

REMY BUMPPPO

think theatre

FICTION

By
Steven Dietz

Study Guide



Compiled and Edited by Peter Davis
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Biography: Steven Dietz

Steven Dietz is one of America's most widely-produced and published contemporary playwrights. Since 1983, his twenty-plus plays have been seen at over one hundred regional theatres in the United States, as well as Off-Broadway. International productions have been seen in England, Japan, Germany, France, Australia, Sweden, Austria, Russia, Slovenia, Argentina, Peru, Singapore and South Africa. His work has been translated into seven languages.

Mr. Dietz is a two-time winner of the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays Award, for *FICTION* (produced Off-Broadway by the Roundabout Theatre Company), and *STILL LIFE WITH IRIS*. He received the PEN USA West Award in Drama for *LONELY PLANET*; the 2007 Edgar Award for Drama from the Mystery Writers of America for his widely-produced *SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE FINAL ADVENTURE* (adapted from William Gillette and Arthur Conan Doyle); and the 1995 Yomuri Shimbun Award (the Japanese "Tony") for his adaptation of Shusaku Endo's novel *SILENCE*. Other widely produced plays include *INVENTING VAN GOGH*, *GOD'S COUNTRY*, *PRIVATE EYES*, *THE NINA VARIATIONS*, *TRUST*, *ROCKET MAN*, *HALCYON DAYS*, *TEN NOVEMBER*, *FOOLIN' AROUND WITH INFINITY* and *MORE FUN THAN BOWLING*. Other award-winning stage adaptations include *FORCE OF NATURE* (from Goethe), *OVER THE MOON* (from P.G. Wodehouse), *THE REMEMBERER* (from Joyce Simmons Cheeka), *PARAGON SPRINGS* (from Ibsen), *DRACULA* (from Bram Stoker), and, with Allison Gregory, *GO, DOG. GO!* (from P.D. Eastman).

Mr. Dietz's work as a director has been seen at many of America's leading regional theatres. He has directed premiere productions of new plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Denver Center Theatre Company, Northlight Theatre (Chicago), ACT Theatre (Seattle), San Jose Repertory Theatre, City Theatre Company (Pittsburgh), Westside Arts (Off-Broadway), and the Sundance Institute, among many others. He was a resident director for ten years at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, where he also served as Artistic Director of Midwest PlayLabs.

Mr. Dietz's widely-reprinted articles about the creation of new plays, most of which were first seen in *American Theatre Magazine*, include "Doom Eager: Writing What We Need to Know," "Developed to Death," "An Audience Manifesto," and the recent "A Modest Proposal: On Training Directors for the New Century." Recent work includes the Pulitzer-nominated *LAST OF THE BOYS* (Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago); the acclaimed adaptation of Dan Gutman's baseball novel, *HONUS AND ME*; and three newly-commissioned plays that will be developed/produced in the coming year: *CITY OF GHOSTS* (McCarter Theatre, Princeton), *NEAR ABERDEEN* (Steppenwolf, Chicago) and *BECKY'S NEW CAR* (ACT, Seattle). Additionally, Mr. Dietz is currently at work on new plays commissioned by the Guthrie Theater (Minneapolis) and the Denver Center Theatre Company.

List of Plays by Steven Dietz

Random Acts (1983)
Wanderlust (1984)
More Fun Than Bowling (1986)
Painting It Red (1986)
Ten November (1987)
Foolin' Around With Infinity (1987)
God's Country (1988)
After You (1990)
Halcyon Days (1991)
To the Nines (1991)
Lonely Planet (1992)*
Trust (1992)
The Rememberer (1993)
Dracula (1996)
The Nina Variations (1996)
Private Eyes (1997)
Still Life With Iris (1997)+
Paragon Springs (2000)
Last of the Boys (2002)
Force of Nature (2003)
Over The Moon (2003)
Rocket Man (2003)
Inventing Van Gogh (2004)
Fiction (2006) +
Honus And Me (2006)
Sherlock Holmes: The Final Adventure (2007) §

* PEN USA Award

+ Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays Award

§ Edgar Award for Drama

Glossary

Reductivism: Also known as minimalism, is an artistic and literary movement of the post-World War Two era that emphasized the simplification of form and the use of a bare minimum of elements.

“Ca vous amuse, no? Je suis L’Americaine lunatique!”: You are amused, no? I am the looney American!

Coda: Literally Italian for “tail,” meaning the end of the musical piece.

Boulevard Saint Germain: A main thoroughfare of Paris, it is one of the most famous centers of activity on the Left Bank.

Rue Cler: A pedestrian street on the Left Bank in Paris famous for its open air market, restaurants, and cafes

Nabokov: Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (1899-1977), a Russian-born American novelist and poet, whose works include *Lolita* (1955) and *Ada* (1969).

