

Interview: Playwright Garry Michael Kluger on the World Premiere of WALKING IN SPACE at Theatre West

The production runs September 8 to October 8.

By: Shari Barrett

Prolific writer Garry Michael Kluger (pictured) is bringing the world premiere of his latest play, *Walking In Space*, to Theatre West for a five-week run beginning September 8, directed by Arden Teresa Lewis. It centers on a family in crisis with a drug-addicted single mother needing the assistance of her children to overcome her demons. Inspired by true events in the playwright's life, this fictionalized, autobiographical play will undoubtedly speak to others who have had to endure this heartbreaking reality in their own lives, one that is often hidden from even the closest of friends.

I decided to speak with the playwright about the events which led to the creation of the play, what made it a difficult one to write, why he chose to have its world premiere production at Theatre West, and about working with the director and cast to tell such a personal story.



Thank you Garry for speaking with me today. First of all, I know you started acting at the age of 8. When and why did you decide to turn to playwrighting?

The turn to writing was gradual, and it took about 15 years to go completely from one to the other. I started writing when I was participating in acting showcases in the 80s. I was working with an acting partner, Julie, and we were always looking for scenes to do for casting directors. Julie once showed me a scene from a play and I remember reading it and thinking, "Well, I could write something better than this." So, I did. When we first performed the scene I wrote, the casting director was quite taken with us, but was even more excited about hearing material she had never heard before because I added originality to my auditions. I kept writing scenes for us and eventually other actors started asking (and paying) me to write for them. It turned out that the characters in the first scene I had written were so enjoyable to me, that I wrote my very first play about them. Ironically, when that play was produced, the director told me that I wasn't right for the role I had written for myself. By 2001, the last three acting roles I had gotten were literally two leprechauns and an elf, so I decided to go with the writing full time.

When was your first work published and what was it?

My first published work was in 1985. It was a collection of the scenes that I had been writing for showcases for several years geared toward acting students. A wonderful man named Bobby Hoffman, a casting director at Paramount Studios, had been using a lot of my scenes to teach a sitcom class. One day he handed me a list of three publishers and suggested I send the scenes to them and see if they thought it would make a good book. One did, and that book and, later, several others, have been in print since then.

Tell me about your time as a movie reviewer for the Hearst Corporation on-line and as an entertainment reporter for your local paper.

By the time I was reviewing movies I had written a couple of my books and plays, was writing on-and-off for Disney, and doing other freelance work. My wife, Lori, is the real journalist in our family and one of her friends was working for a Hearst publication and asked Lori if she thought I might like doing movie reviews for her. I was paid to go to the movies, given a little stipend, so what wasn't to like? I did that for about a year. The stint for the local paper didn't last too long because they kept asking me to write stories on things of which I had no real knowledge. I'd do research but always felt a little phony doing those interviews, so I stopped after a short time.

How about your work on television?

When I first started writing I really wanted to be a television writer. I felt like I had a good ear for it, especially sitcoms. I have had some success; being the head writer on three different series, having written several other TV pilots, some TV work for Disney, and other freelance work, too. I never quite got to the level I was really striving for. The whole landscape of TV writing has changed so much over the years, but I'm still hopeful.

With such a varied writing career, what do you find the most appealing about being a playwright for live theater?

Being perfectly honest, I'd say control... but in a good way. In theatre, for the most part, the playwright's word is final. When I first worked for Disney, a friend of mine who worked there as a director told me that I should understand that some days I would come in as a writer, and other days as a scribe – writing exactly what I was told to write. In TV and film, you hand in a script and God only knows what will happen to it after that. All of that is so very different from live theatre. I've been very lucky with the casts of my plays as I can't think of one actor I've worked with who hasn't respected the words I've written. The actors in *Walking In Space* have been especially respectful of the script.

Let's talk about the world premiere of your play *Walking in Space* at Theatre West. How much of its story is based upon your own family life?

Truman Capote used to refer to his book, *In Cold Blood*, as a "non-fiction novel." In that same vein, I like to call *Walking In Space* my fictional autobiography, in the sense that many of the elements are 100% true, but other elements are not. The first act of the play, when Francine's children take control and get her into treatment for her drug addiction, plays out exactly how it happened in 1972. Much of the dialogue is verbatim, to the best of my recollection. But, for instance, the family makeup is different in the play. In my family, all the children were boys and all under 21 years old. In the play, it's two girls, two boys, and some of them are older than 21. I did this for theatricality and to make the events a touch less convoluted than they actually were. The second act, after Francine returns from treatment, is mostly fictionalized to make that part of the story fit better on the stage. What I really tried to keep totally true was the relationship amongst the siblings. How they talked with each other, dealt with each other, and loved each other was drawn completely from the realities of the relationships amongst my brothers and me.

