



An essayist, an editor and an intern argue over how much creative license is allowed in an essay in "The Lifespan of a Fact."

Fountain Theatre stages debate over what makes a fact a fact

By Bridgette M. Redman
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Society struggles to agree on what constitutes truth and when it can be sacrificed to tell a good story or to best capture people's attention.

The importance of facts and truth is explored in "The Lifespan of a Fact" by Jeremy Kareken, David Murrell and Gordon Farrell at Fountain Theatre Wednesday, Feb. 15, to Sunday, April 2. The production marks the West Coast premiere of a show that starred Daniel Radcliffe when it was on Broadway.

The three-person show is based on a true story, an extended argument between an essayist and the fact-checking intern, with a magazine's editor playing mediator.

They conflict because the essayist feels he can take poetic license to tell a compelling story and the intern is doggedly determined to make sure each element of the essay is factually correct.

Director Simon Levy was drawn to the story addressed the concerns that he wanted to present at The Fountain Theatre.

"This whole idea of truth and facts and when can you bend the facts and when do you, for the sake of a good story, not be accurate about certain details and stuff like that?" Levy explained. "I didn't want it to be too politically on the nose. What I love about this play is that it's based on a true story. It deals with all those themes, but not in a political way. Yet, when you watch the play, you can't help but

think about what's going on in our world politically in terms of social media and all that."

The well-known and cantankerous essayist, John, is played by English actor Ron Bottitta, whom Levy had worked with previously. Bottitta has an extensive career as a voice actor and was at the top of Levy's list for this role.

"He's kind of rough-and-tumble kind of blue collar, the kind of Hemingway-esque, Norman Mailer type of guy," Levy said. "He's a very inventive actor. He's very organic and has a wonderful sense of humor. When I read the play, I thought of him."

Inger Tudor plays the high-powered magazine editor who needs to make a deadline but doesn't want her publication to be sued for inaccurate or libelous content.

Levy said he immediately thought of her for the role, even though they hadn't worked together.

For the intern, Jim Fingal, Levy cast Jonah Robinson. Levy said he had just that right sort of Harvard, East Coast, Ivy League appearance and could play someone who is very intelligent but with a wry sense of humor.

Levy invites audiences to take the deep dive into this play with the actors. Each of them, he said, has his or her own integrity. There is sufficient ambiguity that opens up the play for audience interpretation, for individuals to decide who is right and to what degree they are right.

"Each of them has a very strong compulsive, obsessive view on how important accuracy is in journalism," Levy said. "And, of course, John argues that he's not a journalist, that he's an essayist and therefore should have latitude for creativity, for changing things so that there is a deeper meaning, a subtext to what he's writing, but also to try to find the emotion in the rhythm of the language. So, he argues from that point of view."

Jim, on the other hand, insists every statement needs to be wholly correct and factual. He rejects the idea that there can be multiple truths, especially in a story that is based on a real-life event, a person's suicide. Emily, meanwhile, takes up the middle ground.

"She believes that it's OK to bend things as long as it doesn't become litigious and as long as it's not harmful to somebody," Levy said. "So, you have these three very strong personalities coming after this story."

Levy hopes that, as audience members drive home, they'll debate who is right and who is wrong. He wants them to lean into the ambiguity.

"So many of the plays that we do at the Fountain Theater are about awakening or reawakening people to important issues," Levy said.

It's why he embraces the idea that people will agree with different arguments.

"That conversation will dovetail into what's really happening in our society right now in terms of politics, in terms of social media and in terms of journalism. Where do we allow latitude? Where is it OK to bend the truth, and when is it not OK to bend the truth?"

He hopes audiences will think about the performance when they hear the next political lie or see ridiculous social media accusations.

He points out that the answers people have may vary in different situations. Biographical or historical movies tend to take a lot of liberty to create a more dramatic and interesting story. Do we allow different latitude for that than we do for a politician making claims about their background or the data supporting bills they propose? Where do you draw the line for accuracy for people such as journalists vs. creative nonfiction writers vs. memoir writers?

"The beauty of the play and the joy of the play is that it doesn't give you an answer at the end," Levy said. "The ending is ambiguous. In real life, we know what happened, but in terms of the play, it ends in ambiguity. The point of the play is to have that conversation on the drive home."

The play is based on what Levy called a "true-ish" story. He's read the book and the original essay, and the play takes liberties with both. However, the core of the play is based on an actual event.

"The Lifespan of a Fact," Levy said, is more than a debate. It's a play designed to entertain.

"It's a really smart, funny play about an issue that is important to contemporary society," Levy said.

**"The Lifespan of a Fact" by Jeremy Kareken,
David Murrell and Gordon Farrell**

WHEN: Various times Wednesday, Feb. 15, to Sunday, April 2
WHERE: The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue, Los Angeles
COST: Tickets start at \$25
INFO: 323-663-1525, fountaintheatre.com