

UPSTAGE

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Interview with Kathleen Turner

“So this is what I tell my actors: ‘Get a faucet now! We can change it and we can re-examine it, but we can’t get past this point unless we make a choice right now’.”

We know you are an extraordinary actress. What made you want to direct and what made you want to specifically direct *Crimes of the Heart*?

This is my 30th year in the business. You obviously acquire a great deal of experience, and I thought that I was getting to the point that I would be ready to direct. Roger Rees, who was the Artistic Director at Williamstown, has been after me for a couple of years. I wasn’t quite ready to spend all the time off stage. He actually suggested *Crimes of the Heart* because he knows that I am particularly interested in relationships between women. I find them less predictable. They’re less pegged. There’s more room for exploration than in a typical male/female relationship. In any case, this seemed really suitable for that because I think the play is lovely.

Tell me a little bit about your connection to the play. Did you immediately have a personal response to the play?

What I saw right away as a challenge was the possibility that this play could be done wrong. It could be maudlin, or sentimental, or self-pitying: all qualities which I despise. So, my first thought was how I would make this into comedy keeping the emotion, the content, but approaching it in a different way. That was a challenge to me which I thought I’d take up.

What were you looking for in your actors?

I was tremendously lucky in this. I was casting it from the road. I was on tour in contact with the casting people and called a few that I’d talked about it to. Then Sarah Paulson got in touch with my agent and said that she would like very much to do it. Then she recommended Lily. So, I had two of the three right there. Basically, I didn’t get a chance to meet many of these people in person, but people’s personal recommendations came up. I’m so thrilled. I think they’re all brilliant. The rest of the casting was sort of done on trust of resume.

How would you describe your process? Did you spend a lot of time of the table?

No, I am a very basic actor and director and I think at first the cast was very shocked by my speed because we had the first read through with everybody invited. We had our first run through on the fourth day. They were like “Wait a minute, wait a minute!” I have a story that I tell my actors. My husband and I were living in a brownstone. I was spending all this time agonizing about which faucets I wanted in the bathroom, and he finally said to me, “For God’s sake, just get some faucets”. He said, “If you don’t like them or if you don’t want to live with them, then change them - but we need something that works now!” So this is what I tell my actors: “Get a faucet now! We can change it and we can re-examine it, but we can’t get past this point unless we make a choice right now.”

Can you talk to me a little bit about what this play means on a personal level to you?

It’s much deeper to me now than it was when I first read it. Similar to that, of course, are the women. I mean to a great extent there’s this unbelievable bond between siblings. My family is quite scattered but there’s never a sense that we’re strangers in any way. Our lives are obviously extremely different; my life is. But there is a bond, there is a responsibility and a caring towards the ones that you’re pretty much you’re born into. This play reinforces it, in a kind of chaotic crisis situation. How the family supports each other is, I think, the heart of this.

What would you like the audience to come away with after seeing this production?

Oh, a pleasant experience. Really, truly. Beth Henley said this yesterday. We were working on the end of Act III a lot. She was crying at the end, and I said, “Oh, what what what?” She said, “It’s so hopeful. I’d forgotten. Over the years I’d just forgotten that was possible. I’m crying because I’ve forgotten that.” So I would think that it’s satisfying, it’s a satisfying experience.

How familiar are you with the South?

I don't know much about the South. Most of my travels were in South America and Europe; my dad was a diplomat. But the only base in the US is Washington, DC. So I didn't know anything about the South, other than that my grandparents lived in southern Missouri. I suppose most of it just comes from the reading more than anything else.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your journey on this piece?

Only that I'm always astounded at the capability of actors to continue the exploration and to make new discoveries. It's the whole thing about coming back. We also found this with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*. Coming back to a piece after you've had a break, you start almost where you ended. Rather than trying to repeat what you did before, you start finding whole new levels and details that only add to it. It's a joy to watch that happen.

What advice would you give to young people who are interested in being actors or directors?

I can't really tell them how to start out because the world has changed a great deal since I did, but what I will say is to always be brave, make choices, take risks. Nobody is really going to be interested in you unless you are willing to risk yourself.



Interview with Lily Rabe, Jennifer Dundas, and Sarah Paulson

Why did you want to do this play? What about this play intrigued you?

