

THE ATHEIST

Written and Directed by Ronan Noone

Jan. 19 - Feb. 5

Boston **PLAYWRIGHTS'** *Theatre*

Tickets: (866) 811-4111 or BostonPlaywrights.org

Boston University Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
Playwriting



A WELCOME FROM OUR ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Dear Friends:

Welcome to 2017 and our third production in our Season of New Plays—*The Atheist* by Ronan Noone, featuring the incomparable Georgia Lyman as Augustine Early.

Ronan is one of ours in all ways. He studied with our founder Derek Walcott in our MFA program and then went on to write a number of award-winning plays. His Irish trilogy—*The Lepers of Baile Baiste* (winner of the Kennedy Center National Student Play Award and Boston's Elliot Norton Award), *The Gigolo Confessions of Baile Braeg* and *The Blowin of Baile Gall* (winner of an Elliot Norton Award) began his career. The Huntington Theatre Company premiered both his *Brendan* and *The Atheist* with Campbell Scott in the titular role; Chris Pine (of *Star Trek* fame) continued this role off-Broadway in New York. Ronan's *The Second Girl* premiered with the Huntington and since then has been produced to great acclaim at the Contemporary American Theater Festival, at the Vineyard Playhouse, and it will appear in Ireland in July. All this, PLUS...Ronan is a member of our MFA faculty and has been teaching in our MFA program for the last seven years.

When we approached Ronan about a production of *The Atheist* along with our Season of New Plays, he came up with the grand idea of casting a woman as Augustine Early. I immediately jumped at the chance. Not only does the play comment on our American political environment, but the role of women in American society (and in the world) is changing. This casting reinvigorates the play by asking important questions about gender and responsibility. This vibrant new version comments on the world we're negotiating now and in the future. This is how the Theatre can change our lives.

I think you're going to be talking about this play long after the lights go down; I know I am. Thanks for your faith in us as a Home of New Plays in Boston. Enjoy!

With warmest regards,



Kate Snodgrass
Artistic Director, Boston Playwrights' Theatre
Director, MFA in Playwriting/English Department

Boston Playwrights' Theatre
presents

THE ATHEIST

Written and Directed by Ronan Noone

Scenic Design	Ronan Noone
Lighting Design	Matthew Breton
Sound Design	Phil Schroeder
Costume Design	Georgia Lyman
Media Advisor	Zachary Dyer
Stage Manager	Katherine Humbert*
Technical Director	Marc Olivere
Master Electrician	Matthew Breton
Production Assistant	Jake Mellen
Costume Masters	Marzie Ghasempour, Laura J. Neill
Properties Master	Kate Snodgrass
House Managers	Anna Oehlberg, Paisley Piasecki
Front of House Staff	Beirut Balutis, Anmol Dhaliwal, Marzie Ghasempour, Matt Manarchy, Sarah Shin, Alexis Scheer

CAST

Augustine Early Georgia Lyman*

***The Atheist* runs 100 minutes. There will be one 10-minute intermission.**

The Atheist is presented by special arrangement with
Dramatists Play Service, Inc., New York.

*Appears courtesy of Actors' Equity Association.

*The video and/or audio recording of this performance
by any means whatsoever is strictly prohibited.*

NOTES ON WHY ‘THE ATHEIST’ NOW

“So much for Objective Journalism. Don’t bother to look for it here—not under any byline of mine; or anyone else I can think of. With the possible exception of things like box scores, race results, and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms.”

—Hunter S. Thompson

1 - It would be foolish to think that objectivity is still a foundation on which our media is built. It is not. A newspaper, a TV channel, a radio station, and a website—whether blatantly obvious or mildly subtle—is ultimately linked to a political party and/or a specific political ideology. If you associate that ideology with a personal belief that mirrors and outlines your own ethical slant, it is likely you will buy that paper and find solace, faith, and a linked community upon which your safety and anger act as both offense and defense against those whose beliefs are often the exact opposite. And for those whose beliefs are the opposite, they will read and agree with the paper and TV channel that sings to their choir. It seems there is little room for compromise these days, particularly as the news is repeated in a cyclical stream leaving the viewer riddled with anxiety and fearful of the other side.

2 - When I was growing up, the headline on the front page was usually a clever, reductive and self-satisfied bon mot that explained a story in a word, like “Gotcha,” which is how the Sun newspaper in Britain announced the sinking of an Argentinian ship during the Falklands war. It is that bawdy, xenophobic, nationalistic attitude and irreverent language that gave voice to Augustine Early. It is a familiar voice again. Back then it was the men, Rupert Murdoch and Robert Maxwell who published those papers. Today it is still men: Murdoch, Henry, Bezos, Karsh, Slim. (I would also count Peter Thiel in there too because he had the money to shut down a media group because of a sex tape.)

