

# SUICIDE, INCORPORATED

## UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT **ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY**, FALL 2011

# UPSTAGE Callboard

## WHAT

The right words can be hard to find, especially when they're your last. Andrew Hinderaker's provocative and darkly funny new play takes us to an unorthodox writing service that specializes in crafting the perfect suicide note, where a subversive new employee is suspected of the unthinkable. Could he actually be trying to keep his client alive?

Jonathan Berry directs this New York premiere about the business of rewriting your ending.

*Suicide, Incorporated* is the 6th production in the Roundabout underground. The Roundabout underground gives debut productions to emerging playwrights, giving them an intimate space in which to take artistic risks.

<http://www.roundaboutunderground.com/about.htm>

## WHERE

An office, Jason's apartment, a call center, a diner.

## WHEN

The present.

## WHO

Characters:

JASON: 25. The new hire.

SCOTT: 28. The boss.

PERRY: 26. A loyal employee.

NORM: 29. A client.

TOMMY: 19. Jason's brother.

OFFICER: 30s. A police officer.



The cast of *Suicide, Incorporated* at their first rehearsal.

# Table of Contents

---

Interview with Playwright, Andrew Hinderaker .....	Page 4-5
Interview with Director, Jonathan Berry .....	Page 6-7
What are the Facts? .....	Page 8-9
How Can I Help? .....	Page 10
Interview with Courtney Knowles, The Jed Foundation .....	Page 11
Interview with Robyn Goodman, UNDERGROUND Producer .....	Page 12-13
Interview with Jill Rafson and Josh Fiedler, UNDERGROUND Associate Producers .....	Page 14-15



## UPSTAGE Contributors

**Greg McCaslin**  
*Education Director*

**Jennifer DiBella**  
*Associate Education Director*

**Sarah Malone**  
*Education Program Associate*

**Aliza Greenberg**  
*Education Program Manager*

**Ted Sod**  
*Education Dramaturg*

**Holly Sansom**  
*Education Assistant*

**Jill Rafson**  
*Literary Manager*

**Eric Emch**  
*Graphic Designer*

**Kimberley Oria**  
*Education Apprentice*

# Interview with the Playwright

*Ted Sod, Roundabout's Education Dramaturg, sat down with playwright Andrew Hinderaker to discuss the play.*

**Ted Sod:** Will you give us some background information on yourself: where you're from, where you were educated, when you decided to become a playwright?

**Andrew Hinderaker:** I grew up in Wisconsin, which I think shapes a lot of my writing. There's a Midwestern earnestness that's at the core of what I write despite the dark and even sarcastic premise of some of the work. I lived in Madison, Wisconsin through high school and then I went out to Stanford to do my undergraduate/graduate degrees. I started taking fiction writing classes and wrote a number of short stories. In my junior year, I entered a one-act competition on a bet, which was accepted as part of a festival. It really was not a good play. I'm not being modest; it was a very bad play. But that experience of being in the rehearsal room and working with actors and a director, I immediately felt an excitement that I hadn't felt in any other academic pursuit. After graduating, I realized that I'd gone through my undergraduate degree and had done very little theatre and very little reading even though I had a degree in English and creative writing. So I ended up designing my own master's program at Stanford. I stumbled into these great opportunities and put things up on stage routinely. I did a couple internships out at San Jose Rep and TheatreWorks and got immersed that way. Finally, I came up to Chicago and got started there.

**TS:** What inspired you to write *Suicide, Incorporated*?

**AH:** There were a couple years in Chicago that I actually took off from writing. For about two and a half years in Chicago, I worked at Northwestern University in a Student Affairs position, doing a bit of teaching, and I had the opportunity to supervise a number of students. One of the students that I supervised, who became a friend of mine, committed suicide in November, 2005.

At the time, I had already been working on a presentation with this psychologist who works at Northwestern, a man named David Shor. He does these presentations on masculinity and it was fascinating research. I was there as a co-presenter; none of these are my ideas. But he talks about masculinity; he talks about some of the archetypes of what it means to be a man. His idea was to take all these archetypes of being strong, competitive, successful and even being emotionally controlled and open up what they meant, so that the definition of what it means for men to be strong would be broader. I found it fascinating, and the reason that I mentioned it is because when I lost this friend of mine, he was, in a lot of ways, very archetypically male. He was 6'6" and 250 lbs. He was an athlete. He was Vice President of his fraternity. He was all these things that a lot of guys would associate with being a man. He was somebody that everybody went to for help. In hindsight, it became very apparent that it prevented him from asking for help. Being the person who had to be impenetrable made it difficult for him to say, "I don't know what's going on here, I'm losing control of a lot of different things." And so that realization led me to appreciate the fundamental statistics about the fact that 80% of suicides are male in this country and that one of the largest groups is late teens to late 20s. Guys are entering that stage in their life where they "should" be



figuring out what it means to be a man. And it seemed to me there was a dialogue that wasn't happening. So that's where the play came from.

**TS:** What would you say your play is about?

**AH:** In some ways, it's about the relationship between masculinity and suicide, particularly in this country. Growing up in Wisconsin with that Midwestern ethos where you don't really ask for help, I wanted to put men on stage and show them being vulnerable with each other in a way that felt honest and important. I fundamentally feel like many of the men who consider or complete suicide do in fact have relationships in place, often with other men, and there is support there if only those two guys can find a way to connect; if they can find a way to be vulnerable and ask for and offer help. What the play is really trying to encourage is for more of those conversations to happen. Ultimately, even though the play ends on far from what I would describe as a happy note, it's a life affirming one. It is one that celebrates the kind of connection that can happen between two people.

