

# DYING CITY RISES AGAIN

PLAYWRIGHT CHRISTOPHER SHINN TALKS TO OUR ARTISTIC TEAM ABOUT THE UPCOMING NEW PRODUCTION OF HIS PULITZER-FINALIST PLAY, *DYING CITY*, AT THE TONY KISER THEATER THIS SPRING.

**YOUR PLAY *DYING CITY* PREMIERED IN 2006, AND THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE STORY HAPPENS IS THE EARLY YEARS OF OUR INVASION OF IRAQ. PART OF OUR MISSION AT SECOND STAGE IS TO REINVESTIGATE PLAYS OUTSIDE OF THE CULTURAL MOMENT IN WHICH THEY FIRST ARRIVED, IN ORDER TO EXPERIENCE THEM IN A NEW WAY. WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO RETURN TO THIS STORY, AND HOW DO YOU THINK THE WAYS IN WHICH THE WORLD HAS CHANGED (AND NOT CHANGED) COLOR YOUR READING OF IT TODAY?**

When the play was first performed in London in 2006 and New York in 2007, the Iraq War was still going strong and it felt like the play was saying something about that war more than anything else. Even though it was an intimate story about human beings, it resonated in that particular way due to the context of the news cycle, the debates about the war in the play, and the fact that one of the characters is in the military.

I never really felt the play was about the Iraq War and when I had an impulse to hear the play again last year, I think it was mostly due to the fact that I thought the play might reveal itself more intimately without the “current events” aspect of the original production. I organized a little reading and was struck by the centrality of the exploration of trauma in it, particularly in the intimate realm. It sounded to me like the heart of the play was more immediately present a decade on from the original productions.

**SPECIFICALLY, THE STORY CONCERNS THE RELATIONSHIP OF A WOMAN AND TWO IDENTICAL TWINS - ONE HER HUSBAND, WHO SERVED IN THAT WAR, AND HIS BROTHER, AN ACTOR. WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR CHOICE TO MAKE THE BROTHERS IDENTICAL TWINS-BOTH IN REGARD TO PRACTICAL CHALLENGES (ONE ACTOR MUST PLAY BOTH ROLES) AND IN TERMS OF THEME?**

I think when I wrote the play I was very interested in the diverse ways that people construct meaning and how this determines so much of what they do and think. Still to this day we are often presented with a vision of the human in which we are essentially driven by biological, evolutionary programs, and human nature as something relatively fixed, stable, and common to us all. I think in the intervening years a segment of our culture has become more vocal about how important difference is and how varied individual subjectivities are, but I still think people have a tendency to assume that people are all alike on some fundamental level, or should be -- that we should all believe the same things in a just world. The twins was just my way of trying to get people to think about similarity and difference in a really direct way, to upset any expectations of sameness in human nature, and to interrupt the rhythms that can be established in a work of art when we come to feel we “know” the play as it goes on. I wanted the audience to keep having to “reset” throughout the play, and I think this happens as we watch Kelly navigate these two very different men -- who look exactly alike.

**THOUGH THE PLAY IS A SENSITIVE AND DELICATE EXPLORATION OF DEEPLY HUMAN CHARACTERS, IT ALSO HAS THE MUSCULARITY OF A CLASSIC MYSTERY. WE ARE SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS RIGHT UP UNTIL THE PLAY ENDS, AND IN A SENSE, AFTERWARDS AS WELL. CAN YOU SPEAK A BIT ABOUT HOW YOU CRAFTED THE NARRATIVE, AND HOW CONTENT AND STRUCTURE INFORM ONE ANOTHER?**

I wanted the play to be about trauma, but also to be a trauma itself. I didn't want to create a tidy play about something messy and horrible. So the challenge then became to make the form of the play resemble in some way the experience of trauma. And trauma has many aspects to it, one of which is, I think, mystery: why do I feel the way I do? What happened to me in the past? What might happen in the future? What do I do with this incomplete knowledge that I currently have? Do I face it more? Do I run away from it? All these questions have elements of mystery to them and a play that was structured like a thriller or mystery seemed a good envelope for what I wanted to explore. Trauma keeps us destabilized and is unpredictable and I wanted the play to be those things, too.

**WHAT IS CHRIS SHINN DOING WHEN HE'S NOT AT THE THEATER OR WORKING ON A PLAY?**

Thinking up get-rich-quick schemes. Enjoying my partner's delicious home cooked meals. Watching *Great British Baking*. Dragging myself to the gym. Chiding myself for being on social media... The usual distractions, both healthy and less so. 