

Christopher Shinn on the ephemeral pleasures of theater



November 18, 2016 - Christopher Shinn has written over a dozen plays, one of which—2008's *Dying City*—was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. He is a Guggenheim fellow, as well as a recipient of an Obie for Playwriting. In addition to currently developing a new TV project for a cable network, he recently returned from London where he workshoped a new play about violence in America.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3912 words.

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Where do you think your desire to write plays—as opposed to, say, being a poet or a novelist—comes from?

I always loved writing and I wrote poetry for a long time. In my early and mid-20s, I wrote fiction. I went to Columbia briefly. I didn't complete the program, but I went to get my MFA in fiction writing there and I was there for a year and a half. I was always fascinated with other forms of writing and I took all of it really, really seriously. Still, it wasn't like theater was my absolute dream and these other things were just side interests, it just kind of ended up that theater was the thing I was best at.

I wrote a play in 1998 and the Royal Court Theater wanted to do it. I was 23 and I thought, "Okay. This was the first professional success I've had, so maybe this is what I should choose to do." You know, part of it was just sort of responding to the marketplace, I suppose. Somebody wanted my play and then it got good reviews, and I thought, "All right, maybe I can do this." I think there's a deeper answer as well, which is that I really like being around people. If you want to be a writer and you want to be around people, basically there's only theater. That's pretty much it, because the collaborative aspect of theater is such a huge, huge part of it and it's obviously not a part of fiction writing or poetry. In the end, I just had this insatiable hunger to be around people and to communicate and to participate in group activity.

Do you feel like there's something specific that you can do in the theater that you can't do in other genres?

This answer applies to theater that's both realistic and not realistic. Because theater is involving real people in the shared space and time, it captures something about reality itself in a more visceral way than the written word, because when you watch a piece of theater, again, whether it's a realistic play or something non-realistic, avant garde, you are still watching real people.

There's always the amazing double level of the theater—which is the story, or one part that you're watching, and then the people who are doing it, who you're also watching. It's just that slight difference, no matter how expert the performers are. You're always somewhat aware of this—that people are acting or performing. There's a fascinating slice of reality on that level that's not necessarily part of the story you're watching, which is "Who are these people? Do they like each other? Do they hate each other? How do they feel about each other? What was it like for them to work on this? What are they like in their normal lives? What will they do after the show?" All those questions.

I think that the psychoanalytic reading of it would be that there's a voyeuristic aspect to the theater. Whether you're an audience member or you're creating it as a playwright, you're always watching reality unfold on multiple levels.

Someone can easily read a play, but to really experience it in its truest form requires seeing it performed live. Is that ever a frustration for you?

There are a couple different ways to answer that question. It's cool that people read plays. I don't think it's a diminished experience, necessarily, if you can only read a play, because people have imaginations and can imagine what is happening in very elaborate ways. That being said, if somebody said to me, "People can only read your plays from now on, they'll never be produced," I probably wouldn't keep writing plays. I don't want to say that reading a play is a diminished experience, but if that were the only way somebody could experience my work, I would probably say, "You know what? I'm going to move on to a different kind of storytelling." Yeah. I do think that, ideally, a play is realized through performance, through production.

I think where people get caught up has to do with the fact that a lot of playwrights have a rigid vision of what their play, ideally, is in performance, and they will try to realize that vision quite obsessively. That's never interested me. At times, it can feel like there's something perverse about this or masochistic or submissive, but I know that you can't control reality. I know that any kind of authoritarian attempt to manufacture a rigid reality is, in some way, dead. I've always enjoyed that. You want it to be done in a certain way, you want it to have a certain feel, but I find it very exciting that it's so different night to night or that different productions are so different. Again, I don't want to make it seem like I don't care, but I'm definitely not one of these playwrights who sees a certain set in his mind and has an idea for an actor, or insists that a line should be read a certain way. I don't give line readings and I never have an idea of what a character really looks like.

