

and are shocked to see how relevant they are.

I remember the first time I read *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and listening to those guys talk. It was the first time that I read a play and felt like I was sitting in the room with those people, even though they were a bunch of 60-year old black guys from the 1930s. There's the way things look different now, but a bunch of places in the south are still like that.

The things those people are dealing with are what we're dealing with. It goes to show what problems and issues are timeless. Things change, but people don't.

If you're doing it right, especially in plays, you're looking at forever stuff, not what's trending.

It goes back to the conceit that if you just write very honestly from yourself and are aware of where you come from, I think that's what's going to work the best.

What draws you to the short play form?

I used to dog the idea of a ten-minute play because it seemed like something you'd do for a class, that there'd be no life beyond, which seemed pointless. It's incredibly tricky to start and finish a play in such a short period. You've barely had time to establish anything much less put those touches on it that distinguish it as a piece of theatre. I'm pretty sure it would be easier to write a ten-hour play.

The rewarding part is finishing it: stripping it to shreds, and not going back...spending a brief and concise period of time getting it done and being able to honestly step back, look at it, and say, "okay I think we're good."

What projects next excite you?

The ones where I can be a part of a great team. I had several collaborative opportunities when I was younger but always defaulted to the notion of too many cooks in the kitchen burns the meal. Now I feel the opposite: get me in a room full of writers. Piggybacking Greg DePaul's comments in his interview – it's good to have a group of people whom you know and respect ask something of you. That's the best way to get something done. I'm over the moon about this whole process, and I hope to have a long-lasting relationship with The Collective. Even though the group is a really talented bunch of actors, they focus more on their mission and less on assigning themselves stage time.

My favorite piece of theatre of all time was *Black Watch*: a full-on theatre experience that was lightning striking once because of the alchemy engendered by the people involved. I saw it six times and each one was like church. I'd love to do something like that.

I love a great story. I always preferred seeing plays over movies because you're in the room. My theatre heroes are masters of emotional and physical violence. Any great play leaves the stage shattered with either kind of bloodshed.

I'm 32, and go on wikipedia and I look up Edward Albee to I make sure that I'm not older than the age he was when he wrote *Zoo Story*, because that was his first big play. I think for a lot of writers, no one cares what a 28-year old has to say about life. Of course there are exceptions, but I think you need to get some dirt on you.



A DIALOGUE WITH THE PLAYWRIGHTS:
MATTHEW K. WEILAND
Breaking Up With My Mother

MATTHEW K. WEILAND sat down with ensemble member Lisa Kicielinski to assess a decade-long editing process, becoming our parents, and what to do with the lottery ticket you find in your pocket.

LK: Where are you from?

MW: I was born and raised in Lakewood, Ohio, just west of Cleveland along the lake on a street beside the Rocky River. For a number of reasons, it was a great place to grow up and enjoy an extended adolescence.

I now live just over the bridge from where I grew up in the city of Rocky River.

Where did the idea for *Breaking Up with My Mother* come from?

When my dad died, I moved home from New York to live with my mom for a time and help her readjust. This play is about a mother and son, living together after the death of the father and husband, dealing with the reality of living together as two adults in close quarters during a difficult time.

It's based on a relationship dynamic and the circumstances that press upon that.

How did you arrive at the 10-minute form?

I initially had the title, which generated some catchy phrases: a Freudian fantasia; an umbilical discord; an Oedipal wreck. From those musings I wrote a short story about a decade ago, a story that received some encouragement from people I respect. I then promptly set it aside for some ten years or so.

The 10-minute play format has resuscitated the story, I think, because you jump right in. You end up experiencing a major moment in time for these two people, a time when truth rises to the surface and the dynamic changes. In ten minutes we can meet and discover this mother and son and the tension they're feeling about the process they're dealing with at this particular moment in time. These ten minutes are a pivotal time in this relationship, and so are the jumping off point toward a new dimension.

These are two balanced characters – they each have flaws, and they each have a righteous point at the same time, and a lot to fight for: how each meets his or her memories, and this loss, will determine, the success of their futures.

Hopefully the camaraderie also comes through...two people who can call bullshit on each other and who can also sit side by side on bar stools and laugh at the absurdities of life – these are two individuals in a life-long relationship.

For me, short plays have a sort of all-crescendo quality to them, so identifying and amplifying the right moments in time – with minimal exposition – can be especially challenging, particularly if you don't want the characters to be shrill.

