



At the Boston Playwrights' Theatre, all's fair in the name of a good show

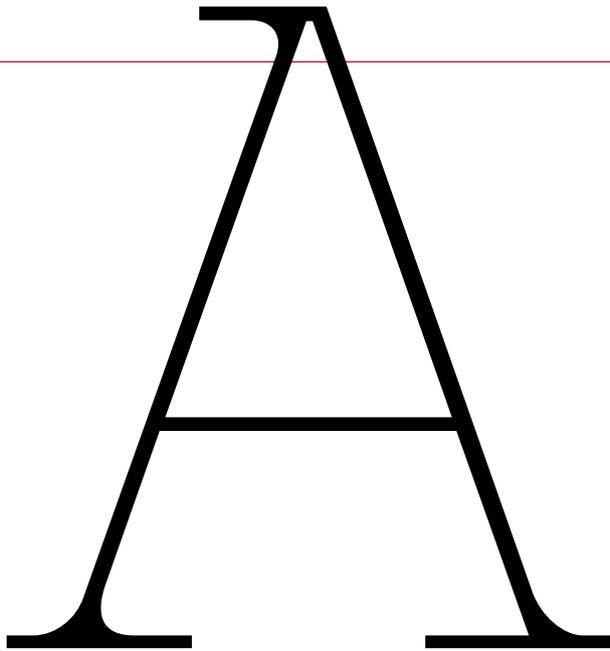
By Jessica Ullian

The Play's

THE OIL THIEF'S
director, Judy Braha
(left) interprets
a scene with cast
members Sheldon
Best, Will Lyman
(CFA'71), and
Melinda Lopez
(GRS'00).



the Thing



AMY, A FORTY-SOMETHING petroleum geologist, is flummoxed. Aleks, the handsome young translator assigned to her research project, has accompanied her on a hike to look at a sandstone outcrop — but he seems more interested in gazing at Amy.

Melinda Lopez, the actress playing Amy in the Boston Playwrights' Theatre production of *The Oil Thief*, is equally confused. It's mid-October, the second rehearsal; she and the cast and crew are sitting around a table in the darkened theater on Commonwealth Avenue as they read through the script. Lopez (GRS'00) is questioning Amy's reaction to Aleks, debating the scene with the director, Judy Braha, a College of Fine Arts assistant professor. They speak quickly, in fragments: "Don't you think . . .?" "Could it be . . .?" Finally, Braha calls for help.

"Joyce?"

Joyce Van Dyke (GRS'96), the playwright, has been sitting quietly at the end of the table. She's been listening, tugging at a lock of her black hair, as Lopez and Braha debate her intentions. She looks up at the sound of her name and murmurs a few words of assent. The rehearsal continues.

Anyone who has ever watched a high school production of *Romeo and Juliet* knows the basics of the playwright's existence: write the words, then hand them over to the actors — with joy and fear — for interpretation and animation. The process is easier when the play is centuries old and the playwright long deceased; Shakespeare may not have envisioned Leonardo DiCaprio as his leading man, but no one has heard him complain. Contemporary playwrights cannot remain as blissfully ignorant. Instead, they are forced to watch the dissection of their work again and again — in Van Dyke's case, four times a week, through three-and-a-half weeks of rehearsal and then a three-week run.

It's excruciating, playwrights say. But it's also a critical part of the process and a hallmark of Boston University's graduate playwriting program, which counts Van Dyke and Lopez among its award-winning alumni. The program, now in its twenty-seventh year, has undergone major changes of late, transitioning in 2007 from a Master of Arts degree to a Master of Fine Arts degree and marking the retirement last year of its founder, Nobel Prize-winning poet and playwright Derek Walcott. But in a time of growth and change, the program's long-established credo remains its guiding light: it's not a play until you hand it over and watch it grow.

"I keep having this experience of being a little taken aback, because an actor will say something, and you're right there in the room," Van Dyke says. "But they have to start taking possession of the play, and you have to let them. A play has to be made to let all these other imaginations come in and work on it. That's what you're making it for."

