July 23, 2012

We of the Dramatists Guild of America wholeheartedly support playwright David Adjani who has been facing pressure to silence his play SC. His work is a darkly comic parody of the sitcom Three's Company, intended to critique the show and the social mores underlying it. The copyright owners of that work have written a "cease and desist" letter, which would, in effect, require him to stick the play in a drawer forever. But works of parody are protected under the "fair use" doctrine of copyright law, because such works serve an invaluable social criticism.

Corporate interests may prefer not to have their properties targeted for mockery, but artists have the right to do so, regardless of the best bullying tactics that corporate profits can buy. And more than having the right to do so, artists have an obligation to critique the vestments of our culture. So we stand with Mr. Adjani, and are in discussions with him to see what assistance he might require. We hope others will show their support for David as well. Because, by so doing, we demonstrate that culture is too important to be controlled solely by the corporations that claim to own it.

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ, PRESIDENT
Dramatists Guild of America, Inc.
In May 2012, the Guild's Kentucky Regional Representative, Herman Daniel Farrell, sat down to talk with Les Waters, the new artistic director of Actors Theatre of Louisville. Farrell explores the unique, creative perspective of the Actors Theatre of Louisville, uncovers Waters artistic journey and his specific interest in dramatists and new work.

Herman Daniel Farrell: Playwrights across the country are truly excited that you’ve got this position because of your interest in playwrights and in new work. What is it that intrigues you about new work?

Les Waters: I think it’s in my DNA. I’ve said this many times, but if I were to walk into a bookstore, I think I would naturally gravitate towards something that had been published now. Although I do like a lot of classic writers, I find the world I live in very complex and difficult to under-
stand. New plays feel to me like guides or maps in a way, so I find them useful to my vision of the world. And it's not to say that a classical play doesn't work in that way, I just don't have an appetite to work on them myself.

When I do work on a classic play, I have to say I'm puzzled a lot of the time. Recently, I did Sarah Ruhl's adaptation of Three Sisters and it was great when Sarah was around. But boy, I would have liked to have Chekhov in the room.

HDF: So you like to be in the room with the playwright and be able to just walk over and ask them questions.

LW: I do. I trained, if that's the correct word for it, at the Royal Court Theater in London. I went to University of Manchester, the north of England, in '71 to '74 and did a degree in drama, although there was no specialization in that. There was a studio where we were allowed to do whatever we wanted with hardly any guidance.

I just directed plays. Then I went to the Royal Court Theater to be an assistant director because they did the plays that I wanted to know. I would look at newspapers and see photographs of shows and read about people like Max Stafford-Clark and Bill Gaskill and my great friend, Caryl Churchill.

I was there in '77, so I was 25. I was an assistant and I ran the theater up-
7:30 pm. Tired, overworked I sat at my desk lamenting the fact that I had given up playwriting for a 9 to 5 job, when beneath a pile of papers I discovered a colorful flier calling for submissions to a ten minute play competition held annually at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. It was an invitation to put aside my work for a moment and re-awaken the dormant creative side of my brain that was slowly succumbing to atrophy. I reread the flier several times, felt an urgent tingling in my fingers, pushed aside my work, opened a blank page on the computer screen and did something I hadn’t done in four years, wrote a play. The next day I sent the play off and didn’t think about it. Months later, quite unexpectedly I found myself at this lively vibrant theatre party, a festival, watching my ten minute play Poof on stage. It was my first professionally produced play and in many ways the moment that codified my commitment to being a theatre artist. I still think of Actors Theatre as a grand welcoming doorway into the theatre community, and feel grateful that they placed my quirky voice on their stage at a time when I was still questioning it.

—LYNN NOTTAGE

stairs and later became an associate. There it was expected that the writer would be in the room. So I was brought up in an atmosphere where they would be there. One of my earliest jobs as an assistant was working with Max Stafford-Clark on the original production of Cary’s Cloud Nine. So I’m used to having the writer in the room.

I recently worked with Sarah Ruhl on The Vrator Play on Broadway and Sarah would be in the room and cut a bit or change a bit. So yeah, I would’ve like Chekhov around too.

HDF: How do you work with playwrights?
LW: Well, it depends who it is because they’re all very different. If I get draft six or seven or eight, I will often ask is it possible to see the very early draft just to see what the original impetus was.

I hope I’m one of those directors who trusts the material. If I didn’t really trust it, I don’t think I’d be directing it. I’m not very good at directing something I really don’t want to do, you know, like when it’s a job. We all need money but if it’s a job job, it doesn’t settle very well with me.

HDF: When you have your choice, like a Sarah Ruhl, Anne Washburn, or Will Eno, what is it that draws you to their work? I get a sense that they’re moving away from just sort of language-based theater — certainly the language is rich — but they’re interested in scenography...in giving us a sense of what the stage looks like too. Is that part of it?

LW: Probably, but I don’t really see it like that. Although it’s pointed out to me a lot of the times that’s what it is, I think it’s the content. What are the questions that play has? Does it engage me? In Will Eno’s play, Middletown, I suppose it was to do with life, death, and everything in between and
the fact that we’re always in the middle of something. Do you know what I mean? So I’m now in the middle of this interview with you and now rather aware that I’m in the middle of some sentence and I don’t quite see the end of it.

With Sarah on Eurydice, that was to do with grieving. In some sense, it was to do with loss and how do you talk to your dead parents. I’m a dad and have daughters. I think I’m like a whole bunch of people out there. I mean I have similar preoccupations and they change according to age or whatever you’re thinking about.