**TS:** Was there any other research that you had to do to write the play?

**AH:** I reached out to the Jed Foundation. They specialize in suicide prevention for college students. I explained what I was doing with this play and they were understandably a little wary. I imagine they thought, "Well, this looks like it might be treating the matter lightly, but let's find out more about it." I crafted a message that they sent out to a few of the folks they knew. A couple of young men who had attempted suicide and some parents who had lost their sons to suicide got in touch with me and I had conversations with them. Even though it was just a few conversations, it was really important in shaping the story. It was affirming to know that

# Andrew Hinderaker

some of the things I was going through, having lost my friend, were shared experiences. One of the parents I spoke with had become intensely involved in suicide prevention efforts and she said something to the effect of, "Well, you have to; that's the only thing you can do to keep going." That mentality is definitely apparent in the play.

**TS:** It sounds like you were fortunate to have people who were open to talking with you in a deep, personal way.

**AH:** They were extremely gracious. I talked to a young man who had attempted suicide and his story was incredible. I wouldn't feel comfortable sharing it because he's a writer and he's working on a book where he's talking about it, but the end is that a complete stranger ultimately saved his life. I once said, a little flippantly, that I thought you could distill everything I've written down to the very simple idea that we're capable of saving each other's lives. And I think that there is that element in this piece. Not that it's easy, not that it can work for everyone, and not in a way that negates the fact that people who commit suicide are almost always dealing with very severe mental illness.

**TS:** What was the most challenging part of writing this play and what was the most fun?

**AH:** The immediate answer in terms of what was the most fun was the opportunity to work with all of the people I've gotten to work with. I've been so lucky. The very first reading of the play was at Victory Gardens. And then I had the extraordinary opportunity to develop the play at the Seven Devils Playwrights Conference. They give you two weeks to develop a play in the mountains of Idaho and you work with these amazing actors. Immediately after that reading, we did a reading of the play at Steppenwolf, which Jonathan Berry, who's directing the play here, directed and Michael Thornton, who produced the play in Chicago, was in. One of the great joys of playwriting is being in the rehearsal room and being a part of the development process.

A few things are challenging. There's a scene in the play where a police officer comes in and it ultimately leads to a memory for the main character. I feel pretty good about how it's finally been orchestrated, but it took about forty drafts to structure that right. The other challenge is that it's a bit of a counterintuitive structure because the scenes get longer as we go through.

**TS:** Can you describe what you look for in a director and in casting actors for this piece?

**AH:** You look for someone who understands your writing, who can hear the cadences of it. It is a play where the rhythms are so important and you need somebody who gets that and gets where it's coming from. The humor at the top of the play is important to draw people in; to let people know that just because it's a serious topic, we're not going to treat it so seriously that we forget what is on the other side of the sadness.

One of the wonderful things about Jonathan Berry is he's a Midwestern dude about my age and we're from that same Midwestern, slightly awkward, earnest stock that understands that humor comes from a place of self-deprecation. I generally know within ten minutes of having a conversation with a director if they are right for the play. They get right to the heart of it. In conversations with Jonathan, he cut right to the chase and talked about loss in a very personal and profound way.

**TS:** Who are your favorite playwrights and do you find reading or seeing other plays helpful?

**AH:** I was reading an interview recently with Annie Baker and she was talking about a piece of advice she got from Mac Wellman saying, "There really is no great secret, the best playwrights are the best read playwrights." When I was in Chicago, I burned a hole through my Chicago Public Library card. Routinely, every month I'd take my little canvas tote bag and they would say, "I'm sorry the limit is thirty." That conversation happened a number of times. I was fortunate to be in a community where you could go and see interesting work. That is definitely the way I feed myself. I go back and read some of my favorite plays and am reminded of what theatre can do for me.

**TS:** What are those plays?

**AH:** *Shining City* by Conor McPherson is one. I really love Sam Hunter's work. I was just knocked on the floor when I read his play, *I am Montana*. *The Brothers Size* is a stunning piece of writing. In my bag right now I have *M. Butterfly* and *Amadeus* because I'm working on a piece that has a lot of direct address and I think they do that in such a brilliant way. *Topdog/Underdog* is a play I constantly go back to, I love that play. *Burn This*. *Red Light Winter*. *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. There are just so many writers right now that excite me. I dig Naomi Iizuka's and Julia Cho's work. I mentioned Annie Baker; her play, *The Aliens*, blew me away. *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity*, by Kris Diaz, reminded me how much fun theater can be. And I stumbled into one of the very first previews of *August: Osage County*, and got to watch an ensemble leave everything on stage, and fight for a piece of theater before it became a phenomenon. I'm going to walk out of here and there's going to be forty writers that I'm going to think of. I always go back to Chekhov and Shakespeare. Chekhov and Ibsen and the Chicago Bears and *Dumb and Dumber* shape how I write and probably in a combination that you don't necessarily find that often.

**TS:** You've started answering this next question. We have many students who will be very curious about your advice to someone who aspires to write. You've already said, "read".

**AH:** Yeah, there's no getting around it. And it's advice that I was given. To the extent that you can, see as many plays as you can. Ideally, see them and read them. I think that's the best thing you can do. I certainly appreciate that it can be tricky with the economics of it but there are often student discounts. If you're a little bit older, you can usher and go to shows for free. That's how I got into a lot of shows. Find out the companies and the places that are doing the kind of work you love, and get to know those people. If you are a huge sports fan or a fan of music or movies, you can filter that into your work. I'm a big believer in writing every day. Have fun and lean into the things that are joyful for you.