Tom Wolfe (1900-1938), American writer whose best known works include the autobiographical novels *Look Homeward Angel* (1929) and *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940).

Silvia Plath (1932-1963), American poet and diarist. Her best know works are the autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* and the poetry collections *Colossus* and *Ariel*.

Anaïs Nin (1903-1977), French-born American writer, best known for her revealing and extensive dairies spanning more than thirty years.

Stendahl, pen name of Marie Henri Beyle (1783-1842), a French writer of psychological romances, whose work greatly advanced the development of the novel in Western literature.

Oraluna: A nonsensical name that may be derived from Italian—ora, meaning hour; and luna, meaning moon.

Shabeen: A pub or bar usually located in South African townships.

Soweto: A large and impoverished township located southwest of Johannesburg, South Africa, that became the seat of opposition to apartheid.

The Drake Colony: While the Drake Colony is a purely fictional place, writers’ colonies or retreats have been a common fixture among artists in the US for the last

century, the oldest and most famous being the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire founded in 1907. For more information see: www.poetryresourcepage.com/colonies

Rilke: Rainier Maria Rilke (1875-1926), considered one of Germany's greatest poets. Works include *Sonnets to Orpheus* and *Duino Elegies*.

“Mademoiselle—Qu’est-ce que c’est?—Pouvez-vous me dire?—la table?—non, non—la chaise?—occ-u-pied?” In essence: “Miss—what is this?—Can you tell me? – The table?—no, no—the chair?—occupied?”

"Sidelights"

[From Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2007]

Although he never took a class in his craft, Steven Dietz has become one of the most successful playwrights of his generation to emerge from Colorado. His stage dramas, which include *More Fun than Bowling*, *God's Country*, and *Private Eyes*, have been produced by theaters across the United States, as well as internationally, and range from satire to serious commentaries and adaptations of works by others. Calling Dietz "unique" due to his continued focus on politics, a *Contemporary Dramatists* essayist praised the playwright as "prolific and diverse, and he has a voice that is always changing and yet recognizable as his own." As Dietz himself commented in *Contemporary Dramatists*: "I believe that, at its best, the theatre can serve as a social forum, a place where members of a community can gather to confront those things which affect them. A place for reasoning and rage, laughter and loss, recognition and discussion."

Dietz was born in Denver, Colorado, the son of a career railroader. When he finished college, he moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, and began an acting career. He wrote his first play out of necessity, when a production of the Children's Theatre Company in which he was cast was lacking a script. With this success, he authored more plays produced in Minneapolis, and also began directing plays by other writers. In more recent years, Dietz's plays have been produced in Seattle, Washington, where he now makes his home, although some have made debuts in cities such as San Diego, Washington, D.C., and Louisville, Kentucky.

Dietz's topics can sometimes be disturbing, as in *Foolin' Around with Infinity*, wherein two men who work underground in a government nuclear weapons facility in Utah suffer from constant fear of the end of mankind, even as they guard the button that can make it happen. His plays are timely, and often incorporate actual news events or the politics of the day. *Ten November*, for example, is a retelling of the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* in Lake Superior in 1975.

In *God's Country*, Dietz replicates the 1984 murder of Denver-based talk-show host Alan Berg by The Order, a neo-Nazi, white supremacist group that was founded by Robert Matthews in 1983. Dietz provides background on how the group grew and increased its membership and power base prior to targeting Berg for death due to his constant attack on their ultra-conservative values. The downfall of The Order, whose members were charged with racketeering, is also covered in the play.

Dietz's *Trust* is about trust and how it is betrayed. *Back Stage West* critic Dany Margolies, who commented on a Hollywood production of the play, wrote that the drama is "carefully crafted in its structure and characters, ostensibly skewering L.A.'s music scene and mankind's pathetic attempts at enduring love."

The two main characters in *Lonely Planet* are the retiring Jody, who owns a map shop, and Carl, who spends most of his free time in Jody's store. "It's only as Dietz's leisurely paced script unfolds, however, and as Carl begins to clutter the shop with an assortment

of chairs, that we better understand the bond these two share," noted Kristina Mannion in *Back Stage West*. The play recalls Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* in that by play's end, the set is filled with seating furniture, each chair representing a friend of the two protagonists who has died of AIDS. David Sheward wrote in *Back Stage* that "the most refreshing part of *Lonely Planet* is its subtlety. The symbolism of the maps and the chairs is not heavy handed and the two men don't wear their emotions or preferences on their sleeves. Gay sexuality isn't even brought up until well into the second act."

Force of Nature is an adaptation of Goethe's novella *Elective Affinities*, and revolves around an aristocratic man and woman who, although married, each take another romantic partner. *Variety* reviewer Chris Jones called Dietz's play "one of those savvy period adaptations that provides an erudite evening of old-fashioned theater while simultaneously offering an audience a decent helping of contemporary relevance."

