

A conversation with playwright George Brant

Excerpted from interviews conducted by Gillian Gurganus for the world premiere production at Trinity Repertory Company in January 2018 and Northlight Theatre's Dramaturg, Lauren Shouse for their production in May 2019.

What was your inspiration for writing *Into the Breeches!*?

My wife Laura Kepley is the artistic director for The Cleveland Play House, and the theatre was about to celebrate their 100th anniversary, and as a result, everyone on the staff was digging into the theatre's history. I became intrigued by the effort, which led me to rifling through the Women's Committee's archived scrapbooks of the Play House's WWII years and discovering the pivotal part that the women on the home-front played in keeping the theatre afloat during that difficult time. This spurred me on to further research: wartime diaries, sweethearts' correspondence with soldiers, African-American poetry of the time, anything that expanded my knowledge of women on the home-front beyond Rosie the Riveter. At the time I had a commission with Trinity Repertory Company, a theatre which I'm quite familiar with from our time living in Rhode Island, so the play ended up a bit of a hybrid between the history of the two theatres.

How is *Into the Breeches!* relevant to today's audiences?

Even though the play does take place in the '40s, I do think it holds a mirror up to today in many ways, actually kind of increasingly with recent events, with more of a focus on women and their struggles in various industries. It's been interesting to see how the play is taking on more relevance as time goes on because it is very much about a group of women, in this case who have never had the opportunity to act on stage before, but it's the very fact that the men are away for the war that allows the women to take on roles that they've never had before, and not just roles in the theatre, but really roles in their lives that they've never had. One of the characters in the play has never acted before because her husband never really approved of it, but now he's gone, so she feels like she can take a chance on it. The character Maggie, was the assistant director for 26 years, and this is finally her chance to actually direct a show. It's really about all the characters awakening to new possibilities in their lives and opening up to those possibilities and running with them. It's very much about women of this time, but unfortunately, things haven't changed all that drastically since then, so I think it does carry a lot of relevance and also just the simple fact that we are technically still at war as a country, even though most of us are able to carry about as if that's not the case. This is very much a play where the presence of war is being felt and I think the contrast, to me, is almost very interesting in that this was a time period where everybody really pulled together as a country and everybody knew we were at war and everyone knew someone who was fighting overseas and the whole country really rallied together, whether it was scrap metal drives or rationing of food. The whole country was in that war and I think it's good to be reminded of that nowadays when it seems like a small percentage of our countrymen are fighting these wars for us, and the rest of us are told to just go shopping and carry about our lives.

What is your connection to Shakespeare's works, especially *The Henriad*, Shakespeare's play series following the rise of Prince Hal?

I grew up loving Shakespeare; I don't know how many times as a kid I watched the VHS tape I'd recorded of Olivier's *King Lear*. I've had the pleasure of seeing a full *Henriad* at Trinity Rep and many productions of the individual plays. The Henry plays, particularly *Henry V*, felt like the perfect match for a theatre trying to rally the troops and the home front.

In the show, Maggie tells Ellsworth about "the linger effect." What do you hope lingers with these audiences who come to *Into the Breeches!*?

With any play you hope that your characters will linger afterwards and will hang in the audience's memories, but in this case, this play ends on a note where they're about to do the play and I think that might create a bit of the linger effect because we know that something happens right after the play ends. The play ends with a beginning, so I think in that vein it will linger for an audience. There's a certain tragic air to the end of the play, I mean if you know the history of things, as far as women in the workforce in this time, they were all first told, "Don't get a job, stay at home as women, this is all men's work" and when the men all went away, suddenly the women were encouraged to work in the factories and to support the troops in that way, but once the men came back, the women were all fired and lost their jobs. So it's a time of flowering that I think this play shows, but for those of us who know the history, we know this flowering comes to an end in a few years. So I think there's also some tragic lingering in that effect.

While the play was originally set in Providence, RI, you've encouraged local productions to shift the play's location. How does that impact the story, if at all?

Yes, as *Breeches!* makes its way out into the world, I thought it might be more interesting to encourage theaters to work the WWII history of their area into their productions to make it more personal.

What do you hope audiences take away from this play?

Although the script takes place in the '40s, my hope is that it resonates in our present day as well. *Breeches* depicts a time when our country pulled together in common sacrifice; a juxtaposition which I hope puts our current home-front efforts (or lack thereof) in sharp relief. In addition, while the play pokes fun at the

sometimes absurd world of the theatre, I hope it also shares its unique ability to allow a person to become their best self while portraying someone else.