

UPSTAGE

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Interview with the Director: Mark Brokaw

"In our story, everyone is a little bit right *and* a little bit wrong."

Why did you want to direct *Distracted*?

I think the play has something very important to say about how inundated we are with information, and how hard it can be sometimes to sort through the clutter and just stay present and listen to the person in front of us. I also think the play is structured in a very unusual way – it moves the way a mind dealing with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) would move, bouncing without order from point to point like a pinball in a pinball machine. I also admire that the writer has been fair to all the differing points of view concerning this maddening condition (even to those who would say that it is not a condition at all – just kids being kids). The performance of the play also demands constant transformation – of the actors, of the performing space and of your point of view as you watch the story unfold. It has great ambition, and demands that you listen and leave your preconceived notions at the door to the theatre. In our story, everyone is a little bit right *and* a little bit wrong. And the author tells the tale with a comic point of view towards a very serious topic.

What do you feel the play is about?

Everyone in the world of our story struggles to get their hands around ADHD – a challenging condition that has numerous symptoms but no real objective test to determine its diagnosis and no real lifetime "cure." The doctors struggle with how to treat the children who have symptoms as defined by the American Medical Association and fight amongst themselves over what is the proper way to treat the condition; the parents struggle to help alleviate the sometimes tragic challenges their children face; the children struggle to understand why the world doesn't seem to work for them the way it does for others and why their parents and siblings might be having a hard time at home. And as I mentioned earlier, the story moves the way a mind dealing with ADHD might move – randomly veering from point to point as it is bombarded with all manner of "distractions" – both technological (internet, television, cell phones, radio, voicemail, etc.) and human.

How did you research the world of the play and what kind of research did you do?

The more and more I delved into the world of the play and all of the research material available out there on this subject,

the more and more I began to feel the way the Mama does as she moves through the story. The more you learn, the more you feel you don't know. For every "sure" opinion stated in print, you can find five "sure" opinions that refute that opinion. I have never investigated a subject that seems to engender such rabid disagreement – not only involving its treatment, but even over the very issue of whether it actually even exists as a condition.

I began my exploration by going to the bookstore and checking out the books available on the subject – and I was blown away by the sheer volume of material that is out there. After a while I felt as if I was being whirred around inside a never-ending vortex, always on the verge of being sucked beneath its surface – and in that way I began to experience the play the way that Mama does. She journeys from one end of the spectrum to the other as she fights to find a solution to the challenges facing her child.

How do you perceive the character of Mama?

Mama is our "everywoman" – the central voice we follow as we are propelled forward through our story. She is a smart woman with a healthy ironic edge who (like everyone else in the story) is only trying to do the right thing. We experience the story as she experiences the story; the central relationship is between Mama and the audience.



Roundabout Theatre Company's *DISTRACTED*
Pictured (l-r): Cynthia Nixon, Matthew Gumley
Photo credit: Joan Marcus, 2009

Can you describe your process in collaborating with the design team?

Get the smartest group you can in a room together, and don't censor yourself. Tell everything you feel about the play and share all of the research. You look at everything. Pictures and paintings are most evocative for me. The work of the artist Paul Klee was very influential to our process. You also listen to music. Go to museums. Everything is fair game. I go into the process with a strong hunch about what I think the active point of view towards the material should be – but that point of view is further fleshed out and further articulated in the work you all do together. I like to work with collaborators who have an interest in all aspects of the storytelling – not just their department. Because at the beginning, that's really what we're doing – talking about how to visually, in three dimensions, create a world where when the characters enter, the story must be told. It is inevitable. And that requires trial and error, a lot of "what ifs" that you test out, hang onto part of, and then throw the rest away until you reach what seems right. It's an exciting process that requires great openness and a love of collaboration.

What qualities were you looking for in the actors when casting the play?