Were you raised in a similar upper-middle class Jewish family in suburban Baltimore?

Yup. I was raised in Pikesville, Maryland. It's in Baltimore County and is a middle, upper-middle, and upper-class neighborhood. Barry Levinson set several of his movies there.

Why did you title it *Walking In Space*?

In Act II of the musical *Hair*, there a song called "Walking In Space." The song takes place during an LSD trip. I was in the show in 1981 and when I heard the song and what it was about, it always reminded me of when my mother would "wander" when she was on barbiturates. She would sort of float around the house, no real destination, sort of "walking in space." The name just seemed... correct to me.

What did you find most difficult about writing such a personal play?

The most difficult part about writing such a personal play was not in the writing of it, but in watching it unfold on stage. The writing part is not emotional for me. However, when I started doing readings of the play and hearing the voices say the things that have been in my head for years, that's when it started getting very emotional. And now, watching people portraying a difficult part of my life, live in front of me, never gets easy. There have been many times since we started rehearsals that I'll be watching, feel a hand on my shoulder, and look up to see my director, Arden, looking at me and saying, "You, okay?" Cast members have noticed, too, when I get emotional, also check on me. I feel very protected in this group.

Is there an incident in the play from your childhood when you really struggled to be happy and somehow succeeded despite the odds?

I wouldn't say there was any particular time when I struggled more to be happy. I kind of feel my formative years were all a struggle. My parents were divorced, acrimoniously, when I was 5 or 6. My mother



The real-life Kluger family c. 1960
Photo courtesy of playwright Garry Michael Kluger, far right



The Silberman Family in *Walking in Space*.
Photo by Garry Michael Kluger

remarried for about a year and a half. She was always doing some drugs, but it started to get worse after her second divorce. By the time the drug problem was resolved, I was a senior in high school. After college, I did feel a little like escaping, and that's when I moved to California. What's amazing, and is reflected in the play, is that all my brothers not only survived, but went on to great careers. We're all writers, of varying kinds, and are doing well.

Why did you decide to offer the world premiere to Theatre West?

I joined Theatre West at the end of 2012. I had a couple of one-act plays go up in their short play festival WestFest after I joined. Then in 2016, the Artistic Board picked my play *A Thorn in the Family Paw* for production. It was pretty successful, winning a bunch of awards, including several Best Play awards. During this time, I was also workshopping *Walking In Space* in our writers workshop, culminating in a staged reading in 2019. Then, of course, was the pandemic, and when the theatre was up and running again, I brought the play to the Artistic Board for production and it was chosen. Theatre West is my professional family and I can't think of anywhere else I'd like it to premiere.

Have you worked with director Arden Teresa Lewis before?

When I joined Theatre West, Arden was the first director to approach me and ask if I was looking for a director. I guess she based this on the work I had brought into our writers' workshop. She directed my first two one-acts, and when I was offered a spot for *A Thorn in the Family Paw*, I turned right to her. There are a lot of terrific directors at Theatre West and I've worked with several of them, but Arden just gets me and especially my writing from the outset. The great majority of my work is relationship pieces and Arden's ability to get to the core of those relationships, to get into the nuances of what I'm writing about, is just amazing. She never dictates, she discusses. Have we agreed on everything? No, but it's always discussed in the most artistic of manners. I think we may be 50/50 on who's won the artistic discussions, but boy, those discussions are fun.

Tell me about the play's characters and the actors portraying them.

Francine (Franny) is the mother and addict in the play. I think Francine was born too early, like my mother, and was basically groomed to be a housewife. Drugs were an escape for her. It's complex role, played by Kathie Barnes. I have seen Kathie's work for years at Theatre West and there were only two or three actresses I believed could play this role. Kathie was one of them. She is studied, her work is layered and she is doing everything she can to bring the spirit of my mother to the stage.

Patricia (Patti) is the oldest of the children, basically been Mom to her siblings since Franny's problem started getting really bad when Patti was only 15 years old. She is trying to keep her own life together while taking care of her family. She is being played by Mary Somers. Mary, like Patti, is a fighter who wants everything to be perfect and wants to understand every cell that makes Patti tick.

Kirby is second in line to Patti. He has recently graduated from college, gotten his dream job, and is trying to get his own life started. Unfortunately, his mother is making his post school years as difficult as they were while he was still living at home. Kirby is being played by Cecil Jennings who is almost an enigma to me because I don't think there's anything he can't do. Cecil is a newer member to the theatre and since I first saw him work several years ago, he's been on a literal list of actors I had written down for *Walking In Space*.