WHAT MAKES OR BREAKS YOU

AT BU, ASPIRING playwrights start reaping the benefits of those other imaginations immediately. Kate Snodgrass (GRS'90), the director of the playwriting program and of the Boston Playwrights' Theatre, the award-winning professional theater founded by Walcott in 1981, brings local actors into the classroom in the first weeks of school so playwrights can see how their words work as a scene. A playwright herself, Snodgrass says that giving students the opportunity to hear their dialogue is critical; it shows them the discrepancy between what they imagine the play to be and what it actually is. The experience is also part of a playwright's lifelong education in building trust in other artists. "That's what makes or breaks you in the profession," she says.

For Van Dyke — a Shakespeare scholar who formerly taught at Wellesley and at Harvard's Extension School — the classroom experience was terrifying. She applied to BU to give her work exposure beyond her own living room, she says, but the public drubbings from her peers were difficult. "It's total exposure, total nakedness, terror, and humiliation," she says. "It's discovering how awful your writing can be and that you have to write through the terrible writing. In the beginning, that's awful."

It was thrilling, too; she'd never imagined that actors would perform her work, and suddenly, they were doing it every week. When something wasn't working — when actors repeatedly stumbled over lines that she could hear clearly in her mind, a sure sign of a problem in the script — it was dreadful.



JOYCE VAN DYKE,
on the set of
The Oil Thief, says she
strives to write words
that feel as natural as
improvisation.

“IT’S TOTAL EXPOSURE, TOTAL NAKEDNESS, TERROR, AND HUMILIATION,” SAYS JOYCE VAN DYKE. IT’S THRILLING, TOO.

When an exchange she thought would be funny got a laugh or a scene she hoped would be poignant drew tears, it was deeply exciting.

More than a decade after graduating from BU, Van Dyke still feels the same highs and lows with every production. But *The Oil Thief*, a three-person play about the search for dwindling amounts of petroleum, love, and time, tested her in new ways. The play came into being at a critical, changeable time for Van Dyke: she was trying to challenge herself after the success of her play *A Girl’s War*, which was named one of the top ten plays of 2001 by the *Boston Globe*. Van Dyke describes the piece, about an Armenian-American fashion model caught up in a tribal conflict in her homeland, as a “very plotty play,” with a conventional realistic narrative. In *The Oil Thief*, she deliberately did away with a linear timeline and action scenes, focusing instead on the love stories and emotional stakes for the characters: Amy, the geologist, Aleksi, the translator, and Rex, an actor and Amy’s longtime partner.

“I thought it was going to be liberating,” Van Dyke says. “It was much harder.”

The New Repertory Theatre in Watertown, Massachusetts, gave *The Oil Thief* a staged reading in February 2008, but the work was so far from what Van Dyke imagined that the process became “physically painful,” she says. When the reading was over, in an effort to jump-start the play’s progress, she made an uncharacteristic decision: to send it to Snodgrass while she was still very unhappy with it.

“It’s hard for me to say, ‘Here is my work, and it’s really imperfect,’” Van Dyke says. “But it seemed like the responsible and economical way to do it. When people who are very smart and who I trust can look at the work, it’s a huge shortcut.”

Despite the play’s rough edges, Snodgrass accepted it for the following season at the Playwrights’ Theatre because she trusted what *The Oil Thief* would become as Van Dyke kept exploring. Braha, who has been working with Van Dyke for several years on an untitled project about the Armenian genocide, signed on to direct because she relished the opportunity to work with a playwright who can talk back — a rare event in most directors’ careers, Braha says, requiring the ability “to work on behalf of the play, instead of on behalf of one’s own ego.

“What really excites me is creating a family that rallies around this world, and then tries to get that world to grow,” she says. “The question is how to enable it to grow in a way that really supports the play and the playwright. Joyce is fun to work with — she really likes rewriting and really likes rethinking, and we seem to get on a wave together. Sometimes, working with other playwrights, there’s

more reluctance to change what’s there; for us, it’s been a labor of love.

“And sometimes,” she adds, “it’s more contentious than that.”

Eight months before the play would open on Commonwealth Avenue, with two other strong voices contributing to the process, Van Dyke began revising again. And again. And again.

TO MICROMANAGE, OR NOT TO MICROMANAGE?

SPRING AND SUMMER come and go. The show is scheduled, the play is cast, the production staff is hired. Seven days before *The Oil Thief* opens, the play has been through six major revisions involving characters, locations, and sequence, plus infinite small tweaks. When Van Dyke was absent from rehearsal one day, the actors inadvertently skipped three pages of a scene and never missed a beat. The consensus was that the play worked better without them.

