

My First Play? Ah, I Remember It Well

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Body

The return of Tony Kushner's "A Bright Room Called Day" prompted us to ask leading writers: How did it go for you? And what did you learn?

Tony Kushner was in his 20s when he wrote "A Bright Room Called Day," on the graveyard shift at his job as a hotel switchboard operator.

Ronald Reagan had just been re-elected, and Kushner, political to the core, channeled his alarm into the play. When his theater company, Heat & Light, staged it in 1985, Oskar Eustis -- now the artistic director of the Public Theater -- was there. That's how they met.

"There's a scene where the characters sing 'The Internationale,'" Kushner said the other day, "and someone in the audience started singing along with them. And that was Oskar."

Eustis, who gave Kushner his professional debut two years later when he staged "Bright Room" at the Eureka Theater in San Francisco, is now directing a revival at the Public.

And Kushner, whose published script includes an appendix of alternate text that he wrote for the 1991 run at the Public, is taking yet another crack at the play, which is in previews for a Nov. 19 opening. This time, the modern character who's always troubled him is joined by a character from 2019.

Kushner and some other well-known playwrights mixed insight with affection for their younger selves when they spoke recently about their first professionally produced works, and whether they rewrite old scripts. These are edited and condensed excerpts.

Tony Kushner

Known for "Angels in America," "Caroline, or Change"

Professional debut "A Bright Room Called Day," 1987, Eureka Theater, San Francisco. Age: 31.

Plot In early 1930s Berlin, a group of artists reacts to rising fascism, their narrative occasionally interrupted by a modern-day New Yorker named Zillah.

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Looking back "The modern character was intended to suggest that successful projects of the political right are on a continuum. But the character, in a certain sense, never worked. I felt a degree of ambivalence -- I still feel it -- about plays and theater and whether or not it's a good way to address political concerns, because it's indirect. She was there to make sure that I made my point."

Critical response "An early front-runner for the most infuriating play of 1991." (Frank Rich, reviewing its New York debut in The New York Times)

Rewrites? "I rewrite everything. 'Caroline, or Change,' I haven't changed a word. I listen to it, and I feel very happy with it."

Afterlife The published text suggests updating Zillah as needed, with Kushner's approval. "I didn't realize I was setting myself up for 30 years of college directors calling me up and saying, 'Would you like to read my Zillah thing?'"

Katori Hall

Known for "The Mountaintop," "Tina: The Tina Turner Musical"

Professional debut "Hoodoo Love," 2007, Cherry Lane Theater, New York. Age: 26.

Plot A play with music about a young black woman in Depression-era Memphis who longs to sing the blues.

Looking back "Even though 'Tina' is my first musical, the reason it didn't scare me to take on such a gargantuan project is because I have an instinct for music, and it started with my first play. As an artist, you want validation, and my first play wasn't a critical darling. But it really taught me that it was O.K. to be me."

Critical response A "right-minded but ambling opus," a flawed but "creditable early effort." (Anne Midgette, in The Times)

Rewrites? "That last draft is the snapshot of who I was as an artist at that time. I'm not ashamed about any mistakes."

Afterlife A new production opened this month in Chicago.

David Henry Hwang

Known for "M. Butterfly," "Soft Power"

Professional debut "F.O.B.," 1980, Public Theater, New York. Age: 22.

Plot Two young Chinese-Americans spend an evening with an immigrant "fresh off the boat" in a comedy about heritage, assimilation and shame.

Looking back "I had gone to the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival. I saw an ad in The L.A. Times that said, 'Study playwriting with Sam Shepard.' At Padua, I studied with Sam and María Irene Fornés and Murray Mednick. I started learning to write more from my subconscious. And as I did that, I found that these themes started appearing on the page. I wasn't aware that I had an interest in Asian and Asian-American stories and identity issues."

Critical response "If West and East don't precisely meet in 'F.O.B.,' they certainly fight each other to a fascinating standoff." (Frank Rich in The Times)

Rewrites? "I'm an inveterate rewriter. But I don't feel like I want to rewrite 'F.O.B.' I wouldn't know how to make it better, or fix it."

Afterlife "For a play that has references to the Bee Gees and John Travolta, I'm sort of amazed that it continues to be as alive as it is."

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Tracy Letts

Known for "August: Osage County," "Linda Vista"

Professional debut "Killer Joe," 1993, Next Lab, Evanston, Ill. Age: 28.

