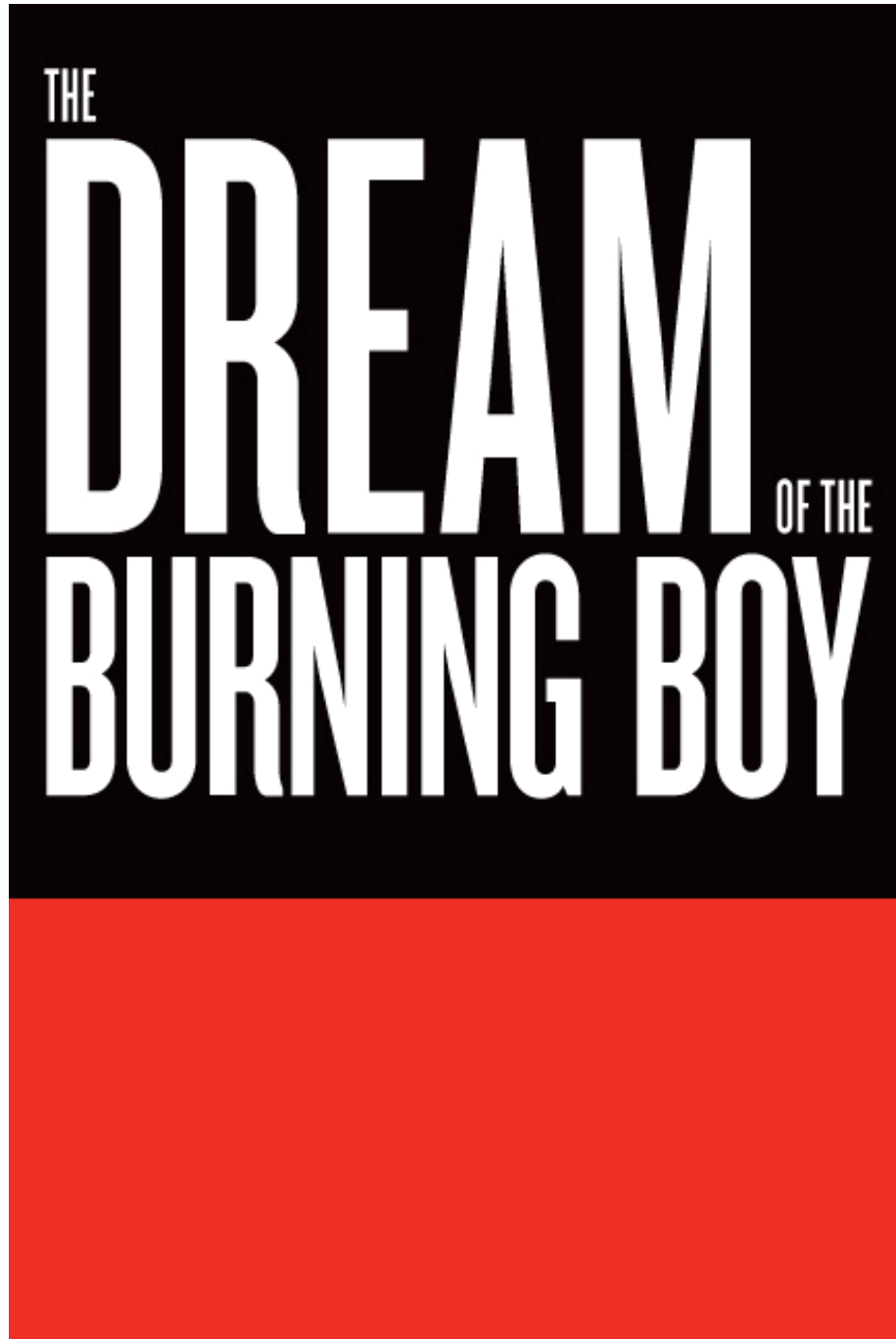


UPSTAGE



Interview with the Playwright: **David West Read**

Playwright David West Read completed an interview for UPSTAGE to share his thoughts on the playwriting process and the inspiration for The Dream of the Burning Boy.

UPSTAGE: Will you give us some background information on yourself. Where are you from? Where were you educated? When did you decide to become a playwright and why?

