

Q&A WITH PLAYWRIGHT BRUCE GRAHAM



Playwright Bruce Graham

Bruce Graham is a Philadelphia-based playwright and screenwriter. His other works include *Stella and Lou*, which MRT produced, in December 2013. He lives in South Philly and Elkton, Maryland.

Is there a character you particularly identify with in *The Outgoing Tide*?

There's always some of me in every play.

I'm from a blue collar background. There's a lot of my father in Gunner, but there's also a lot of me in Gunner. When I was 22, my own mother called me the world's youngest curmudgeon.

Everything I write is either firsthand knowledge, or observation.

You've set the play in Maryland, on the Chesapeake Bay...

Everybody in Philly goes down the Jersey Shore for vacation. If you want to go to a Philly restaurant on a Saturday night in August, you don't need a reservation. You just go! Everybody's down the shore.

When my wife and I wanted to buy some property, I couldn't afford on-water property down in Jersey. And besides, I said "no way are we going to Jersey. There's too many damn people."

So we got a house in Maryland. I got my own beach out here, 'cause it's so cheap.

The cliché for a family like Gunner's would be to go down the Jersey shore. Well, in the back of my mind, Gunner's like me. Gunner doesn't like people. Down here on the Chesapeake, it's very secluded, it's very quiet, and I think that's what Gunner

would want. Someplace where he wouldn't have to stand in line to go to a restaurant.

It kind of defies the cliché.

And all three characters are from Philly...

I think it could be Philly, it could be Boston, it could be New York. There's a northeast frame of mind: we're all a little edgier. I've traveled all over the country, and in Philly, Boston, New York, we all have an edge to us the rest of the country really doesn't have. You couldn't set it in Atlanta, or Kansas City or something, 'cause it loses its edge.

That's what I like about these characters: They *are* in your face. They *do* make jokes about death, where other people would say, "Oh God, how can you do that??" But we got no problem with it.

In the first scene, Gunner's talking to his son Jack, but doesn't recognize him. It's somehow both heartbreaking and humorous, but also a good way to get in some exposition.

Oh absolutely. It's the cheapest exposition you ever saw.

My father had dementia of some sort. Certainly not as bad as Gunner. But I'd be driving him someplace, and suddenly he'd start having a whole conversation with me, as his brother (my uncle). And he'd say "Oh, remember the time when..." and it'd always be some nice reminiscence, always pointing out something that the two of us did as kids. And I would just go along with it. What are you gonna do, you know? I can't say I enjoyed it, but I always found it interesting.

You never use the word "Alzheimer's" in the play. Any reason?

Yeah. Sometimes if you say it, it turns into "Uh-oh! It's an Alzheimer's play!" And it's not about Alzheimer's.

To me, the play is about regret. You look back on your life, and you see mistakes you've made, and you try to make up for them.

But what keeps it from getting maudlin—keeps us from wanting to go home and get a drink or something—is the fact that there's humor in it. Without the laughter, *The Outgoing Tide* would be an absolute disaster. It's important to mix humor with the tragedy.

Parent-child relationships, and spousal relationships, are at the center of the story. How do we see them play out across two different generations?

Characters are always rooted in the time in which they grew up. Twenty years from now, if anybody's doing this play, I hope they do it as a period piece, because someone like Gunner was raised a very different way.

There weren't a lot of nurturing fathers in Gunner's time. My father, when he was 17, was in a foxhole getting shot at in the Philippines. That's really rough. There's this generation of guys who came out of World War II and Korea, who were taught at an early age, "you don't *get* in touch with your feelings." And it's

nobody's fault—that's just how they were raised.

But I do think Gunner and Peg have a happy marriage: despite all the sniping and everything, there's a lot of love there.

That's one view.

Then, you look at Jack and his wife. They've just kind of grown apart. And what are they doing? Well, it's 2015, they're children of a different generation: they're getting a divorce. But it's an amicable divorce. They're not fighting, they're not screaming, they still talk on the phone, they're still worried about their kid.

We produced *Stella and Lou* last year, and our audiences loved it. Does any of that spirit come through here?

Jack, from *The Outgoing Tide*, grew up a couple of blocks from Lou's bar, you know? Gunner may have stopped in once in a while for a beer on his way home from work.

I could sit down tomorrow and write twelve plays about South Philadelphia.

So locale wise, there's a lot in common there. Tone wise, I'd say they're within maybe 70 degrees of each other. *Stella and Peg* both fear being alone. Lou may be more gentle than Gunner but they share the same basic background. Although on a smaller scale, *Stella and Lou* could be kind of tragic if not for Lou's change of heart at the end. And beer and whiskey are prominent in both.

What do you like about writing for the stage, specifically?

Funny you should ask that, 'cause I'm writing a lot of television right now.

The reason I write for the theatre is that you have control. And I'm not a control freak, I'm always open to listening to actors. Smart actors are a huge help. And directors. It's a collaborative art, but at the end of the day, I have the final say on the words. I used to write a lot of movies, and I had no control; there'd be a lot of stuff up there that I did not write, but my name was on it, and I just wanted to scream.

If it's gonna be crap, I want it to be *my* crap. If it stinks, it's my fault, and nobody else's. And if it's brilliant, it's my fault, and nobody else's.

You worked with MRT Artistic Director Charles Towers as the director on *Stella and Lou*. Are you excited to have him take on another play?

Oh, it's terrible. I never want to work with that guy again.

Actually, he came down with a designer in the summer, to the Maryland house. We went out kayaking, had lunch, and I took them back to the train. It was good! And I saw, in rehearsal for *Stella and Lou*, that he knew what he was doing, he knew how to talk to actors, and he certainly had intelligent ideas on the script. So I'm thrilled to work with him.



Felicity LaFortune, David Adkins, Ross Bickell. Photo by Meghan Moore.



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