Fiction is about Michael and Linda, a writing couple who have been married for sixteen years. While Michael's work has not amounted to success, Linda's first novel, set in South Africa, gained her literary recognition and a faculty job at a university. When Linda is discovered to have a brain tumor that will end her life in three weeks, she asks only that Michael allow her to read his diaries. While she discovers that he had a month-long affair at a writers' colony, the question becomes whether what Michael has written is entirely fact, or perhaps contains a bit of fiction. When Abby, the other woman, shows up in the second act, having learned of Linda's illness, Linda realizes that she had also met her, and had appropriated a horrific real-life experience Abby had shared with her for her bestseller. "What we have here is a series of betrayals, a sense that nothing is quite as represented," wrote Stefan Kanfer in a review of *Fiction* for the *New Leader*. "Therein lies the appeal of *Fiction*, a narrative full of surprises as it traverses time and space."

After the birth of his daughter, Ruby, Deitz began to write for children, and his *Still Life with Iris* was awarded a Kennedy Center grant. In an interview with *Denver Post* reviewer John Moore, Dietz said that writing for kids is "the hardest writing you will ever do. It's harder because kids take their imagination for granted. They are the most honest audience.... You can get through a lifetime in the 'adult American theater' and never really learn how to construct a story as a writer. When you write plays for kids, that's when you are tested. It's a gut-check."

An Audience Manifesto

Steven Dietz

There is absolutely nothing to support the notion that contemporary plays should reflect the prevailing attitudes of the community. Prevailing attitudes (social, sexual, religious, political) do not need the support of artists--they have the weight of governments, corporations, advertisers and the media behind them. When we, as audiences, demand this from our artists, we are selling ourselves short. And we are asking the theatre--this marvelous, grand accident of an art form--to perform pedestrian tasks. Demand more.

The highest challenge you, as an audience, can issue to your theatre artists is to demand that they run through the minefields before you do. To demand that they make the mistakes, confront the idiocy and revel in the excesses (social, sexual, religious, political) of the culture in the metaphorical safety of the theatre (where you can watch and judge), before it hits you in the bloody maelstrom of the world. Push your artists ahead of you through the dark room. If they fall, you'll know to watch your step. If they bloody their heads, you'll know to duck. If they look foolish, perhaps you'll linger longer at your mirror. And if they race forward, smiling and unscathed, you'll know you can toss yourself forward with abandon.

This is a daunting challenge for those of us who are theatre artists, one we seldom live up to. But don't let us lower our standards. Don't let our questions get safer, smaller. We should encourage our theatre artists to go where we dare not. We should thank them (grudgingly, at times) for revealing to each of us, individually, what our boundaries are--social, sexual, religious, political. We should applaud them when they help us either draw the line or, willingly, step over it. Ask that your theatre artists talk about what you talk about at the dinner table--but, also demand that they talk about, and show you, the things you're afraid to bring up at the dinner table, at work, with friends. Demand that they be militantly articulate about the world. The American theatre needs fewer chestnuts and more grenades.

Art is often made in a fury. And we can learn more, in one instant on stage, from someone's fury--how it engages, divides or offends us--than we can from years of sanitized, community-approved work. Believe me if writers thought that taking "fuck" and "shit" out of their plays would stop civil rights abuses, end sexism, feed children or clothe the homeless--they would. If writers thought they were harming the moral fabric of tolerance and respect by suggesting that maybe AIDS exists, or maybe kids should be told that sex (and its inherent dangers) exists, or suggesting that maybe lust and lying and corruption exist and flourish--they would do otherwise. But the fact is that sex and beauty, hatred and disease, truth and manipulation, hunger and faith exist concurrently in the culture. And to ask artists to address only "pleasant" or "nice" or "approved" aspects of the culture is not only small-minded, it is patently impossible. It is contradiction and complexity that make up the body politic--and to demand simplification is to accept a lie.

These are the two things you should know about censorship. First: if someone is denied the chance to present their work--no matter how controversial (socially, sexually, religiously, politically)--that is censorship. Period. Second: Censorship is propaganda for a cause. Censorship has nothing whatsoever to do with ridding something from the culture. It has everything to do with instilling something in the culture. The person or

organization that claims to be protecting you and yours from evil, is attempting to blanket you and yours with a belief system. Censorship is the advocacy by one group of a specific set of ideas at the exclusion of all others. The world is messy, art is messy, but censorship is easy. It is the demand that we hold the mirror up to a nature that does not exist.

So what can you do as an audience?

Demand not to be sheltered from ideas, language or images. Demand the right to make up your own mind about your interests, pleasures and boundaries. Demand not only the right to escape, but the right to be engaged.

Demand newness. The theatre is not about nostalgia. The theatre is not a museum. Plays don't hang on walls, oblivious to time. The theatre is a rehearsal of the concerns of the present moment. Whether the given text is old or new, demand that it move you forward.