Matthew is the second youngest of the siblings. A college sophomore, Matthew is the quietest of all the siblings and keeps most of his emotions internal. The problems with his mother weigh on him heavily and it shows on the day they put her away. Matthew is being played by Theatre West, and when I saw his picture on our member's page on our website, I thought he looked great for the part. And when he auditioned, all I could think of was that sometimes the universe is in sync.

Hogan Mason who I didn't know before we started casting the show. He was a really recent addition to Lori is the youngest of the siblings. Though the youngest, Lori is probably the wisest person in the room, and maybe the quickest and most astute. She's been basically alone in the house with her mother for 2 years and it's starting to take its toll. Lori is being played by Liv Denevi, an extraordinary actress, subtle, in tune, and pliable. She'll try whatever she's asked and brings everything she can to the role.

Keith is Patti's on-again / off-again boyfriend, a medical resident at Johns Hopkins Hospital. No matter how much he tries, he can't get Patti out of his life... probably because he's been in love with her since they met. Keith is being played by Andrew Cereghino, another actor I didn't know before the casting process. Before his callback Andrew and I talked for about an hour going over everything we could so he could see what motivates Keith. This remains his modus operandi throughout rehearsals.

Dr. Jerome Collar is the Silberman family doctor. Jerry is an old-fashioned doctor whose concern is the entire family. When Francine's problem is brought to light, it is Dr. Collar who puts the plan in motion to get her well. Jerry is being played by David Mingrino, a long-time member of Theatre West and a fine

actor. His work ethic is impeccable and he wants to understand everything that's involved with his character, without any suggestion too small for him to experiment with when it comes to Jerry.

Have you worked with any of them before?

I've produced plays at Theatre West that David, Cecil, and Mary were in. David's done several readings for me. Mary was part of my one-act called Death & Cold Cuts and it was where I discovered she WAS Patti. Liv is an interesting story. She and my daughter, Emily, went to high school together and were both in the theatre department. I was asked to write and direct a play for that department and it's how I met Liv. I cast her in a pivotal role and even then, at 14 or 15, I could see she was an amazing actor. I couldn't have been happier when several years later she joined us at Theatre West.

After casting the play, how have you continued to be involved in the rehearsal process?

Arden and I cast the show together, but I left the final decisions to her. I go to all rehearsals (except for that week I got hit with Covid). My place there is to answer any questions that may arise. I basically leave the actors and director to do their own thing and will give any line notes once rehearsal is over. There is a hierarchy process to rehearsal that I always try and follow.

Did anyone involved with the production share their own experience growing up with a drug or alcohol-addicted parent?

I believe one of the actors may have been in a similar situation, but they've not gone into depth about it with me.

In doing your research, did you find the experience of dealing with an addicted parent to be quite widespread and usually hidden from outsiders?

I can really only speak for myself, but things like drug addiction were never talked about in my neighborhood. There may have been more, but truthfully, I don't know. Of course, we did not bring a lot of friends over to our house because of my mother's condition, and many people were surprised, years later, that this had been going on. The other stigma that was attached to our situations was that because there were no rehab centers at the time, my mother was treated in the drug section of a mental institution called The Seton Institute. Though she was concerned with her daughter's health, my grandmother also wouldn't talk about her daughter being in Seton.

What do you hope audiences will be talking about after seeing Walking in Space?

First, I hope they find the story compelling. I also hope they will talk about all the creative elements like acting, directing, set, lights, etc. But what would thrill me is if people realize that situations like this go on all the time. My story is not an anomaly, how we handled it at the time was unique. But the story, unfortunately, is more common than most people know.

Are there talkbacks planned with the cast and production team during the play's run?

Yes, we are planning and working on creating talkbacks with health professionals on the topic of addiction, and cast members will be invited to take part and add their insights. I will also be attending any talkbacks, which will generally be scheduled after our Sunday matinees.

Ultimately, what call to action do you hope this play presents to audiences?

I guess it would be if you know anyone in a similar situation – reach out. Addiction is a disease and can be beaten, but not on its own. People need to reach out for help for themselves or someone they care for. Also, there is nothing wrong with admitting you (or someone you know) has a problem. Silence helps no one.

Thanks so much, Garry. I look forward to seeing your play!

The world premiere of Garry Michael Kluger's Walking In Space runs from September 8 through October 8, with performances on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. The performance on Friday, Sept. 29 will be ASL interpreted, and the performance on Sunday, Oct. 1 will be sensory-friendly. Tickets are \$35 with online advance purchase, or \$40 at the door, with \$30 tickets available to students, veterans and members of the military. This play features adult content and is recommended for mature audiences ages 14 and up.

Theatre West is located at 3333 Cahuenga Blvd. West in Los Angeles, CA 90068 (across the street from Universal CityWalk, between Barham and Lankershim); metered street parking available, and there is a paid lot across the street from the theater. For reservations and information, call (323) 851-7977 or go to theatrewest.org.