But I also like an aesthetic challenge. Like in Eurydice where there’s an elevator and it rains inside it. I mean not that I designed that; that was Scott Bradley, but I do like all of that. I think Sarah said she wanted to write something so she could keep talking to her father, who she’d lost, but there’s an elevator that rains or Lord of the Underworld or three stones... And sometimes with a play, I can see bits of it in my head when I read it, and those are the ones that I tend to gravitate towards. I think [Eurydice] is remarkably precise and also sort of open, do you know what I mean? So tell me what a room made out of string looks like. Speaking as a director, I can come up with the room or Scott could come up with the room and then the stage management would work out that the string should be like this or not that. But it was very easy to see when I read it. I could visualize it.

HDF: Let’s just go back across the pond to England again. So you make your way to Royal Court. Was it simultaneously that you made your way to Joint Stock and working with them?
LW: Joined the Royal Court to assist Max Stafford-Clark on a play called The Clad Hand by Snoo Wilson. At the time, [Max] was also one of the directors of Joint Stock Theater Group. They were working on Cloud Nine and he asked would I like to work on that. So I was at the Court and sometimes with Joint Stock.

Then I left the Royal Court. If you’re me, you’d claim I was fired by Max, and if you’re Max, you’d claim I walked out. [Laughter] I was young and completely daft and thought I could do whatever I want, and I couldn’t. So I left the Court and directed a play of Caryl’s called Fen. It was critically well-received and invited to a festival in New York [held at] the Public Theater. I think I was 30, so it’s 1982 and I...

HDF: So was that the way you came over?

LW: Yeah. It was invited to this festival at the Public. Frank Rich and the New York Times gave it one of those love letter reviews and that was how it got started here. And then I did more and more here.

HDF: Did you move at that point?

LW: No. I moved sixteen years ago. Then there was a curious period in which I lived in England but didn’t work there. It is very odd if you’re living in your home country but not working in it.

I had done some shows at La Jolla Playhouse, which is attached to UCSD Department of Theater and Dance. Somebody there called and asked if I was interested in heading the MFA Directing Program. I got the job and we moved.

HDF: You’re at UCSD for several years and you worked with some very interesting directors. I see that Steve Cosson is someone that you’ve worked with and now he’s with Civilians. It dawned on me when looking at your career, it’s sort of like Six Degrees of Les Waters. Your connections to the Royal Court, Wallace Shawn, and Caryl Churchill and over here with all the American playwrights and then also with these directors... it’s kind of fascinating.

LW: Well, Steve Cosson and Anne Kauffman were the first two students I accepted to UCSD.

HDF: Wow. That’ll make you feel good!

LW: It does really. There are many students at UCSD that I love and I thought they were terrific. I learned a lot from them. I have ways of rehearsing and there’s a lot of prep that I do. But then when I’m in [rehearsal], I don’t want to know what I’m consciously doing, so I make it mysterious to
A place of alchemy where artistry, commitment and collaboration make magic.

— José Cruz González

myself. That's not really useful if you're teaching and Anne Kauffman, in particular, would really be on me, and quite rightly.

HDF: Because you were just beginning as a teacher. You were just learning...

LW: Yeah, you know, I mean I would be talking about something and she would say, "What does that mean?" So they were great. And Steve Cosson and Chuck Mee were the two people who pointed me in the direction of Sarah Ruhl.

They both said on the same day, "There's a writer and she's in LA now called Sarah Ruhl who's written these plays. You would probably like them." And I have to thank them for that. I was at UCSD for eight years and would freelance. I mean it's how I came here for doing Big Love at the Humana of 2000 but it was first done at UCSD.

HDF: I feel like I've learned a lot more about playwriting just by engaging in the teaching process. Did you feel the same over the course of several years?

LW: Yes.

HDF: And what are those lessons? How do you think you improved?

LW: Well, I think it broadened — I think it gave me more techniques, more ways of doing stuff, you know? It helped me strip things down I think.

HDF: You were teaching at UCSD and then you made your way to Berkeley Rep to become the Associate Artistic Director. Tell us a little bit about that experience and what you did in terms of again bringing in new playwrights into the community.
community at Berkeley.

LW: Well, I entered Berkeley Rep at a particularly interesting time for me and for them. There was this huge commissioning deal going on and a commitment to new plays and new writers, which has continued. I went in with Sarah's Eurydice and a Chuck Mee play called Fêtes de la Nuit. I directed a couple of shows a year and recommended writers and directors.

HDF: You are a champion of playwrights, and wherever you go, you bring them in and you give them a home. How do you feel things are moving for playwrights across the country? Do you feel like the system itself is working to identify as many of the new and up coming playwrights as possible?

LW: Oh gosh, I don't know. I don't think of myself as somebody who supplies the labels to where we are. I'm just in it. Doing it. I think there are great writers around and I'm sure there are many people who are completely frustrated by the system.

HDF: You're here now as the Artistic Director of Actors Theater of Louisville. What can we hope for or expect in the next couple of years?

LW: I'm very interested in modern adaptations, translations, or meditations on classic work. I've done quite a few. And in 2004, I did a site-specific work at the Humana Festival called At the Vanishing Point by Naomi Iizaka, who spent months interviewing people in Butcher Town. It was in a warehouse up there and was about one of my heroes, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, an optician in Lexington [Kentucky] and one of the great photographers of the last century. I'm interested in creating pieces about the local community.

HDF: I'm excited to hear about that. Switching over to the Humana Festival, one of the things that's happened over the last couple years is ensemble companies have come in like SITI with Anne Bogart and also The Civilians. Do you foresee that continuing?

LW: Yeah, I have an interest in it. I think there are some extraordinary groups out there, SITI Company and Elevator Repair Service. I think we need to show a spectrum of things.

HDF: What would you say to American playwrights at this point now that you are in this position as Artistic Director of ATL?

LW: Send us your stuff.