DAVID WEST READ: I grew up in Toronto, Canada, and received my undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto—a double major in English Literature and Semiotics/Communication Theory. I had no intention of studying drama, but became involved in theatre as an extracurricular activity. I wrote, directed and performed in a college sketch show called *The Bob*—Canada’s longest-running comedy revue (over 130 years old). We had a sizeable budget, which I took full advantage of by renting full-sized penis and vagina costumes for a musical number that closed our show. Suffice it to say, it was very high-brow. I then started writing my own one-act plays and was able to get a few of them performed through a college theatre festival. It was at this point that I realized I might want to pursue dramatic writing on a higher level, and I applied to NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts.

I didn’t get in. To make matters worse, my rejection letter was lost in the mail, and I didn’t find out until very late. At this point, I turned to my backup plan: I cried. Not really, because I’m too much

of a man, but I was pretty devastated. That eventually passed, and I turned to my backup backup plan, which was to focus on my writing, develop a portfolio, and try again. In the meantime, I staged a couple of short plays at fringe theatre festivals in Toronto, and fell into acting. I won a Best Actor prize for a role I played in a 48-hour film challenge, and the prize was acting lessons. I took the acting lessons, and my teacher recommended me to several agents. I signed with one of the agents and booked my first job—a commercial in which I played a white rapper. I also scored a commercial for a major phone company in Canada, which ended up paying my rent for a year, and a juicy role as the guy who got killed at the beginning of a TV movie.

But eventually, I came to terms with the fact that my passion was still in writing, so I took a television writing course at a local university and re-applied to the Masters of Fine Arts program at the Tisch School with a TV spec script. This time, I was accepted.

At Tisch, graduate students are expected to train across all mediums—film, TV and playwriting. When I first entered the program, theatre was the medium that least appealed to me. But then I started seeing plays in New York, and I took my first playwriting class with a fantastic teacher who convinced me

that playwriting was awesome and that I should give it a try. It was in that class that I wrote my first full-length play, *The Dream of the Burning Boy*.

Over the course of the two-year program, I switched streams from TV to playwriting and became more and more involved in theatre. I love the freedom and the immediacy of theatre. TV and particularly film work can take years and years to develop, but if you write a play, you can gather a few friends and get it up on its feet immediately. In the summer between my first and second year, I volunteered as an assistant to my teacher as he developed his play at Playwrights Horizons, and by observing his work from page to stage, I learned a great deal about the process. In the fall, I had my first reading at the Roundabout, and was told they would like to produce *The Dream of the Burning Boy* in their Underground space.

I'm currently a Playwriting Fellow at The Juilliard School, where I have a fantastic support system of other young writers and actors.

UPSTAGE: What inspired you to write this play? What do you feel the play is about? Does the play have personal resonance for you and if so, how?

DAVID WEST READ: I prefer not to discuss the specific autobiographical

inspiration for my work, because I think it can be reductive, but I do think it's very important for a play to have personal resonance for the writer. This particular play was written in my first playwriting class after the instructor had us each write out a list of the twenty

events which had most shaped our lives, and then whittle that list down to the single most defining moment. We were then asked to write a scene about that moment. To me, the process of turning that moment into a play involved disguising it, revising it, reshaping and transforming it until it became something bigger, which other people might actually find interesting and relatable, without losing that personal resonance.

I think this play is about what happens when you lose someone in your life very suddenly—the process of grieving and what that means for different people. I'm trying to explore the ways in which we negotiate and renegotiate our relationships to the people around us, especially in those formative high school years, when everyone is so fragile and raw. I think it's also a play about regret, and missed opportunities, and finding a way to move forward with your life while accepting that you can't change the past.

UPSTAGE: How did you research the world of the play? What kind of research did you have to do in order to write it?

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DAVID WEST READ: This was not a research-intensive play, in the sense that I didn't have to go spy around a high school to find out what they're like, but in terms of making the play "accurate" or "realistic," I really tried to capture the way that young people talk. The play features characters at very different stages in their lives, with different sets of vocabulary and different ways of expressing themselves, and it was really important to me that the teenagers would sound like teenagers. Ideally, all of the characters have a slightly different way of talking, and none of those characters talks exactly the way that I do. I think the best way to research for this kind of naturalistic writing is just to listen to people talking—on the subway, in crowded places, etc.—and try to pick up on patterns. That's research, in a way.

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UPSTAGE: What was the most challenging part of writing your play? What part was the most fun??

