

UPSTAGE

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THE LANGUAGE OF TREES

Interview with the Playwright and Director: Steven Levenson and Alex Timbers

“I think we often believe that if we only had the right words we could reach one another and come up with some kind of understanding.”

Steven, you are the author of *The Language of Trees*, will you give us some background information on yourself?

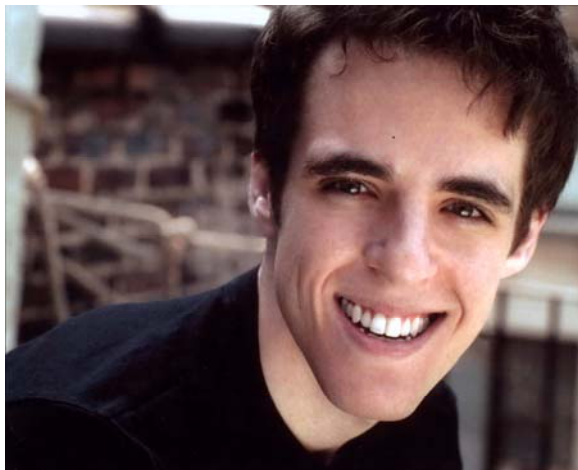
SL: I'm from Bethesda, Maryland originally, and then went to college at Brown University. I began as an actor in college, and I sort of slowly found writing. I took classes with Brighde Mullins and Paula Vogel at Brown, and graduated in '06, then moved to New York basically to write. I worked at Playwrights Horizons as a literary assistant until this past June, when I finally left to be a writer full time

Am I correct in saying you are 23?

SL: 24.

So *The Language of Trees* is your first? Second? Third play?

SL: It is my first play. It's my first real play that I showed to more than just one or two people. I began writing it in my senior year of college, 2005. And I've been working on it since then.



(Playwright, Steven Levenson)

Will you talk a little bit about the inspiration for the play?

SL: I was saying yesterday that I don't really remember what initially propelled the writing of it. I remember that it began with the situation of two neighbors from completely different backgrounds sitting down in one of the women's homes, and suddenly this story came out that the younger woman's husband was off somewhere else as a translator in a war. And then the story just kind of came in around that. I was interested in trying to think about what was happening in the world in terms of the war but through the lens of this very small story.

What inspired the character of Eben? He's such a remarkable young person.

SL: That's a really good question. I hadn't even thought of this but I worked at a day care center during high school, and I worked there a little bit in college during summer breaks and stuff, so there was a period when I was around kids a lot. So maybe that's what partly inspired it. I don't know. I just had this idea of a kid who's really interested in nature and in exploring and discovering the world.

Is Eben at all like you?

SL: Not really. I wasn't very into nature as a kid actually, so no, probably not, unfortunately.

Alex, you are directing the play, how did you and Steven find each other?

AT: Steven and I found each other through Robyn Goodman, who's the artistic consultant and basically functions as the director of the Underground program, and she's a fan of Steven's work and my work and had the vision to put us together and it's fantastic. We did a reading together of the play in January and then the play was chosen for programming in April.

Had Robyn seen *Heddatron* or any other works you've directed?

AT: I'm not really sure what she's seen. She seems to have her ear to the ground on all sorts of creative things so it's possible she saw something. Also, Josh Fiedler in

her office has seen work that my company has done and work I've directed freelance, mostly in the musical theatre realm. So he's been a fantastic advocate as well.

Tell me about the play itself. What do you sense it is about, or is it still evolving?

SL: What I'm really trying to crystallize, and to make as clear as possible, is how words work and don't work, and how these characters come together and fall apart based on their inability to fully communicate. I think we often believe that if we only had the right words we could reach one another and come up with some kind of understanding. But sometimes words are not enough, and this idea of a perfect language where everyone understands each other just doesn't work that way. The play right now is about communication and miscommunication; or, whatever the opposite of communication is.

One thing that struck me is what I call the magic realism in the play. Am I off base?

SL: No, no. I feel like I started writing plays in the shadow of Sarah Ruhl and Jordan Harrison. Those are the playwrights I was, and still am, in awe of. I try to write plays that do things magically and theatrically that you can't do in a movie or a TV show.

That brings us to the director's vision I wondered how it would work in the Underground space.

