

## Dramatizing Walt Disney: An Interview With Playwright Lucas Hnath

by Shoshana Greenberg, Contributor

Walt Disney is a character in Lucas Hnath's intriguing play, *A Public Reading of an Unproduced Screenplay about the Death of Walt Disney*. Hnath and I talked in a Lower East Side café about the connections between theater and the Disney aesthetic, as well as between playwright and subject.

Hnath often writes about famous people, the kind of celebrities who become legendary. Isaac Newton and Anna Nicole Smith are among his subjects. "I get a kick out of putting small problems into the lives of cultural deities," Hnath said. "I wanted to make Walt simultaneously a person and this concept.... It's not a bio play. What's being dramatized is the idea of Walt Disney." The character of Walt fights with his brother, has problems with his daughter, and doesn't like his son-in-law—human problems Hnath has both taken from biographies as well as constructed.

Hnath's fascination with Walt Disney and Disney World began early. He grew up in Orlando about seven minutes from Disney properties. "It's likely that growing up, having so much access to a total theatrical environment, made me become a playwright," he said.

He recalled one incident when he first rode the ExtraTERRORestrial Alien Encounter ride (which closed in 2003) at the Magic Kingdom. He happened to lean forward as the overhead harness descended and for the duration of the ride could not hear the audio track behind him. As his fellow riders squirmed in terror at the sounds of a rogue alien, Hnath became an accidental observer. "I think that gave me a special appreciation for what was happening. I could stand outside it and just watch the stage craft," Hnath said.

Instead of the Disney films and characters, Hnath was drawn to the park design—the way the signage never makes one feel lost, how crowds are manipulated and patience is managed, and that within the long lines Disney is teaching the rules of that particular ride's world. It's a way to control the experience, which Hnath also does with his plays. "There is somebody who has made a space....," he said of both Disney World and the theater. "You enter it, and they are going to put on a show for you. You are going to be struck with wonder and awe, but you are not in control when you go into that space. It's the director/playwright/god that is pulling every string."

As the title suggests, the play is staged as a screenplay reading. The set consists of a few tables and chairs. Special scripts were made for the page turning to occur at the right moments, and all the "across the page" (screen directions) are read. The actors stay within the reality of the reading, never stepping out to enact separate scenes. "The actions of performing a reading are surprisingly interesting," Hnath said. "They don't represent what's happening in the story. They complement what is happening. It creates a kind of tension."

As might happen with writer and subject, Hnath admitted that he and Walt Disney may share some traits. Hnath's plays, he claimed, are bio plays cloaked in a celebrity subject and gimmicky form, as he puts it. "In order to understand something, I have to make it [similar to] me," Hnath said. Likewise, in Walt Disney's nature documentaries, which aren't wildly known but make an appearance in the play, the footage is edited with narration so that the animals resemble people. "It's Disney's inability to encounter wildlife without making it like him," Hnath said. "He's coming in with a preconception of how the world works."

Also like Walt Disney, Hnath is seeking immortality. Walt has his corporation; Hnath has his plays. "I like to write plays that are really hard to mess up," he said, referring to his penchant for old-fashioned dramatic structure. "It's a pretentious desire for my plays to outlive me."