

UPSTAGE

**TIGERS
BE STILL**

By Kim Rosenstock
Directed by Sam Gold

Interview with the Director: **Sam Gold**



Director Sam Gold was interviewed by Education Dramaturge Ted Sod during rehearsals of *Tigers Be Still*. A transcript of that session follows:

UPSTAGE: Why did you want to direct *Tigers Be Still*?

SAM GOLD: I've known Kim now for probably seven years, though we never worked together. We've always wanted to work together, and as soon as I read the play I was really excited to get to work with her on it. Whoa, I just said "work" three times in a row.

UPSTAGE: What is the play about from your POV?

SAM GOLD: The play is about people being slammed by emotionally difficult circumstances and how they get up and get back to living after they have been damaged by those circumstances. It's also a celebration of the ways we succeed and fail at picking ourselves back up after we go through sadness. I think Kim has a very unique and amazing ability to show you the very funny side of sad situations. This play is

about a common experience. All four characters in the play live through various stages of depression. Not clinical depression but circumstantial depression. Everyone in the play has gone through something really difficult and that is a common experience to all people. We all have these times in our lives where we go through something difficult and emotionally challenging. Kim has taken the common experience of dealing with these emotional battles and she gets us to identify with ourselves in it and she also gets us to laugh and enjoy it. That's exactly why I like going to the theatre. I saw lots of familiar feelings and experiences inside the play. On top of that, Kim and I both grew up in the 1980's. The comfort that the characters take during their depression seems to have a 1980's spin to it which I really enjoy.

UPSTAGE: The play seems to have a quirky logic. Do you agree with that?

SAM GOLD: Yeah, I totally agree and know what you mean. The word "quirky" is apt to describe this play but I find I get lost in that word. I don't know what to do with it anymore because it gets applied to so much. I think this definitely fits what people call "quirky" but what I would call "quirky" is, as I said before, how Kim is able to step out from this common experience and make you hear it and experience it in a new way.

UPSTAGE: How did you research the world of the play? What kind of

research did you have to do to direct it?

SAM GOLD: I'm going to put it out there that I'm not a big believer in research. I think one of the hardest things about being a director is being the eye of the audience. I think as the director you are taking care of the audience's journey. A play like this is really accessible and contemporary. The next play I'm directing takes place in 1790 with dueling Englishman and I'm doing a lot of research for that. But for a play like this that basically happened in my backyard, I honestly didn't do a minute of research for -- other than to get to know the characters and understanding the world they inhabit.

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

SAM GOLD: These are real people that you must sympathize with and must feel that you understand their humanity. There's also a precision in the language that is hopefully going to make the audience laugh. So it was about finding actors who can be completely grounded and believable but also serve the unique rhythm of the language and what's humorous about it. Being able to make depression funny is not something everybody can do.

UPSTAGE: I loved the play when I read it and I really felt for everybody. I was so curious about the mother – she is a very strong offstage character.

SAM GOLD: It's an amazing thing to have this woman literally hovering over

the play; what's a more powerful subject matter to deal with than moms?

UPSTAGE: The other thing that fascinated me about the family was the contrast between the sisters. They feel like night and day in some ways and yet you could believe they were from the same family.

SAM GOLD: I think what's amazing with these two sisters is you feel like there's a trading of places. You feel like Sherry could have been in the situation Grace is in at another point in her life and Grace could have been in Sherry's position. There were times with these two sisters where Grace was the one that had her shit together and it was Sherry who was a disaster and couldn't get out of bed. But we are just seeing the play about Sherry getting up and getting back to life. We're not seeing the play about Grace.

UPSTAGE: Let's talk about the play visually. What did you think when you walked into the tiny Roundabout Underground theatre?

SAM GOLD: I believe limitations are the best friends of creativity and I feel that where we landed in terms of design is a place we never would have landed if we were given the Lucille Lortel to do this play or the Laura Pels. We were forced to really think about the play inside these limitations and it just makes you work hard to be creative to see what's essential to the world of the play. It's a play about people who can or cannot get off their couch so if you have much more than the couch, you're not necessarily helping the gestalt of the play. I think we made out well by having

this very intimate, very little space where we couldn't do a lot of fancy tricks.