AT: It's quite a complicated task to render a show with so many locations and so many strong visual metaphors in a space that is essentially a large room with low ceilings. One of the things I've found lucky about this process is being able to work with the designers I really wanted to work with. Robyn trusted us to choose our collaborators in this process. Cameron, our set designer, in particular, has a strong history in working in magical realism; working on Jose Rivera plays. She's primarily an opera designer, and I think that on a show like this, she is a really great person to have involved. When we do shows together, the aesthetic is simultaneously beautiful and disgusting. We incorporate things that look like detritus and stuff that's in disuse but is really beautiful at the same time. I just feel like we've really lucked out too with the lighting designer, David Weiner. To me, he has the same beautiful and disgusting aesthetic and is incredibly painterly and through Roundabout's generosity has some pretty cool tricks up his sleeve. The sound designer, M.L. Dogg, is someone who thinks in terms of real soundscapes and industrials. He's not what I think of as a normal sound designer. He's also an engineer. And then there is Emily Rebholz, the costumer. I've done nine shows with her now. She's

actually right out of school. She's really young and already she's done a show at Lincoln Center. So it's all just really lucky.

Will there be music per se?

AT: There's going to be a sonic textural scoring as opposed to a musical underscoring or a melodic underscoring. It sounds pretentious when I talk like that but you know what I mean.

What traits were you looking for in the actors when you were casting this?

AT: Well, we were looking for people who were incredibly honest, incredibly accessible. We were talking today about how we don't want to tip into sentimentality and that could happen on a show that's so fragile and so poetic, so we were looking for actors who had a sense of humor and who were able to make positive choices. I've never worked on a show that's so intimately performed. I think the acting style is going to feel somewhat unique.



(Director, Alex Timbers)

And in casting Gio, who is an adult actor playing a seven year old, which is called for in the script, was there a specific thing you needed for him?

AT: I think we were so lucky to find Gio. The part demands an innocence and a certain kind of pain. The character is somehow wounded on the inside from the very beginning, and there's something about Gio that's just so warm and open, and yet there's also something very fragile and possibly dangerous or sad about him. He was just perfect when he came in. You believed him. He wasn't playing at the part, he was fully inhabiting it. It was really lucky to find him.

Can you tell us something about your vision?

AT: To me what's essential to the play is this idea of loss and what it takes to move beyond loss and grief. What we've tried to do scenically is create three different spaces, three different areas, and there is this tree that reaches through all these areas to connect them. Hopefully, it will be the big visual metaphor that lands at the end. Cameron has had a cool idea of a kind of vessel of a tree. She's taken the hugging tree and related it to the sand so it's a tree that fills with sand and the sand filling the tree is something that is used as a form of communication. It is the murmuring, but it's also a suffocating gesture.

SL: I should also say when I'm writing I don't think about the stage itself. I don't have a very proprietary sense of what I need it to look like. Part of what's so exciting, about Alex specifically, is he has such a visual sense. I just love handing it over to Alex and the designers and seeing what they come up with.

AT: And if this show is successful, it will receive many productions all around the United States, just as is happening with *Speech and Debate*. And I'm sure no one will stage the show the way we're staging it here. I mean this show is so open to many different visual interpretations. It's going to be thrilling to see those other productions.

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

AT: See as much work as you can, and intern at as many theatres and nonprofits and things like that. My first job out of college was interning at the Manhattan Theatre Club. I knew I wanted to be involved somehow in theatre, but I thought possibly as an actor or as an administrator, and then I decided to be a director. It didn't mean that any of the work I had done trying to be an actor was down the drain. Just keep all the

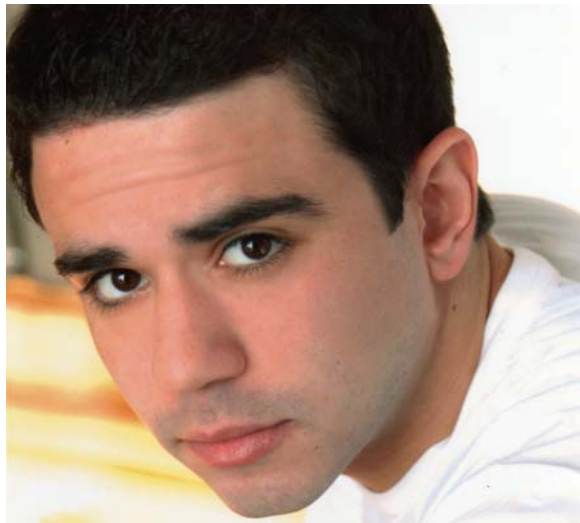
possibilities open and be receptive to trying any different opportunity in the theatre. Seeing as much theatre and being around actual professional theatre is the best thing you can do as a young person.

SL: Working at Playwrights Horizons for a year and a half was invaluable because all I did was read plays all day long. I had to leave that job ultimately because it became hard to try to create work and also evaluate it in a critical way. But reading plays and seeing plays are just so important. Just being around other people and being part of the conversation. Learning where you fit in and getting to see all sorts of things like *Hell House* at St. Anne's Warehouse and then going to see something at Roundabout or on Broadway. It's important because you see the kind of work you want to be doing and you also see if the kind of work you want to do isn't there yet.



