

~ THE MIND-SPACE ~  
a preface by Ronan Noone

It's always dangerous to write a preface to your work, but after a certain amount of time and confidence, you break out with the best of intentions, while also realizing that you're holding yourself out for even more ridicule. The nature of this business, not unlike most others I suspect, has to do with criticism. Criticism can take many forms, but basically it breaks down to either a personal attack, use of the play as a veil to stand behind, or a recognition of the piece as either good, bad or mediocre. I write this preface with these things in mind and upholding a tradition in which many playwrights have participated. Writing a preface helps to focus and re-focus a playwright's thoughts because the time/distance between thinking about a piece, then allowing it to gestate, writing it, workshopping it, reading it, and, if you're lucky, seeing it performed, can take often two years. This means that by the time you get the play up and running, you may have forgotten exactly what your intentions were when you began the project in the first place.

This time lapse can leave you (in this case, me) open to many suggestions and interpretations and vulnerable to audience reactions during cold readings and various, comfortable workshops. If, during this time period, you have begun to write a new play, you have a tendency to be even more sensitive to the variety of responses at a reading. Often in response to these opinions, you make immediate (and sometimes rash) changes because you want to fix the perceived problem. The quickest way to do this is to accept the majority opinion so that you can maintain your double focus - one for your reading and one for the project gestating in the back of your mind. Playwrights are always looking for the easiest way out - the straightest line from the source to full production. This desire is even more pronounced in this Age of Development; the very process of development itself can force the play to be cut so tight that the meat drops from its bones. The play can be over-developed through constant advice and critiques, so much so that it loses its shape completely. The developmental process can codify a play and lead to a diffident playwright. But if a playwright is aware of the pitfalls, then he can use the developmental process to his advantage. He can circumvent the emotional flailing. One such method is to write a preface for every play and then return to it before any reading. This puts the writer back into his original mind-space and bolsters his confidence. At the very least, it can act as a monitor to help defend against any rash changes.

I wrote *Little Black Dress* three and half years ago and based it on a concept and conceit I used in the third part of the Baile Trilogy - *The Gigolo Confessions of Baile Breag*. I found it very difficult after that production to reestablish my confidence. I experimented with form, language and abstraction in that play. At that stage my easily bruised sensibility couldn't handle the many compliments on my "ambitious attempt" - a euphemism I took for failure. I understood after that production that I couldn't continue to pursue my Irish side in Boston town and survive. I made a choice - I decided to write plays based in America and slowly to transition into the American idiom. Accordingly, as with most art forms, I expected to be boxed into a category (always easier for promotion, you see). My category is now the immigrant commenting on America - the "outside eye" category.

That decided, now I wanted to research and to study the basic American form. In contemporary American regional and commercial theatre I have noticed that it is often helpful to end on an optimistic note; never kill anyone, mine your piece for laughs - often easy laughs (the pa dum dum variety) or outrageous laughs ("I can't believe he said that" variety). You must attempt to ground the play in realism, and, finally, never be afraid of sentimentality. I am not being cynical here, I'm being forthright - I use these notes as markers. This is not a formula, and if you think it is - try it. It's not easy to do. I fused these markers into my Irish stage craft where plays often end tragically, are voluble, are shot through with knockabout humor, and are founded in unmasking hypocrisy and social realism.

The downside of all of this study and note-taking is that you have to compromise your writing, your theatrical sensibilities. But then you have to ask yourself, how much compromise am I willing to endure? If you want to survive, you know what you have to do. On the other hand, what if you want, in fact need, to write in a way that does not suit either marker? Well then, you write it and be damned. *Little Black Dress* is that “be damned” play.

I wrote the play in two weeks in February 2006, after a one-year gestation period. I brought it to Aspen to workshop it for four days with Theatre Masters. I was reassured after a reading in front of an invited audience that the first act worked wonderfully. A year later I brought it to Austin Theatreworks in Texas where I rewrote the first and second acts. However, I gave the major climax a presentational format, and, although the invited audience really liked the play, I wanted a representational climax. I brought it back to New Repertory Theatre a month later for a reading of the same draft. The audience was a very sombre and cold National New Play Conference with 23 Artistic Directors from around the country present. I knew the play worked - it just needed to go into rehearsal, I told myself. But what was funny in Texas was not funny in Newton. What the hell was this? I just saw a wonderful read of the same play in Austin and now the reading was flat. Was it the space? The actors? The play? The jaded Artistic Directors? To be fair, the play does not shine a light on one particular social issue; it shines a light on a lot of social issues. It’s caught somewhere between an Irish and an American sensibility. The characters are crass, and the action is violent – but it’s still a play, and it follows in the tradition of quite a few of my plays, *Lepers...*, *The Blowin...*, *The Atheist...* It’s in the genre of “protest.” The play is about the individual battling to give his/her life significance and using whatever means available for this end.