Demand to laugh. Not just at others, but at yourself.

Demand more from your critics than "did s/he like it or not?" Demand to know the context of a given play in the author's body of work as well as in the theatre's body of work.

Demand that theatres stop using critics' quotes to sell their plays. Until they do, all their carping about the unfair power of critics is absolutely hypocritical.

Demand leadership. Encourage your artists and administrators to follow their mission statement, not their exit polling. Any theatre must--like all of us--grow, change and evolve. It can't be asked to provide its audience with what they've grown accustomed to. A theatre that tries to be all things to all people inevitably fails everyone.

Demand no dress codes, spoken or unspoken.

Demand an end to the farcical belief that theatres need to "educate" their audience before they can affect, provoke or entertain them. Tell your theatre that you're ready for anything, and that you plan to let them know exactly what you think of it, good or bad.

Demand fun. Demand fury. Getting your money's worth is not enough. Get your heart and mind's worth.

As artists and audiences, together we share the theatre. Together we share this grand, eloquent, messy, unpredictable experiment. Let's revel in that.

[These comments first appeared in the program for A Contemporary Theatre of Seattle's premiere of his *Trust*.]

Source Citation: Dietz, Steven. "An audience manifesto." *American Theatre* 9.n9 (Jan 1993): 9(1). *Expanded*

Steven Dietz Interview with Nick Sandys--Aug 5th 2007

Prolific playwright Steven Dietz was in town briefly to attend a reading of his latest commission from Steppenwolf and see Chicago Children's Theatre's production of his play *Honus & Me* -- but luckily he managed to find time to join Nick Sandys and wife, Patrice Egleston, for a spot of lunch and to answer some questions about his play, *Fiction*.

NS: Here we are, opening a season for the first time with a modern American play. But I must say I am somewhat amazed that nobody else in town has picked it up. I mean, this is the Chicago premier--how did that happen

SD: Well, you know, I have no complaints. Chicago has been very good to me as a writer. But the theatres here are pretty fierce about their own writers, the writers that they really support, and that's great. I've been the recipient of that support in other cities. I mean, I know all the Northlight [where his play *Lonely Planet* premiered], and Victory Gardens, and Goodman people, and they look at my plays. But actually one of the great things about Chicago is that a lot of cities are like, "Well, it was done Off-Broadway, so then it's worthy for us" -- but what I love about Chicago is that kind of: "Well, I don't fucking care about that" attitude. "We'll do whatever we really need to do." I love that about Chicago.

NS: In the Playbill interview you gave for the New York production [at The Roundabout Theatre in 2004], you said that you rewrote a few things after the premier at The McCarter Theatre [in New Jersey].

SD: Yes, but not like I normally rewrite. I mean I normally cut characters and scenes and acts. I don't like to open a play until I've made a cut on every page. But I learned a lot from directing the original reading [at ACT in Seattle] and then coming back to direct it with a couple of the actors I had written it for. I feel like you learn a very brief, prepared speech for each of your plays. I mean, I'm getting to chat with you face to face, but on email, if someone has a question about *Private Eyes* or *Lonely Planet* or *Sherlock Holmes*, you kind of pare it down to a couple of sentences of probably self-evident things--and those productions helped sort of confirm what those few things about *Fiction* are to me. And that basically was: the productions that all worked have one thing in common, which is the actors started with the premise that this is a very, very great marriage--and it seemed so self-evident and I watched actors outsmart themselves. They started off thinking that, but they didn't hold onto it --and of course, things should change in rehearsal, and you should get to take the play apart, the play is way tougher than the playwright--but that initial premise of: "We can be this brave and frank with each other to beat this cancer; we can show it to you because we have nothing to hide." I don't mean they're heroes. It's a great marriage; they love each other to death, and that's the test for everything else. I've seen some productions where it was a play about a marriage in trouble and I thought to myself, "You've got nowhere to go."

And then the self-evident thing of just playing the moment and not letting the actors tip off what they know. There is something, for example, that Abby knows she knows on

this page -- but she can't play it earlier. Ideally: everybody make the hardest, smartest choices, but then they play their cards close to the chest. That ends up being my prepared speech on *Fiction*-- and you can ask me anything else whether you want to or not.

NS: It seems to me that music or sound is really important in the play, particularly with the set up in the first scene. Did you use a lot in the production you directed yourself in Seattle?

SD: I'm a big music buff, so I did a huge sort of "found" sound design, though I would love to have done it with a composer...I used groups like Tin Hat Trio and Bill Frisell and Paris Combo -- contemporary stuff, but with some weird instrumentations. I just thought of it as the fourth character...I love an aggressive sound design....Actually, I have this beautiful riff that's actually from Zimbabwe --it's called the Kankan Blues and it's this nine minute song, and I lifted out snippets of it--it may be totally wrong for your production, of course.

