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# When the Rubber Meets the Road

by Gary Garrison



I've written three fan letters in my life: one to the Monkees when I was ten years old (I had a mad-crush on Micky Dolenz), one to Lucille Ball when I was fourteen years old and now at a considerably older age, this arti-

cle-as-fan-letter to Kate Snodgrass and Boston Playwrights' Theater (BPT) at Boston University. Having lived as long as I have and worked in a variety of academic/professional training programs, I know how training programs in the arts should be, what they should focus on pedagogically, how they should train writers (or actors, designers, directors), what their faculty should be and how they should prepare their artists for the career ahead of them—all this while maneuvering big dreams through limited resources. So, what distinguishes BPT from similar training programs (those found at Brown, Carnegie Mellon, NYU, Northwestern and the University of Texas, for example)?

To my mind, when you look at any kind of educational program, you're looking at three things: who's in charge (who's carrying the vision and checks the balance between what you say you'll do versus what you actually do), who's on your faculty (and the quality of their instruction), and what practical, real-world experiences do you give your artists that completes their education and prepares them to step out of the program forewarned and forearmed. Hold those three questions up against any training program and you'll quickly discover just how they sit among their peers. Hold those three questions up against Boston Playwrights' Theatre and you'll quickly discover they practically have no peer. BPT is about as good as it gets.

If I hold those three primary questions of analysis

up against BPT what becomes clear is that this program (for years) is and has been the model for any training program that aspires to train dramatic writers for our contemporary theatre. The "who's in charge" question is answered by discovering one of the most beloved artists in the northeast: Kate Snodgrass, a playwright, actress, director, artist-advocate and community builder. Kate was brought into the program formally as Producing Director in 1992 by its founder, Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, who gave the program its strong foundation by insisting that professional actors be integrated into the classroom; he maintained they were essential to the early part of the process in any play's development. Kate, an actress herself, picked up that mantle and pushed it forward when she was appointed Artistic Director in 2004 by insisting that (1) every participating professional artist be paid and (2) any playwright involved the graduate program be fully produced. "I would hope my legacy here is production because that's where a playwright learns most – seeing his/her/their play in front of audience after hearing several drafts and workshops of a script. Programs close because they can't produce. But we can and do. We produce current students and alumni and we often collaborate with other companies to do that."

Working with professional actors and being fully produced is often a draw to the program, if not THE draw. I can't think of one playwright who'd refuse a production, let alone a production with the area's finest actors, top-notch directors and the most remarkable designers around. But long before any production, there's the involvement with actors and the surge in growth any writer feels when your text meets the minds of those insightful artists. Monica Bauer, an alumnus of the program, constructs BPT's success with this observation: "The best thing I got from my time at BPT was the opportunity to workshop scenes in a class



Georgia Lyman in *The Atheist* by Ronan Noone

PHOTO: KALMAN ZABARSKY

with some of the best actors in Boston. That's what really distinguishes the BPT program, besides the opportunity to work with the great Kate Snodgrass. I made relationships with some very smart actors, and from the very first class, learned the difference between what sounds clever on the page and what has life on a stage."

Laura Neil, one of BPT's most recent alumni and a playwright carving a noticeable path in the theatre, is unequivocal about the value of her production experience within the program. "BPT is a professional theatre that produces a season of MFA thesis plays every other year; in alternate years, the theatre produces plays by alumni playwrights. For my thesis production, we had a team of about twenty—designers, director, dramaturgs and stage managers—who came together to make the production a professional success. The workshop production played for Boston-wide audiences (and I still retain the "world premiere" rights to the piece)." The production experience, combined with expert in-class dramaturgical training, made for a very wise playwright: "The past two and a half years have helped me realize that limits, rules, structures are there only to serve the play. I have always believed that form should mirror content, but this time has helped me cement that idea, really pursue it, and become able to ar-

gue for my pieces and how they're crafted."

The second question of analysis, "who's on your faculty," illuminates another cog of the successful wheel at BPT. I'm often asked my advice about different training programs across the country, and while most don't have the production element for all of the students, they do, by construct, have to have a faculty. To my mind, that's where the real tale is told. The faculty should be working writers—artists who are in the trenches and can bring their rich experiences back to the classroom. They also, frankly, have to have the ability to effectively communicate those experiences into "teaching moments." The faculty at BPT is all you'd want it to be and more.

There's the wise and visionary Kate, of course, who is synonymous with BPT, but there's also a small, diverse faculty that are working writers and engaged educators. Ronan Noone, an extraordinary playwright and Walcott protégé, graduated from the very program he teaches in and has all the markings of a writer I'd want on my faculty. "I feel honored to be considered capable of teaching and relaying my experience to playwrights. I've come a long way from wondering why they called it a green room when it was painted blue. And I understand what it's like to have your heart broken because of a bad review or a failed pro-

Lewis D. Wheeler and Debra Wise in *Chosen Child* by Monica Bauer



PHOTO: KALMAN ZABARSKY

duction. I understand what's it like to pull up your socks and get back to the work-table again even though you may think the effort is not equal to the result. And I've learned how to celebrate a successful production. This is invaluable experience, and you can get lost in your ambition and determination to succeed and forget why you're doing this work in the first place. These, let's call them the existential elements of being a playwright, are always part of my curriculum, part of the conversation when we discuss and workshop a play in our class."