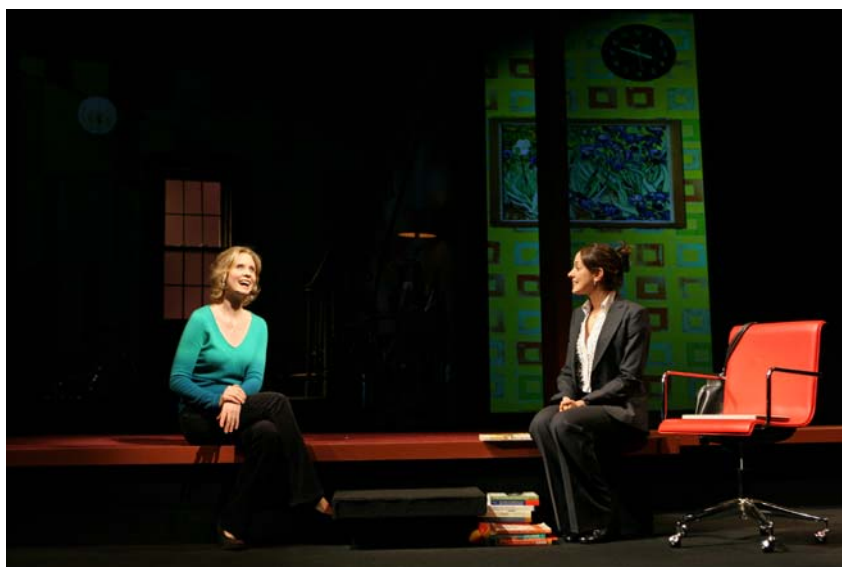
I was looking for actors who were transformational (able to make use of many different parts of themselves), who understood the comic nature of this very serious story, and who had the humanity to understand that there is no right or wrong answer to the central struggle presented in the play – that they are all right, and they are all wrong. It's a story that is not about the "black and white" of objective truths, but all about the grey of subjective beliefs. It is a story that is all about the grey, and how hard it is to live in that place. The actors all needed to be able to empathize with that point of view and embody the compassion at the heart of these struggling families.

What advice would you give to a young person who wants to direct for the theatre?

There is no one way to go about being a director. There are as many ways as there are directors. The important thing is to know what kind of work you are drawn to, and then go out and find where that work is happening. For some, school is the route. As an undergraduate I studied short story writing, then I studied drama in graduate school. For others formal training is not the way. Some move from acting to directing. The right way is the way you do it. And that's the thing. You have to do it. Find or create a situation where you get to direct – get friends together to direct scenes, join a theatre group where you will have the opportunities to direct, or create your own group. I believe that you can be taught technique, but then ultimately you have to put that technique to the test. And you do that by directing. It's a very pro-active field. It won't come to you, you have to go out and put yourself in enough situations so that you ultimately make your own luck and land or create the jobs that give you the opportunity to test your skills and grow.

What do you make of the ending of the play? Do you think Mama makes the right choice?

I don't think it has anything to do with right and wrong. Mama has been making choices all along, and at the end of the story she simply makes a different one. Using the technological vocabulary of the story, Mama stops and "reboots" just as you would a computer. She stops for a moment to be present with her child as she considers the next step – I don't view it as an ending, but the start of a possible new beginning. We don't know where this family will end up, but we have very good reason to hope that they will find their way forward.



Roundabout Theatre Company's *DISTRACTED*. Pictured (l-r): Cynthia Nixon, Natalie Gold, Photo credit: Joan Marcus, 2009

Interview with the Actor: Cynthia Nixon



Why did you want to play the role of Mamma in *Distracted*?

I think all actors look for a wonderful new play to do and I think this is a wonderful new play. I have seen two of Lisa Loomer's previous plays and I really enjoyed them a lot. This play is dealing with an issue I haven't seen dealt with before on stage. I think it deals with a very painful issue; but it's also wildly funny. So, all of those qualities were very appealing.

Can you talk to me a little bit about how you will prepare for this role? Do you have to do a lot of research about ADHD?

I anecdotally talk to people. People ask "what you're doing?" and I tell them and they all seem to have a kid or a niece or a godchild who has ADHD. But no, I didn't feel the need to really do research before hand. For one thing, it's laid out so beautifully in the play. And we have a large research component to our rehearsals. We've got a lot of books, movies to watch, and a pediatric neuro-psychologist came to speak to us today. Also, I'm not playing a doctor. I'm not playing an expert. I'm playing a woman who is going through this for the first time and is learning all this as she goes.

Have there been any questions you've had the opportunity to ask the playwright, Lisa Loomer, about the role so far?

Well, we're very early on in rehearsal and we're mainly asking small and specific questions. One thing we're asking her right now is about a time line. She wrote out a big multi-page timeline to talk about what months and what days these events happen, even events that we talked about that happen before the play starts. It's enormously helpful to be able to look at the calendar and see how much time there is between events.

