

Theater

INCONVERSATION

Straight Outta The Sewers: Banana, Bag & Bodice's Jason Craig with Alec Duffy

by Alec Duffy

Playwright Jason Craig founded the theater company Banana, Bag & Bodice with actress Jessica Jelliffe nearly ten years ago in San Francisco. Since then, they've been doing work "tricoastal" – in San Francisco, New York and Dublin. The company is comprised of a core group of four or five, plus the occasional interloper, and is currently in rehearsal for its new piece, The Sewers, which will run from June 30 – July 22 at the Ontological Theater in Manhattan.

ALEC DUFFY (the RAIL): Jason, it's a pleasure to be here.

JASON CRAIG: You're welcome.

RAIL: You write plays . . . ? Basically.

JASON: I write stuff. I don't write plays.

RAIL: Well, what are they, if they're not plays?

JASON: Shows? Or excerpts. I write excerpts, and then as a group, we create a show. I write the ligaments, and as a group we attach the ligaments to the bone.

RAIL: Where does the bone come from? Isn't it more like: You create the bone, and then the company creates muscle around the bone?

JASON: Or maybe I create the telephone box, and then the company creates the telephone wire.

RAIL: I like that.

JASON: Alright. So for *The Sewers*, I wrote a bunch of scenes, and then we all came together and put them in a certain order that made sense. We came up with a narrative by ordering the scenes from one to ten and made sense of the characters through that, and then I'd fill in the holes with extra scenes.

RAIL: How did you come up with that seed material for *The Sewers*?

JASON: I started writing an “interruption,” where one of the characters came in and introduced himself as the playwright, and explained how he was going to manipulate these people in the room, which were these two girls. Then it became obvious that these two girls were probably sisters, and that this man was in love with them. So I started writing random scenes about male/female love relationship and then scenes between the two sisters.

WIFE

She’s predictable. To me. Not necessarily predictable to anyone else, just to me.

I know things about her, and things repeat. And she confirms herself.

This is what makes us close. I can rely on her nuances, her bits and pieces.

I can see through her like a mirror. One of those one-way mirrors. There’s always a bit of me in her eyes. Like:

She scrunches up her nose when she pees.

She blushes when she sees cutlery touching, as if she understands their secrets.

Every morning before she wakes, she does sit-ups and...what’s it called...circular breathing.

SISTER

Circular breathing

WIFE

I think that’s funny.

JASON: Then the landscape of the world they were living in started being developed – the external world. It turned out that they were possibly living in this chemically-diseased land, maybe uranium fallout, and that no babies were able to be born in this land. So that played into some of the scenes and the language I was using.

MR. LEAK

Now Question.

What happened?

*What happened in *The Sewers*?*

Why no babies?

Why no child?

What happened?

Why they die?

SISTER

Is it kicking?

WIFE I think I can feel it, yes.

HUSBAND

*Why no rusty sand pit trucks
No tiny knee skid graze,
No patchy band aid scratch
No nickel lemonade*

SISTER

When do you think it will leave?

WIFE

*Not sure,
I guess eventually womb rot,
I guess eventually it will spot out, right?
It will start with a spot and then rot out and then out there.
It's a shame really, I've already named it.*

HUSBAND

*Is it just the women not do their jobs,
They all tied up in tubes?
Or is it men i.e. man i.e. me?
My infertile servitude*

Mr. LEAK

*Maybe it's the Air
Maybe it's the Air. . .*

JASON: It was all separate moments. And now, it's probably the most narrative piece I've written.

RAIL: What playwrights are you a fan of?

JASON: Martin McDonagh — I think he's great — I just saw his play again for the second time. I like Beckett — he's a pretty interesting little guy. I've stopped reading plays. When I first got into theater — which was not all that long ago — I'd read plays and that's how I taught myself what a play is. But now, most of the stuff that I see and enjoy are not plays, they're compendia of ideas. Like Radiohole's stuff — it's not a play. You wouldn't find their scripts in a compilation of plays. I think the idea of a play is dead. Unfortunately, people still do them. But I write plays. I'm the antithesis of what I'm talking about. I sit down and write something. Most things I see and enjoy aren't created that way. That's because I'm a control freak. I don't like people to write stuff that I'm going to say. I like to control the environment I'm creating. I don't like other people's ideas—they're stupid.

RAIL: I find that as I create work, I'm starting to write more at home, outside of rehearsal, and I'm

actually creating scenes now and building character arcs — writing more of a traditional play. And I think, “Would I ever want to see this?”

JASON: Exactly, that’s what I’m scared of, writing *The Sewers*.

RAIL: I mean, once you find yourself sitting at a desk working out things like narrative, Jason, you’re halfway to a Pulitzer Prize. Bet you never imagined that!

JASON: I don’t want to win a Pulitzer Prize.

RAIL: Well, what prize would you like to win?

JASON: I’d like to get some grants. Grants are hard for me. They want you to say that you’re helping a group — that you’re bringing up specific issues for some underserved community. And we don’t, because we’re white, we’re not sick, we’re probably from a middle-class background, although that’s arguable. We don’t smell. Well, maybe we smell. We don’t have an agenda. We’re not trying to help people through a social message. We’re not a moralistic theater company. So it’s really hard to write a mission statement with that in mind. Ultimately, we’re a very selfish group — we’re just trying to entertain ourselves and the downtown theater community, which is very hard to put in a mission statement. So therefore it’s hard to get grants, and you have to lie, and you have to say that you want to help the Hasidic-Muslim man, or whatever.

RAIL: Jason, downtown theater is super-saturated by technology today, but Banana, Bag & Bodice remains pretty low-tech — blessedly, in my opinion. Your last show, *Panel . Animal*, a combination of your two pieces *Sandwich* and *The Young War*, was done at Collapsible Hole in Williamsburg, a hotbed for the use of video and sound design in theater.

JASON: We had cooking onstage — that’s kind-of high tech. We had plastic walls, that’s pretty futuristic.

RAIL: Do you ever imagine using video?

JASON: There’s a big difference between theater and TV, Alec. If I want to watch a TV screen, I’ll stay at home on my couch, okay? Our “high-tech” is in the language that we speak.

The Sewers will perform June 30-July 22 as part of the Ontological-Hysteric’s ongoing Incubator Residency Program. Wed.-Mon., 8pm. \$17/\$12. 131 E. 10th St., Manhattan. www.ontological.com, www.bananabagandbodice.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alec Duffy’s play

The Top Ten People of the Millennium Sing Their Favorite Schubert Lieder was recently published in the volume,

Plays and Playwrights 2006

. The Ensemble Studio Theatre has awarded Alec a Sloan Foundation commission to create his new theater piece,

Dysphoria

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COMMENTS

There are no comments yet.