

## **UNDER THE SKIN Gets Under My Skin: Interview with playwright Michael Hollinger**

By Henrik Eger

*Michael Hollinger is a much-produced Pennsylvania playwright and associate professor of theater at Villanova University, writer of three short films for PBS, and co-author of the feature-length Philadelphia Diary. His works have been performed in many different theaters, including productions in Europe and Asia. He has received numerous awards and fellowships all over the United States.*

**As a dramaturg in Philadelphia and other cities, you helped in the production of world premieres of well-known and respected authors like Chaim Potok, Joyce Carol Oates, and Bruce Graham. How did those experiences shape your own writing?**

Reading hundreds upon hundreds of play submissions, and watching scores upon scores of rehearsals and performances, helped me strengthen my dramatic “muscle” and increase my sensitivity to what works and doesn’t work in the theatre. In my view, there are no hard-and-fast rules beyond “Don’t bore the audience,” but this period allowed me to absorb and test the basic principles of this art form.

**You participated in a number of script development workshops with directors, actors, and fellow writers. How did they shape your own development as a playwright?**

My early workshop experiences taught me to be as bold as possible when a script is in development, to try as many variations as I can in search of the right story, scene or moment. Once a play reaches production, and audiences are in attendance, the scale of revision has to diminish, so I try to take advantage of the time when I can use the crowbar and saw rather than the sandpaper and varnish.

**When you started as a young playwright submitting your scripts, how did you build and develop working relationships with theaters? What worked, and what advice do you have for the next generation of playwrights?**

It was extremely advantageous that I was a literary manager, because my colleagues at various theatres around the country had to read the plays I sent them cover to cover, since they knew they might run into me at a conference or festival. (This didn’t mean they had to like them; my plays still got turned down many more times than they were accepted, like most playwrights.) But by submitting my plays very broadly early on, I came to distinguish between the theatres where my plays were near-misses from those where they were long shots, and continued to submit where I’d received the encouraging rejection letters, sensing that perhaps these organizations shared my own vision. Over time I’ve developed a group of theatrical “familiar” around the country, places and people who I know will seriously consider my next play, even if they ultimately opt not to produce it.

**You have won numerous awards all over the US. What impact did they have on you as a playwright and as an individual?**

It’s certainly fun to win things, and an artist’s life is so inherently filled with doubt that an award (or several) can momentarily affirm that you’re on the right track. But they don’t make the next play easier to write. I think most playwrights would say that the most exciting moments are when you think there are no solutions to the play at hand and suddenly one presents itself.

**Tell us about people you knew who were organ donors or recipients and how some of their experiences might have influenced *Under the Skin*.**

Most of the donor/recipient stories I collected were between family members, and, unlike my play, were marked by a deep underlying generosity from the start. Perhaps my most striking encounter, however, was with Marie Manley, Transplant Assistant at Lankenau Hospital, who spoke about her journey as an organ donor. Some years ago, she had just moved to a new parish and saw a notice in her church bulletin that another parishioner needed a kidney. Marie decided on the spot that she wanted to donate to this unknown fellow human being. This example of blind, extravagant altruism helped develop the “counterweight” in my play to the main character’s resistance to donating to her own father.

**Who do you consider “kidney-worthy”? If your wife children, or colleague needed a kidney and you were a match, what would you do?**

I don't think I've evolved to the point where I'm ready to go on a donor website and pick out a stranger to receive my kidney, but I'd happily share one with any of these people, and others in my life, too.

***Under the Skin* shows an average family that could be considered dysfunctional. You open closets with quite a few hidden secrets that most people don't dare to talk about. What experiences, whether personal or from literature, shaped your writing of Raina, the deeply troubled and angry daughter who bases her contempt for her father on false or incomplete information?**

Both my own family and my wife's have had significant estrangements between parents and children, and these experiences have been enhanced by observing the families of many of my friends over the years as well. (My uncle actually “divorced” his entire family with a formal letter to his father, mother, and sister, and remained out of contact for 25 years, including through the death of both parents. Finally, late in life, my mom began sending him a Valentine every February; after seven years, he replied, and they were in a relationship again for perhaps a decade until their deaths within two months of each other.) As I see it, Raina has displaced her grief for her mother into rage against her father, and she cannot reconcile the latter until she gets to the bottom of the former.

**You described *Under the Skin* as a play where “the clock was ticking—if it's not solved, a guy dies”—a potentially tragic situation. Yet, your play contains quite a few black comedy situations, making the audience laugh. For example, when the patient's daughter was a little girl, he bid her goodnight with Brecht's “Mack the Knife.” What did you do to keep this tragic-comedic play balanced and not make it a soap opera?**

It's one of life's remarkable qualities that nothing retains the same tone or mood for very long. Any good news I receive was probably preceded (and will be succeeded) by something bad. Terrible things happen at weddings, and hysterical things happen at funerals. Since art is based on life, I believe this variety of tone is therefore essential—that a little levity helps balance out, and, indeed, accentuate the gravity and vice versa. Finding the proper balance of what I call “ha-ha-ouch” can be tricky, but rewarding once found.

**A number of people consider *Under the Skin* a comedy. However, I saw it more as a comedy with strong tragic undertones. How does this dichotomy in *Under the Skin* relate to some of your other plays? Do you see a pattern evolving in your work?**

All of my outright comedies have moments of real pain in them, and the dramas have moments where the audience is encouraged to laugh. Again, I think these contrasts refresh our nervous system, like the alternations in hot/cold, savory/sweet, crunch/smooth that one might find in the various courses of an elaborate meal. I always saw the structure and major plot twists in *Under the Skin* as comedic, though the deeper I got into the play, the more I felt obliged to plumb the depths of its characters' suffering as well.

**Henrik Ibsen would have turned *Under the Skin* into a tragedy with Raina as a lovable, misunderstood, young woman. Brecht did the opposite. He tried many times to roughen up Mother Courage's character to make her as unsympathetic as possible. What did you intend when creating Raina's character?**

I love both Ibsen and Brecht, and Raina, too. Both playwrights were fascinated by their characters' flaws, by their blind spots and brokenness, though they treated them with different degrees of judgment and compassion. In *Under the Skin*, Raina says that her yoga teacher has described her as “a Young Soul,” and I find this touching. She knows that she's short-sighted and emotionally messy, but also aspires to be a better person than she is at the moment. She's on the same journey we're all on, at all different stages.

***Under the Skin* was inspired by a letter written by a brother and sister to columnist Randy Cohen, asking for advice on who could donate a kidney to their father. Did you ever contact them about your play, and if so, what were their responses?**

No, I was not interested in the particulars of their story, only the interesting nexus of forces at work. (The original title idea, Rock Paper Scissors—a phrase which came up in that article—suggested something to me of the timeless game of dominance and submission among three equal forces.)

**Thanks, Michael. Give my best to all the characters... especially Raina!**