And then there's the beloved Cuban American playwright and actress Melinda Lopez, a prolific playwright that deservedly generates excitement (and awards) for any play she writes. Ask any student coming out of the program about their experience, and Lopez's name surfaces somewhere in that conversation. When I asked recent alumni playwright, director, and producer Alexis Scheer what sets BPT's program apart from other programs in the country, she was pointedly clear: "No other program is led by Kate Snodgrass and shaped by Ronan Noone and Melinda Lopez. I should come clean now and admit this was the only program I applied to, and that was very intentional . . . Watching these three professors meet the work with their own

specific brand of curiosity, wisdom, and intuition made me desperate to be sitting with the playwrights. Melinda, in particular, is an actor I have long admired and a playwright whose words make me feel at home. Her guidance has been invaluable and has shown me the power of having a mentor you really identify and align with."

The final question of analysis, "what practical, real-world experiences do you give your artists that completes their education," not only points to the previously mentioned actor-involvement and production element of the program but can also be supported with one simple phrase: Boston Theatre Marathon. If you're not familiar with BTM, it's a festival of ten-minute plays that was founded by Snodgrass in 1999 as response to no new work being produced in Boston. Since '99, Kate has assembled 50 New England theatre companies to fully realize 50 ten-minute plays by New England playwrights in one day (over a long weekend of other readings and workshops). It's an extraordinary event – one that I've been privileged to be involved with alongside hundreds of playwrights over the years. There are, as you would imagine, the more well-known playwrights—Theresa Rebeck, Richard Dresser, David Mamet, Robert Brustein, Connie Congdon—

Melissa Jesser, Amanda Collins, Evan Horwitz in *Back the Night* by Melinda Lopez



PHOTO: KALMAN ZABARSKY

intermixed with those of us who are lucky enough to be engulfed by a circle of professional love by New England's finest artists. But how does this translate into the education of writers at BPT?

K. Alexa Mavromatis, an alumna of the program and currently its Marketing Coordinator, offers this: "I quite literally write plays because of BPT. One of my ten-minute plays was selected for the Boston Theater Marathon in 2006, and that acceptance was a huge part of what emboldened me to explore this path in the first place. That production led to applying to the MFA program here and to working on longer plays. My playwriting group holds its meetings here. In 2013, I was hired to manage marketing and communications for BPT, so I've discovered my love of arts administration here as well. And it's all traceable to that one ten-minute play! BPT is my artistic home on every level. I should add that this path is not necessarily unique—a number of playwrights I know have used the BTM as a launching pad to graduate school and other full-length writing adventures."

Kate would modestly tell you that she's only a part of BPT's success as a training program. But like so many professional writers who lead our training programs, they are

the energy force, the drive behind anything that happens for students, faculty or programming. And they often do this at the expense of their own writing or careers, which is unfortunate on many levels. By many accounts, Kate is a beautiful writer in her own right; a writer that needs to be heard often. Says Sinan Unel, a former student and faculty member of BPT, "Kate's primary motivation in writing is to challenge my intellect and to elevate my senses and emotions. She's a philosophical playwright in the most authentic sense of the word. Which means she gives us questions, not answers. I believe this is borne out of Kate's dauntless curiosity: about the world, about humans and their relationships, about the evolving position of women in the world, and about nature, science, and the universe." An on-going dilemma, then, is posed for all educational programs: how we keep our staff and faculty engaged in their own artistry while inspiring and educating those coming up behind us?

In the case of BPT, a lot of support comes from the visiting professionals and educators that support the program, and a brilliant Technical Director and Production Manager, Jeffrey Peterson, all corralled by an equally effective Managing Director, Jacob Strautmann. And where

there may be any slack from that support, there are all the sincerely appreciative, successful playwrights that have cycled through the program that support as much of BPT's mission (and legacy) as anything else. Molly Smith Metzler, a BPT alum, chronicles it perfectly:

*"I'm a playwright today because I studied at BPT fifteen years ago. It's like magic, what the program does for its graduate students. I arrived in Boston an inexperienced youngster with one undercooked one-act play to my name, and I emerged a year later with a strong POV, a portfolio of work, an extreme comfort with collaborators, and a new full-length play going into full production at BPT. But that's Kate Snodgrass for you. She takes every resource the Boston theatre community has to offer and shares it with her playwrights. She trains you how to make the most of your process: the rewriting, the listening, the honing, the patience. It's a generous, rigorous, hands-on graduate program and I still marvel that I had the good fortune to go there. Where else would I have had the chance to see my first full-length play fully produced almost as I wrote it? Of course, I came out of the program addicted. There's no greater gift than production. That's why I recommend BPT to young playwrights. They don't practice playwrighting there, they actually do it."*

"Do it," indeed. In all the right ways. For this training program and promoter of new plays, I'd give it an A+. 



Lydia Barnett-Mulligan, Amanda Collins in  
*Elemeno Pea* by Molly Smith Metzler

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