not the same. Accept that writing is rewriting. And it's important to hear your work instead of just reading it, so when you write something have a reading, even if you're just grabbing a few friends and sitting around your dining room table. It informs you as to what is working and what is not and helps you on the journey of finding the play. Write from your heart, not what you think is commercial. And follow Tony Kushner's great advice: Whenever you feel stuck, go back to your original impulse. I have that one hanging over my computer to remind me daily!

Q: Plugs, please:

A: It's been years since he disappeared, but Emily Diamond is still haunted by dreams of her twin brother, Becket. Kiff Scholl directs the world premiere of Please Don't Ask About Becket, an enthralling family drama by Wendy Graf (All American Girl, No Word In Guyanese for Me) opening August 20 in an Electric Footlights production at the Sacred Fools Theater Black Box in Hollywood, Calif.
