



New Play Project

New Play Project is a Mormon theatre company based in Provo, Utah. They produce new plays, primarily in sets of short plays but occasionally full-lengths as well. Web: newplayproject.org

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July 18, 2008

First off, tell us about your background—where you're from, family background, college, mission.

I call Columbus, Ohio, home and I love it, but it's only been my immediate family's home for thirteen years. My family comes from all over the place: one grandma's family came from the Mormon colonies, and she spent her early life in Mexico. One grandpa (her husband) is from Punjab state in India and immigrated to the U.S. in the 1950s. My other grandmother is from southern California, although I believe her parents were born in Utah. My other grandfather was Jewish. His parents came over from Romania and he grew up mostly in L.A.

Both of my parents are great storytellers. My mother used to go do it formally, and my dad's just interesting to talk to. Both my parents and three of my grandparents were in education, so that's an important part of my background, too. I started college in Ohio at a small school called Otterbein with a reputation as a great theatre undergraduate program. That's a big part of my development skills: it was a great education.

I left to serve a mission in the former East Germany from 2002–04. By the time I came back, tuition had increased substantially, so I dropped out and worked for a while as a substitute teacher, math tutor, and high school drama director, and then transferred to BYU to do the last six months of my undergrad. After that, some friends and I founded New Play Project. I've been doing that and other projects for the past two years, and I recently started work on a master's degree in Creative Writing at BYU.

How did you get started with writing?

I wrote a lot in school ... not huge, polished works

so much as random little things in the margins of notebooks while not paying attention in class. Also in high school, I got involved in a sort of student-theatre movement, editing other people's plays, acting in and directing original work. After a while, I also start writing my own things: a few short plays, a libretto for an opera a friend of mine had written the music for, whatever came my way in terms of production opportunities.

How has your family background influenced your writing?

Like I mentioned earlier, there's a great family storytelling tradition ... by which I mean that we talk a lot. My mom likes to tell one story about when I was a kid, she says it disproves theories that language developed to communicate needs or for survival purposes. When I had first learned to talk, she tells me, I would tell long stories, but whenever I wanted something, I would point and grunt. I think I've retained a little of that tendency to the present day. In any case, I grew up in a family culture that was very verbal, where questions were encouraged and answers were both extended and interactive. We also enjoyed word play and verbal games. When we read the scriptures as a family, we'd always stop every few verses to talk about them. That tradition was important: I was raised to think of meaning as an active rather than passive process. The multicultural element was also important in the sense that it adds urgency to storytelling: every Jewish holiday is a story, with a purpose. My mother would also work hard to try to give us a sense of our heritage from both her parents ... she couldn't just leave it to the larger culture to give us a sense of identity. Having different ethnic identity and traditions made that clear.

How has your dual Jewish-Mormon heritage affected you as an artist?

It's actually Jewish-Sikh-Mormon, three heritages. I think the biggest thing is that growing up with stories from and respect for multiple traditions, you start to see that different people explain fundamental truths in different ways. And for me, there's a sense that the stories are part of what helps us to be close to God and to do what's right. Being an artist requires a belief in art. I'm what you could call a narrative artist, I guess ... a storyteller. I have to believe in the power of narratives, of stories. There are other elements, of course, each tradition had its own strengths and perspective that's informed me, but that's a much more in-depth conversation.



Tell us about your writing process, focusing primarily on your plays and your essays. Where does a project begin for you? How do you tackle it? How long does it typically take?

Plays usually stay in my head a long time before I really get started with a draft. A lot of times I'll jot ideas or snatches of dialogue on notecards, sticky notes, the backs of receipts ... but it's just pieces, nothing terribly organized. By the time I start writing, I usually have three things in my head: 1) a thematic concern, something I want to talk about using the play form, 2) a theatrical concept: something visually or structurally interesting that says to me that this could make an interesting play 3) a sense of the characters. If I have one piece, I just think of it as a random fragment. Once I have both #1 and #2, it's a work in progress. Typically, a lot of the percolating process is getting characters and a rough sense of the events that will bring things out in them. #1, #2, and #3 need to intersect—I've got to have a sense of that.

Then I start to write a real draft. The thinking is usually months or more, but not always. The first draft is a day or days; the revision process is typically weeks.

What's your revision process like?

I like to have people see my work—as a writer, you always know what you're saying, but it's important, especially in theatre where people can't stop or go back to reread something like in a book, to know if what you're saying is clear to a potential audience. So, when a draft is done, I take it to New Play Project workshop sessions when possible or send it to friends. When I get their feedback, I go over my script to clarify things and make other changes. A lot of times, something someone said will also spark a whole new idea for a change to make for more than clarity, something that can really improve the play.

Where do you write? Always at the same place or does it depend?

When I'm not pressed for time, I do like to write a first draft longhand, with pen and paper, before feeling chained to keyboard and screen. I write first drafts on the porch, on the couch, at night or in the morning in bed, etc. The process of typing it up is actually really valuable: it becomes a first revision, making me go over the whole text at my mediocre typing speed and fix things up. In many cases, I'll write part of a play, get stuck and type it, and know how to continue by the time I finish revising/typing the first part: at which point I abandon the computer for couch or porch again.

I should also add that while those are the places I *write*, they're not necessarily the places where I compose my pieces. Ideas come and the best dialogue often form while I'm walking. Or driving (without music). Sometimes I have actual places to go, and that's nice. Often, I have to just go walk around the neighborhood or pace around in my house.

In our culture, we call it writing after the recording process, but creating and telling stories is a lot more than the writing part.

