Sarah DeLappe on having a play staged for the first time

January 25, 2017 - Sarah DeLappe is a playwright who lives in Brooklyn. Her play *The Wolves*, about a girls soccer team, premiered off-Broadway at The Playwrights Realm at The Duke on 42nd Street for a sold-out, critically acclaimed run, followed by a sold-out return engagement produced in association with Scott Rudin and Eli Bush. *The Wolves* won the American Playwriting Foundation's inaugural Relentless Award, and was a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and the Yale Prize. *The Wolves* will be published by Samuel French in 2017.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1961 words.

Tags: Writing, Success, Beginnings, Process.

You had a lot success with your play, *The Wolves*. Its off-Broadway run recently ended. I'm curious about having success early—you're 26—and then thinking about where you go next.

It's on my mind for sure. The funny thing about playwriting is that I'm not really the author of the events. I'm creating a blueprint and then it takes a whole army of people to make that blueprint a building. The director, the actors, the designers, the producers, most importantly the audience. It's wild to me that I wrote this thing in my tiny bedroom about two years ago, and over a course of a lot of different events, it ended up being realized and being seen and witnessed by all of these people, and now it's gone. I feel like there's something about the fleetingness of that, and the community of it, that at once makes it easier to process and let go of because it feels like it's its own ritual. It created this community, and then the community is kind of there to support you in letting go. But there's also something about that that makes me feel like it wasn't mine to begin with. Or like it was never really mine.

I saw the Diane Arbus exhibit at the Met Breuer, which I thought was amazing, and I was walking around and writing down all of her quotes that are hung up above all of the portraits. There's this quote. She said, "I don't press the shutter, the image does, and it's like being gently clobbered." I feel that way about the play. I didn't make the play, the play did. Or like I didn't bring up that light that started the show, the play did, and watching that was like being gently clobbered. Now that it's over, I feel like I've gone through this slight period of postpartum depression or mourning or whatever but there's also a real emptiness—a peaceful emptiness in that.

I'm working on a couple of different plays, and I'm experiencing a major shift in my thinking about playwriting after going through the production, because I've never had a production before this. It's making me think about all of the different plays that I'm working on and the different voices, because it's one thing to write things without them ever being performed and experienced but it's making me think more about the live event of it. And I'm writing a couple of different plays and have been for the last couple of years. It's put a different slant on all of them.

I don't really know what's going to happen next. I'm working on new things, and I'm just trying to stay as focused on the work as possible.

I imagine it must shift the process quite a bit—going from being a playwright who hasn't had one of her works staged, to one who has.

When you're starting out, no one is seeing what you're creating, and you're kind of creating in a void hoping that one day it will be staged or read or seen by someone other than yourself and whatever friends you convince to help you do a reading of it. With theater, especially theater live performance, as a writer, it is a really solitary undertaking just like any other kind of writing. You have to go into your little hole and create something and then bring it to these other people.

It makes me think about the difference between writing a play to be read and never staged and writing a play to be performed. I have a friend who's interested in starting a press for plays that are just meant to be read and experienced on the page, which I think is a really interesting idea. But it's kind of antithetical to what playwriting is, which is writing sketches for a live event in time and space.

Is there a feeling of anxiety? Like, I've done this thing that went well, what comes next?

Absolutely. I think it'd be crazy if I didn't feel that. My parents were both artists. My dad was a visual artist. My mom was a photographer and is now a poet. I grew up around a lot of art and artists. I was prepared for the long haul. I've witnessed close-hand what it takes to make something and to persevere and continue to make something. The anxiety that I'm feeling now I've kind of always felt. That doesn't go away. I don't know how you could be an artist and not feel that anxiety. You're always starting again and you never really know where it's going to take you.

Did seeing your work directed by someone else, and seeing your words performed by real people, change the way you think about your writing?

It's made me want to be more as generous as I possibly can be to actors and to the director. And they're amazing. I mean what they do, what actors do, is so hard and so mystical almost. It was really hard. I felt incredibly vulnerable and exposed and also delighted to see all of these people watching these actors say words that I had made up. I feel like a little part of me was in every one of those characters, and a little part of my world. The experience of watching and listening to them… It just shows that if something rings hollow or flat or feels like not of the world that you've created, it rings so clear when it comes out of somebody else's mouth.