NS: I said to Josh Horvath [Remy Bumppo's Sound Designer for *Fiction*] that I would interested, if we can do this, of maybe using a cello version of the Janice Joplin mentioned in the first scene but not where you expect it.

SD: Oh I get passionate emails from people on voting on that question [Janis Joplin v. John Lennon--best vocals], and then telling me those aren't nearly as good as, oh, Otis Redding, or Aretha Franklin, and I often agree with them...

NS: I think we're going to put that vote on our website too.

SD: Oh, let 'em vote! The Greatest Rock Vocal Performance of All-Time! To me, Janis' isn't even that one. "Piece of My Heart" isn't even as good as "Me & Bobby McGee", but there are two many words in "Me & Bobby McGee" for the way I wanted to use it in the dialogue, shameless pragmatist that I am ...

And in my experience, the music is very helpful because it allows you to hit the quiet, the relative quiet when Michael and Linda are back in their house.... I mean, we really only make noise in the theatre just to produce quiet ... the quiet of a home, the quiet of Drake Writers' Colony.

NS: I see the Drake Colony as very New England, perhaps a distant sea sound, almost like the South Africa trip, but that's all you can hear, a lulling.

SD: Yes. The sound of your mind not working.

NS: Do you see *Fiction* also as a metaphor for our current culture? A culture of "non-realities," of fake "reality" shows, a culture of lies?

SD: Well, somewhat. I have plays that point at the culture more than this play does, but obviously it fits in the culture and has to play against the culture. On the personal level, (I'm sorry if I've said this in some interview you've already read--you can never sound original anymore because of the stuff you've already said that's on the web), but you know I've grown interested in the fact that there are really three "pasts": the past we remember, the past that we record, and the past that actually happened. I think they are seldom the same thing. And I suppose culturally it's similar to, you know, things that we are told, the way that they are then presented to us, and the things that actually happened. And so there is this gulf between memory and reality and how we're able to, probably, "spin" our own lives.

NS: Especially with all these current scandals about authors who apparently write a biography and it turns out to be a totally fictional account, and the woman in New York recently--JT Leroy, who was actually Laura Albert--who created a whole fictional novelist persona, and is now being sued for not "being" this other drug-culture character, under which name she signed movie deals etc.

SD: Which is the great reaction to "You can only write about your own life, blah blah..." So this person being very savvy said, "They really love, like, you know, fucked-up-life people and drug-addiction and I-was-abused-by-all-of-my-foster-parents," so she'll just become that person. That is the reality show culture and you have to sort of admire the nerve to embrace it with abandon.

You know, I'm an author. I'll do anything to get my story told, I don't care what it is. So I tend to say, if the writing is good, well who cares? I am sorry that some people got bummed out, that they read that book and had this picture of this person in their mind, and then they found out, and "Well, that's not who I thought it was." But who cares?! Did the sentences land with you or not? End of topic. It shows, I suppose, how we conflate our creators, how we turn our authors into the people we think or need them to be.

NS: Like when we turn actors into the characters they play--people think you are that other person.

SD: Absolutely, and I think at some point that's when I added that line--I don't know if it's still in the play--about, "You don't have to put yourself in your book. People will find you in your book, whether you're in there or not."

NS: That desperation, that need for truth at the bottom of fiction--and people will sue when confronted with that "betrayal." I see it as a wonderful metaphor for where we are right now.

But also, ironically, the play's playing with narrative realities reminded me very much of my own research into the history of the early novel form itself. In the midst of a volatile social world of the 18th century, the early capitalist/middle-class/industrial revolutions, that battle over questions of morality and truth, of how do you create a reality that is not there without lying, which is deemed sinful--a dilemma which caused the invention of all those narrative forms and experiments

from the likes of Defoe and Fielding etc.

SD: Yes, I'm finally getting around to reading "David Copperfield". You know, you take so much for granted in a "classic text", then you realise it's also so completely ground-breaking. Like the narrator saying, "O I don't know this yet, I can't really know this yet, I'm not an omniscient narrator, but I kind of do know it, but I'm not going to talk about it in this chapter, I'm going to tell you later." And now we just kind of read that like, "Oh, okay."

NS: Do you read a lot of novels?

SD: I do, but not as many as I would like.

NS: Were there particular writers you thought of when you were writing *Fiction*?

SD: Certainly. But I've never managed to be invited to a writers' colony -- I'm trying to get an invitation, so I can research my play retroactively, now that it's published. One of the great disappointments of the New York publicists of this play was that, you know my wife [Allison Gregory] and I are both playwrights, and so the angle they wanted to write was this must be like a really dramatic story of my own marriage. And they were SOOO disappointed when I told them it wasn't. And they seemed actually disappointed that my wife did not have cancer [knocks on wood] and we didn't share each other's diaries and tear each other to shreds emotionally. I'm not kidding! They felt so betrayed, I guess, that I had made stuff up. I just wanted to say to them: "Did you read the title?"