I am obsessed with stories, with dilemmas, and with meaning. The obsession fuels a near-constant process of composition, and sometimes the composition gets pressing enough to get committed to an actually written form. In my writing, at least, though, the intense process of unwritten composition almost invariably comes first.

Which of the plays you've written are you most proud of? Why?

I like "Sinners" ... which I haven't actually written yet, but will be quite good. It's about King David and his sons, also Joab, who's a nephew or cousin ... I forget. I've got the thematic idea, a decent sense of the characters, and am trying to pick the right structure and sense of the theatrical. I have lots of individual ideas, but haven't settled on a comprehensive plan.

I like most of my plays, but for different reasons. I like what I did with "Prodigal Son" in terms of creating a structure I like, telling a compelling story, and drawing audiences in emotionally. I also love "Drip-Drop," which is a short comedy about a leak under a kitchen sink. I enjoy the characters and the visual concept, it makes me happy. And that's good enough. "To every thing there is a season," right?

Where'd the idea for "Drip-Drop" come from?

I wanted to write something light, wanted to deal with the complexity of the world around us, and how the average person no longer comprehends the first thing about the inner workings of his/her own house. And then I got this idea of watching a husband and wife work on their kitchen sink, with the audience seeing it as if through the wall. I got a sense of the characters and wrote.

Tell us about founding New Play Project—what led up to it, how it started, what sorts of obstacles you ran into (and how you overcame them), how the project has grown, etc.

A major figure in the founding of New Play Project was Arisael Rivera. He and I were in a playwriting class together and shared an interest in telling Mormon religious stories in a human, grounded way (at the time, I was working on "Maror" and Ari was working on "Somos Sangre"). One night, after auditions for a set of short plays, which was to my knowledge the last production to go up under the name of the Provo Fringe Theatre Co., I invited Ari over for dinner at my house if he was up to the 40-minute walk.

I'm a believer in the theory that great ideas happen more often in conversation, at the intersection of minds, than when a single mind operates alone, and New Play Project is great evidence of that. Ari and I shared a lot of artistic goals and were able to hash out a plan together as to how to create a company where writers like us could

get experience writing the kind of material we were most interested in, for an audience and in a community of writers that understood our shared values and could help us get better at writing with those values. We had another long conversation with two other friends and soon a company was formed ... in theory, at least.

The initial plan had been to do our first show in June of '06, but with Ari in New York, things didn't come together. When he came back in July to recruit actors and take a generous portion of the directing load, things got rolling. With the help of Eric Heaps and the BYU Experimental Theatre Club, we were able to get space for free on campus and put up a great first show.

Another early, significant influence on the company was Bianca Dillard. She set up the workshop program for helping revise new plays prior to the script selection process and helped put together program notes and lobby displays to help the audience connect with the issues in the play texts, which in turn help us focus on producing texts that interact in some meaningful way with audiences.

In December of 2006, a board made up of several volunteers who'd been active during our first three shows voted to incorporate as an official nonprofit theatre company rather than continuing as a loosely organized group. We'd been looking at the piles of required paperwork for some time and felt prepared to take the step. The reasoning was that our vision was one that shouldn't be confined to BYU students, and to keep opportunities open for others, we would need to move off campus.

Our central financial goal as an organization was "don't lose money." We decided the best way to pursue this goal was to produce plays on a shoestring budget at first and only increase spending as we were able to build up a larger paying audience. So far, the strategy has worked: we haven't been driven out of business yet partly because we kept our business so financially easy to maintain in the early days. We've moved from the highly inexpensive and simple rooms at Provo City Library to pricier but much nicer facility of Provo Theatre Company. We're awarding cash prizes to the audience's favorite playwrights. Overall, things have been good.

A key figure in our recent expansion and financial success has been Adam Stallard. Adam first saw a show, then became a regular attendee at our workshop sessions, gradually also developing an interest in company administration. His background is in computers, not business, but his unyielding drive to find solutions to problems and alter patterns of organization to improve performance created a major shift in how we operate. Under Adam, our audience has expanded and the

accessibility of the organization to those who want to get involved has been greatly improved. Theatre is an art, but it's a collaborative art, one that is both created and appreciated in groups. Adam's interest in group dynamics actually improves the art itself.

Our challenge now is to put together enough programming to bring in enough revenue to help keep the under-used space open. It will be a significant challenge, but we have a new wave of committed and insightful volunteers to help once again move the company forward.

Did you ever get discouraged?

Incredibly.

How did you keep going?

First recurring issue: any kind of art gets emotional, and collaborative arts are the most difficult emotionally, because everyone's exposed emotions have more chances to collide and cause conflict. I think it's fair to say that every significant figure in New Play Project has had feelings hurt by every other significant figure in New Play Project. Sometimes we disagree about artistic matters, sometimes over business and organizational matters. Sometimes we're just not as considerate of each other as we should be. We all let each other down from time to time, and we all gradually come to know each others' weaknesses as collaborators. Often we're working too hard and not feeling respected enough and that alone can create conflict.

The way we get over those kinds of conflicts is to move on and keep going. Some people end up moving on to other projects because of artistic, organizational, or personal differences of opinion, but for the most part we stick around and keep working because we share a fundamental belief in the value and uniqueness of what we're doing. It's that vision that drives you forward when things get rough: the vision of a culture strengthened by better and more socially responsible, spiritually-oriented writers.

Other frustrations have included an unending stream of government paperwork and accounting that sometimes take time away from the art, a necessary proliferation of checklists, and bad performances.

Another source of strength: Every once in a while, there's a moment of pure magic on that stage, of absolute connection of performance with audience. Knowing that from the beginning to the end of the process everything is original and home-grown makes the finished product that much sweeter. ■