

FOCUS ON:

JASON GROTE

Playwright Jason Grote, O'Neill National Playwrights Conference alumnus, returned to the campus this fall, not as a playwright, but as an instructor of the craft. When NTI playwriting teacher Donna DiNovelli became unavailable for the fall semester, Jason agreed to teach students the fine art of playwriting. I had the opportunity to sit down with Jason shortly after a class early in the semester to discuss how this acclaimed playwright planned to pass his knowledge on to our NTI students.

- Deena Nicol



DN: So tell me, how are classes going?

JG: It's great; they are a great bunch of kids. I am really enjoying it. An NTI semester is such a compressed period of time, with playwriting classes scheduled sporadically, it will be a challenge to accomplish and complete what I want with the students. This is especially true because they are taking so many other things; I don't want to inundate them to the point where it becomes counterproductive. But yeah, it is going very well. The work they generated today was really terrific.

DN: That brings up an interesting question. With the students wearing so many different hats, how do you work with those that are not necessarily writers? How do you place them in the mindset of a writer?

JG: I think there is a huge amount of overlap; I mean, I think about my own background. I came out of a BFA acting and directing program before I ever really wrote. I was always somewhat literary minded, but I don't necessarily think that there is such a distinction. It is really beneficial for non-writers, especially in programs such as this, to know how to write. Also, sometimes non-writers are more writers than they think they are. There are so many diverse kinds of writers.

DN: With such a short amount of time with them, how are you approaching the semester?

JG: The first class was kind of "getting to know you" things, exercises, building a common language, drafts and discussions. Then there's the break when students go to England. When we come back in November, our work will be focused toward each student generating a solid piece.

DN: Do you plan to bring your own work into the classroom?

JG: Yes, but it won't be required reading. I will send the students PDFs of plays; some will be mine and the others are going to be unpublished works of my colleagues. I really like the idea of students seeing contemporary works that still require development. Then they get a closer look into the professional experience and realize that work does not just happen instantly; it goes through a long development process before it is published.

DN: I know that you also teach at Rutgers, how does that differ from teaching at NTI?

JG: This is a lot more fun! I have a pretty heavy teaching load at Rutgers. I am in the English department, so working at the O'Neill with theater people brings me back to my days in a theater department. It is amazing to see how little theater students have changed in 20 years; they still retain the energy and enthusiasm and the practice of wearing their hearts on their sleeve. Sometimes, when teaching English students, you don't get as much openness. Half of my teaching load at Rutgers is English Comp classes; I really like what I teach and it keeps me sharp, but sometimes the environment feels foreign.

Here at NTI, they are so incredibly self-motivated; they come right into it. It's like they say: "90% of directing is casting;" I think 90% of teaching comes from the students. They come in with such a want to learn, my imparted knowledge is just a really minor part. I also think it is a matter of teaching the students what they already know. There are a number of steps to get there, but the guidance is small, everything really comes from them.

DN: So what is your goal for the semester, what would you like the students to take from your teaching?

JG: With only one semester teaching them, I want to spend it pointing them in the right direction. I feel they start to reap any benefits of an intensive class when the class is over; when you are so immersed in the process, it is very hard to absorb the lessons in the now. Even with two years of Grad school, I wasn't completely aware. It wasn't until a full year after Grad school I began to draft 1001. That is when the lessons really came into play; there was definitely a lag time. What I want to do is give the students confidence, a basic overview, a bag of tricks, a list of books, plays and movies they can consult, and then let them go. Not everyone wants to be a playwright, but sometimes it is very unpredictable. Sometimes people that never thought they could or wanted to write are the ones that excel at it. On the other hand if someone already has the idea to be a writer, the trick then is to work on stretching them in a different direction than they are accustomed to. Like if someone is very traditional and Aristotelian, pull them in an experimental direction, and if someone works in the experimental they should learn more craft.

DN: What advice would you give to students that want to continue playwriting?

JG: I think the biggest question to themselves should be: "Why a play?" Are you enthusiastic about the medium? I say this only because it is not an easy way to make a living and it can be incredibly frustrating. They need to be completely committed to the actual medium of writing and making plays; that is what is going to get them through. Another question would be: "Does this story have to be in play form?" Playwriting is less competitive than screenwriting or being a novelist, but they have potential to reach much wider audiences and to be more central to the culture. Sometimes those forms of storytelling are better suited for what you are trying to convey. The final question would be: "What do you want to get out of your writing?"

This Semester's NTI students have had positive things to say about having Jason Grote as their playwriting teacher. The skills, guidance and advice he provided to the students are invaluable. The O'Neill is happy to have hosted Jason twice for the National Playwrights Conference, and now as an NTI faculty member. For more information about Jason and his work, please visit his website and blog at www.jasongrote.com and <http://jasongrote.blogspot.com>.

To learn more about the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center and its National Theater Institute, visit www.theoneill.org.