UPSTAGE: I take it you have collaborated with the people on your design team before?

SAM GOLD: Well, Dane Laffrey is doing sets and costumes and this is our third show together. I thought of him right away for this play. The other two plays we did together were also fairly whimsical comedies and I knew when I read this play that he would get the sense of humor and the world of the play and really respond to the anti-aesthetic of suburban Long Island where we set it. There is a neutrality, visually, to the world that I thought he would really enjoy. You have to be a sick and twisted designer to really love putting things that look bad on stage and I love putting things on stage that are visually unappealing. There's nothing that makes me happier than a bland, neutral, "not that appealing" looking space for a play. I know most people really want to make beautiful pictures but I feel like we've basically seen every beautiful picture that can be put on stage and I'm ready to put things onstage that look just okay. Dane is on that journey with me so we've made this "just okay" suburban living room which is where most people in life live. Not everybody gets to live in a beautiful place.

UPSTAGE: And it does seem with the mom out of the picture that there is not a lot of housekeeping going on.

SAM GOLD: Yeah, there isn't a ton of decorating going on in the house. Also, I think that when you are depressed you want comfort. So I think in another

production you might've gone down this road of this really, really depressing place that could be dirty and sad. But I thought that when you're sad, what you want is blankets, stuffed animals, ice cream and your favorite movie. You want to be cheered up so I think the space has a sadness in the form of failed cheerfulness.

UPSTAGE: What about sound and lights? Is that a big aspect of the show?

SAM GOLD: Well, Kim writes with a lot of sound in mind. She really thinks musically so there's a lot of music in the show that is intrinsic to the writing. There's a song that Grace is obsessed with, *The Rose* by Bette Midler and there's the movie *Top Gun* from which they listen to lots of things. There's a lot of stuff built in and it's easy to run with because it's an evocative period and sentiment.

UPSTAGE: Will the audience be in a traditional configuration?

SAM GOLD: Yeah, the audience is going to be voyeurs into the living room. You are going to see through the fourth wall of it. It's pretty simple and straight on that way.

UPSTAGE: Can we talk a little bit about the title *Tigers Be Still*? Would you would say it is symbolism?

SAM GOLD: Yes. There is a tiger on the loose which is a metaphor literalized in a hopefully fun way.

UPSTAGE: Let's talk about you for a bit. I think many of the people who will come to see this show saw your

exquisite work on *Circle, Mirror, Transformation*. Tell us about how you became a director and what your background is.

SAM GOLD: I grew up in New York, saw a lot of theatre and really enjoyed it. I started out as an actor which is how I think basically everyone in the theatre starts. Then I learned pretty quickly that I'm a control freak and didn't like anyone else telling me what to do, so I became a director. I came to New York after college and have been here ever since directing plays. I did a directing-ish fellowship that was like a graduate program at Julliard and I also spent a few years working as the assistant director and dramaturge at the Wooster Group. Those two things which I did simultaneously were my schooling in the theatre – working with Liz LeCompte and the Wooster Group downtown and then heading uptown and working at Julliard, taking acting classes and meeting the actors and also the writers in the very, very good playwriting program there. Between those two pieces of my life, I started to gain a sense of who I was as a director and what my place was in the community. When I finished at Julliard and the Wooster Group, I started a career as a freelance director in New York.

UPSTAGE: Where did you go to school?

SAM GOLD: Undergrad was at Cornell.

UPSTAGE: What inspires you? Do you see other director's work? Go to movies, museums, travel?

SAM GOLD: I get obsessed with different film directors. Like right now I

can't get enough of Werner Herzog. And I love to see the work of International theatre directors. I spent all of January in Berlin seeing theatre. It's a director's theatre in Berlin right now as opposed to New York, which is a playwright's theatre right now. I saw the best Hamlet I've ever seen. Directed by Thomas Ostermeier.

UPSTAGE: What would you say to someone who says, "I want to be a director too"? What advice would you give them?