After the New Repertory Theatre’s reading, I took the play to the New York Irish Arts Center in February in 2008 for a wonderful reading and a great response to another rewrite. Of course, by now I had forgotten why I wrote the play, and I was quite sick of this rollercoaster of cheap readings, short rehearsals, and a frustrating dependence on feedback from an unknown audience. Worse still, I couldn’t concentrate on writing anything new because I was obsessed, confused by the developmental hell I was putting this play (and myself) through. I mean, if you tell someone (an audience) before they even enter the room that what they’re about to see is incomplete and not finished, well, their automatic response is to tell you what’s wrong with it. Believe me, if all the plays I’ve seen in full production over the years had been given readings beforehand (and the audience told the plays were unfinished), well, we could save our theatres a lot of production money. In fact, it seems easier to have theatres do readings than full productions, especially when the play is judged by a reading in the first place (because, of course, playwrights don’t know how to write plays nowadays). Then we have to ask ourselves...Will a production really enhance the play? Of course, I’m being facetious, but I do think the system needs to reconsider the playwright rather than the audience’s reaction.

Or maybe what I’m trying to say is that playwrights should anticipate the rollercoaster of emotions they are about to put themselves through once they enter “development.” They should prepare their play for the stage on which it is being promoted, and they should study or research that theatre’s audience, its programming, and its mission statement before committing to the reading. This may seem like obvious advice, but it’s not. Not every public reading is advantageous to your play. All of us playwrights, whether we admit it or not, want to communicate with our audience - the more the merrier, we say. We want to create commercial plays, and, in fact, plays are measured in America by their commerciability. This doesn’t always leave room for our experimental, absurd or genre-bending plays. Every playwright seeks a second, third, fourth life for his play, but this may not happen no matter how “good” the play is. Playwrights, not unlike their plays, have a narrative trajectory themselves. Accordingly, the playwright must write the piece, is compelled to write the piece, that may never see the light of day while on his way to writing the play that makes him most proud. In other words, the playwright should write a play for himself and for no one else, first and foremost.

I know this now because, ambitiously and Machiavellian-like, I used *Little Black Dress* to introduce myself to various theatres and people of the theatre. But apart from Boston Playwrights' Theatre, no one would commit to producing the play. Is that an indictment of the play already? Only if you measure by the markers I've set out. I do think that the relatively conservative nature and "shot-through-with-hope-attitude (all those happy endings) determines the play list for many theatres in America. So....

I continued with *Little Black Dress*'s reading tour at New York Stage and Film, and I spent another four days last summer developing the play for another reading in front of another audience. I needed to please this audience above all. I changed the play depending on all the audiences' reactions and remarks I had received over the years. I was searching for the straight line to production. I gave it my American marker ending because I sought commerciability. I felt this was a good platform to get the play recognized. Then, the stage manager at Vasser told me my play was the most anticipated reading of the festival. "Jesus, I thought, I came here to experiment! What have I done? I should have left it alone. Why did I write it again?" And the little woman inside my head began her analysis of my own character beginning with – "Are you an idiot? What is the matter with you, Fool?" When the writer goes against the heart of the matter, even if it "succeeds," he will forever feel jarred by compromise and craft prostitution. The reading was poor.

What I'm saying here is that after the development history of *Little Black Dress*, I lost my confidence again, became mired in indecision, hated my occupation and had completely forgotten why I wanted to tell stories on a stage. At the same time, I was presenting myself as a capable, confident, assured playwright when, in fact, the opposite was the case. I needed to return to my Alma Mater to regain my composure and recalibrate my focus. And again Kate Snodgrass and BPT gave me that space. It goes without saying how much BPT is worth to our theatre community, but it is rarely mentioned how it is a space in which you are allowed to fail and yet you still succeed. I came away from Vasser and went into retirement. Three months later I put *Little Black Dress* back into its original shape, and I began to realize that all the readings I had suffered through were now informing the piece through latent memory recall. How ridiculous is that, and especially after all I've said? (The very nature and study of playwriting insists on contradictory elements). I improved my mechanics, raised the stakes, refined lines, and discovered, finally, that the whole process was not a failure after all. It was an emotional journey I put myself and the play through which resulted in a momentary loss of objectivity, and it illustrated to me how public and private expectation is the ruination of this playwright.