Lily Rabe: The first monologue I ever did in my whole life was from this play. I had very little interest in being an actress and when I was a child I was doing a summer program where I was teaching ballet. They did an end of the summer talent show and some kids my age were doing an acting class. They said I should do a monologue. They gave me a bunch to choose from and I picked one from this play. After that, I decided I wanted to go to school for acting and become an actress. I was having lunch with Sarah Paulson and I said, "I hear they're doing *Crimes of the Heart*" and how I always wanted to play Babe all my life. Sarah said she always wanted to play Meg and that's how that happened.

Jennifer Dundas: Well, I feel that on a very basic level I really connect with the character. Also, as an actor, it's really wonderful dialogue, characters, and relationships. This type of a play is just a joy to do because it's so well constructed. Of course, this answer also involves Williamstown because I worked there for a number of summers, and after not being there for a couple of summers, I wanted to go back there.

Sarah Paulson: I actually called Kathleen on the telephone and said how Lily Rabe and I are friends and that we had done a play where we had played sisters before. Lily told me that Kathleen was directing *Crimes of the Heart* at Williamstown Theatre Festival. I called her and told her that Lily Rabe is great and I want to be in it too. I told her I'd play any role and we got the offers to do it. And then, Jennifer Dundas got the offer as well, which was so exciting to work with people who you have had a relationship with before.

Did you know each other before?

Lily: I had met Jennie once when I saw her do a production of *The Cherry Orchard* but we didn't know each other. Sarah and I knew each other and Jennie and Sarah knew each other from *The Cherry Orchard*.

Could you talk a little about the process as it relates to this particular play?

Sarah: Well, it's hard because I've seen it played before in various places and ways. I can imagine that the trap with Meg is to play this tough talking, sassy, hard drinking, smoking, and hard living person. I know that

is what she is but if you only think about playing the results of something, of communicating someone's toughness, the person inside who projects toughness doesn't feel tough; it's quite the opposite of that. I think I'm more interested in trying to play the more anxious and unsure part of Meg so that what you see is a more 3-dimensional person. People get to be the way they are for reasons. She has the best intentions, is pure of heart, and tries but she just gets them wrong. She's been hurt and her defensive mechanism is to protect herself by bouncing stuff off her. Meg got really good at defending herself. Lily's character Babe says that I force myself to look at pictures of these disgusting things to force myself to toughen up. I am the one who found my mother hanging in the basement. There is a myriad of reactions that could happen but I think the more interesting one is that Beth has written a person that literally made herself get tough. I'm sure her breakdown is a direct consequence of what happened.

Jennifer: I feel like Kathleen is a very open director because she lets us and expects us to come up with our own stuff; she doesn't do any hand-holding. In that way, it has been a very productive process for me. But on the same token, it's challenging because sometimes as an actor you want your hand held. In the end it worked really well for us because ultimately we are strong actors and when left to our own devices. I think we've all come up with stuff that really works. Then, Kathleen does the shaping of it and sets the limits and says, "Well, that didn't work." Each of our roles were well suited to us so we can each have a lot of access to the emotion and the experiences that each of the actors are experiencing.

Lily: Babe is quite different from me. I always find that it's interesting that when I start something and think, "This person is so incredibly different." Then, through doing it, I always find myself feeling quite similar to the person at the end of the day. I'd say that Babe is quite dissimilar in a lot of ways but I feel incredibly connected and incredibly like her the more we did it.

Jennifer: That's true: if you were to look at me and then look at Lenny, we aren't really alike on the outside but the interior story and the emotional threads are things that I understand. But of course, that's why it's a great character because that's true for the audience as well and they see it and empathize with it. I think that's true for all the characters. Even though the embodiment of the character is pretty extreme a lot of people who are

going to see the play, on the inside, will see that she has so much in common with so many people.

Lily: Beth has created these three people who, at the end of the day, are very human and very real and even extreme in some ways. What's so wonderful about the play and the characters are these extraordinary circumstances and extraordinary things going on but the through-line is very basic and human and simple. Anyone can relate to that.

What about the concept of playing a sister? Is that something that came easily?

Lily: We lived together, the three of us, in a house in Williamstown. Jennie and I didn't know each but it came pretty quickly because we were really together 24 hours a day. So, even before our first rehearsal we had already been sharing a house together. It was an amazing way to do that: to all of a sudden be living with your sisters and getting thrown into that so quickly.

Jennifer: I agree. It's very conducive to quick bonding. That part of it really did help.