But, obviously having said that, you know, I am writing about the life of a person who has responsibilities in the real world, and also has responsibilities to the fictional world of his writing -- and the line between those is always wonderfully problematic; both gold mine and land mine.

Also, I *was* in South Africa, like the characters in *Fiction*. I did see that line of that water--it was amazing. And I knew I'd want to write about it someday... but I certainly didn't think it would turn up 11 years later in a play about writers and diaries. These things find their own homes.

NS: When were you there?

SD: I was there in 1990. I was seeing a production of my play *God's Country* in Johannesburg and it moved to Pretoria. I was able to spend time in the townships. I was in Soweto for a full day--a wild, unforgettable day in my life-- and got to Capetown and to False Bay, which is described in the play. But, again, somehow it felt like the right story to fold into this play. You asked about how this play fits into the culture, etc. -- and that is hard to talk about as a writer, because once you tell it, it's no longer yours. You write to give over. Period. So, I don't know how successful the play is, or needs to be, about addressing or answering any of those larger societal questions, but I feel like the fierceness and love of those three people going headlong towards each other is the central point... and those other questions are the stuff we debate on the drive home.

NS: Which is what we too strive for at Remy Bumppo, the "driving home debate" play, and why this play fits so well with us.

PLAYBILL ON-LINE'S BRIEF ENCOUNTER with Steven Dietz

By *Kenneth Jones*

22 Jul 2004

Steven Dietz is one of the most-produced playwrights in the United States, but, as is widely reported about the prolific writer, his plays have barely been seen in New York City.

Hardly a season goes by without professional regional productions of the 46-year-old Seattle writer's *Dracula*, *God's Country*, *More Fun Than Bowling*, *Private Eyes*, *Lonely Planet* or a world premiere. While hot young writers flicker brightly for a moment on Broadway, Dietz's experience is about consistency — he's penned some 25 plays, including 2003's *Fiction*, about husband and wife fiction writers who agree to swap their journals. The play had its world premiere at McCarter Theatre in New Jersey.

Roundabout Theatre Company is currently staging the New York City premiere of *Fiction*, a three-actor dramatic comedy that is by turns a romance, a mystery and a rumination on the creative process. David Warren directs Tom Irwin, Julie White and Emily Bergl in the new production at the Laura Pels Theatre Off-Broadway. The twists and turns of the plot have prompted "parking lot conversation," as Dietz calls it. By phone from his home in Seattle, Dietz spoke to Playbill On-Line about his writing career, his work habits and the contents of his own journals.

Playbill On-Line: Prior to this current New York production of *Fiction* you saw the play done at McCarter Theatre. Did you do rewrites in between productions? Is a play always a fluid thing?

Steven Dietz: I generally do enormous rewrites, and I enjoy that. In the case of *Fiction* and *Lonely Planet*, at least relative to my 25 plays, they are the plays that came out pretty clean. The first draft of *Fiction* is not all that different from the draft you saw. Having said that, I did do some changes following the McCarter run. Nothing major, but the play is sort of a Rubik's Cube or a House of Mirrors: A small change in *Fiction* can have a big impact. We learned things at McCarter. The great thing about this art form, as maddening as it can be, is that you do get to improve your plays. It's not already in the video store, signed, sealed and delivered. I'm directing it out here in the fall [at Seattle's ACT], and will direct it at The Old Globe [in San Diego] in the fall. Maybe it will keep growing there, but as it stands now I think it's as good as I can make that story now.

PBOL: The play's couple are writers, and the outsider serves as a kind of muse for both. Are you attracted to writing about creative types?

SD: I waited 25 plays to write a play about a writer — with the exception of my first play that you'll *never* find no matter how hard you try. Certainly, I have a Van Gogh play that's making the rounds at regional theatres. *Private Eyes* is about theatre. I think there's a little bit of a trap but there's this notion of a curiosity among theatregoers about the creative act, and in some ways to call *Fiction* a play about writers is accurate and similarly incomplete. I love these people because I love what snobs they are, I love how articulate they are, and I love that they traffic in the world of deception in their work.

Therefore, how that spills into their lives — there's bound to be some grist for a play in that.

PBOL: Journals and diaries and secrets are very important to the play. Is journaling something you do?

SD: I do it very casually. I am starting to write more personal things. I have a four-year-old daughter, so I'm trying to keep up with the amazing stuff my daughter said or did that day and fill some pages. Mine are more working journals — notions for plays. Getting something off my chest about a grant I didn't get! [Laughs.] There's introspection in them and things like that. Probably like a lot of people, my yearly New Year's resolution is to write in my journal a lot. And I don't! I go months without writing. And then I'm stuck on an airplane and then I'll do [it]. This play came out of old journals. Maybe 10 years ago I wrote the title *The Waterman Diaries* in a journal. I'll do that — jot down possible titles. That title formulated the idea of the conceit of a woman sharing her diaries and asking to read her husband's. Then some theatre calls my bluff and says, "Do you wanna write *this* play by *this* date?" Hopefully, somewhere in my journals I have something to give them.