One thing that's common is for casting directors to say, "Well, who's your dream actor in this part?" or "Who do you see in it?" I never can answer, not because I don't have a strong sense of who the person is—who the character is—but because I just don't have that kind of vision where I see it vividly. I have a feeling. I have a sense. At times, I wonder if that's hurt my productions a little bit, in that I'm willing to accept that things may not always feel the way I imagine they would feel, and although I'm passionate about my vision, I definitely don't try to control it in a rigid and authoritarian way. In fact, I like that you can't control it. I like that it can be different night to night. I like that reality is beyond my control and I just have to submit to it. I have an abstract emotional sense of what something should be. At the same time, I'm really open to the fact that other people, other subjectivities, other minds, other souls are going to be wholly outside of my imagination and that there's going to be a dialogue and a collaboration where all these forces come together and end up creating something that is, in some ways, going to be what I envisioned, and in other ways will be very different from what I imagined my play would be.

On the other hand, I do think a lot of people get into the theater because they want to control reality. There are playwrights and directors who basically demand submission and get it. I mean, there is that way of working. I think it produces something that has a very dead feeling, because you can always perceive if somebody's being controlled or being given a very narrow space to move in. But sometimes it works. Oftentimes, people like that kind of very, very controlled theater.

One of the most wonderful aspects of theater is the ephemeral nature of it. You are seeing something happen live and in real time. It exists only in that moment.

"Ephemeral" is a good word. It's really intimate. It's a bit like seeing live music in that way, in that it's only happening in a specific time and space—you're there, and you're experiencing it. Of course now people record a portion of a concert on their phones and have it forever, so it isn't quite the same as it was before you could record things easily. Thankfully, we don't allow people to record plays on their phones and probably never will. So at least right now that quality of ephemerality is still absolutely in existence. When you see a play you are aware, "This is it. I'm only receiving it in this way, and after it's over, I'll never receive it again except in my memory or in discussions with someone who was there that night with me." I think that is really special, and in that way, it's like life. Again, as long as we're not recording each other in all of our intimate interactions. In ten years, who knows, maybe everything will somehow be recorded by whatever crazy devices we have in our homes. Right now, if a friend comes over for dinner, there's no recording of your dinner. Despite all our social media and all our constant recording of our actions of our lives, on a fundamental level, when we interact with people most of those interactions are ephemeral and once they're over, all we have are our memories. Theater replicates this aspect of our life in a very interesting way. I think the more that we do mediate the rest of our lives with technology, and other art forms too, the theater will continue to represent that profound aspect of human life that when we interact, after the interaction is over, it's lost to everything but our memories.

Do most directors and playwrights record their own productions as a means of saving them for posterity?

I don't. The New York Performing Arts Library videotapes many plays. I think most of my plays are there, or at least many of them. I've never seen them, though. I don't think I've ever seen any video of any of my plays. I know some exist at the library, but I've never really had a desire to see them. There's something for me still that feels there is something super-sacred about the experience of watching a play knowing it really is an intimate communication that exists in a very limited time and space. Even if there are recordings, I've never had an impulse to go look at them because it just feels like a different thing from sitting and watching a play.

Christopher Shinn recommends:

Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World - René Girard had one central idea: envy is a threat to social cohesion and so to promote societal functioning, human groups unconsciously channel their envy-derived aggression onto scapegoats. We think of these scapegoats (who are usually "other" in some way) as objectively bad and guilty, but in reality they are innocent or no worse than ourselves. Driven by a deep commitment to non-violence, Girard in this book explored the tragic implications of his theory from the beginning of time into our era, opening up endless lines of thought.

Collected Papers on Schizophrenia and Related Subjects - Harold Searles was a psychoanalyst who argued for plain-spokenness and mutuality in the therapeutic relationship. Where other analysts probed for complex intrapsychic structures and hid behind a mask of neutrality, Searles saw love, longing, desire, shame, anger, hatred, grief, and pain—and fostered communication of these feelings openly, in both directions. Searles also refused to draw a hard line between neurosis and psychosis—his radical work asks us to confront how mad we are as the only road to sanity.