What's rewarding, though, is that tight parameters keep you honest. You don't have time to luxuriate in the sound of your own language. You have to keep it moving and keep it real.

How is your experience different with the play versus the story version?

The community created by collaboration, for me, is the ultimate gratification of theatre. One of the most challenging facets of writing is the vacuum in which you work, and to have a piece benefit from the views of others is a blast as well as a blessing.

What is it like to revisit material after years, with a new perspective?

You want your first to be a perfect draft, but part of my karma, my path in life, is to deal with the reconciling – and the fact that things take a long time. You start to check your expectations and remember why you do this – for the craft and the process as much as the product.

I like having written; I don't always like the process of writing. Twenty years ago, I had a different sense of what I wanted to accomplish, and now, I'm glad to make a living in my field.

I read Richard Ford's *Independence Day* every ten years in July, because that's when it's set. I read it this past July, and I saw new things, and I understand the world in some different ways, so I know coming back to something gives you a whole new understanding of nuance and subtlety and dimension.

The most recent draft of *Breaking Up With My Mother* has helped me understand silence... how that speaks to history. You don't need to fill up every moment with talking, like in life. These long gestations have given me a trajectory to understand things more.

How does it feel to see this little kernel of your actual history, even escalated and fictionalized, as a play?

You don't want to be solipsistic – as in “This is happening to me, so it's important that I share it with everyone.” And that's kind of what's happening in our culture.

It's a strange experience in that you create in a vacuum, and you try to be as honest as you can be, with organic, authentic feelings, and then the time comes to put it on stage, and you're like, “Whoa! Hold on a minute.”

Ultimately though – it's a story. At some point it gets divorced from its reality. It's a story on its own, regardless of the characters' names. So I don't worry too much – because it's more universal than personal at this point.



We know that it's the specifics that make things universal. For example, the very specific list of items Matt finds in his father's coat pocket: you write not that Matt finds “a handful of change,” but that he pulls out \$1.38. Every one of us would remember exactly how much was there if we discovered the last things our loved one touched... whether the pack of Certs was open or not, and that it was Certs and not Lifesavers... and each of those items is filled with a lifetime of context. Only the actors and the readers of the short story will even get to see some of those particular details in the script, but what a gift of specificity to cut right to the universal, heart-rending reality of this moment of inheriting these items and moving forward.

All this half finished life is in that pocket: there's a lottery ticket waiting to be redeemed... life interrupted in a way.

One of the things this play is about is the inevitability of genetics. We become our parents in some ways whether we want to or not, and you can't pick and choose what qualities: I would've rather have my father's waistline and my mother's hairline, but I have the opposite. That element of seeing those habits in yourself is sometimes creepy. And then I put that relationship element of someone's significant other on top of that. Matthew hugs his mom goodbye, and doesn't know if she's hugging him or his father.

What are your inspirations?

Finding something to be inspired by is almost a daily quest, much like food and love, and you often take it where you can find it on any given day. I look for the serendipitous times when a voice registers with the rhythms of my own life.

Lately, I've been inspired by the work – and the vocation – of Barbara Ehrenreich. I'm also stoked by virtually anything Ken Burns does on PBS; I find myself in a greater state of alertness and appreciation. Quietly witnessing a small gesture of kindness can also do the same.

There's a moment I always remember, as a prime theatrical moment at a Steppenwolf production of *A Summer Remembered* where company member Gary Cole (Bill Lumbergh to many) played a father chastising his son. The Gary Cole character takes the boy off stage where you can hear the sounds of beating while the uncle and cousin wait outside. Cole returns, looping up his belt and glaring. And I was so struck by it...just frozen. I truly had to cough, but I really thought that if I did so, Gary Cole would come out into the audience and kick my ass. It was as riveting – and as frightening – as anything I've ever experienced in art.

What next projects excite you?

On the back and side burners are four or five projects, each of which is something nice to think about while walking during the early morning hours.

I don't use the word “lucky” ever, because it suggests that life is just chance, so I like to say that this has been a fortunate year. Then you gotta' figure out how to deal with that. Because that doesn't mean you wake up happy every day. I got some aches and pains, and I'm aware of the mortality of my body, but I have to say that I got the creative and professional opportunities that I asked for this year, which makes you want to take a walk and get some shit done – to use those opportunities to grow, but first to enjoy.