

BWW Interview: Southern Californian Peter Richards Makes It Personal in Directing WALT DISNEY

broadwayworld.com/los-angeles/article/BWW-Interview-Southern-Californian-Peter-Richards-Makes-It-Personal-in-Directing-WALT-DISNEY-20220320

by Gil Kaan

March 20, 2022

West Coast premiere of Lucas Hnath's A Public Reading of An Unproduced Screenplay About the Death of Walt Disney opens March 26th @ the Odyssey Theatre

West Coast premiere of Lucas Hnath's A Public Reading of An Unproduced Screenplay About the Death of Walt Disney opens March 26, 2022 at the Odyssey Theatre. Peter Richards directs the cast of Kevin Ashworth, Brittney Bertier, Thomas Piper and Cory Washington. Peter allowed me to probe into the interworking of A Public Read..., as well as his acting/directing career trajectory.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Peter!

My pleasure.

The script of Lucas Hnath's A Public Reading of An Unproduced Screenplay About the Death of Walt Disney first landed on your desk as artistic consultant of the Venturous Theater Fund of the Tides Foundation. What aspects of this script piqued your interest?

Three aspects of the script immediately piqued my interest: first, the language of the play is mesmerizing in its elliptical, repetitive, and poetic musicality. Second, the structure of the play - a reading of a screenplay within a play - is highly imaginative. Third, the fragmented, fast-paced dialogue - featuring characters seemingly finishing each other's thoughts - is a writing style that was new to me. Reviewers of this play often compare it to dialogue from a David Mamet play. The minimalist quality of this text, however, is even more stark than a typical Mamet play, something entirely original.

Are you familiar with Lucas Hnath other works?

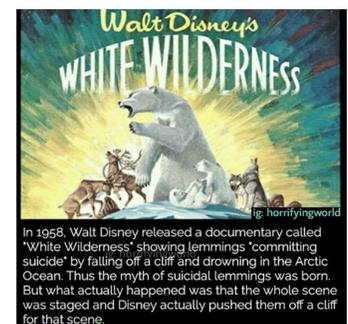
I have read all of his published works and have seen A Doll's House, Part 2, The Thin Place, The Christians, and the world premiere production of A Public Reading of an Unproduced Screenplay About the Death of Walt Disney.

Was your initial response to direct this play, as opposed to act in it?

I am understudying the role of Roy, so, in this production, I suppose I am doing both! But, yes, my initial response was always to direct. As a director I'm drawn to projects and plays that scare me a little, and the style of this piece is something I knew would present a fun challenge - something I could sink my teeth into as a director. And having grown up in Southern California - the home of Disneyland and Disney Studios - I knew I wanted to tell this story here, where I hope it will have special resonance.

How long has the gestation period of producing this west coast premiere at the Odyssey taken?

I suppose the gestation began when I first read the play back in 2013, before it had been staged. I knew I wanted to put it on in Los Angeles, so when I moved here from New York in 2018, it was on the top of my list.



This production was originally planned to begin rehearsals in March of 2020, when we were derailed by the pandemic. We were fully cast, designs were ready, welcome emails had been sent... and then suddenly everything stopped. So, it's been a long time coming! This is the first indoor theater project I have directed since the pandemic hit, and I'm thrilled we've been able to re-group and re-boot.

What would your three-line pitch of A Public Reading of An Unproduced Screenplay About the Death of Walt Disney be?

This play will up-end your idea of Walt Disney; make you laugh about death, ego, and family; and will offer audience members a truly unique theatrical experience.

What was your first exposure to Walt Disney? Cartoons on TV? Films in theatres? Disneyland?

I went to Disneyland when I was a kid, where my favorite rides were the Matterhorn and Splash Mountain. My favorite Disney movie by far was "Beauty and the Beast," which I saw twice in the theater when it first came out. I was a sucker for the prince-princess romantic storyline; the music (who doesn't love Angela Lansbury singing the title song?!) and comedy were icing on the cake.

Has being involved in this play changed your perception of Walt Disney at all - good or bad?