3 - I agreed to a remounting of *The Atheist* as long as it starred a woman. Originally, it was written with a man in mind, but I wondered what difference, if any, would there be for an audience when a woman played the part? Would she be seen as more scrupulous than a man? Would she be judged differently from a man, even though the same words are being said? Do we measure our news by an alternative standard when a woman reports it to us? Casting Augustine Early as a woman immediately updated the play for me. I re-read it and realized that there was nothing in the play that said a woman should not play the role. And if someone thinks I am wrong—let it add to the conversation.

4- But let me tack the sails. When I was 22, I was a court reporter for a short time in Ireland. One day a friend of mine was up on a charge. He saw me with my notebook, short-handing the case. After, he came up to me and asked if I wouldn't mind not writing about it. He didn't want his name in the paper. I told him it was public information, and I had a duty to my newspaper. He became quite disgruntled. He asked me to do it as a favor for him. It is always very difficult when a friend begins pleading with you. I apologized but told him this is my occupation, if I did it now it would set a precedent for the future. My integrity, my youthful vigor, and my sense of professionalism wouldn't allow it. I was beginning a career. I was going to follow the rules. We never talked after that day. And it was the day I realized the stakes in my life had increased exponentially. Afterwards, I wondered, naively, did some journalists change a word to affect a description, putting a particular slant on a story to suit some personal need? What if they simply ignored a story on the same basis or were told by their gods—the editors, to quash it? This was the event that sewed together the first inklings of an idea for *The Atheist* although I didn't know that until 13 years later.

5 - As a playwright I have always felt like an outsider, a contrarian, and as such, my job was to unmask the hypocrisy and bring ideas to the table that eventually direct us to a better path in life. It has never been anything less than that, albeit I often do it through the anti-hero. In this case, I thought of Hari Kunzru's description of Hunter S. Thompson as, "One who often makes himself ugly to expose the ugliness he sees around him."

6 - I didn't write *The Atheist* with the intention of belittling the power and necessity of the media. We need it more than ever, but that doesn't mean that our perceptions of it shouldn't be challenged. I wrote *The Atheist* because I wanted to tell a Faustian story. The garbage collector at the top of the show is Mephistopheles. It is a well-travelled narrative. It is a fun narrative. I love playing with the anti-hero. I love trying to make him or her despicable while holding the audience with their charm or arrogance. The distinct chemistry of the piece is built on two ideas in conflict with each other: Repulsion and Compulsion. You want to look away, but you can't. And it is about Augustine trying to reconcile the fact she is losing her soul, while wallowing in the malignancy, and it is that majestic audacity that gives the story its power.

7 - The criticism heaped on *The Atheist* when it first appeared was that it couldn't happen as it was told. There are too many in-house barriers, too much fact checking and overseeing of content for an Augustine Early to survive in a newsroom. But it is easy to name journalists who have bent those rules to the detriment of their paper's reputation. And today, *The Atheist* may seem less of an exaggerated reality. In my view it is an 85-page self-contained story that

attempts to capture the time we live in, a time when, in our desire to win, we have the ability to manipulate the story whatever the cost to suit our needs. It is there to reflect what we are capable of, and, without a strong moral compass, call attention to our inevitable destination. And it illustrates our perceptions of newspapers, local tv news, cable news, the internet news sites, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Reddit and Google, particularly as the President has made the media his piñata.

8 - *The Atheist* is about surveillance and privacy too, which in the age of WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden contemporizes the play. But it is a comic satire, and so the surveillance occurs in a bathroom, and privacy thereafter is peeled away in brash Machiavellian maneuvers. But the play needed a world to travel through, and I gave Augustine the world of newspapers. We consider it a dying institution now, but it is not, it is just trying to evolve. Like most institutions in the process of transformation, newspapers appeal to Darwin's idea of being "better designed for an immediate, local environment." In my opinion, this change has caused the newspaper institution to slip and falter. Inevitably, the inviolable rules upon which journalism was built have become watered down and re-sculpted to suit the needs of survival. The fragility of this situation has become untenable. At present, we are beginning to suspect that the former trust we had in our newspapers is breaking and that, in fact, it may have been broken for a long time. It could be argued that it truly broke with the United States' second invasion of Iraq. And now this nation, where 60 million citizens voted directly opposite to its other 60 million citizens, is divided not by ideas, but by anger. All we need is someone to be a conduit for that anger—someone like Alex Jones or for others, Van Jones. And as part of its evolution, the news media recognizes that this divide, this conflict, can make money. This conflict sells.