**TS:** I sense the joy you bring to your work, Andrew.

**AH:** I've been surrounded by such wonderful collaborators. That's once again proven to be the case here at Roundabout. It's such a great opportunity and I feel so excited about this show and this space. Putting this play in an ideal, intimate space with an ideal group of artists is pretty rare in my experience. It provides yet another opportunity to work with these extraordinary collaborators. Try to work with the most talented, fun people whose hearts are entirely in it. •



# Interview with the Director

*Ted Sod, Roundabout's Education Dramaturg, interviewed director Jonathan Berry to discuss the play.*

**Ted Sod:** Why did you want to direct *Suicide, Incorporated*?

**Jonathan Berry:** For this play, I think Andrew has so beautifully and painfully captured what it is to be a young man in the world. The play is remarkably clear-eyed and honest in its dealing with the challenges society places on men – the perception that all men must remain strong, that somehow the showing of emotion is a sign of weakness, and the damage that can occur when there is no release from that pressure. The image of the man being strong and silent has dominated our perception of what is “correct” and is so deeply embedded in our cultural understanding. I am grateful to be a part of a vehicle that addresses that bias head on, while at the same time being honest about the challenges men face and compassionate to those who are struggling with it. It’s great to be a part of a project that dares to voice a truth that is often ignored.

**TS:** How did you and Andrew come to collaborate on this play? What changes will there be, if any, in your approach to the play since first directing it in Chicago?

**JB:** I’m a believer that every theatrical process is best when all those involved are engaged and excited and bring the best of themselves to the work. So in many respects, my role as director is to put forth why I think doing this play is important, what I think the play is about, and then respond to what that inspires in the designers and actors. So my ideas about what the play is about hasn’t changed, but because I am working with entirely new people, they will, necessarily generate a completely unique response. I’m grateful for my intimate knowledge of the play and how it has to work on stage, and am excited to find, with this new team, a completely different path.

**TS:** What do you think the play is about?

**JB:** The play, for me, is about the struggles of being a young man in society today – specifically, the pressure that comes from trying to live up to this ideal of masculinity. The young man is made to feel like there are standards that he must uphold, and that failure, or the experience of pain or loss, is something that is not acceptable to express. By holding that in, we cut ourselves off from the very human connection that is required to make it through life. The play is about men who reach the critical point where the need for connection is so strong that they are faced with the choice of asking for help or ending their lives.



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

**JB:** A lot of the research was listening to or seeking out accounts of young men who attempted suicide, or reading survivor stories for those loved ones left behind. I read a lot of David Foster Wallace, specifically one of his graduation addresses that spoke about how he tried to function in the world – trying to get past the idea that everything is happening to you rather than the idea that things are just happening and you’re experiencing them.

I grabbed onto Kindlon and Thompson’s book *Raising Cain*, that speaks specifically of the emotional life of boys, and how boys grow up differently and the need to acknowledge that difference – how the basic wiring of boys remains more geared towards physicality and release and how the education system is changing to make that kind of release inappropriate, and the effect that it’s having on boys. I think that same study talks about parents’ response to babies crying and how that changes with gender – how girl babies are allowed to cry, while boy babies are more actively shushed and told not to.

I also work very visually, so I always have a lot of photos that feel right to me – that I somehow respond to emotionally, and then I try to work with the designers to determine what it is that creates that feeling for me. Same is true for music.

# Jonathan Berry

---

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

**JB:** With casting, all I'm ever really looking for is whether or not I believe the person is acting from a place of honesty. Once that's established, I think about the needs of the play and the traits of the character – what qualities does an actor have, that the character also has? What is their energy, what is the vibe they give off coming through the door?

Sometimes it is a physical thing – when we were casting Tommy and Jason, it was really important that the two people look like they could be brothers – so some physical similarities, and then also, the right age gap between them – as that relationship is crucial to the story telling.

I will try to give everyone some kind of adjustment, to see if they are able to listen to and take direction. Also, if they are clearly a good actor who just has a different take on the character, I need to see if they can be flexible and have a willingness to try something else.

Finally, I'm a big believer in intuition. Getting a read on what kind of person they are. The ethos of the room is really important to me, and a single person who is negative, or aggressive in a bad way, or is focused on the wrong thing can really turn a room quickly. I see it as putting together a team that has to work together – they need to be an ensemble, and I try to put people together who will be excited about working with each other.

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

**JB:** The key word that we've been focusing on with the design is pressure – I see that the play happens from Jason's perspective, so everything that the audience sees and responds to needs to be about supporting the feeling of Jason's experience. Jason puts an incredible amount of pressure on himself to be successful, and he sees no room for error. He is also trying to keep clean and control an emotional experience that defies order. He says, of his experience, that all the color has drained out of his life, going from color to black and white.

With the design, we've tried to create a space that feels a little blank, a white box that Jason has to manipulate to bring about the changes in scene to scene. Any changes in the space will be handled primarily by Jason, pushing one scene away, pulling another on. The design team has talked about the experience almost like a treadmill that keeps getting faster. It's manageable at first, but as it speeds up, you have the breathless lack of control and danger of falling. The sound design will support that, and the lights and costumes are working in a limited

palate to create focus, isolation, and a sameness to the world. If we're successful, your experience with the play should be one of pressure, of breathless increasing pace and finally, hopefully, one of release.

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

**JB:** For me, I don't have specific things that I do to recharge or to receive inspiration. I do see a lot of plays and love it when I see some kind of smart production idea that I've never seen before. But mostly, I try to find things that, while in process, make me think of the play. I find in trying to be open to that, if you're lucky, the world suddenly becomes filled with things that reflect the play. It can be a piece of music, or an image, or a movie or newspaper article.