While abashed at the idea that at this late stage the script included three unnecessary pages, Van Dyke isn’t bothered by the edits that took place while she was away.

“It really helped the action of that scene,” she says. “I think it’s probably good for the actors not to have me there some of the time.”

The cast of *The Oil Thief* may be uniquely poised to make such contributions. In addition to newcomer Sheldon Best, a recent graduate of Brandeis University’s conservatory program, and Will Lyman (CFA’71), who is best known as the voice of the PBS series *Frontline* and whose recent roles include the narrator in the 2006 film *Little Children* and voice work in last summer’s *Iron Man*, there’s Lopez, well on the way to national renown as a playwright herself. Her play *Sonia Flew* was premiered by BU’s Huntington Theatre Company, where she and Van Dyke are both playwrighting fellows, in 2004 and has since been produced in Chicago, Miami, and Laguna, California. She joined the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences faculty last fall, along with fellow playwright Ronan Noone (GRS’01) — both brought on board to fill Walcott’s position.

Lopez says that being a playwright and an actress is an exercise in multitasking, involving two different parts of her brain that she can’t separate — “each process by itself is all-consuming,” she says. But although she can’t write while she’s working as an actress, she says, she never completely lets go of one perspective or the other.

“I feel like Joyce is very much in tune with what we’re struggling with, but she’s much quieter,” Lopez says. “She sits back, she really watches, she



WHEN SHE'S ACTING,
Melinda Lopez
(onstage as Amy
in *The Oil Thief*)
parses every
moment; as
a playwright,
she has to see the
whole piece.

takes a larger view of the process. I tend to want to micromanage everything. As an actor, that's your job: to parse every phrase, every moment, to get yourself through the text. As an actor, you're just going from one breath to the next. The writer sees the whole fleet. It's like those paintings that are made of little dots — when you stand across the room, the whole thing comes into focus.”

In rehearsal, Lopez and Lyman are running through the closing scene, where Lopez's Amy is describing a dream involving all three characters. The set has been built — two massive, imposing ramps that serve at various points as tables, stone ridges, and stages. Lyman is seated; Lopez climbs across the scenery as she talks.

“I had a dream,” Lopez begins. She hesitates, starts again, then unleashes a stream of curses. “I'm sorry, Joyce!” she calls.

The crew begins to laugh. Van Dyke, sitting in the audience, laughs with them and takes a few notes on what could be revision number seven.

“You've aligned all these words in such a pattern, but until the actors get up on their feet, you don't know if it's going to happen or not,” she says. “Yeah, I can give up control.”

THE MYTH OF THE FINISHED PLAY

ON OPENING NIGHT, Van Dyke is still rewriting. The collaboration has made *The Oil Thief* much more coherent for her; still, she says, “I don't feel I even got to the point where this play had a fixed

form. It's been harder to find the form of it, harder than any other play that I've written.”

And the play won't be finished even after its premiere. The Playwrights' Theatre specializes in works-in-progress, and most productions go on to further revisions and different productions. Snodgrass says the goal is to experiment, to put playwrights through this process, and to give them an audience so they can see where it goes. “The audience is the big deal,” she says. “That's where the playwright learns everything — the production.”

Van Dyke isn't bothered by all the work behind her or by the prospect of the work that lies ahead. The experience of this play — the collaboration, the constant refinements, and the new ending, written two days before opening night — reminds her of her first professional production, *Love in the Gulf*, which was staged at BPT the year she graduated from BU. At the dress rehearsal, the actors were struggling with the last scene, a fight between two siblings. The dialogue was stilted, unnatural; director Snodgrass suggested the actors try to improvise. The result, Van Dyke says, was the scene as she had imagined it. She wrote down a few lines, but the actors weren't able to rehearse together again before opening night, so the closing scene of the first performance was created largely off the cuff.

It's a lesson that has influenced her work ever since.

“In a way, I'm trying to write something that feels as natural and fluent as what the actors are able to improvise,” she says. “Something that feels as if it hadn't been written at all.” ■

“AS AN ACTOR, YOU'RE GOING FROM ONE BREATH TO THE NEXT,” SAYS MELINDA LOPEZ.

WEB EXTRA
Watch a slide show of scenes from *The Oil Thief* as Joyce Van Dyke discusses how the play evolved at www.bu.edu/bostonia.