Does the character of Mamma have any personal resonance for you? When you read the play, did you think, "Oh, I'm a little like this?" Or is she completely different from Cynthia Nixon?

I think she's similar to me and similar to a lot of people nowadays in that one of the themes of the play is distraction and multi-tasking. Are you really focused and can you really turn your phone off? I'm very much a Blackberry person. So I am very aware of daily struggles with how connected is too connected to your machinery as opposed to the person in front of you.

And you have children yourself, yes?

I have two, yes.

Do you have a sense yet why Mamma makes the choice she does at the end of the play or is that something you're still discovering?

I think the play is about a family with a child who may or may not have ADD and what to do about that. But it's also a parable about our modern world, how over-stimulated and distracted we all are every day and how it's robbing us of our ability to be present. When Mamma makes her decision at the end of the play, I don't think she only makes it for her son. I think she makes it for herself. It takes a lot of strength and will-power to be present and it's hard to know what other decision she could make. So yes, I absolutely understand why she makes it.

You've worked in different mediums. Do you find you approach roles differently for television, movies and stage?

Yes, absolutely. One of the things I find very luxurious about doing a play is that you have a whole cast of people and a director doing your preparation with you. Where as, in film

and television, you often get no rehearsal or very little rehearsal, so you really have to do that on your own.

What do you look for in a director?

That is my favorite relationship. I love the other actors and I love the playwright and I love the designers and all that stuff, but my favorite relationship is the director-actor relationship. I look at that person with a definite point of view because I feel like I want to understand as much as I can from him or her about what he or she wants. I'm the type of person who asks a million questions because I really want us both to be on the same page. You know there are actors you run across who don't like to be directed a lot and who like to follow their instincts and not have somebody getting in their way. I'm really the opposite. Any information you have for me, I want it.

Tell me a little bit about inspiration. Do you like watching other actors act in plays that you're not in or do you like going to movies or reading books?

I go to plays a lot. I don't read that many books and I go to the movies sometimes, but I go to plays a lot. I do find it very inspiring to watch other actors. Sometimes when you see an actor who's so remarkable, it can be very intimidating and you can learn absolutely nothing from it. Because when you have someone who's performing at such a high level, it's magic. You can't see how they're doing what they're doing. It's actually much more instructive to see a performance that you don't think is very successful, because you can see the machinations of it. You can say, "Oh, yeah, this is what they did wrong here. And that's what they did wrong there." You know what I mean? You can see the skeleton. Whereas, when you're seeing a truly great performance, it's just seamless.

Are there roles that you say to yourself, "That's a role someday I'd like to play?"

Yes, I certainly have a bunch of those...

Any you'd want to share?

I feel like I'm on the outer edge of being able to play a lot of Shakespearean heroines. I could just barely squeak by a Rosalind, I think, depending on the age of the other characters. I certainly would like to try that, or a Viola. I'm a big Mary-Louise Parker fan and I'm very excited to see her as Hedda Gabler. That's certainly one I'd be interested in trying, too. I've done Ibsen twice and I love it.

What kind of advice would you give to a young person who wants to be an actor?

I would say the most important thing about being an actor is to act. And it's hard because if you're a writer, you can write all you want. All you need is paper and a pencil. But as an actor, you need other people and you need a production. So I would just say, go and be in as many productions as you can – wherever they are. Whether they're in your school or your church, or your synagogue, or your summer camp. Wherever it is – go and do it. Wonderful teachers are invaluable, but there's no substitute for doing the real thing at whatever level you're doing it.



Roundabout Theatre Company's *DISTRACTED*
Pictured (l-r): Cynthia Nixon, Josh Stamberg
Photo credit: Joan Marcus, 2009

Interview with the Playwright: Lisa Loomer



What inspired you to write *Distracted*?

Thinking back, a number of things probably inspired or compelled me to write this play. For one, I was hearing about ADD more and more, and reading about the increasing use of medication for kids. I found the numbers staggering. I began to wonder, for instance, well, why does the United States consume eighty-five percent of the world's Ritalin? What does it say about us as a society? On the personal front, as the mother of a young child, I saw many kids labeled "ADD." And I had close adult friends with ADD as well. I became interested in the question, "What is ADD in an ADD world?" I mean, when was the last time you finished a phone conversation without being interrupted by Call Waiting? How long can you go without checking your E Mail? Still, ADD is a real psychiatric diagnosis. But I wanted to explore the question of whether it is a "difference" or a "dysfunction?" And I wanted to know who gets to decide.