I like photography a lot – both looking at and taking pictures. Particularly candid street photography – a photo that captures an honest moment, getting access to something that maybe should be private – I love collecting those – little life stories that inspire engagement. I try to just keep my eyes open. I see things all the time that I want to put on stage.

**TS:** 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?

**JB:** The most valuable thing for me, while directing, is my opinion. You are called on to make a lot of decisions and you need to know your point of view so you can have a clear response. So, at a young age, I'd actually practice having an opinion. When you read something, try to decide not just what you've read, but how you feel about what you've read.

The other thing I'd say is that theater is a social medium – you are in response to the world you are living in – so at an early age, I'd cultivate an awareness of the world. Read the newspaper, pay attention to the events in your school, state, nation, world. And be wary of just repeating other people's ideas. Try to stay interested in things outside the theater as well. Make yourself a citizen of the world. Theater, the best, most effective theater, is about illuminating commonalities between divergent people – bringing people together through shared experience. So I caution against isolating yourself too much – become a student of humanity, and find the commonality in people different from yourself. •

# What are the facts?

## *Understanding Suicide*

Some people think suicide is a problem that only impacts people who experience traumatic life events. In reality, suicide is generally the result of mental health conditions like depression. It can impact any family or community, so it's important to know the facts and know how to recognize and address the warning signs.

➔ More than **90 percent** of people who die by suicide have a treatable mental illness at the time of their death. The most common conditions are:

- Major depression (especially when combined with alcohol and/or drug abuse)
- Substance abuse and dependence
- Anxiety Disorders like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Bipolar disorder
- Drug abuse and dependence
- Eating disorders
- Schizophrenia

# 80%-90%

Depression is among the most treatable of psychiatric illnesses. Between **80% and 90%** of people with depression respond positively to treatment, and almost all patients gain some relief from their symptoms. But first, depression has to be recognized.

# 10th

Suicide is the  
**10th**  
leading cause of  
death in America.

Although most depressed people are not suicidal, most suicidal people are depressed.



---

# Warning Signs of Suicide

Observable signs of serious depression:

- *Unrelenting low mood*
- *Pessimism*
- *Hopelessness*
- *Desperation*
- *Anxiety, psychic pain and inner tension*
- *Withdrawal*
- *Sleep problems*

Increased alcohol and/or other drug use

Recent impulsiveness and taking unnecessary risks

Threatening suicide or expressing a strong wish to die

Unexpected rage or anger

Making a plan:

- *Giving away prized possessions*
- *Sudden or impulsive purchase of a firearm*
- *Obtaining other means of ending one's life such as poisons or medication*

*If you suspect someone is dealing with an emotional health issue like depression or is thinking about suicide, it is important to get them help or tell someone about your concerns as soon as possible. If someone you know is talking about a specific plan to end their life, you should not leave them alone and should call 9-1-1 immediately. If you are unsure about what to do, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for guidance or visit [www.halfofus.com/HelpAFriend.aspx](http://www.halfofus.com/HelpAFriend.aspx).*

# How can I help?

- ➔ Recognize the warning signs
  - ➔ Take it seriously
  - ➔ Express your concern
  - ➔ Listen
  - ➔ Don't be afraid to ask if they have thought about suicide
  - ➔ Empower the person to seek help
  - ➔ Suicide can be prevented through education and public awareness
- ➔ Use any of the following hotlines for emergencies:

• ***The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline***  
***1-800-273-TALK (8255) – 24 Hotline***

• *The Trevor Lifeline*  
*1-866-4-U-TREVOR (1-866-488-7386)*

- ➔ Use any of the following hotlines for non-emergencies and more information:

• *American Association for Suicidology*  
*1-202-237-2280*

• *The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention*  
*1-888-333-2377*

## FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

### **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**

Dedicated to understanding and preventing suicide through promoting education and advocacy  
*Visit at: [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)*

### **The Jed Foundation**

Focused on reducing the prevalence of emotional distress and rate of suicide among students.

*Visit at: [www.jedfoundation.org](http://www.jedfoundation.org)*

### **Half of Us**

A Peabody-Award winning multi-media campaign from The Jed Foundation and MTV that shares the real stories of high-profile artists and students who have dealt with mental health issues like depression and suicide.

*Visit at: [www.halfofus.com](http://www.halfofus.com)*

### **The Trevor Project**

Determined to end suicide among the LGBTQ youth and provide life-affirming resources.

*Visit at: [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)*

# Interview with Courtney Knowles

## *The Jed Foundation*

**Ted Sod:** Tell us about your work and the mission of the Jed foundation

**Courtney Knowles:** The Jed Foundation is a national nonprofit working to support emotional health and prevent suicide among college students. We offer programming and resources for campuses, students, parents and communities. We are connected to over 1,500 schools and millions of families in our efforts to change the way parents and students think about emotional health, help colleges create healthier and safer campus communities, and pave the way for more young people to get help if needed. You can learn more about our work at [www.jedfoundation.org](http://www.jedfoundation.org) or visit one of our sites for students at [www.ulifeline.org](http://www.ulifeline.org) or [www.halfofus.com](http://www.halfofus.com).

**TS:** How did you become aware of the play *Suicide, Incorporated*?

**CK:** Andrew contacted us when he was still writing the play as part of his research. He wanted to know more about the real stories of people and families dealing with suicide. He seemed very dedicated to understand both what it felt like to struggle with suicidal thoughts and how families dealt with a loss due to suicide. It's a difficult subject to incorporate into a theatrical experience and Andrew seemed really dedicated to doing it the right way.