Sarah: The actors playing Doc and Barnett would come over to our house and we'd make dinner, talk about the play and run lines. Being at Williamstown first was integral in allowing us to create personal relationships with each other that were based on reality that then could then inform the work in a positive way.

I love the idea that Meg is the one that got away, especially as the middle child. How does this affect the dynamic?

Sarah: I think it's a very important piece of her because the other two stayed home. I went to visit a friend recently in a very small town in Tennessee and it occurred to me that if someone like Meg, who did what she wanted when she wanted and didn't think about the consequences, had been in this town I had been in, everyone would have been talking about her. It wasn't until I was actually in the town I thought, "God, she would have been such a pariah here. She would have had to get out of here." It's an intense thing to be the only sibling who chooses not to stay home. I shook all responsibilities. I don't have to take care of anyone or anything and all I have to do is take care of myself. Which is about all I'm capable of doing, and clearly I can't do that very well either.

How did you find your Southern woman?

Sarah: My mother was born in Alabama and her mother was born in Alabama and my father was born in North Carolina. It's not Mississippi but it's that whole world. For me, it was kind of allowing myself to remember

those sounds. It's a different accent, topography, everything.

Is there a moment in the play that you know is a challenge every night for you?

Sarah: Yes. Always the scene when Meg comes back in after the night with Doc. You spend two acts playing a specific kind of woman and then you come back in and you have been completely liberated. You have found yourself capable of loving someone which you have not been capable of doing. I finally realize that he doesn't want me in that way and he forgives me. We had a beautiful night together and it's not going to go any further, but it doesn't matter. The fact that he's forgiven me helps me forgive myself. It's a beautiful thing and very exposing as an actor to come onstage when everyone else is quiet and you know you have a chunk of dialogue to say. I'm starting be less scared of it now because we're finding new things. I know I can survive it, much like how Meg feels.

Lily: There is safety. For instance, Lenny and Babe are very extreme. On the one hand, they are creations, they are beings that on the surface are very other and there is safety in that. You're not on the brink, you're just there, you're Babe and you're Lenny and you're sort of on that track. It changes every night, too.

Jennifer: The parts where I feel dread are the parts where I feel uncomfortable. One would hope they wouldn't have those feelings in a performance, that those would be worked out. We call certain moments that we feel don't work on stage 'eggy' because you feel like you have egg on your face. Working out those uncomfortable moments is our job.

Lily: And that's the wonderful thing about doing this play. It has stood the test of time and is so well constructed that if something isn't feeling right or something is 'eggy' it's probably your fault because it's there. The play doesn't have any holes in it.

Jennifer: I find that also as an actor I had more 'eggy' moments like that in performance when I was younger. As I've gotten older I've learned how to say in rehearsal "I'm not comfortable there, I got to work this out," or to just take the time internally to figure out how to smooth it out and connect the dots between moments.

We have a lot of students who will ask what advice you would give somebody who wanted to be an actor. If somebody said to you, I want to be an actor, I want to work like you, what would you say to them?

Lily: For me, I think education. I don't want this to come across the wrong way because there are millions of incredibly talented actors who didn't go to school. It was a privileged thing to be able to have that time in my life when you can really study something and do a bunch of productions. I was not only around other people who wanted to act but I was around people who wanted to study everything. I got to study all sorts of things. It's a very sacred time and if you can have it, have it.

Jennifer: I would say, first of all, not to look at any particular path and think that it's going to work for you. Every actor I know became successful in a very different way. I think education is really important. Seek out community. Be active and if you're not going to college to study, go to acting class and make your own plays. It's partly about practice but it's also about building community. In the long run, if you're feeling shut out from the cliques, you can create your own opportunities. I have a lot of friends who have done that to great success and I would say it is very important to be patient and open to whatever your path turns out to be. It is also important to be impatient in order to really make yourself be out there and be active. You have nothing to lose by being out there and meeting as many people as you can. In any business, that's what a lot of success is about: introducing yourself to people constantly and getting exposure. You never know where relationships will lead. More than half of business is networking. That's a reality of business.

Sarah: I always give the advice that you really better love it and not the idea of fame or fortune or recognition. I think we all have those dreams and then sometimes those dreams shift into something more real and far better. You have to love it because it's really hard. Not only is the process of doing it when you get the job but also not getting the job or trying to get the job. If the goal for you is to be recognized and to be special and famous: it's got to be a little bit more than that or you'll never be satisfied.

