



The Writing Life: Rajiv Joseph and Melissa Ross

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At the beginning of a Q&A with playwrights Rajiv Joseph and Melissa Ross, the former wryly observed, “You have the dual masks of the theater here. Melissa’s play is so funny and my plays are so (pause) not funny.”

Indeed Melpomene (tragedy) and Thalia (comedy) are the yin and yang represented by “Mr. Wolf” and “Of Good Stock,” their respective plays premiering at South Coast Repertory this spring. Joseph previously explored the scar tissue of human interaction in “Bengal

Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo,” a 2010 Pulitzer Prize finalist. The 40-year-old playwright now brings his scalpel to “Mr. Wolf,” a haunting drama about a young woman and her unsettling bond with a man who has victimized her.

In “Of Good Stock,” Ross, three years out of Juilliard’s playwriting program, brings a lighter touch to the lacerating comic collisions among three sisters and their respective mates in a house shadowed by the ghost of their father, a legendary novelist. The fraying of blood ties is something Ross touched on in her first play, “Thinner Than Water,” in which a trio of wounded half-siblings gather in the hospital room of their dying father to lob grenades at one another. Similar shrapnel ricochets through “Of Good Stock.”

Marc Masterson, SCR’s artistic director, says that while both plays are about family, it would be a mistake to align them too closely. “They are separate and independent,” he says. “Rajiv’s play is about the traumatic effect that almost losing a child has on the members of her family. It’s challenging but ultimately I find the story to be redemptive and the writing to be sparkling, economical and compelling. ‘Of Good Stock’ is a very funny comedy built on a tragic situation. Melissa is particularly skillful at getting us to laugh at this family and to understand and recognize them and to feel compassion for them. That’s a winning combination.”

On a recent frigid morning in a Manhattan coffeehouse, the two playwrights spoke of the inspirations and challenges of their chosen profession and the crucial role SCR has played in transforming their work into, as Ross put it, “a breathing, living thing.”

A pivotal moment for both of you was Stephen Adly Guirgis’s play “Our Lady of 121st Street.” Rajiv, you saw it while at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts and Melissa you acted in it as a member of the Labyrinth Theater Company.

Rajiv Joseph: I had never seen such a racially diverse cast in a play which wasn’t about race. That was very moving to me. I’m of mixed race and I remembered thinking, “This is something very contemporary and real and important.” I’d never responded to a movie like that. And that switched me over from writing for movies to writing plays.

Melissa Ross: Being a part of the play from development all the way through the initial run was a wonderful experience. I then started writing plays with the company. We did a reading of some short plays of mine and it was like, “Oh, this is what I want to do.”

As part of SCR’s development process, you had table readings as well as

staged readings in front of an audience as part of the Pacific Playwrights Festival. How does that help in revising the work?

MR: For me, there are multiple steps and that's why the South Coast process is really great. This play started as a commission and then had multiple readings and workshops on its way to production. At cold readings just for me I can quickly assess if what I'm writing is easily accessible right off the page. But it is only when I see a play in front of a live audience that I start to really know what it is. I listen for when they laugh, how they respond to certain scenes. I pay attention to the energy in the room. Because the theater is so collaborative, it is only with an audience that I can start to see a play as a living, breathing thing.

RJ: I think of it like an orchestral piece, a string quartet. I can't play those instruments so I need the musicians to come and play it for me. And you think, "Oh, no, that character is in the wrong key. That musical moment which I thought would be so moving is actually quite trite." That's why it's so necessary to hear it.

Do you expect brutal honesty from your peers when you show them your work?

RJ: Brutal honesty is not part of it. It can be eventually, but when anyone is spending a day writing and they are sharing their words, they're so raw. It's no place for anyone to say, "I didn't like it." Or "It's not working." It's not about lying; it's just knowing that we're all in this very, very vulnerable tender place. The act of sharing itself is a creative step. To squash that in any way is not helpful.

MR: I feel similarly. I have a couple of ridiculously close friends who I feel get my work. I can hand them something that I'm feeling tentative about and say, "Tell me when you get annoyed." But when I'm in a group or having a first read, I tend to like questions: "What were you trying to do here?"

Can you tell if a play is going to have a difficult birth?

RJ: I don't know if there are any easy births. (Laughter)

MR: I try to have a different experience with each play without expectations. Again I have different directors working sometimes on the same play, and they have different visions that are going to get added into the mix with different actors.

What do you look for in a director?

RJ: Artistic vision. And part of that comes from their personality and knowledge of the text. If a director can't be in charge, then that's a problem. Sometimes you need a maternal figure and sometimes you need a dictator.

MR: Someone who shares my sense of humor. If we can make each other laugh over coffee, then that's a good sign they're going to get my work and we're going to get along.

Do you ever feel constrained by economics to keep the cast small?

RJ: No. I tend towards less. I feel like characters have to earn their way into a play. Sometimes you start a play with eight characters. Then it's "OK, we're on our feet, I'm going to have to let some of you go." And you end up with a three-character play.

MR: I fully agree about characters having to earn their place. I want each of them to have a purposeful part in the machine that's moving the play forward.

Do you find that the characters speak to you?

RJ: I don't know if I would characterize it that way. A turn of phrase might pop out. Or a characteristic. "Who is this guy?" "This is a guy who counts his blessings." And it turned out to be a kernel that unlocked his character.

MR: With "Thinner Than Water," I was shopping at Whole Foods and I heard the first three lines of the play out of nowhere.

RJ: In your head?

MR: Yeah. In my head. I just started hearing that conversation.

What were they?

MR: Renee says "I can't believe he called you." And Cassie says, "You're overreacting." And Renee says, "I'm not overreacting." I went home, sat down and wrote the scene.

RJ: There are three pronouns in there, and they're separated by disbelief and action that's happened. It's an instantly dramatic phrase. (Laughter)

How do you survive financially as playwrights?

MR: Right now I have a couple of productions, a couple of commissions and a couple of other things going on. And I really love teaching. In another world, I would be an elementary school teacher. I've taught

teenagers for many years, which is pretty awesome. Whatever I end up doing, I really hope that I can come back to teaching.

RJ: If you only want to write plays, it can be very challenging. You're betting on things that aren't necessarily going to happen. I was teaching a writing course at NYU, and then I got an advance for a published play and got some awards and then wrote for TV ("Nurse Jackie") and film ("Draft Day"). That said, I never just wanted to be a playwright, so it's a nice balance for me.

Has teaching made you better playwrights?

MR: I think so. Writing is so solitary, so being in a writers room, hearing and critiquing others' work, is just so inspiring.

RJ: I don't know if it makes me a better playwright, but it makes me a happier person. The trick to being a writer is to find those places where you don't have to be alone. When I was teaching at NYU, I became such good friends with the other teachers and during spring break we would rent a house in the Catskills, spend the week there and write. That's my ideal week. To be in a house with a bunch of writers, writing quietly during the day, and getting drunk at night and reading each others' stuff. To me, that's heaven.

MR: That's similar to the Labyrinth Summer Intensive. We would get a house and have readings at night, and we would cook and assist every evening at dinner. I made macaroni and cheese for 60 people! Even after we started going to college dorms where we'd have dining halls, I'd still try to have a mac and cheese night.