**TS:** How did you respond to the play when you read and/or saw it?

**CK:** I was initially intrigued by the concept of the play. Obviously, a corporation that writes suicide notes isn't a pleasant idea, but it creates an effective context in which to talk about the perspective of someone so hopeless that they feel death is the only option. It's not a perspective we often see explored in TV, film or theater. For me, the most powerful take-away of the play is that we do have

the power to reach people who seem unreachable, and in doing so, we often help ourselves heal as well.

**TS:** What do you expect the play to bring up for people, both those who have been directly affected by suicide and those who have not?

**CK:** Suicide is an issue that is often confined to the shadows and, unless you've been personally impacted, it may not be something that is brought up or discussed much. Hopefully the play will help audience members become better able to recognize the warning signs of suicide in themselves or someone they know, and empower them to take action to help someone who may be struggling. Like in the play, sometimes just getting someone to consider the idea of getting help is a powerful first step.

For those who have been affected by suicide, I'm sure the play will bring up many different emotions – sadness, pain and even hope. I think knowing that stories are being told and that suicide is being discussed openly can bring feelings of hope that future tragedies can be avoided.

**TS:** What resources are available to people who have been affected by suicide or whose lives might be in danger?

**CK:** If you are having thoughts of suicide or are worried about someone you know, you can call 1-800-273-TALK for free, confidential help now. It's important to realize that people struggling with issues like depression or anxiety disorders are more likely to have thoughts of suicide. So it is critical to reach out and get help for any type of emotional health issue before things reach that point. You can learn more about mental health issues and suicide prevention through our campaign with MTV at [www.halfofus.com](http://www.halfofus.com). To find a mental health professional in your community, visit <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment>. •

# Interview with the Producer

*Ted Sod, Roundabout's Education Dramaturg, sat down with Roundabout Underground producer Robyn Goodman to discuss the play and her work with the Underground.*

**Ted Sod:** Will you explain the genesis of Roundabout Underground and your involvement?

**Robyn Goodman:** It starts back when I got involved as an artistic consultant. When Roundabout was creating the Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre off-Broadway, Todd came to me and asked if I would come work on the new plays that were going to be produced there. I wanted to, but I had a full time job as a producer on Broadway; so I offered to be a consultant who would find plays for Todd. It has developed into a much larger job now. There was a point at which he did a play by a young playwright and the critics were harsh and he was very upset about that. He thought maybe the Pels stage was too big a space for these young playwrights. I gave him a play entitled *Speech and Debate* by Stephen Karam and I told him we should do it in the Pels and he agreed that it was good, but he was reluctant to do it in that space. He thought the writer was young and he would get the show produced elsewhere. I said, "I don't want to do this play somewhere else, I want to do this play here because I think it's very special." He called me back and said "I've always wanted a black box theatre and there's a space underneath the Pels that I think we could turn into a black box just for young emerging writers like Stephen." I went and looked at the space and I said "let's give it a mission statement; let's say writers that haven't had a major production in New York, let's say we're giving them all the Roundabout resources in this small 65 seat space and I bet you the critics will understand what it is." And that's how it started. We did *Speech and Debate* and hired Jason Moore to direct it. It was reviewed beautifully and it was quite a success and it launched the idea. Now we're on our 6th play.

**TS:** *Speech and Debate* got hundreds of productions regionally after that.

**RG:** The great thing about the Underground is, if you look at the list of playwrights, Stephen Karam, Steven Levenson, Adam Gwon, Kim Rosenstock, and David West Read all launched their careers at the Underground. They all suddenly had attention, their plays were being done across the country, some of them got agents, some got commissions from Roundabout and other theatres. In fact, Stephen Karam's play, *Sons of the Prophet*, is going to be in the Pels this season. The Underground is now on the map and we get submissions all the time now. It's exciting to discover talent and give them their first shot; it's the best part of my job. The Underground is right up my alley.

**TS:** Tell me a little bit about choosing plays. How subjective is it? How much do you trust your intuition? How do you know it's a play for the Underground?

**RG:** We look for a voice, someone who writes in a way that's special.



We look for things we have never seen on a stage before or stories that are told in a way that we've never heard before. Characters that are unique, ways of approaching a subject that's unique. *The Dream of the Burning Boy*, for instance, was about a tragic incident in a high school and a very specific reaction of the people around the boy who died. But it was told in a way that's surprising and incredibly sensitive. *The Language of Trees* told a very real story with magical realism. *Speech and Debate* was just hilarious, and the characters were so specific and so wonderful. *Tigers Be Still* had quirky characters. In *Ordinary Days*, a through-sung musical, Adam Gwon was able to tell a story using only music and lyrics in very emotional ways. Each had its own special voice that we responded to.

**TS:** Do you have a vision for it beyond what's happening right now? Do you think it will stay with emerging writers?

**RG:** I think we offer a very important option for young playwrights in the theatre. It's not some basement downtown; it's a respected theatre that attracts critics and news, and if you want to launch your career, it's a fantastic place to do it. It launches careers, and what we do best is their first productions.

**TS:** I'd like to talk about *Suicide, Incorporated*. What do you think that play is about?

**RG:** It's a very interesting play because it begins as a dark satire about a business that is operating in order to help people write

# Robyn Goodman

---

their suicide notes. It's darkly funny at the beginning. There's this entrepreneur who saw a target market in men who commit suicide and he is exploiting their inability to express themselves, which is often a trait of men. He hires writers to help these men write more eloquent suicide notes. In walks a young man who is carrying some kind of secret, but wants a job as a writer, and the relationship between the entrepreneur and the writer gets very complicated during the course of the play. I would say both of them learn more about themselves because of their different points of view in life. It's an uplifting play, it turns a corner and shows the complexity of emotions that are sometimes hidden within people, how people negotiate the darkest moments in their lives, especially men. I think that it's about forgiveness and compassion, and survival. I think ultimately it has a very positive message.