After they're eating the birthday cake as the last image starts to fade, what do you think happens next?

Jennifer: I have high hopes for her with Charlie, and I think she's going to tell them about him and preparing for the visit. I have high hopes for her.

Sarah: I think she goes back to California, I don't think she stays here. Maybe she comes home a lot more frequently. I think through this experience it's the beginning of exorcising some of these ghosts that this town has for her. I don't think life has all been fixed for her; she's still who she is even when big things happen that change her. I think she has a newfound hopefulness. I imagine she gives up the singing dream and sings now for herself. It's not about trying to please old granddaddy or trying to become a famous person. It's about finding a way to live my life in a way that is artistic, however I want to do it. I probably go home and get a job at a restaurant somewhere waiting tables - but happily - until I figure out what I want to do.

Lily: I think it's very important to be able to feel in that last moment that it's not neatly tied up. I think that's one of the great things about this play and yet all the seeds are planted firmly in different possibilities. For Babe, I think there is a lot of hope in that last moment. Things are not clear; I don't think things with her and Barnett work out but I think that she saw that it's possible to be in a relationship with someone who makes her feel good. That is so priceless for Babe and since her growth has been stunted, I think it's not about whether things work out quickly or not, but the possibility of happiness for all of them.

About the Playwright: Beth Henley

"The past never leaves but lies viruslike in the blood waiting to erupt: inevitably, unexpectedly¹." This quote from playwright Beth Henley describes how she approaches many topics explored in her plays. In her writing, Henley often draws on themes and events from her past². From there she creates complete environments, situations, and characters. Born on May 8, 1952 in Jackson, MS, Beth Henley was the daughter of a lawyer and an actress. Growing up in Mississippi, her southern roots were incorporated into many of her plays, including *Crimes of the Heart*. After graduating from Southern Methodist University, her career as a playwright began to take off.

She won the Great American Play Contest in 1979 for *Crimes of the Heart*, her first full-length play. It was not long before it was a success on Broadway. In 1981, the play won her the Pulitzer Prize for Drama³. With only a few female Pulitzer Prize winners before her, this etched a permanent place for Henley in the history of playwriting. Henley went on to receive a Tony Award that same year, and an Academy Award Nomination in 1986 for her *Crimes of the Heart* screenplay adaptation. Some of her other plays include *Am I Blue*, *The Wake of Jamey Foster*, and *Signature*. Today Beth Henley lives in Los Angeles and continues to write plays⁴.

Among her friends and colleagues in the theatre world she is known as dedicated, courageous, slightly sinister, and meticulous with her work⁵.

"The past never leaves but lies virus like in the blood waiting to erupt..."



¹ *Beth Henley: Collected Plays Volume I 1980-1989*. Contemporary Playwrights Series; Smith and Kraus, New Hampshire, 2000, page vii.

² *Beth Henley: Collected Plays Volume I 1980-1989*. Contemporary Playwrights Series; Smith and Kraus, New Hampshire, 2000, page vi.

³ Gale, Thomas. *Contemporary Authors Online*. Literature Resource Center, 2005.

⁴ Gale, Thomas. *Contemporary Authors Online*. Literature Resource Center, 2005.

⁵ *Beth Henley: Collected Plays Volume I 1980-1989*. Contemporary Playwrights Series; Smith and Kraus, New Hampshire, 2000, page ix.

Theatrical Devices

Realism is a movement in art which focused on portraying characters, situations, and events in a lifelike manner. Theatrical Realism depicted life on stage just as it would be offstage.

Southern Gothic is a literary genre only found in American literature. It often includes grotesque situations, characters, and themes such as racism and oppression to depict elements of culture unique to the American South.

Vocabulary

Absurdism – a movement in theatre exploring the philosophy that life is inherently meaningless and rejected the idea of realistic characters and situations.

Black comedy -- comedy that incorporates tragic and dark situations

Dramedy – a genre that fuses elements of comedy and drama

Eccentric – peculiar, strange, out of the ordinary

Estrangement – the experience of being alienated or kept at a distance

Gothic – a literary style that includes a gloomy setting, and grotesque, puzzling, or violent events

Oppression -- the exercise of authority or power in a cruel and unjust way.

Patriarchy -- a group (community, family, etc.) in which the father is the main authority

Tragic comedy -- a genre that blends a tragic plot with humor

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