9 - And *The Atheist* is about words, the power of words and how we can begin again to rectify, specify, and measure our sense of duty to words. For instance: just because Bill O'Reilly calls his program a "no-spin zone" to protect his objectivity doesn't mean it is a "no-spin zone." Words matter, and if you believe any institution that emphatically states "there is no spin," then you must question your trust of that institution. So who can we believe? "Fair and Balanced?" "All the News That's Fit to Print?" What do these words mean now? Charles Sykes says in Politico, "The Media Outlets function best when the dial is set at outrage, and since they are too deeply invested to be outraged at any failures or reversals from Trump World, the anger will inevitably be focused on attacking the left and launching purges of the saboteurs and dissenters on the right." And it can be said that this works in the reverse. In contrast we have Dean Baquet, the executive editor of *The New York Times* stating that, "I think that (Trump) challenged our language. He will have changed journalism, he

really will have....We didn't know how to write the paragraph that said, 'This is just false.' We struggle with that. I think Trump has ended that struggle."

10 - And so *The New York Times* called Trump a liar, and Fox calls *The New York Times* a liar, and the President-elect calls CNN liars—they are all preaching to their own choirs, and we, the people, become culpable. Why? Because we want to maintain our own sense of injustice and anger. And does calling someone a liar mean the truth will win out or maintain the division? Either way we will be given some catchy phrase, some good reductive bon mots, from the tastemakers, to give a simple veneer to a complex issue; words that allow us to get onto the same page so we can stand around the water cooler in, yet again, another sudden understanding of our nation's narrative: "Post-Truth" was created to explain the deeper problems, except there is no post-truth; there is only truth. Truth remains constant. The problem is when the truth is acknowledged it may give the opportunity for the most maladjusted candidate to win, so, in that case, what does the truth serve? And, then, it is what we want to believe that changes. So we go from distrusting the news to distrusting our friends, family, colleagues, peers and associates because of what they believe. And that can lead to—what I feel in the air—contempt.

11 - The question is how do you respond and what will it take to find the language of compromise. My neo-liberal friends will insult the suggestion of compromise as easily as my neo-conservative friends. But as PEN America has stated, "If our democracy is to endure and thrive, it is critical that we defend the vital role and the rights of a free press." But it is not good enough to call for a free press. We must define it. Because a free press must separate itself from the influence of any administration, be it corporate or government and it must be a fierce watchdog for all. It is that kind of free press that will find the voices we trust, the thinkers we admire, hire the best investigative reporters, and finally recognize the original American oath, out of many, one.

—Ronan L. Noone
1/10/2017

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CAST & CREW

MATTHEW BRETON (Lighting Design) has worked with Boston Playwrights' Theatre for the past three years. Recent designs include *The Nutcracker* (Jose Mateo Ballet Theater), *Little Shop of Horrors* (Marblehead Little Theater), and *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers* (Cape Playhouse). His design for *Cabaret* (Marblehead Little Theater) received an IRNE nomination for Best Lighting Design, and his lighting for *Romeo and Juliet* (Independent Drama Society) received a Broadway World nomination. Upcoming productions include *Entangling* (choreographed by Wendy Jehlen and Lacina Coulibaly), *Getting Out* (Curry College), and *Art* (Cape Playhouse). Mr. Breton is the lighting supervisor for the Strand Theater in Dorchester.

ZACHARY DYER (Media Adviser) is happy to return to Boston Playwrights' Theatre for a second time. He is a local dramaturg and Boston University alum. Recent dramaturgical credits include *A Number* (New Repertory Theatre); *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Julius Caesar*, and *1984* (Classic Repertory Company); *Equal Writes* (Boston Playwrights' Theatre); *Wit*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *The Dumb Waiter* (New Repertory Theatre/Boston Center for American Performance); and *columbinus* (Boston University).

KATHERINE HUMBERT* (Stage Manager) is delighted to work on her second production with Boston Playwrights' Theatre where she stage managed *Memorial* last fall. She has spent several years with Central Square Theater where she has assistant stage managed The Nora Theatre Company's *Operation Epsilon* and *Arcadia*, and the Underground Railway Theater's productions of *SILA*, *A Disappearing Number*, and *Mr. g*. She has also had the pleasure of working on The Nora/URT's *The Other Place* and *Arabian Nights*. A graduate of Carnegie Mellon University, she returned to the Boston area several years ago to explore the theatre scene and has been enjoying every moment. Most recently, Katherine stage managed The URT's production of *Matchless* and *The Happy Prince* in its second season. Other recent stage management credits include: *Into the Woods* (Weston Drama Workshop), *Translations* (Bad Habit Productions), and *Company* (Moonbox Productions).