**TS:** It does have a positive message and it surprises you because you're not quite sure where it's going to go. I found it very intriguing.

**RG:** The wonderful thing about the play is that it takes these turns that are so unexpected and I think the trick for the director is to negotiate those turns seamlessly, so that stylistically, it is of the piece. You want to ground the play in reality, and you want all the characters to be very real even when they're funny, so that you can follow through on what the playwright is trying to achieve, which is something that is very moving in the end.

**TS:** What about putting together a team for these productions? Do you work together with Josh Fiedler, Literary Associate, and Jill Rafson, Literary Manager, on the team or do you just find the director and let them pick the team?

**RG:** Josh, Jill and I work on every show together. The most important decision is the director, and then you share that decision with the playwright and sometimes I just make suggestions. You introduce people to those that you think they'll work well with and if they hit it off, then great; if not, you move on. It's a place for emerging directors as well, but sometimes I feel like the playwright needs a director that's a little more established because they need a little more guidance. The last few plays we've done we felt that these emerging directors were ready for the experience.

Once you have confidence in the director and their relationship with the playwright, we like to just know who they are thinking about. But I like to let them put their own teams together. Sometimes they ask for suggestions and we all have people we have seen and would like to give a chance to, but the director should be happy with their team. We ended up with Jonathan Berry, a Chicago director, for *Suicide, Incorporated* who had worked on the play before. We told him the one criteria is that it has to be a completely new cast and design team. So Jonathan came here and interviewed a bunch of designers and cast new people and picked the team he's excited about. That's the most important thing; that he feels like it's his team and that they can find a new vision.

**TS:** If a young person were to say to you that they wanted to do the type of work you do, what advice would you give them?

**RG:** Be brave. Every time I've done something I always felt like I was jumping off a cliff. When I started Second Stage Theatre with Carole Rothman, it was a wild crazy thing to do, but I just thought, "I'll just do the plays that Carole and I like and we'll just go from there." I found that I had a sensibility and a real response to work. That's what you have to find out: what is your own response to work? What is your vision? What turns you on? What it is that you respond to? You have to work very hard and pursue it with great passion in order to make a life in the theatre.

**TS:** I believe you worked as a producer on a soap opera as well, didn't you?

**RG:** I produced "One Life to Live". I was the supervising producer for almost five years.

**TD:** Do you feel like that work has helped make you brave?

**RG:** Yes! No question. Because I didn't know anything about cameras. I had acted in front of cameras in my day, but I really didn't know anything about producing television or working with camera men. But as a very wise person said to me, "You know a lot about writing, acting, and directing; the technical stuff you'll pick up." And she was right, I learned a lot. The biggest thing I learned besides editing and all the technical stuff was soap operas are incremental story telling and you have to take a long form story that tells a story that you're supposed to tell over six months and break it up into little one hour shows. And in the theatre when you deal with a playwright, you're trying to draw out what the playwright wants to do in the most successful way you can, by encouraging them, asking questions, bouncing ideas off each other; it's a very nurturing process. I think the soap made me a better producer, a better dramaturge and someone who understands movement of storytelling.

**TS:** Soaps remind me of the Dickens serials; those stories were told over time as well.

**RG:** Dickens, all those great people who wrote in magazines, it's serial writing and I was reading them the whole time I was doing soaps. In theatre, when you're working with the playwrights, it's a gentler process. I think there's a gut thing about helping someone tell their story and I guess I've developed it. I feel like there are ways in which I can help writers be better at what they're trying to say.

**TS:** Is there a question you wish I had asked about the play? Or the *Underground*?

**RG:** The one thing that I would like to say about *Suicide, Incorporated* is that I don't want people to be afraid of it. I don't want them to come in thinking they're going to see a play about someone committing suicide. They're going to laugh some and they're going to go on a fascinating journey that ultimately gives them hope and uplifts them. Everyone has been through loss and darkness on some level and this play has a very positive message about that. •



# Interview with the Associate Producers

*Ted Sod, Roundabout's Education Dramaturg, sat down with Roundabout Underground associate producers Jill Rafson and Josh Fiedler to discuss the play and their work with the Underground.*

**Ted Sod:** How do you define Roundabout Underground?

**Josh Fiedler:** I would describe Roundabout Underground as a place to debut works from artists who haven't been produced in New York.

**Jill Rafson:** It's a place where we can take risks and help launch the next generation of artists, particularly in terms of the playwrights and directors. It's also meant to be the start of an artistic relationship between Roundabout and those writers. In addition to doing that first play, we commission them to write another work and will hopefully continue that relationship for a long time.

**TS:** Can you talk about your process in finding scripts, reading scripts and choosing scripts?

**JF:** Most of the scripts come from agents we work with. It's a very rare event that we are sent an unsolicited script that we read and fall in love with. Our second play, *The Language of Trees*, was written by Steven Levenson, who was an actor in a reading of *Speech and Debate*. He said to Robyn, "Would you mind reading a play that I wrote, too?" We all read it and loved it and then we helped him get an agent. But that's a rare event. When you read so many plays, about ten-twenty pages in, you usually have a good idea if you're responding to the piece or not. And the ones that we've chosen for the Underground are the ones that you just don't want to stop reading.