SAM GOLD: There's the good news and the bad news. The theatre is a really challenging place to make a life and I think it's good to think about why you want to make your life in the theatre as opposed to somewhere else. One great thing to think about is what it is about the stage that excites you because directing for the stage is a really easy way to go into debt. The good news is that if you have a point of view and passion, then there is a community - a really solid, palpable community - that you'll get to express and explore your point of view with. It's transactional and it's easy to taste the transaction between you and the community. It's immediate and very fulfilling that way. It's easy to find out if you're a director in the theatre by doing it because it's immediate. As soon as you do it, there's an audience that sees it. It's not in the abstract, you don't have to guess as to whether you like directing plays. You just go do it and you'll figure it out pretty quickly.

Interview with the Playwright: **Kim Rosenstock**



*Playwright Kim Rosenstock completed an interview for UPSTAGE to share her thoughts on writing *Tigers Be Still*.*

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

KIM ROSENSTOCK: I'm from the suburb of Baldwin, Long Island and went to the public schools there.

When I was in second grade my mother brought me to a community theater in a nearby town because she was worried that I was too shy and thought that being forced to talk onstage would help. Since this theater didn't really reject anyone who auditioned, the directors would make up extra roles for me with one or two lines. So every play I auditioned for ended up gaining a quiet

kid sister or a quiet neighbor in the background.

These marginal parts allowed me to spend most of my time on and offstage developing an extensive repertoire of facial expressions which haunts me to this day. Every now and then someone will be like, "Why is your face doing that?" And I know that what "that" means is that my face is just shifting rapidly from looking happy to sad to surprised...etc.

Anyway, playwriting. Yes. So the real advantage to having very minor roles onstage was that I had time to sit backstage and watch the plays over and over again from the wings. This was how I spent most of my free time from about 8 years old until 13 years old.

In high school I started writing short stories. And I read everything I could get my hands on. Unfortunately, I'm a very slow reader. So reading ended up occupying most of my time. There was this one semester when I disappeared and none of my friends knew what had happened to me. I was reading *Anna Karenina*. And I was obsessive about not skipping over anything, no matter how boring. There is an entire chapter of *Moby Dick* dedicated to a bone-by-bone description of a whale's skeleton. I read the whole thing. I guess I've always been a little bit masochistic.

After high school I went to Amherst College in Massachusetts where all

freshmen are required to take a “freshmen seminar” in their first semester. I was assigned to one called The Living Newspaper, taught by the school’s Playwright-In-Residence, Connie Congdon. This was my first introduction to playwriting: fifteen students who had never written a play before collaborating to make a performance piece about hate crimes. We wrote a show called *Sticks and Bones*. It involved a lot of flashlights. I think Connie wrote most of it.

For some reason, based on the writing I brought into that seminar Connie encouraged me to take her playwriting class. So I did. And in that class I wrote my first play. It was called *Endangered Feces*. It was kind of a musical. We would cast each other in our plays, clear a space at the front of the room, and put the plays up on the fly. So, suddenly, I was sitting there, and my whole class was standing in front of me, performing my play and improvising music and it was like the best afternoon of my life. I remember sitting outside on the steps afterwards and Connie standing over me and saying, “You’re a playwright.” And I didn’t know if she was right, but I knew that no one had ever said that to me about anything else, so I decided to believe her.

Up until this point my knowledge of dramatic literature consisted mostly of Shakespeare and the Greeks. So I started reading everything else. Soon my dorm room was overflowing with plays by pretty much every major playwright from the last 400 years.

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One day while browsing the drama section of the college library I took Christopher Durang’s *Baby with the Bathwater* off the shelf, sat on the floor and started reading to see if I should check it out. I ended up sitting there for the next two hours, riveted. The play’s first image was a young couple cooing at their newborn baby in a basinet, and within the first thirty seconds the wife was asking her husband for a divorce. The rhythm of the writing was so strong—you were on this crazy emotional rollercoaster from the first moment. The language and the characters and situations were so heightened, yet it struck me as a brutally honest portrait of two people stuck in a bad relationship. I related to the warped logic the characters bought into wholeheartedly. I remember thinking, “Yes, this is what life feels like.”

I realized that plays could be like hands reaching across time and space to pat you on the shoulder reassuringly. And the thought that perhaps one day something I wrote might do that for someone made me want to write.

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?

