

INTERVIEW WITH the **ACTOR**: Julie White

UPSTAGE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH TONY AWARD-WINNING ACTRESS JULIE WHITE ABOUT HER ROLE IN *THE UNDERSTUDY*, ROXANNE, THE STAGE MANAGER.

What made you decide to become an actress?

I've told this story before. I was late for my English class so many times that I had built up like three hours of detention, and I came after school to do my three hours with the English teacher. He was also the head of the drama department, and he was having auditions for *Guys & Dolls*. So I sat there and watched all these other kids audition—specifically for Miss Adelaide—and I was like, “Wait a minute. I could do that. I could do that way better than any of them.” So I asked him if I could audition, if he would cut my three hours down to two if I agreed to potentially humiliate myself. He said yes. So I auditioned and I got it.

Have you been singing since?

I sang a little in my first show. The show that actually brought me here was *The Baker's Wife* by Stephen Schwartz and Joseph Stein. My first show when I came to New York was the musical *Lucky Stiff*.

You strike me as someone who can see the humor in the roles you play, who has real gifts as a comedienne. Is that something you were born with?

I can't tell if it is nature versus nurture or something. But definitely my response to hardship is generally to see the funniness in it. To see what's amusing. And I love to laugh.

Was the part of Roxanne, the stage manager, written for you?

I couldn't say for sure, but I know that is what was written with me in mind.

I think it's an ideal role for you.

I like doing Theresa Rebeck's stuff. I think I just get the humor in it and the resilience of the characters that she writes for me to play.

You were in her play *Bad Dates*, right?

Yes.

And you were in *Spike Heels* too?

I was.

So, you've done quite a bit of Rebeck?

Yes. I also did a play called *The Family of Mann*.

Tell me a little bit about what it's like to do a play by a female writer, and Rebeck in particular.

What's it like to act in a play by a woman? I've done a lot of that. Mainly, of course, because what I'm drawn to doing in a play is a great character. Of course, a woman

could write a play about anything, but very often in a play written by a woman there are female protagonists or the central story is also about a woman. So those are the good parts to play. I certainly don't confine myself to it.

Do you find that a woman's perspective is different from a man's? Or is that too reductive?

Each individual playwright's perspective is different, whether it be that of a man or a woman. They are coming from their own individual set of what their belief systems are, what is important to them. For example, Liz Flahive, she's a wonderful young writer whose play, *From Up Here*, I just did last year at Manhattan Theater Club. She was writing about young people, and I played the parent of a troubled teen. She was writing about her recent past. She was only like 24 or 25 when she started working on the play. On the other hand, sometimes you do a play by someone later in their life, like when I did Donald Margulies' play *Dinner with Friends*; he was sort of at a mid-life place and sort of wrote about that perspective—about people who were in their late 30s and 40s. It is where you catch them in their development. Playwrights are people too, so they write about what's happening in their lives or what interests them in their lives.

Tell me a little bit about the part of Roxanne. I know you haven't started rehearsals, but do you have any impressions of who she is at this point?

Well, not more than is actually indicated in the writing. What Theresa mainly does is give me these great obstacles. Roxanne has a huge obstacle from the very get-go of the play, from the minute she sees Harry. I'm under such duress in this play. It'll be really interesting to work on it, to see how we work through it, because I feel like there's a change in Roxanne by the end of the piece.

Do you think that change is precipitated by interacting with the character of Harry?

A little bit. Yes, by getting to see him after all these years, never seeing him or having spoken to him after he did that dreadful thing.

What is the first thing you did when you got the script? Read it and then...?

This play I've had for a couple of years. I've been reading drafts of this play for a while now. I've been sort of living with it and thinking about it. I'm about four weeks out from rehearsal now, and what I will probably



do is just take it with me—I'm going out of town for a little bit—and try and read it in the morning and read it before I go to bed. I'll actually start learning it. I started doing that with *Bad Dates*, because how can you start rehearsing a play if you are holding a script in your hand? I don't know how to work on a play until I know it. So I'll learn a lot of it before we start. Or I'll have it down pretty well in my head. Not letter perfect. I find that it's the old Spencer Tracy thing—"Learn your lines and don't bump into the furniture." Step one is definitely to learn the lines because how can you work it until you know what you are saying? Then you can really deeply learn what you are saying as you rehearse it.

Tell me a little bit about research. Will you talk to a lot of stage managers?

No. I know so many stage managers so well. They are just great people in general. I mean Roxanne was an actress at one point who gave that up because it was just too insane. I think she wasn't willing to deal with the craziness of waiting for the call every day and would rather have a more hands-on job behind the scenes.

What do you think the play is about?

I think a key to the show has always been Laura, the unseen character in the booth.

You mean the stoner technician, right?

Yes. And no matter what I ask for she doesn't give me what I ask for. Like I'll ask for the bar scene, and she'll bring in the interrogation room. So we just end up doing that instead. In some ways I think she is representative of God. I think that you ask God for what you think you need, and you don't get it. And I think there's something like that with Laura. Is God just a big stoner and everything is random? Or is there method to that madness? Is there an intelligence to that order, or is it just random? I think that's the great question of the play—how does one deal with that crazy stoner, God? Maybe at the end of the day you just got to do a dance.

What about the play within the play—the whole Kafka thing. Do you have any idea what the play within the play is about?

You mean the actual story of that play?

Yes. The play *Harry, Roxanne and Jake* are rehearsing is a "lost" play of Kafka's. It feels like sometimes the play we are watching is mirroring some Kafkaesque world. Do you agree?

Completely. It's incredibly clever how Theresa's weaving that in and out. And by making the undiscovered piece be by Kafka, she's giving you themes through the play. She is telling you what we're dealing with; it's kind of absurd existentialism. What they always identify with Kafka is whether he believed there was a God or not.

This play also deals with the hierarchy of actors. I know you probably know a lot about this because you've done television, movies and plays. Do you think there is a kind of snobbery about theater actors versus film actors?

Well, sure. The world of show business is a very complicated hierarchical lunch room. Who gets to sit at the fancy table; and who gets to be student body president; and who are the drama nerds at the drama table. I think the theater actors are probably still perceived as the drama nerds. The ridiculousness, the absurdity of the hierarchy, is what Theresa is dealing with in the play, along with the hierarchy in Kafka. He's always looking at office politics. And in some ways it's about Harry and where he fits in. You know how in *Metamorphosis* Kafka famously had that guy wake up as a giant cockroach.

What do you look for in a director?

I've worked with Scott Ellis on *Little Dog Laughed*. He directed it off-Broadway, on Broadway and then again in Los Angeles. I love working with him because I know Scott so well. I really trust him. You are letting the director be your eyes and ears, telling you how to tell the story the way you want to tell it. So you really have to trust him. I trust Scott a lot—I trust him to have good taste; I trust him to have a sense of humor. I look for directors whose judgment I trust. ([click here to see a clip of Julie White's performance in *Little Dog Laughed*](#))

Can we talk a little bit about what advice you might give to a young person who says they want to be an actor?

Don't do it! You have to be very brave because most of the time you are going to hear something that is a variation on the word "no." "No, you didn't get it. No, you're not right for it. No, you can't get an audition for it." So you have to really, really, really want to do it. And really believe in yourself. 🍷