(Actors; Michael Warner and Michael Hayden)

Interview with the Actor: Gio Perez



Can you tell us how you are going to prepare to play Eben, who is seven years old?

I definitely, 100%, plan on hanging out with a seven-year-old from now until we start previews on the 4th. I also have a couple of child psychology books I've been peeking at, but the key thing about this character is that he's not really your average seven year old which makes it a little easier. He's an extremely smug little man, incredibly intuitive, and I really like to think that there's something extraordinarily special about him. He's very human, very much like an adult in a way. I want to make it as truthful as possible. I used to baby sit a seven-year-old boy who was very precocious and I always found it interesting because he always looked uncomfortable in his body. Their expressions are usually not very easily hidden so you can kind of sense how they feel. I'm having a lot of fun so far figuring out where he lives in his body.

Can you tell me how this is different from other roles you've played?

Oh my gosh, so incredibly different. It's definitely new. Unfortunately, I've had to play characters that are very evil. I've been dying to play a character that is not like that and Eben is not evil at all. As soon as I got my hands on the script, I was in love with the character. It's something I want to dig my teeth into. I think I have a lot in common with Eben, so it's making it kind of easy so far. I'm definitely excited.

How is the role in the play personally relevant to you? What resonates for you personally in the play and in the character?

Things that I really love and cherish I think Eben does as well. I constantly go to Central Park. If I don't go to Central Park at least twice a week I start craving it. So I understand his love of nature and the love he has for his parents. I think he has inherited both of his parents' finest qualities. His mother is very caring and Eben is very caring and very sensitive. And his father is very much of an intellectual and Eben is as well. For me, my dad was always very funny and my mom was always responsible and those were good qualities for me to inherit; so in that respect I feel very similar to Eben. I was also an only child and I did play alone all the time. When I was in preschool up into the second grade, I lived in the suburbs and I had a big backyard and every day I would be exploring in my backyard which is almost exactly like Eben. Looking for stuff, digging holes, collecting spiders under the porch, climbing trees, collecting rocks and shells and getting my hands on every type of bug there ever was, any bit of nature I possibly could.

Do you have a sense of what the play is about at this point in your process?

I do. The play has a lot to say; especially politically. There's something in the play about how a simple little family can be torn to shreds by something so far away like a war. And there's something about words not being enough for communication.

How did you become an actor and what type of training did you have?

I started acting by mistake in high school, just being a goofy kid. I went to a smaller high school and they had this event at the end of the year called the School Olympics where they would divide the school up into three teams and they had this one event called the *Gongless Gong Show* and I offered to do it. You had to pick a song out of the hat which you had to prepare to lip sync. I picked "These Boots Were Made for Walking" by Nancy Sinatra. My mom bought this little mini skirt and I dressed in drag and I performed the song and won. I realized it was kind of fun being in front of the entire school, being a goofy guy. And the theatre director approached me and asked me to audition for one of the school plays and I was cast as Seymour in *Little Shop of Horrors*. I just really just fell in love with it. I wasn't sure this is what I wanted to do, but with the support of my friends and family, I applied to NYU and I got in. I studied at the experimental theatre wing which I absolutely loved with all my heart.

"There's something in the play about how a simple little family can be torn to shreds by something so far away like a war."

The professors there really love what they do and it was an ideal place to find my physical approach to acting. It was a really safe environment to figure out if this was what I wanted to do.

When did you graduate?

About two years, ago in May 2006.

And you've been working since then?

I have. I've been very, very lucky. 90 % of all my work the last two years has been in films, television, commercials or the theatre.

What advice would you give to a middle school or high school student who wants to be an actor?

I would tell them that they have to make sure that they love it. That's really what it is. Because if you don't love it and you are doing it for some other reason, it's not going to fill you up. It's got to piece your soul together. If you are out for money or you're out to be famous-- it's not about any of those things really. The thing about this business, I think, is that a lot of times you get really lucky in meeting other artists and they teach you so much. It's a really awesome field to get into but you definitely have to love it...yeah.

Gio, is there any question that you wish I had asked that I haven't asked?

Yeah, how do I feel about all the people I met so far who are involved with the show and with Roundabout? I think they're all freaking amazing! Alex is so cool and smart and calm and Steven is just so warm and the other actors are so talented and everybody I've met so far is so great. It just seems too good to be true. I feel blessed, I really do.