**JR:** We tend to go for plays of ambition. We're looking for a voice and somebody who isn't just going to write one good play, but someone we think has a lot of potential in them. Todd [Haimes, Artistic Director] always says, "It's a space where we can aim high" because we can take the risk there. One of the times that we brought a play to Todd and he ended up not wanting us to move ahead, the play was a really strong comedy. Todd basically said, "It's a funny play, but I want to do shows there where we're not just going to succeed or fail based on how funny they think it is. I want us to be aiming for something a little bit bigger than that." And so that's something we really took to heart, and I think that the plays we've chosen have reflected that.

**TS:** Let's talk about *Suicide, Incorporated*. Can you relive your response to the play when you read it?

**JF:** I think I received *Suicide, Incorporated* right around the time when there was a series of suicides of young people in the news like Tyler Clementi. It was in the birth of that whole "It Gets Better"



movement and I thought "this play obviously must be about suicide. I feel icky even reading it." I sat down and I read it and ten pages in, I was still feeling icky. But then as I kept reading, the play turned into something I completely didn't expect it to. It was hopeful, it was heartfelt and it dealt with the subject matter very delicately.

**JR:** When I was reading *Suicide, Incorporated*, I didn't quite know what to do with it. I put it aside for a while because it was sort of scary. But I read it a second time, around the time when Robyn and Josh read it, and I realized that it wasn't cavalier at all. It starts in this high concept place, in this borderline absurd place with a company that helps you write suicide notes, which is kind of a crazy idea. But the journey it takes you on is so carefully navigated that you get from this place of borderline absurdity to a place of real honesty and as Josh said "hope". That's surprising and I think it's what makes the play so special.

**JF:** And we're rarely surprised. Honestly. It's rare that a play genuinely takes a turn in a positive way that you didn't expect. And that's what I love most about this play.

**TS:** What do you think *Suicide, Incorporated* is about?

**JR:** I think it's about asking for help. Andrew talks about questions of masculinity a lot. I know that's a big theme for him and it does run through all of his work. I think *Suicide, Incorporated* really

# Jill Rafson and Josh Fiedler

---

displays that. It's about, "What does it mean to be a man? Are men allowed to ask for help? What happens to those who do? What happens to those who don't?"

**JF:** I actually really like, "What happens to those who do, what happens to those who don't?" To go even further, just because you do ask for help, doesn't always mean you make the right choices. It's about the choices you make and the consequences of those choices, whether positive or negative. It's also about growing up and how the choices you make effect the rest of your life.

**JR:** When you put that in the context of suicide, there's no going back. That's what makes the play so heightened, not only within the concept of the play, but just in terms of the actions that these characters take, because once you've made that decision, there's no changing it. The play is cathartic in a lot of ways. It's a complex play and no one should go in thinking they know where it's going, because believe me, you don't. This was one of the rare occasions where we did a reading and within five minutes of it ending, we had agreed to produce the play. It has an immediate impact and I think that people just need to go in without any assumptions.

**TS:** Can we talk about the Underground space? How much does your mind go to, "Will this play work in this space?"

**JR:** Well, once you've done a musical where people throw things off a rooftop (*Ordinary Days*) in that space, you realize that it really can achieve a lot of things that wouldn't necessarily seem to make sense for such an intimate space. Obviously, we have to keep in mind a certain cast size because you have to be practical. But so far we haven't really found ourselves terribly limited by that.

**TS:** Once the play is chosen, how do you decide on the director and the design team?

**JF:** As we see a director's body of work, we get a feel of what their skill set is and what they respond to. In *The Dream of the Burning Boy*, for example, we had wanted to work with Evan Cabnet for a long time and he kept sending us plays that we liked but we didn't feel like they were right for the Roundabout. Then *Burning Boy* came along and we had the playwright, David West Read, and Evan meet and they clicked from the beginning. Actually, it's a partnership that's continuing. David's next play is going to be directed by Evan as well.

**JR:** In the case of *Burning Boy*, it was a perfect match of experience levels so that they could help each other. David really came to the process with fresh eyes and Evan could guide him through that. For *Suicide, Incorporated*, Jon Berry is somebody who we didn't know at all. We knew his reputation and we knew that our playwright loved him.

**JF:** We got to know Jonathan during the casting process, and it was clear from the start that he connected with the play and would be

a welcome addition to our team.

**JR:** In terms of the design team, because Jon comes out of the Chicago scene, he wasn't as familiar with New York designers. So in this case, we probably made more suggestions about a design team than we normally would. Jon met with a whole bunch of people and found the ones he clicked with the best. Three of the four of them are new to us. They're people that we know by reputation or whose work we've seen.

**TS:** Can we talk a little bit about your vision for the future? What would you like to see happen at Roundabout Underground?

**JR:** The Underground answers the need that we've seen out there for giving artists full productions to get their careers started. So we just want to do more. We want to see this program keep going; we want to be able to do more productions each year and we want to be able to keep these playwrights around. Stephen Karam is the perfect example. Seeing him go from being our first playwright produced in the Black Box to having his play, *Sons of the Prophet*, done at the Laura Pels is absolutely perfect, and we would love to see similar trajectories for all of these writers.

**TS:** If a young person came up to either one of you and said, "I want to do what you do." What would you say to them?

**JR:** Read a lot of plays. I don't know if there's one particular path to follow to get into the area that we're in.

**JF:** When I moved here, the most beneficial thing to me was whenever I saw a show I liked and felt was my taste, I'd look at that portion of the playbill that tells you who the producing and creative team is. I saw *Avenue Q* and I said I have to work for the people who made that. I saw the name Robyn Goodman and through a form of kismet, I ended up working for her.