Far Away - Caryl Churchill's 2000 play about the omnipresence of deceit in a world of apocalyptic violence cuts through the defenses our culture constructs around its deepest pathologies and anxieties. Teaching the play again to my students recently, I was struck by how powerfully it resonates with events today. Her work inspires me to believe that we can see through the cultural fads of the moment to human truths which change form but not substance—truths we must address in order to survive.

The Schooldays of Jesus - JM Coetzee's latest novel explores why violence and nihilism are so exciting to us, and asks if it is possible to indulge the sensual, intuitive, primal parts of ourselves without giving over to aggression, narcissism, and insanity. In its story of an adult figuring out how to best parent a psychologically wild and creative child, the novel investigates what a mature human being should look like—spiritual and philosophical problems we so rarely talk about.

What is your favorite thing about writing a play?

The most fun is when meaning appears, because I feel like I've never really known what a play means initially. I have some ideas about what I think I'm writing about and what I imagine will come into focus as I go on. Once you're really in the meat of a play and you've been writing it for a while, it really is about organizing the characters and the actions of the play towards some kind of meaning. It's very mysterious, because it feels like that meaning sneaks up on me. I don't know ahead of time really what it will be, and that makes it scary, but it also makes it exciting. When that part of my mind that can put things into words what something means—when that starts to enter the writing—that's a really, really exciting moment because it makes me feel like life has meaning. It's not just that my work of art has meaning, but that deep inside me, I'm trying to understand the meaning of life at that time for me, through this play. It's just a relief. It's a relief to feel like, "Wow, okay, there is meaning in my life. It's not just all chaos and randomness and confusion, but something deep inside of me is at work constructing meaning." That's a very special feeling. It's almost like a spiritual feeling, something very sacred.

Art-making is almost always a way of making sense of the world, even when you don't realize that's what you're doing.

It's really amazing. It's amazing how the psyche works. I mean, I think of it like dreams. You don't make a dream, but you know it came from you because there's nothing else. When you're asleep, it's just you. There's no other stimulus. It's an amazing thing. There's some part of us that is constantly making meaning—or at the very minimal level with dreams, making narratives or making images—and we have no control over it. Some part of us that we have no control over, nevertheless, is doing all this work all the time. It's really incredible.

You've adapted work for the stage and I know you are currently writing something for television, are there other kinds of work that you would like to do that you haven't yet?

I would like to direct people's plays—people's plays other than my own. I directed my own play, "Where Do We Live" and I really loved it. I would certainly direct my own work again. I learned so much from that experience. I've been doing this for almost 20 years professionally, and I just feel like I've learned so much. I feel like I have a lot to apply to other people's work. As a playwright, you're often really just absorbing what's happening in the rehearsal room as a director and the actors work. I've had 20 years of lessons of seeing how directors and actors interact and how a play comes together. That's a base of stored-up knowledge that can find its way into the way you write a play a little bit, but not really, not fully. So, that part of me is aching to be exercised. I would really love to do that.

Also, the economics of theater being what they are, you can't really play with the length of something too much. Some really genius writers like Caryl Churchill can write a ten-minute play and people will still pay attention to it, but we don't really have a system where really short plays can get done in a way that can get a lot of attention. As the world becomes more and more challenging and people are working harder and longer, they have less time for art. Thinking about that, I've become really interested in short things. That's why I like Twitter. It's really fun to think about, "How can I create an interesting thought with only 140 characters?" I feel like it would be fun to try to learn to tell stories in three to four minutes for bands who are looking for interesting ways to create visuals for their music. That's something that interests me. I just feel like people's time is so precious, that I want to learn how to make art that will take 60 seconds to consume. I don't know what form that will take, ultimately, but that really interests me. How can we create deep, thoughtful things that people will still really be able to make time for and room for?