What do you feel the play is about? Does the play have personal resonance for you and if so, how?

The play is about a mother's quest to find out what's wrong with her son, and what to do about it. She is bombarded with information and conflicting opinions from doctors, neighbors, even her own husband. And, on top of this, she has all the distractions of modern life. The question is, can she let go of the distractions, the opinions of others, and focus on what is really important this person (as opposed to this problem) this child? So, yes, the play is about a child

with ADD. But it's also about how we live our lives in these times.

All my plays have personal resonance for me. If not, why would I write them? In this question, which I am asked often, I sense a desire to locate the author in a particular story or character. But the truth is, I am many, if not all, of my characters. They are all arguing in my head, after all. And most of them are right.

How did you research the world of the play and what kind of research did you do?

I read lots and lots of books on ADD, with lots of conflicting opinions. I did some scientific research on the genes that cause ADD. I read about both medical and alternative approaches. I visited classrooms and clinics. I talked to experts, including Dr. Lawrence Diller who read drafts and advised me. I also talked to parents, teachers, homeopaths, and both children and adults with ADD.

Did the play evolve much in rehearsals for the Los Angeles premiere? Will it change at all for the New York production?

A first production usually goes through a lot of changes. And then the play went to The Oregon Shakespeare Festival where it also changed. I have made some changes for the NY production and will undoubtedly make some more.

"So, yes, the play is about a child with ADD. But it's also about how we live our lives in these times. "

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

I look for a director with a compatible sense of tone. Someone who "gets" comedy without going broad and is not afraid of emotion, who finds the funny in the truth of human behavior. Also someone with a great visual sense and wild imagination as my plays tend to be theatrical. I also like to work with a person who will be both kind and fun to work with in the rehearsal room because life is short. I especially like off-center actors, with a little madness behind the eyes, who are utterly truthful, inventive, and emotionally available. Mark Brokaw, Cynthia Nixon, and this cast.

You also write for different mediums like movies and television. What are some of the challenges writing for stage, screen and TV?

The challenge of writing for the stage is it is so hard to make a living at it. And usually you have to wait a long time for a production. But, you get to say what you want to say, explore what you want to explore, and the only limits as to how you do that are the limits of your own imagination. With screenwriting, I'm a pen, well, a mind for hire. I have to fit my "vision" to the producer's vision and, ultimately, the director's. And I'm more bound by the screenplay "form" as I usually work on assignment. So, often, the original inspiration is someone else's. Maybe I'm adapting a book, or a documentary, or an article. The initial challenge is to find why I need to express the theme of the particular piece, and then, how to do that. In other words, I have to "find my way in" with a movie (unless it's my original idea), whereas with a play, it just hits me. Another challenge of a movie is you have to please more cooks. Many more.

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

Write what you care about, what you want to write, what you must write. Don't even think about what "might be popular." Write that thing you fear will be too personal, too idiosyncratic, too weird. And have a life while you're doing it.

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

I am rediscovering Arthur Miller, the human condition within the social context. I love Tennessee Williams, Carol Churchill, Tony Kushner, August Wilson, Eduardo Machado, lots of other Latino writers, Danny Hoch, other hip hop writers, Susan Lori Parks, Lynn Nottage, and many, many more.

I feed myself by being married to my husband Joe Romano, who makes great pasta (and great music and paintings). But maybe you are asking metaphorically? If so, I feed myself as a writer by traveling, by eavesdropping, by raising a child, by living in a hometown, and living in different cultures, by going to the theatre, having animals, going to all sorts of different churches and places of worship, reading the news, talking to people I don't agree with...and sometimes actually writing.



Roundabout Theatre Company's *DISTRACTED*
Pictured (l-r): Cynthia Nixon, Peter Benson, Josh Stamberg
Photo credit: Joan Marcus, 2009

Interview with a Psychiatrist: Dr. Lenard A. Adler



Roundabout Theatre Company's *DISTRACTED*, Pictured (l-r): Cynthia Nixon, Matthew Gumley. Photo credit: Joan Marcus. 2009

How would you treat Jesse (based on his behavior in the play) if he were your patient?