DAVID WEST READ: All young playwrights will be told, over and over again, that you have to learn to "kill your darlings"—those little pieces of writing that you particularly love, but which are not necessarily essential to the telling of the story. I had to kill a lot of darlings in the development of this play, but figuring out which darlings to kill was often very difficult. Over the past two years, I've received constant feedback from directors, actors, teachers, dramaturgs, agents, producers and audiences, and the biggest challenge has been finding the balance between addressing their questions and suggestions and maintaining my original artistic vision. This play has been drastically rewritten since its first incarnation, but I think

there's a danger in over-writing a play, trying to answer every single question and smoothing out all the rough edges. At a certain point, I had to go back and re-read my very first draft, because the play had changed so much that I needed to check in with myself, and make sure that I was staying true to what I wanted the play to be in the first place.

The most fun part of the process was writing the character of Steve. It's so important to have a character who offers some comic relief in a heavy play like this, and I really do love the idea of a well-intentioned if slightly awkward guidance counselor who becomes the unexpected hero. The challenge was finding the right tone for Steve—not letting him become too goofy or exaggerated, because he, like everyone else in the school, needs to be grounded by the gravity of the situation.

UPSTAGE: Can you describe what you look for in a director? In casting actors?

DAVID WEST READ: In looking for a director, I like someone who's got a good sense of humor, and knows how to leave the drama onstage. I've been really fortunate to work with Evan Cabnet on this play, and despite the fact that it's a serious subject matter (or perhaps because it is), we both like to laugh a lot during rehearsals, and do whatever we can to make the actors relaxed and comfortable. Evan is also universally loved by actors because he's approachable and kind, and because he knows how to give notes. Sometimes, if I see something I don't like, I want to jump in and fix it right away, but Evan is respectful of the actor's process, and he knows how to give them space to

experiment, and when to step in and steer them in a different direction.

In casting actors, I look for people who are intelligent, enthusiastic, and polite, and I like actors who ask good questions, as opposed to questions for the sake of asking questions. I think it's always better to get a smart actor who understands their character from the inside out, instead of the actor who just *is* that character and therefore must be perfect.

UPSTAGE: Who are your favorite playwrights? Do you find reading or seeing other plays helpful? How do you feed yourself as a writer?

DAVID WEST READ: Some of my favorite playwrights include Annie Baker, Kenneth Lonergan and Martin McDonagh. I have a huge library of plays in my apartment, and I find both reading and seeing plays to be incredibly helpful. I try to see as many plays as I can, of all different styles, and I find that some of my best ideas come to me as I'm sitting in a theatre. I think it's very difficult to write "cold"—to just wake up in the morning and sit down at your computer and write—and I usually start by reading, which can kickstart the creative juices, and wake up those voices in your head.

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UPSTAGE: What advice would you give to a young person who wants to write for the theatre?

DAVID WEST READ: I think the most essential thing you can do, as a young playwright, is to write about what's important to you. A lot of young writers want to imitate the playwrights and plays they most admire, or they try to anticipate what they think an agent, or theatre, or audience is going to respond to. But what's most interesting is always what's truthful and real—which is not to suggest that playwrights need to write

strictly from their own experience. If you can write from your own *emotional* experience, and find something in your life that helps you understand what your character's going through—whether it's an eighty-year-old man, or a teenage girl, or a monkey, or whatever—then you can write about anything.

UPSTAGE: What are you working on now?

DAVID WEST READ: I just finished a new play about a pop star who takes refuge with her family in northern Canada after getting released from a rehab clinic, and finds that her sister is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia.

Interview with the Director: **EVAN CABNET**

Director Evan Cabnet completed an interview for UPSTAGE to talk about the process of directing The Dream of the Burning Boy.

UPSTAGE: Why did you want to direct *The Dream of the Burning Boy*?

EVAN CABNET: The first time I read *The Dream of the Burning Boy*, I was immediately struck by David's ear for realism, and his incredible ability to find beauty and honesty in the face of tragedy. Without divulging too much about the plot, I love David's perspective on grief and the healing process after a sudden and shocking loss. He's captured the confusion and ache and heart and humor of a truly gut-wrenching moment in the characters' lives, and does so with enormous compassion for what these people are wrestling with. I was so moved when I read the play, I knew I wanted to be a part of the production.

UPSTAGE: How did you and David come to collaborate on this play?