GEORGIA LYMAN* (Augustine Early/Costume Design) has been a staple of the Boston film and theater community for a decade. A founding member of the critically acclaimed Orfeo Group, she starred in and/or co-produced all five award-winning shows during its six-year run. Other works include *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Chesapeake* (Norton Award—Outstanding Solo Performance), *The Scene*, *The Women*, *The Hotel Nepenthe* (Norton Award—Outstanding Ensemble), *The Whale*, and *Necessary Monsters*. Film and television credits include Showtime's *Brotherhood*, *Olive Kitteridge*, *RIPD*, *The Forger*, *Law & Order: SVU*, *The Women*, *The Town*, *Infinitely Polar Bear*, *The Makeover*, *Clear History*, *Bride Wars*, and others. She is also an independent curator and producer, and for the last two years has been the artistic director of Outside the Box, Boston's largest interdisciplinary performing arts festival, which runs on the Boston Common every July.

RONAN NOONE's (Playwright/Director/Scenic Design) plays *The Second Girl*, *Brendan*, *The Lepers of Baile Baiste*, *The Blowin of Baile Gall*, *Little Black Dress*, *Compass Rose*, *Scenes From An Adultery*, *Alex Alexander*, and *The Atheist* have been produced in theaters across America. *The Atheist* marks his fourth production at BPT. Other recent productions have taken place in the UK (London and Edinburgh), Spain, Canada, the Philippines, and Ireland. His full-length and one-act plays are published by Samuel French, Smith and Kraus, Baker Plays, and Dramatists Play Service. He has received three Independent Reviewers of New England (IRNE) Awards for Best New Play; the Boston Theatre Critics Association's Elliot Norton Outstanding Script Award; Kennedy Center National Playwriting Award; a 2014 Edgerton New American Play Award and the 2015 Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) Award for Excellence in Playwriting. His essay on theatre, "Being Afraid to Breathe," is published by the Princeton University Library Chronicle LXVIII. His play *The Second Girl* is featured and published in the most recent edition of *The Eugene O'Neill Review*, Vol, 37, No.2. Noone has also developed work for television with *Pretty Matches Productions* and the reality TV-based production company *High Noon Entertainment*. His 2014 Live Action Short *The Accident* premiered at the Boston International Film Festival and the Montclair Film Festival. He is an Assistant Professor (adj) at Boston University's MFA program in Playwriting and a member of the Dramatists Guild. ronannoone.com

PHIL SCHROEDER (Sound Design) returns to Boston Playwrights' Theatre after completing his MFA in Playwriting; his first full-length play *Equal Writes* was produced here in 2015. Prior to that, he spent 25 years in San Francisco composing music and sound for television, radio, and advertising. Local credits for music and sound in theatre include *A Number* (New Repertory Theatre) and *1984* (Boston Center for American Performance). He is currently producing and directing music for *Annie* in Brookline.

SPECIAL THANKS

Tracy Schroeder, Linda Vaughan Jerrett, and Chris Burgess from Boston University Information Services & Technology.



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Founded in 1981 at Boston University by Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, Boston Playwrights' Theatre is an award-winning professional theatre dedicated to new works. At the core of our programs is the Playwriting MFA offered in the celebrated English Department in the College of Arts & Sciences and in collaboration with the award-winning School of Theatre in the College of Fine Arts. Alumni of our program have been produced in regional and New York houses as well as in London's West End; our own productions of alumni work have garnered regional and Boston awards, including numerous Best New Script Awards from the Elliot Norton committee and the Independent Reviewers of New England.

From class workshops to our Season of New Plays, BPT employs the best of New England's professional actors, directors, and designers to bring each playwright's vision to its first audiences.

Each spring, in collaboration with Boston Children's Theatre, we produce New Noises: Massachusetts Young Playwrights' Project. Area high schools work with professional playwrights, directors, and actors to see student works on stage for the first time.

Fifty local theatre companies join us annually for the Boston Theater Marathon, a showcase of new ten-minute plays by New England playwrights chosen each year from hundreds of entrants. Each play is produced by a different New England theatre company in a single ten-hour event with all proceeds going to charity.

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