PBOL: Do you approach the creation of each of your plays differently? Will the seed begin sometimes with a character, sometimes a title, sometimes a snatch of dialogue?

SD: I bet it's different. There's certainly no rhyme or reason. It often is an image or a character and often some question: Something I just don't understand, or something that is significantly outside of my experience. The writing of the play consists of, in some ways, a sort of travelogue between who I am in my life and my journey to what I want to write about. Somewhere along that line, the story of the play comes out.

PBOL: How did the "Waterman Diaries" line in your journal grow into the larger play? Did you know they were married?

SD: I remember writing a sentence years ago which said: "What if instead of dying with your secrets you had to live with your secrets?" That was profound and stupidly general like many things in one's journal. That stuck with me. I did know they were married. I didn't know they were writers. That came much later. I knew there was a third character who played into the story of the husband. The thing I didn't know was how does this third character figure into the wife, Linda's, story?

PBOL: The play constantly flirts with reality vs. fiction vs. memory.

SD: Hopefully there is a recognition in all these people that — as I said to the actors at some point — in some way we all have three pasts: We have the past that we remember, we have the past that we may have transcribed or written in the journal or diary and we have the past that actually happened. The tension between what we remember, what we invent and what actually happened is fairly inexhaustible. It was a great challenge to dive into those questions and see what came out.

PBOL: You have a writing studio-office that's separate from home?

SD: Yeah, I do. I worked out of my home most of my life, and then the last couple of years it's a 10 minute walk over a little bridge here in Seattle. I'm actually looking at it out the window of my house right now.

PBOL: So it's on your property?

SD: No, it's just on the other side of the ship canal here in Seattle. A 10-minute walk to a little area called Fremont. It's in an old funky office building.

PBOL: It's freeing, creatively, to have that separate space?

SD: Well, it is. Even just the walk. My head is clearer on my walk over. I'm a much better father and husband having walked for 10 minutes coming home.

PBOL: Do you work on several plays at once?

SD: I'm usually juggling several projects at once. I'm seldom at any given time actually writing on two plays. I've been doing small rewrites on *Fiction*, I'm starting the first draft of another play, I'm juggling a couple commissions — a McCarter commission and a couple of others for theatres, going into [the] 2006-07 season.

PBOL: When you get a commission, do you sometimes say, "Oh, God, I have nothing!"?

SD: No, I just lie, I guess. [Laughs.] Generally, there's enough lead time. About half my commissions are targeted to a specific project: Someone will say, do you want to adapt this book for us? Some of them, like this McCarter one, are great because they say, "Whatever play you wanna write that year we're interested in." That is both, as you implied, a godsend and terrifying. God love those working journals. I have thoughts for things that might turn into plays — I have six or seven of those floating around in my head. One never knows whether they are worthy enough, or have legs enough, to turn into a play.

PBOL: You have been produced in theatres all around the country, but you haven't had what American culture considers major success — Broadway. Yet, so many writers would love to be in your position of being in every major regional house there is. How do you view your own success?

SD: I'm asked this enough that I can probably answer it. I'll give you a couple of stabs at it. Am I excited and delighted and thrilled about this? This is far and away my most major production in New York. I had a couple of small things some years ago at the Barrow Group and at Circle Rep. [*Fiction* by Roundabout Theatre Company] is the most visible thing I've had. The advantage of it happening at age 46 instead of age 26 — when

I was desperate and hungry to have my work done in New York — is that it's almost like this amazing roll of the dice. I haven't built my life around having my plays in New York, I just haven't. I'm fond of saying that maybe I've inverted the old adage that you can make a killing [in the theatre] but you can't make a living. I've done the exact opposite: I've made a living on my plays for 20 some years. But I don't have a hit play. I don't have one play that pays my bills. Instead I've had 15 or more plays that are seen in theatres and colleges — and then there are five or six that pay my bills.

PBOL: What pays your bills?

SD: *God's Country*, *Private Eyes*, *Lonely Planet* and *Dracula* — and, knock on wood, maybe *Fiction*. The advantage of not having success as a younger writer in New York, unlike a lot of my peers — as envious as I was of them — what I've gotten to do instead is make a body of work. As much as I wanted my early plays to have a big New York success, the very fact that they didn't — or more importantly, didn't go to New York and get *hammered* — meant that I got to write my next play, and my next play. So I feel like I've had this 20-year apprenticeship. I've gotten to learn my craft. This is a hard craft to learn. If I'd have been a New York playwright, I don't know if I would have gotten to do that. Instead, I have very happily lived out here where, as we said before, my plays get several chances instead of one chance. I know where having a play in New York sort of fits into my life, whereas some years back it would have *been* my life.