With Trump becoming president, a lot of people can't help but speculate as to what effect this will have on the arts. What do you think?

We're in a culture now where there is an instant media reaction to everything all the time. Sometimes it takes a while for the real impact of something like this to make itself known in the arts. Play writing is something that takes a really long time, then it takes even longer to find a theater to produce it and get it up on stage, so there's a delay there.

If we're on social media, we participate in a culture that is lightning fast and highly responsive to events. It can feel like that is the dominant mode of interacting today. It is really interesting to think about how art works in that space. Depending on what kind of art form you work in, it could be a several year process before what you are making actually gets seen by the world. Thinking about what questions are suitable for that longer time table, that's something that I think about a lot. The play that I'm working on now—something that is still in process—uses violence as one of the main themes. Violence has literally been around from the beginning of time, and will not end anytime soon. So that as a theme is something that I feel pretty confident will be relevant no matter how long it takes to write the play, and no matter how long it takes for a theater to produce it.

I wrote my new play during the Obama administration. When I began the play, it was literally during the beginning of the republican primaries. I imagined a more establishment figure as a possible president. Someone like Mitt Romney or Marco Rubio, an establishment figure who would offer more continuity than someone like Trump. The fact that I'm revising the play in a political climate that's very different is interesting. I don't know yet how it will change the play. Obviously there was violence before Donald Trump was elected president. On one level, the core of the play will remain the same, but cultures change and certain realities feel like a significant break with what came before. I'm sure that will somehow affect the play. I'm trying to keep my mind working on two tracks. One is the eternal—the unchanging aspect of human nature and social reality. The other track tries to be responsive to what is changing about our social reality right now.

It is interesting to think about what historically we will look back on this time. I grow weary of the "at least we'll have some great art" line of thinking.

It's very easy when things are less polarized to fall into a less politicized mindset. When things are more polarized, political questions become easier to get people to engage with. There's a lot of concern about immigration for example, given all of Donald Trump's rhetoric. One of the things that's been interesting to me is seeing that the Obama administration had deported more people than any other president. Why wasn't that a bigger deal? That's an interesting question to ask. I don't necessarily have an answer. I'm not asking it in a shaming way, it's just that in a more polarized moment things become questions that were not questions before. There's an opportunity to ask them in a way where they generate more attention. Hopefully that can shed light not only on the president and the future, but also the recent past. It helps us see the things we weren't talking and thinking about perhaps at the level that, in retrospect, we should have been.

I also try to think of it this way. You can always pick and choose. You can always look at things that are getting worse, or that are already really bad, or you can look at things that are getting better, that are pretty good. History is always like this—things are always getting worse in some places, and always getting better in other places. I think that makes it really hard to know where to look. Are you somebody who's more pessimistic? Do you want to focus on the more negative things? Are you somebody who's more optimistic? Do you want to focus on things that are good? Are you somebody who tries to integrate those two ways of thinking? It's just so interesting to think about how we look at things and where we choose to focus our energies.

That's always a question the artist has to ask. We all have pessimistic parts of ourselves. We all have optimistic parts of ourselves. There are things that are tragic happening around us all the time. There's things that are inspiring happening around us all the time. It's fascinating to think how every individual artist, and every individual citizen, makes a decision for themselves about where their pessimism is going to focus, where their optimism will focus, and where the balance will be.

Where do you think that you fall on that spectrum?

It's funny. I always think I'm really cynical and pessimistic, but I've actually been trying to articulate some optimism and hopefulness to some people I know the last few days. I don't think it's because I'm unduly optimistic as a person, it's just that I'm generally so pessimistic that I had less ground to travel when Trump was elected. Constitutionally I'm just a more negative person, so I'm somehow less shocked. Still, like everyone else, now I have to consider not just how this happened but what happens next. At some point you have to start thinking about the way forward.

Name

Christopher Shinn

Vocation

Playwright

Fact

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