This play has made me think a lot harder about what it means to have a name, such as Walt Disney, that is more-than-human, that represents a company, a brand, an idea, an aesthetic, and maybe even a way of living, of seeing the world. The tension and contradictions of living such a life - simultaneously embodying a flesh-and-blood human while also representing so much more - is more fascinating to me than ever.

Are any of the cast or creatives alumni of your productions?

Yes, I have worked with Thomas Piper, who plays Roy, more times than I can count. He has acted in numerous productions I've directed, and I've also performed with him in Shakespeare plays and as a fellow company member of Conni's Avant Garde Restaurant. We first worked together in a production of As You Like It back in 2005, and have been working together consistently ever since, most recently in the one-person show Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally, by Kevin Armento, also at the Odyssey Theatre, in which Tommy starred.

Your directing resume includes both classics and contemporary projects. What specific qualities of each attract you to each genre?

I find myself attracted to the classics, in part, because it offers me the opportunity to grapple with heightened language - the poetry of Shakespeare, the lyrical melodrama of O'Neill. It calls for a mode of expression that can transmit a story with particular power and force.

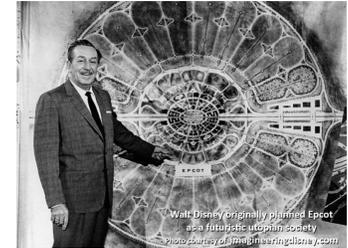
When it comes to contemporary plays, I try to seek out unique styles of expression that challenge audiences and make them sit forward in their chairs. A Public Reading... is a good example of that. The Aliens by Annie Baker is another; it's a play that is approximately one-third silence. When an audience member is faced with feeling uncomfortable, when they sit forward in their chair, these contemporary plays can offer great rewards.

You received his MFA in acting from A.R.T. Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University. Any particular incident spurred you to pivot to directing?



Even when I was studying acting, I always wanted one day to direct. Directing allows me to use more of my analytical skills; I'm responsible for the entire story, all the characters, and not just the storyline of the one character I'm playing as an actor. And I've always been a deep admirer of writers. The director's job is to bring that writer's vision to life, filtered through your own ideas; directing allows me to live a little inside the brain of our great writers, and learn from them.

You're a founding member of the New York-based Conni's Avant Garde Restaurant in 2009. How out-of-the-box was the idea then of an interactive dinner service/show? Did you have any precursor to Conni's to learn lessons from?



The idea for Conni's sprung forth from a joke-of-a-question that the As You Like It cast asked ourselves one night at a cast party: what would happen if a troupe of avant garde theater artists decided to take over and run a restaurant? It was a crazy enough question that the cast decided we needed to form a theater company, make a show, and find out the answer. Our show became something of an underground hit off-off-off Broadway, and, as it turned out, we were at the forefront a wave of interactive food-service theatrical events. Before Conni's there was, of course, traditional "dinner theater," which in all ways is what Conni's tries *not* to be.

Your last Conni production was in 2018. Any plans to revise a 2022 production?

We have no plans for a revival at the moment, but you never know when the band might get back together!

Can you explain how writers can apply for Tides Foundation's Venturous Theater Fund? What criteria is needed, if any.

Check out the website: www.venturous theater fund.org

Our main program provides support to theater companies that produce plays that require extraordinary costs above and beyond the needs of a typical production, such as an exceptionally large cast. We cannot support writers directly, although we do support writers through partner organization such as New Dramatists and The Playwrights Center. We also support playwrights who self-produce through their own theater company.



What's in the near future for Peter Richards?

I'll be acting in a production of Much Ado About Nothing in Maine this summer, playing Don John, the baddie. I'll also be doing my best to play the role of silly daddy for my 4-month-old daughter. She's definitely my toughest critic.

Thank you again, Peter! I look forward to seeing yours and Lucas' take on Walt Disney.

Thank you! I look forward to seeing you at the show!

For tickets to the live performances of A Public Reading of An Unproduced Screenplay About the Death of Walt Disney through May 1st, log onto www.Onstage411.com/Disney