**JR:** For me, it was getting into organizations that I had heard about and was excited to be a part of and figuring out how they worked. Lucky for me, one of my first internships was with the Roundabout and they haven't been able to get rid of me since. I think that we're really lucky that the Underground started while we were already here. And our roles have changed a huge amount since this program got on its feet.

**JF:** We're definitely blessed that Robyn and Todd trust and believe in us. The amount of faith and trust that they put in us is really wonderful. It doesn't go unnoticed and we're very thankful for it.

**JR:** We're really lucky to have people who believe in mentoring and I think that has made us interested in mentoring other people who are just starting out. Maybe that's one of the reasons we feel so invested in the Underground because we know how important it was for people to take a chance on us and to give us a lot of responsibility early on. So here we are trying to do the same thing for others now. •

# When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

## TICKET POLICY

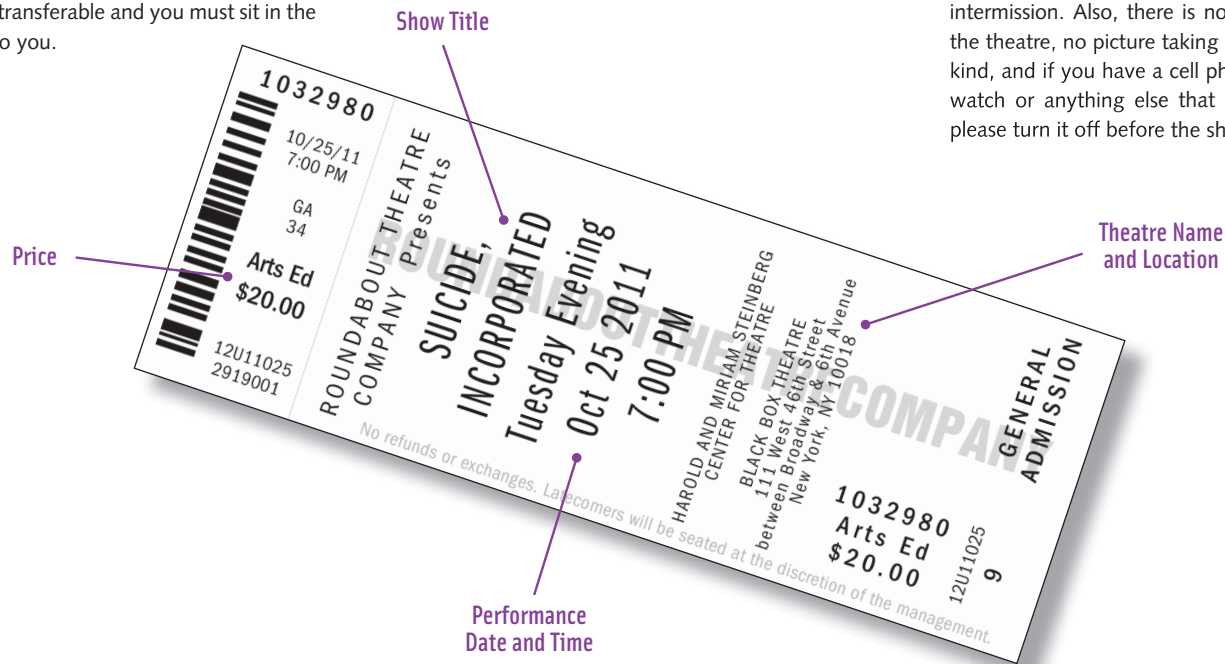
As a student participant in Producing Partners, Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

## PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

## AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM:

The Aeroflex Foundation  
Anonymous  
Rose M. Badgeley Residuary Charitable Trust  
Bank of America  
Theodore H. Barth Foundation  
Arlene and Harvey Blau  
Lisa and Dick Cashin  
Goldman Sachs Gives at the recommendation of  
R. Martin Chavez  
Citi Foundation  
Lisa Pevaroff Cohn and Gary Cohn  
Consolidated Edison Company of New York  
Kenneth DeRegt  
New York State Assemblyman Herman D. Farrell,  
Jr.  
Barbara Lee and Alston Gardner  
Jodi Glucksman  
Jeanne and Tom Hagerty  
The Heckscher Foundation for Children  
Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust

Muna and Basem Hishmeh  
Elroy and Terry Krumholz Foundation  
Mark J. Manoff  
Andrew Martin-Weber  
Marsha Mason  
David and Anita Massengill  
Gilda and John P. McGarry, Jr.  
The McGraw-Hill Companies  
Mellam Family Foundation  
Kathryn Myers  
Neuberger Berman  
New York City Department of Cultural Affairs  
New York State Council on the Arts  
New York State Department of Education  
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and  
Historic Preservation  
New York State Assemblyman Daniel J.  
O'Donnell  
Charles R. O'Malley Charitable Trust  
Victoria and Paul Orlin

Gordon B. Pattee  
Lisa and Gregg Rechler  
Richmond County Savings Bank  
Rick Rickertsen  
Chuck and Deborah Royce  
Bill Rudin  
The Rudin Foundation  
Adolph and Ruth Schnurmacher Foundation  
Mary and David Solomon  
New York State Senator Jose M. Serrano  
Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund  
Michael Tuch Foundation  
Beth Uffner  
Edward and Stella Van Houten Fund  
The Walt Disney Company  
New York State Assemblywoman Helene E.  
Weinstein  
The Winston Foundation

Education programs at Roundabout are made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of Governor Cuomo and the New York State Legislature; and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