I put it up for another reading at BPT. It was a wonderful read – I heard what I wanted to hear because I had the play measured to within an inch of it's life. I knew where the periods were, the commas, the dashes. I knew the font and size of the Title. It was ready for production. Two months later I changed it again. Why? Why? I think that two months is the correct fermentation time for me to be able to hear and to gauge the changes made and be reassured (or not) by them.

I wanted to take the play even further, to push the envelope - because at BPT I wasn't relying on commercial concerns. Here I can see if I can get away with something on the stage and still maintain audience reactions that I hope for. Regardless of how good any reading was, there was something in the back of my mind that told me that the play felt too safe, too regional, too "well made." So I rewrote it. But I was not dependant on another person's power, and I didn't have to keep submitting three or four finished plays so I could have a chance at a prestigious reading and then thank all my developers publicly. I gave the play its seventh (Sixteenth draft) reading - just myself, Kate, the actors, and a representative of a local theatre company. I liked the reading a lot, but the rep from the local theatre wanted the play to be more linear, which, in fact, only confirmed my original intention. I needed to hear the critiques again, but this time I wanted to be able to stand by my intentions without wavering. At this stage I knew exactly where I wanted the plot to tack and where I wanted the characters to

fall, and I didn't need anymore yays or nays. There comes a time when that has to be the case, or the playwright will be forever rewriting the same play for the rest of his life.

*Little Black Dress* is about a woman, Amy Beaudreaux, who has come to a point in her life where she realizes it is time to live her life on her terms and not at the service to others, namely her husband and son. And she finds this freedom, this confidence to pursue her freedom through sex. This was my conceit, and my theme was asking... "What do you sacrifice if you pursue freedom?" And not wanting to be deliberately, insipidly whorish by mentioning our actions in Iraq, which I don't understand nor feel able to comment on, but it was in my original mind-space to attempt to understand what the price of freedom costs. I wanted to tackle the nature of sexual repression through a warped, exaggerated reality, allowing me to comment on art, economics, parental expectations, teenage confusion, religion and romantic love. A lot of themes, no doubt, but the more I work in the theatre, the more I accept the basic falsehood of the stage and see it as an opportunity to layer a narrative with a variety of themes.

I had finished reading *Miss Julie* and Strindberg's preface, and it was my intention - either subconsciously or not, I can't answer that with reliability - to use some of his methods in the design of the play, such as monologue, pantomime and ballet. At the same time, I was reading about "ludology," the art of gamesmanship in video games and the skill involved in reaching particular levels and aiming for a goal. This is really Playwriting 101, but I took it in again, subconsciously or not, and I pursued the outrageousness of the theatrics in these games, the constant shift in perception, the basic falsehoods, and I measured those against the play and combined them. It was a form of escapism, which is what Amy wants to do, blended with theatre, which is ultimately what theatre is, whatever about catharsis. I put plays on stage to say "Don't become like this," rather than mirroring nature. I wanted the play to take place over 90 minutes or so, no interval. I cut a second act. I didn't want any exposition. I wanted fast moving action. I wanted characters that were almost stereotypical. I wanted each scene to have an arc, and I didn't want to build psychology behind the motivations but rather have characters act spontaneously without us questioning their motives. I wanted monologues to break the fourth wall and to make an intimate confessional with the audience. I wanted the Greek aspects to be in place, not as a question of destiny but rather an unstoppable pursuit of a goal. I wanted to create striking visual tropes that festered in an audience's heart and nerves, Artaud-like. And most of all, I wanted the play to be fun. Often a pejorative word in stuffy theatrical circles, but the very conceit of the piece demands fun. And, of course, it is a wonderful way to sneak up on an audience to make them complicit.

I kept returning to the idea of why I started writing plays - to give voice to people who don't go to theatre. (Very noble) But I was aware of the fact that we need Kings to fall because we care about kings, and we don't care about peasants. I knew Strindberg said that the peasants are not concerned with nobility or honor, and, in achieving it, they never worry about disgrace. And I knew blue collar participants rarely present theatrical fodder unless as secondary characters. But what all of them, nobility or no, had common was the unquestionable pursuit of survival at all costs. This is probably the basest instinct in all my pieces, and it allows me to add as much ethical compromise and questions of moral relativity as possible.

So I hope you sat in your seat early enough to read this and are maybe thoroughly confused by the contradictions of this preface. But recognize, at least, that it gives some indication of the process of bringing a play to life. I hope I don't bore you too much, and forgive my indulgence. I do believe, beyond anything else, when it comes to theatre in full production that the audience is first and last.

And so in the words of Strindberg and from my new found confidence (at least until the reviews come out) - if it fails, there is surely time enough for another.