

INTERVIEW WITH

the DIRECTOR: Scott Ellis

UPSTAGE SAT DOWN WITH *THE UNDERSTUDY* DIRECTOR SCOTT ELLIS, WHO ALSO SERVES AS ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY'S ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR.

Why did you want to direct *The Understudy*?

I got the script from Williamstown. Nicky Martin, the artistic director there, said, "You should look at this." So he sent it and I really liked it. And I said, "Ok." I had never read one of Theresa Rebeck's plays before. It was as simple as that.

Did you direct readings of the play at Roundabout first?

Yes. I said to Theresa, who had heard it once, that I'd like to hear it, so we did a small reading just for her and the three actors. She worked on it, and then I said, "Let's do it at the Roundabout in the subscriber program in front of a larger audience," and that went well. Then we brought it to Williamstown. My intent was always to bring it back to the Roundabout.

You've been working in both worlds, theatre and television, and there seems to be something in the play about the hierarchy of actors in different mediums. Did that appeal to you?

I am going to have to say no. The only appeal was that it was a good play and I liked it. It made me laugh, and it made me care about the people. To me that was it.

Tell me about casting. You had a whole other cast at Williamstown.

It's unusual that I'll be doing a play with a whole different cast—I've never done that before. Julie White did the reading originally. She was cast in it and then couldn't do it in Williamstown. But I always knew that if I did it in New York, I would go back to her to do it. So I always had her in mind anyway. The other two roles were cast up in Williamstown, and they've been recast here. Bradley Cooper had a film, and Reg Rogers chose to do another play. But I am beyond thrilled with the cast that we have.

Justin Kirk, who is playing Harry, is a TV star now; he is a very interesting choice and I think he's just got that right dry quality.

And Mark-Paul Gosselaar was Zack on *Saved By the Bell*, but he's never done theater. He auditioned for me and he was great. He had a great audition, and I figured, let's try this.

What this play made me realize when I read it is that we are asked to play certain roles in life. Not just in our business lives, but all the time. And I'm really fascinated by the aborted romance between

Harry and Roxanne. Do you find that an interesting part of the script?

People try to put other people in certain categories. You walk in and you are cast, you are typed. I'm typed, you're typed, it doesn't matter. We are all typed the minute we walk in a room. That can change once they get to know you or they see something else, but we are attracted to people because they are a type. We hire people because they are a type. That's just how human nature works. Harry comes in and thinks Jake is just this stupid action star. Jake thinks Harry is a non-talented actor who is an understudy. Harry now sees his ex, Roxanne, as a stage manager who was an actress. There are these constantly shifting feelings as far as what you are expecting from each individual.

Do you have any idea what the Kafka play within the play is about?

I had Theresa write a little bit of what it was about so the actors could follow the play and know what was going on. But the audience is not there to care about the Kafka play; you don't need to follow that through.

Roxanne and Harry were together as a couple, then he left her and now they are together again as if by fate. That relationship could be seen as sort of Kafkaesque—would you agree?

Yes, there's a way that Kafka dealt with women, and that's how Harry deals with women. There was a commitment, and then he left. Kafka basically did the same thing.

When *Front & Center*, our subscriber magazine, talked to Theresa Rebeck, the author, she said that she felt that this was one of her most tender-hearted plays. Do you see that?

Yeah, totally. It's about love, it's about the love of theater, it's what people do for the art, how much passion they have for it, why we all do it. In fact, at the end, they continue to rehearse, and that speaks volumes. We don't do it for the money. The one person who does do it for the money is Bruce, who gives it all up to go do a big action movie for a lot of money, and the other characters aren't like that. They are passionate about the work.

Tell me something about the sets. They feel like another character to me.

Actually, the character who represents the sets is Laura. She is a character we never see. The way we see that

character behave is through the movement of the sets. The sets are important because there is something going on constantly with lighting, sound and the settings that make the off stage character of Laura important.

How did you collaborate with Alexander Dodge, the set designer? Had you ever worked with him before?

No, I had not worked with him before. Nicky Martin had suggested him. It was a good collaboration—it was a great collaboration. It took us a little bit to get it. In Williamstown we had the challenge of doing it on a smaller stage and how to make that work. And, in fact, it helped us here because we're on a small stage in New York too. The challenge was finding how to get to these constantly changing sets to work. You couldn't see anyone on stage moving them of course. They had to be magically moving because it's all supposed to be happening immediately.

Tell me about the designers for lighting and costumes.

Kenny Posner, who I've worked with before and Tom Broecker, who also did costumes for *Streamers*, is designing the clothes—he's great. I met him through *30 Rock*. He does costume design for *30 Rock*.

You've directed for *30 Rock*, *Weeds*, and *Nurse Jackie*. Do you still love the theater as much as you used to?

Oh, absolutely. I love it. My thing is—I don't do television unless I know I'm doing theater. I've never said yes to a TV show unless I knew I had a theater job coming up.

But don't you feel there are similarities? Do you feel like you are rehearsing a one act when you are doing a TV show?

Yes, there are similarities. Listen, you are telling a story. You tell it in a different way, and you have to tell it in a very fast way in television. That's hugely different. Then you are telling the audience where to look through the use of a camera lens whereas in theater you are doing it in a lot of different ways. I think the biggest thing is that it's just very fast in television. You still have to ask the same questions.

You don't see a difference in the actors, do you? Harry has a prejudice against Jake and Bruce, but that's more out of professional jealousy than reality, right?

I'm fortunate that most of the actors I've worked with



on television shows—*Nurse Jackie*, *Weeds*—come from theater. I think people who don't come from theater can get wrapped up in this Hollywood stuff, and it's not about the work—it's about something else. I've definitely run into that, but for the most part I've been lucky that the actors I've worked with on TV have been good actors, and they've been theater-based.

I wanted to end with talking a little bit about how you are going to prepare for this. You've done it before. Do you have to do anymore work after that?

First of all, it's three new actors, so my challenge is to wipe the other production out of my head. That's really what I've got to do. The design is the same. We up scaled it a little bit and made it better, but the structure of the piece we kept because it worked. Blocking, actors, relationships -- that's all going to be different because we have three new actors. So that for me really is the challenge -- to let it be what it's going to be with these three people and not bring my preconceived ideas from the other production to the table. It's a different ball game. ^{UP}