Going through production has made me think… My job as a playwright, when writing a play, is to decide what kind of table I am making and then make it as clear as possible to the future collaborators who are going to make that table exactly what kind of wood I want you to use and what the stain should be and how you should join the legs to the top. Just give as many details and as much richness as possible to allow them to build that table.

Most reviews of *The Wolves* have focused on how you've given a voice to teenage girls, and that you created for these young women. Do you feel penned in at all by that? For instance, if you want to go in a new direction, and people seem to be defining your work very specifically.

I feel like very lucky and grateful and excited that that has been the response to this play. I'm not going to write another play about teenage girls. One of my next plays is set in a men's restroom and it's all men. I don't feel penned in… It would be crazy for any writer to keep writing the same characters, unless they've set out to write a trilogy or to focus their work in that way. I do feel surprised that that has been the response. That's something that I never really expected or was prepared for. But I think it says something maybe about the moment that we're living in.

Also, I'm reading *The Gift* in grad school, Lewis Hyde's book, and he has this section on women, women as gifts. I was reading that and I thought about *The Wolves*. It made me think that maybe what *The Wolves* is doing is giving girls the space to own their own bodies and not be gifts to anybody. Not to be gifts to their parents or to boyfriends or the male gaze or whatever, but they're just given their turf in which they can define themselves and have some sense of autonomy through these conversations with each other just as people.

You're still finishing your MFA. I imagine it's complicated having a successful play and then thinking, "Now I need to go back to school and finish this degree."

I love my grad school program. I'm at Brooklyn College and it's built for you to be doing your work—there's a lot of flexibility. It meets like night school, so it really enables and encourages all of us to be doing what we're in grad school to be doing. And I actually love having homework. I love having deadlines to bring in plays and drafts of plays and I love the community of people out there, all of my peers and the professors. I really love being in grad school right now. It feels like a very safe and vibrant place to be experimenting and to feel like there's the possibility of failure, and that failure isn't so scary. I never wanna graduate.

You're teaching, too.

I'm teaching a playwriting class at Playwrights Horizons Theater School, which I love.

Do you see school and teaching as strategies for strengthening your work, but also to just keep going?

I feel like everything I do is a way to keep going. There's something about playwriting where you need to be surrounded by people. You need to be in conversation with other playwrights about theater and about what exactly a theater can or could be. There's something integral to the art form about being in constant contact in different ways with your own plays, other people's play, and discussing ideas about the theater. You need to keep the relationship between the page and the reality of the experience as fluid and vibrating as possible.

Update: After Sarah and I spoke, *The Wolves* was brought back for an sold-out encore engagement. I asked her what it was like closing the play and then opening it again. I was curious, too, what it would be like to re-stage it over the years. Her response:

I mean, wow, it was a total dream to have the production return so soon after the first run. Totally and utterly surreal. We closed, we wept, and two months later we were back in rehearsals. Crazy! And I think the second run accelerated the play's natural development, or I guess my own relationship to it. In September, during the initial run, *The Wolves* was my baby. I agonized, I stayed up many anxious nights, I poured every ounce of my being into it. I helicoptered. But by December, it was a teenager who just didn't need me anymore. And I actually felt further away from it. Which was such a strange and humbling experience as a playwright, to see your play outgrow you, so soon after its gestation. My vestigiality was really a testament to the amazing work of Lila Neugebauer (the director), the cast, the designers, the crew, the whole phenomenal team that created the production.

The best part of the second run, far and away, was that so many more people were able to see what we made. Including Gloria Steinem! She stayed after the show to take a photo with the cast, and ended up giving an impromptu rally speech about the importance of Title IX and how to survive the age of Trump. Which, again. A total dream.

I'll be thrilled by future productions. I just hope they happen. I'd love to see *The Wolves* in high schools, colleges, community theaters, all over the world. You don't need much to do it. Just ten women and some turf.

Sarah Delappe recommends:

A hodgepodge of films I like and that are on my mind…

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels
News From Home
Mustang
The Virgin Suicides
3 Women
A New Leaf
Being There
Force Majeure
Rams
Shaolin Soccer
Bend It Like Beckham

Name
Sarah DeLappe

Vocation
Playwright

Fact

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Photo: Peggie Huang