Plot In a squalid Texas trailer home, a drug dealer, his virginal sister and their father hire a contract killer to dispatch the siblings' mother.

Looking back "'Killer Joe' was written, some of it, in an alcoholic haze. I was reading a lot of pulp fiction: David Goodis and Jim Thompson, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. I got sober three weeks after it premiered. It wasn't in any way the impetus for why I got sober, but I was going through a time in my life where I was, let's just say, learning a lot about myself."

Critical response "If you can stomach its ugly nudity, flagrant violence, foul language and blatant sleaze, you're in for one tense, gut-twisting thriller ride." (Richard Christiansen, Chicago Tribune)

Rewrites? "The whole process was eight years, from the time I first wrote it until we did it in New York. Once it's published, I'm done with it."

Afterlife Matthew McConaughey played Killer Joe in the 2012 film. Orlando Bloom played him last year in London.

Lauren Yee

Known for "Cambodian Rock Band," "The Great Leap"

Professional debut "Ching Chong Chinaman," 2009, Theater Mu, Minneapolis. Age: 23.

Plot A satire in which an indentured servant from China goes to work for a Chinese-American family living a comfortable California life.

Looking back "I wrote it as my college thesis without really understanding how to write a play or create a body of work. It was an amalgamation of all these things that I had known and felt over the past however many years. Once I wrote it, then came the much harder task of 'Now it seems like I'm a playwright. How do I keep on writing?' Because I was like, 'Well, it seems like I just used up my one good idea.'"

Critical response "Charming, amusing and entirely overcrammed." (Dominic P. Papatola for Pioneer Press, St. Paul, Minn.)

Rewrites? "There's almost a time limit on how long you have before the play is set. I really can't go back to it as a writer because I'm a different person with different interests. I'd be rewriting someone else's work."

Afterlife "It got done in a lot of different cities, and I think that began my career as a playwright who's worked in a lot of different regions."

Amy Freed

Known for "The Beard of Avon," "Freedomland"

Professional debut "The Psychic Life of Savages," 1995, Woolly Mammoth Theater, Washington, D.C. Age: 37.

Plot A hallucinatory riff on the tormented lives of the poets Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Ted Hughes and Robert Lowell.

Looking back "I spent three years on it. It was like I was going to war to project myself onto the stage. I look back on it now and it's almost painful to see it. And I'm amazed in a good way to see it. I was fighting for my right to be an artist."

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Critical response An "exultantly mean, painfully affecting comedy." (Lloyd Rose, The Washington Post)

Rewrites? "I think they need to happen with every production. The only thing I ever want to be in my whole life is in a rehearsal room with one of my plays, just doing anything that makes it stronger, clearer, better, freer."

Afterlife Productions at the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia and Yale Repertory Theater in New Haven.

Kirsten Greenidge

Known for "Milk Like Sugar," "Luck of the Irish"

Professional debut "Sans-Culottes in the Promised Land," 2004, Humana Festival, Actors Theater of Louisville. Age: 29.

Plot In a white suburb, the daughter of an upwardly mobile black family wants to be Snow White.

Looking back "The end of the play, the stage direction is that the forest grows and a new world begins. It's like, 'Let's overthrow the world. We just need a whole new world, and then we'll be O.K.' That says 'early play' to me."

Critical response "A surreal fable" showing "colossal" imagination but dissolving "into a welter of confusing language and imagery." (Bruce Weber in The Times)

Rewrites? Not for "Sans-Culottes." But "my play that's up at Repertory Theater of St. Louis, 'Feeding Beatrice,' was my thesis in graduate school. In the last few months, I reworked it. It has been wild, going back."

Afterlife "It had one or two productions. They were small."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/theater/first-produced-play-tony-kushner.html>

Graphic

PHOTOS: Jonathan Hadary, Nikki M. James and Crystal Lucas-Perry in the new revival of Tony Kushner's "A Bright Room Called Day." (PHOTOGRAPH BY SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES)

From left, Reno, Frances Conroy and Marian Seldes in the 1991 Public Theater production of "A Bright Room Called Day." (PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTHA SWOPE/THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY)

Angela Lewis and Postell Pringle in a 2006 workshop of "Hoodoo Love." The play served as the professional debut for the writer Katori Hall. (PHOTOGRAPH BY KERRY CHIPMAN)

Tamilla Woodard in Kirsten Greenidge's "Sans-Culottes in the Promised Land," a play that includes a black girl who wants to be Snow White. (PHOTOGRAPH BY HARLAN TAYLOR)

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