(Gio Perez in a scene from *The Language of Trees*)

Interview with the Set Designer: Cameron Anderson

"I always start each process by finding images that tell the metaphorical story"

Tell us a bit about the challenges of designing this play *The Language of Trees*, and how you went about dealing with those challenges.

The main challenge of designing this play is really the size and shape of the theatre. It's very small and has an unconventional amount of space and the play is so vast in its imagery and calls for really evocative magical events. The play is filled with wonderful visual images that are a dream for me to encounter because I love figuring out how to resolve those challenges in transformative ways. The difficulty is that when you're in a really intimate theatre and the audience is very close to the tricks that your trying to use, you have to come up with solutions that work in different ways than they would in a big proscenium theatre. Here you have to be very honest about everything. We've reoriented the theatre in a different configuration than it was used for *Speech and Debate*. We've created this wonderful wrapping around of the scenery so the audience is really surrounded on all sides by the set. We took the image of the tree and the sand and we've combined those two images to create a metaphorical through line.

Do you want to tell us about how the specific images actually work?

I always start each process by finding images that tell the metaphorical story. And they might be images that end up having nothing to do with the play. They may not be images of Iraq or of a kitchen, but for this play, they're images that tell a story of something beautiful and disturbing at the same time. I had an image of sand falling in a translucent tree in my mind when I read the play the first time; an image of beauty and suffocation; an image of a glass tree slowly filling up with sand; which supports the idea of Iraq and all of the imagery of sand in your mouth -- and the stifling of emotion that happens when tragic things happen to people. The translucent tree murmurs and speaks and then lights up in this very magical way and splits with its magnificent light. The sand falling is a part of the murmuring and there's a crystalline wall behind the

tree that reveals itself for the first time in that moment when the tree lights up.

When you say the set wraps around the audience, does that mean the action will happen all around the audience or is it contained?

It's a little bit of both. People are not swirling around the audience. It's sort of 180 degrees not 360 degrees. We're also trying to integrate the existing elements of the theatre, so that when you come in, you really feel like you are immersed in the environment. It's a way to embrace the intimacy.

Can you tell us how the play has relevance for you?

It is a beautiful play that is relevant to everyone because it's about the Iraq war. In that way it's political, but it's not written in a way that's overtly political. Its really a story of loss and how you one day wake up and have something happen to you that is the worst thing you could ever imagine and how you pick up the pieces.



(Natalie Gold, Gio Perez, and Maggie Burke)

It's about how humans have the extraordinary ability to move on in the face of terrible tragedy. It's about family, so it's very moving to me. It's something anyone will be moved by whether you are for or against the Iraq war because it's about loss and that's something that anybody can connect to.

Could you tell us how you came to be a designer and any advice you would give to students in middle or high school who would like to do the type of work you are doing.

I had a very interdisciplinary education. I was an English major in college and studied fine arts and art history and literature. I went to Wesleyan University. My senior year of college I discovered scenic design. I had gone to the opera and theatre growing up but was thrilled to find a profession that brought together many of things I was passionate about. It brings together textual analysis, fine arts, architecture, and installation art into this one medium that is very gratifying because it's created so quickly. If you are an architect your work lasts forever hopefully, but it takes ten years for it to arrive into existence. The beauty of being a set designer and working with theatre artists is that we create these worlds and they only last as long as the audience is there to appreciate them. So there's this sort of communion. It only has meaning when there is a play happening within it. And it's magical in that way. Then it all gets trashed and thrown out and it only exists in the memory of the people who witnessed it, which I think is really beautiful.

Where did you go to grad school?

The College- Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati. I got my MFA in set design there. It has wonderful opera, musical theatre, and drama departments

Would you suggest graduate school to young people?

I would, but I would advise anybody who wants to become a set designer that it's very important to learn about everything else outside of theatre before you focus in on theatre. Because really, you need a sense of history, a sense of art history, you need a sense of the world in order to bring that world to the stage. I actually highly recommend a liberal arts undergraduate education for set designers as opposed to a conservatory education. I think grad school was very important for me because I had very little practical experience. I didn't study theatre in undergrad and I needed to design a lot of shows that were put up in an environment where you can take risks and make mistakes and discover yourself.

Can you talk about people or places that inspire you?

I get inspiration from many varied sources. I get inspiration from fine arts, film, I go to a lot of museums. A lot of installation art. I try to expose myself to as many different art forms as I can. Going to the theatre is also really important. I love Christian Boltanski, who is an installation artist. Rebecca Horn is another artist I love. In terms of designers, there are some Eastern European designers I really love. Ralph Koltai would be my favorite. I try to immerse myself in as many varied viewpoints as I can and see what I find.

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