EVAN CABNET: Robyn Goodman and Jill Rafson sent the play to me. After spending some time reading and rereading the script, I met with David to discuss, and we immediately hit it off. He and I have very similar sensibilities, so it became clear very quickly that he and I would make a good team. We've been collaborating on the play ever since, and I'm one of his biggest fans.

UPSTAGE: What do you think the play is about?

EVAN CABNET: In simplest terms, it's a play about the grieving process, and about how people choose to recognize and cope with-- or not to cope, as the case may be-- a great loss. It's about how we choose to engage, or not to engage, with loved ones, and how we wrestle with regret when the choices we've made-- great and small, wise and misguided-- become irrevocable. It's about the emotional complexities of grief, and how anger, fear, humor, compassion, desire, and hope all play equal parts in the healing process.

UPSTAGE: How did you research the world of the play? What kind of research did you have to do in order to direct it?

EVAN CABNET: Research can take on many forms throughout the process, and for *The Dream of the Burning Boy*, we focused on creating as real a world as possible for the characters to live within. Along with Lee Savage, our set designer, he and I researched dozens of classrooms, teachers' offices, public schools... anything that could give us a sense of what this world would look like. David hasn't specified where the play takes place, which offers us the challenge of creating an environment that is both incredibly detailed and specific, but doesn't dictate location. What we found through our work, though, is that American public schools all over the country share a huge amount of architectural and design

similarities. It's through this research that we're able to create a space that serves both David's idea of where the play should unfold, and also create a detail-oriented space that, we hope, evokes an instant identification from the audience.

Similarly, our costume designer, Jessica Shay, and I spent hours pouring over photographs of contemporary high school students. What a teenager chooses to wear-- and as important, *how* they choose to wear it-- speaks volumes about their character, and so much about a character is often conveyed with the tiniest detail. In order to honor the realism of David's script, we've been exhaustive in researching, and then in creating, the costumes for each role.

UPSTAGE: What did you look for in casting the actors? What traits did you need?

EVAN CABNET: We were looking for actors who appeared to be an effortless fit with the role. David has created such real people; we were seeking actors who seemed to inhabit the roles simply and beautifully. Not to say that they need to be "like" the role in any way, but that they needed to have a feel and an instinct for the character that goes beyond intellectual discussion. We can talk about a character endlessly, but in the end, we wanted actors who understood these people on a gut level. And, luckily, that's exactly what we found.

UPSTAGE: How will the play manifest itself visually? How are you collaborating with your design team?

EVAN CABNET: Besides the research described above, our main focus in creating the visual world is upholding the realism. There are certain elements of a classroom that are undeniably "high school." Florescent lighting with acoustical tile ceilings, cinderblock walls with linoleum flooring. That tannish or blueish paint color you see on every wall in every public school in America. These are the elements that will let an audience know immediately where they are, and in what world these characters exist. David has been exhaustive in capturing honest emotion in difficult circumstances. Sometimes they're beautiful, and other times they're ugly, but David gives every perspective his undivided attention, so we must create an environment that honors that. The visual elements may not always be clean, but they'll always be true.

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UPSTAGE: What inspires you as a director? Do you see other directors' work? Go to movies? Museums? Travel?

EVAN CABNET: People-watching inspires me. Film, television, theater, dance, art... they're all useful inspirations, of course, but no more or less than paying attention to the people across from you on the subway, or the couple next to you in a restaurant. As a director, you're only as good as your sense of observation, so the more you pay attention to the world around you, the more you're (theoretically, at least) sharpening your skill. We're in the business of creating real moments within the given circumstances a writer has provided, so the more you absorb from the world, the more tools you'll have at your disposal in the rehearsal room.

UPSTAGE: We have a lot of young people participating in our education programs who want to direct. What would you say to a high school or middle school student who had those aspirations?

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EVAN CABNET: I'd recommend accumulating as much life experience as possible. Travel, study subjects that have nothing to do with theater, devote time and attention to another art form, take up a sport, watch good movies, watch terrible movies, become a

sponge. You're only as good as the experiences you bring to the process, and if you've only devoted your time to theater, then you're limiting yourself.

When I was in high school, I took a class with then-Chicago based director David Cromer. He told us once, "You are artists. Always create, and it will sustain you." I found that very helpful. Not because I thought of myself as some sort of artist, but because it reminded me to stay busy, to keep working, to keep looking for inspiration. I still carry that advice around with me.