The first step is establishing a diagnosis, which is clinically derived. This involves interviewing the parents and child and gathering information from the teachers. Using rating scales can be quite helpful here. Psycho-educational or neuropsychological testing is often performed for educational reasons as school accommodations are determined on the basis of differences from a normative sample in information processing, executive functions and processing speed, based on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but this is not diagnostic for ADHD.

Once the diagnosis is established, the paradigm that has been shown to be most effective is a combination of medication management and a psycho-social intervention such as parent training or cognitive-behavioral therapy (this is from the large scale, National Institute of Mental Health – NIMH, Multi-Modal Treatment Assignment Study).

The decision to use medication in a child is never an easy one. The treatment program must be partnered with the parents and child. Some parents might decide to try a behavioral intervention first. However, the evidence is that if the diagnosis is ADHD, that medications are often needed,

especially for adolescents and adults. Prior to any medication being initiated, there must be established expectations as to possible benefits and side effects of the medication and appropriate monitoring for both side-effects and the clinical response. If a medication is used, stimulant medications, such as methylphenidate (including Ritalin and Concerta) or amphetamine (including Adderall or Vyvanse) preparations are often used. The development of longer acting stimulants (such as Focalin XR, Concerta, Adderall XR or Vyvanse) has been a real advance but this obviates the need for the child to see the school nurse in the middle of the day, to receive a lunchtime dose, which can be quite stigmatizing.

How would you counsel his parents?

His parents, as above, should be counseled regarding parenting issues and the possible risks and benefits of any medication (if used).

What criteria do you use in prescribing drugs as treatment for ADHD?

Again, the diagnosis needs to be correct. Also, guidelines for baseline work-up (checking blood pressure/pulse and possibly an electrocardiogram should be considered, additional work up may be necessary if the child has a cardiac history or a family history of early/sudden cardiac death, as per guidelines from the American Heart Association). That being said, long-acting stimulants are generally well tolerated; the lowest possible dose should be initiated, with appropriate and regular follow-up as the dose is increased over time, based on benefits and any side-effects that may occur. There are substantial consequences in not treating individuals with ADHD, as in untreated individuals, risks of substance use, academic under-achievement and occupational under-achievement (along with cigarette smoking and possibly sociopathy) have been well documented.

“The decision to use medication in a child is never an easy one.”

In your experience how does ADHD affect families and communities at large?

There is a substantial burden on the family with ADHD as divorce/separation rates have been shown to be higher in families with children with ADHD.

What are some of the causes of ADHD? Does the condition manifest itself differently in children and adults?

We think that about 85% of the transmission of ADHD is familial; accordingly there is a substantial genetic component. If there is a child in the family with ADHD, there is a 40% chance that one of the two parents has ADHD. Maternal smoking has also been shown to be a risk factor. Other environmental causes are rarely, but occasionally, involved.

Do you believe that excessive television watching can cause or exacerbate ADHD? Why or why not?

Excessive television watching has not been consistently shown to be causative for ADHD. Some studies have found children with ADHD may watch more TV, but that does not mean that the TV is causing the ADHD; this association is not always found, and if present, is not causative (and might be secondary to the short attention span in many individuals with ADHD as a coping mechanism). Television watching (as per recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics) should be limited and monitored in all children.

Lenard A. Adler, MD, has been the Director of the Adult ADHD Program and Professor Psychiatry and Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at New York University (NYU) School of Medicine in New York, New York. He obtained a BA in Economics from the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell University in 1978. He earned his MD from Emory University School of Medicine in 1982, and went on to serve an internship in Medicine, Neurology, and Psychiatry, followed by a residency in Psychiatry, acting as Chief Resident from 1983 to 1986, at NYU School of Medicine.

He has been interviewed numerous times in national media venues, including *60 Minutes* and the *Today Show*, as well as *Oprah Radio*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *U.S. News & World Report*, discussing his treatment methods for adults with ADHD. Dr. Adler is the author of the popular lay book, *SCATTERED MINDS: Hope and Help for Adults with ADHD* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2006).

Dr. Adler has been a principle contributor to numerous new treatment trials in ADHD and in the development of new scales to diagnose and evaluate symptoms of adult ADHD.

A Diplomat in Psychiatry to the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, Dr. Adler is board-certified by the National Board of Medical Examiners. He is an active investigator and frequent lecturer, who has authored and coauthored more than 70 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters.

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