KIM ROSENSTOCK: I wanted to write a comedy about depression. Something to acknowledge that most people go through these dark times periodically. Yet depression is inherently a very isolating force. It’s not something we come together over. Like when people ask how you’re doing you don’t say, “Really sad.” And if you did, chances

are the other person wouldn't say, "Oh. Sweet. Me too." And there's a reason why we don't do that: it's depressing. And we try not to depress each other. So I can't just go up to everyone I know and say, "Hey, I know you get really sad sometimes and that's ok." Because that would be super creepy. Especially if I whispered it. From a dark corner. But I *can* write a play that conveys that message and then invite people I know to sit in a dark room and watch it. This is more socially acceptable.

The more I write the more I find that I'm interested in exploring human survival instincts. I'm also interested in looking at this nebulous idea of the human spirit and the ways in which it triumphs. I like to watch the ways in which people stare into the void and make the decision to not fall in.

This play does resonate for me on many levels. The main character, Sherry, is going through a quarter-life crisis, which is something that hits lots, maybe even most, twenty-somethings. You wake up one day and you can't shake this paralyzing combination of dread, uncertainty and loneliness. Even though it isn't a surprise—it's still a shock to realize that you are an adult. Soon an anxiety sets in that you're going to just throw away the prime years of your life by sinking into this wide gulf of self-pity.

When I first began to write this play I was creating this fantasy world where this young woman, our antiheroine, discovers that she can fix everything. As I wrote I realized that she had a sister who could keep her company, and

a boy who could be her friend, and a boss who could serve as a father-figure. Of course, as I began to know my characters better things got a lot messier and pretty soon the world of the play was anything but a fantasy, it had a complicated and messed-up life of its own. Still, the initial seeds of the idea came from a desire to heal.

"I like to watch the ways in which people stare into the void and make the decision to not fall in."

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

KIM ROSENSTOCK: I didn't do research for this play. The need to tell this story came from much more of an emotional place than an intellectual one. I mean, I guess if you count being depressed as research, then I did research.

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

KIM ROSENSTOCK: The most challenging part for me isn't the writing but the rewriting. This play, in particular, presents unique challenges for me because the impulse behind writing it is rooted in a specific time and frame of mind that I now have some distance from emotionally speaking.

I'm also trying not to let my current writer instincts edit away the instincts of a slightly younger version of myself. The world of this play, like the characters who inhabit it, isn't quite so put together, it's messy. So now, having spent three years in grad school, writing constantly, and realizing the traps I tend to fall into structurally, and my go-to crutches with plot and character, I have

to figure out how to revise this play in way that stays true to the spirit in which it was conceived and doesn't reflect the kind of writing I've gravitated to in more recent years.

The most fun part of writing this play, and every play, for me, is discovering everything in the moment. I don't write an outline or anything ahead of time. I just have ideas swimming around for a while. And when I'm ready to start writing, it's like a free fall situation. But, like Wile E. Coyote, I can't look down. If I look down then I start to second-guess myself and I fall into a ravine of self-doubt and extended metaphors.

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

KIM ROSENSTOCK: I think on the first production of a new play, a playwright has a theory—the play—and he/she is testing it out. So it's good to have a director who is invested in helping you test out the theory as intended and not trying to add his/her own stamp. There's a time and place for the 10th anniversary production of a play—and that's not on the first production. Like, it's fun to see new and exciting concepts applied to Shakespeare, but the first time out, I'm sure William just wanted to see if people would buy that Romeo and Juliet could meet at the dance and immediately fall in love.

The key element that must be present for a good collaboration between a director and a playwright is trust. And

usually this is built over time. I was lucky because I had known Sam and his directing for years. I knew we had a similar sense of humor. I also knew that Sam inherently understood the tone of the play. I could tell this at every turn, from his notes on the script, to his casting ideas, to the way he spoke about the design.

I also think, with comedies, it's important to have a director who trusts the language and knows how to let the words land in a way that allows the rhythm to do its job. If audiences can feel the comedy being acknowledged in the delivery of the lines, they tend to shut down.

