

Interview with *Becky's New Car* playwright: Steven Dietz

By Stephanie Mulligan, Artists Rep.

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Stephanie Mulligan: *Becky's New Car* was commissioned as a birthday present from a husband to a wife. Were there any parameters given in regards to the subject matter of the play?

Steven Dietz: There were no parameters. Though there were discussions with Kurt Beattie (the Artistic Director of ACT – the commissioning theatre) that it would be a great challenge to write an ensemble comedy. Which it was.

SM: How do you feel about the age-old tradition of making art as a personal gift to one of its patrons? Have any of your previous plays been commissioned in this way?

SD: This was a first for me and I loved it. It was a leap of faith on the part of the patron – Charlie Staadecker – and it was, I believe, a way for him to make a direct impact in the creation of new work. Again, since there were no parameters given, it was not terribly different for me than a traditional commission – however I gained an “instant advocate” in the person of Charlie and his wife, Benita, who the play was gifted to.

SM: With the current economic situation, the portrayal of extraordinarily wealthy and somewhat frivolous men like Walter Flood could be received more gravely than intended. How present was the theme of economic stability when you were writing the play?

SD: Though the first draft of the play was written pretty quickly – over a summer – I was not able to write as fast as the economy was able to fall into an abyss. The current financial climate probably gives even more empathy to Becky and Joe, but I don't think it affects our perception of Walter too much (I could be wrong here). He's a man who has lost his wife. Loss is loss — however nice your shoes are.

SM: It's always tricky to write in audience participation, just because you never know how cooperative they may be. What was the motivation for bringing the audience so closely into this piece? Does their participation make them complicit in Becky's deception?

SD: That was exactly the intent: some manner of audience complicity. I wanted to have Becky literally take them on this journey, and the most direct way I could think of was to have them

literally be her confidants and helpers. I also didn't want to "shame" or "make fun of" audience members like I've seen other "acts" do. I wanted this to be fun for them, too. Finally, of course, all credit goes to the actress playing Becky – she's the one doing the high-wire act with unsuspecting audience members while I'm sitting safely in the back of the theatre, hiding.

SM: There have been times in the rehearsal hall when I've been reminded of great scenes from I Love Lucy and The Honeymooners. Who were some of your early comedy influences?

SD: Everyone from Charlie Chaplin through Lucille Ball to Steve Martin and Woody Allen. In the end, however, your influences will only get you to the doorstep: you have to step over and come up with the goods on your own. And when it comes to comedy, we are all serving a lifelong apprenticeship.

SM: In Act II where she can 'barely keep up' with the play itself, we infer almost a lack of agency on Becky's part. Was this intentional?

SD: Yes – I wanted the play, which Becky seems to have been in charge of, to spin out of her control ... just like her life.

SM: Walter says "Life is chaos and holidays." I adore that line- care to expand on that thought?

SD: Nope. When I add more words, it gets worse. I'll just leave it at that and say thanks for the compliment.

*** This interview has been shortened for timeliness purposes. To check out the whole interview, visit <http://www.artistsrep.org/onstage/2009---2010-season/becky's-new-car.aspx>**