As for casting, again, on the first production of a new play it's a different ball game from other types of shows. I think most playwrights like to work with actors who are able to roll with the punches and handle rewrites, not becoming too attached to anything. At the same time I also really like to work with actors who invest completely in their roles, becoming their characters' defenders and champions so that they are able to point out where there might be inconsistencies, or smaller things that I might not have noticed because I was looking at the bigger picture.

The hope is that with the right director and actors on board, the play grows and is elevated in a way it could not have been without them. It's those times when you're like, "This play was better when it was just me and my word document," that you know you've got the wrong people involved.

UPSTAGE: Who are your favorite playwrights? Do you find reading or

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seeing other plays helpful? How do you feed yourself as a writer?

KIM ROSENSTOCK: I have a long list of favorite playwrights. But in particular I'm partial to the amazing writers I've been lucky enough to study with over the years—playwrights who are also inspiring and generous mentors. They include: Paula Vogel, Ken Prestininzi, Richard Nelson, John Guare, Adam Rapp, Connie Congdon, Lisa Kron, Lynn Nottage, Michael Korie, Rachel Sheinkin, Frank Pugliese, Deb Margolin and Donald Margulies.

I think it's a playwright's responsibility to read and see other plays. It's the same as any other profession, you need to know what's going on in your field. Why choose to place yourself outside of the conversation? We're part of a tradition that's thousands of years old. And playwrights have been writing in response to each other in one way or another since the beginning. Sophocles thought Euripedes' idea to have Electra recognize her long-lost brother Orestes because of a small scar was lame, so he wrote a different version of the play in response.

There are so many plays and productions that have inspired me. During my first year out of college I saw a production of David Greenspan's *She Stoops to Comedy* which widened the scope of what I thought was possible in writing for the stage. Off the top of my head, a few plays I've read recently that I loved are: Jane Bowles' *In The Summer House*, Friedrich Durrenmatt's *An Angel Comes to Babylon*, Maria Irene Fornes' *Abingdon Square*, Suzan Lori-Parks' *In The Blood* and *Fucking A*,

and Stephen Adly Guirgis' *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*.

Music is another big source of inspiration for me. I love all kinds of music. I try to soundtrack my life so I'm almost always listening to something. Music has definitely given me ideas for characters or moments that end up spinning into whole plays.

I also try to make sure I'm always reading a book. (Warning: this next sentence is going to sound very prententious.) Lately I've been revisiting Flaubert. He's amazing. This guy. I mean, I've read *Madame Bovary* more than any other book. So like, twice. There's this one sentence that I just really love and so I memorized it, "Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars to pity."

"But I think it's important to know that the desire to stop doesn't mean you shouldn't write plays."

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

KIM ROSENSTOCK: It's a good idea to read a lot and write a lot. The more you write the better you get. I guess that's just common sense. But I know that I didn't realize it at first, so I figure maybe it bears acknowledgment. Having taught a bit, I'm surprised by how many younger writers get discouraged because the first play they try to write isn't their great masterpiece. It's certainly easy to stop. But I think it's important to know that the desire to stop doesn't mean you shouldn't write plays. Also, not having a well of ideas in the back of your mind doesn't mean you shouldn't write plays. Also, not always having the burning desire to write plays

all the time doesn't mean you shouldn't write plays. I guess the bottom line is, don't doubt yourself out of a fair shot. I'm a big believer in giving yourself the time and space to see what you're capable of achieving.

UPSTAGE: What are you working on now?

KIM ROSENSTOCK: I have a commission to write a new play from Aspen Theater Masters in association with Florida Stage. I'm also working with two neo-burlesque performers, Trixie Little and The Evil Hate Monkey on a new show going up at Ars Nova in March 2011. My play about sexual deviance through the ages, *99 Ways to Fuck a Swan*, is having productions in the winter of 2011 in Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon. I've also got two musical projects in the works. The first is an original rock musical I conceived and co-wrote called *Fly By Night* which is set in 1965 NYC during the great northeast blackout. The second is a show I'm creating with my brother Jeff who is a ridiculously prolific punk rock musician/singer/composer. And Roundabout has commissioned me to write a new play which is just unbelievable. I keep trying to figure out if I have a long-lost relative working at Roundabout. I feel very fortunate.