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Going to Court Over Fiction by a Fictitious Writer

By ALAN FEUER

June 15, 2007

New York Times

Cloaking one's identity while writing -- to hide, in other words, in order to reveal -- is an old literary tradition. Mary Ann Evans used the gender-crossing pseudonym George Eliot to publish "Adam Bede" in 1859, when female authors still struggled to be taken seriously. Charlotte Bronte released "Jane Eyre" in 1847 under the name Currer Bell.

What, then, of the complex case of JT Leroy, the pseudonymous writer with the titillating past, a supposed child of a truck-stop prostitute who rocketed to fame in 2000 with the publication of "Sarah," a novel of poverty and sexual abuse set among the grease-stained highway rest stops of West Virginia?

Mr. Leroy seemed at first to be a hot commodity in today's biography-obsessed literary world, a gifted writer with a grotesquely compelling story that only enhanced the value of the work. After years of celebrity that included friendships with Winona Ryder and Madonna, articles in The New York Times and Vanity Fair, and many other gaudy trappings of early 21st century fame, JT Leroy was revealed to be the name not of a writer -- in fact, not even of a person -- but of the fictive alter ego of Laura Albert, a mother and otherwise obscure young novelist from Brooklyn Heights.

This intricate game of hide-and-seek with its interlocking issues of identity, fame, money and the healing power of art has now leapt from the media to what is arguably the culture's second most obsessive arena: the courts. A film production company has sued Ms. Albert for fraud, saying that a contract signed with JT Leroy to make a feature film of "Sarah" should be null and void, for the simple reason that JT Leroy does not exist.

At its heart, the case revolves around the contract, signed by Antidote International Films Inc. (producer of, among other movies, "Laurel Canyon" and "Thirteen") and Ms. Albert's company, Underdogs Inc., to option the film rights to "Sarah" in 2003. Underdogs was paid \$15,000 under the contract, which was renewed, at the same rate of \$15,000, for each of the next two years. Antidote is suing for its money back.

Along with tales of commerce, the jury was treated yesterday to a bit of culture: A lawyer for the defendant referred in his opening remarks to the O. Henry story "The Last Leaf" moments after the plaintiff's lawyer played a recording of Terry Gross interviewing someone posing as JT Leroy on NPR's "Fresh Air." The trial, in Federal District Court in Manhattan, promises to be an Escher-like convergence of the movies, literature and journalism with references to sex in truck stops thrown in and a documentary filmmaker, considering a project on the case, sitting quietly in back.

Gregory Curtner, a lawyer for Antidote, opened the trial by painting a broad picture of JT Leroy's supposed rise from Appalachian misery to stardom. The son of a truck-stop

prostitute, the jury learned, JT Leroy (according to the stories concocted on his behalf) would sit in parked cars or at a diner while his mother turned tricks. He himself eventually turned to prostitution and, after finally picking up a pen to describe his ordeal, tried to peddle his early works to agents, publishers and the like by sending faxes from gas station bathrooms.

It was this hardscrabble "life" that caught the attention of a director, Steven Shainberg, who wanted to work with Antidote and blend elements of JT Leroy's biography into the narrative of "Sarah" in what Mr. Curtner called a film about "how art could emerge from a ruined childhood." The trouble was there was no ruined childhood from which art could actually emerge.

Or at least not one that belonged to the imaginary JT Leroy. Ms. Albert's lawyer, Eric Weinstein, began his own remarks with the memorably understated line, "Laura is a complicated person." He said she was physically and sexually abused as a child. He said she was institutionalized in psychiatric wards and in a group home as a ward of the state. He said she was in therapy for 13 years with a psychiatrist whom she spoke to by telephone while posing as a teenage boy named Jeremy, an embryonic version of JT Leroy.

By the time the psychiatrist advised her to write, the persona of the teenage boy had become engrained as Ms. Albert's alter ego, what Mr. Weinstein called her "bridge to the world." Ms. Albert herself, in conversations before the trial, called JT "her respirator," an unreal, though entirely necessary, entity that allowed her to breathe.

As movie people say, the "inciting incident" of the lawsuit came with the publication in late 2005 of an article in New York magazine that questioned JT Leroy's identity. The Times followed with an article in February that identified Ms. Albert as the true author of "Sarah."

The producers at Antidote were stunned; they were also worried that the commercial prospects of their project might crumble. As Mr. Curtner put it, "The whole autobiographical back story aura that made this so attractive was a sham."

Mr. Weinstein told the jury that the contract with Antidote was for a book, not a back story, and that the film company could have made the movie no matter who wrote the novel. He then went on to suggest that the project was in freefall (a bad screenplay) and that Antidote had used the excuse of disputed authorship as an escape hatch.

It was at this point that the sort of lemonade-from-literary-lemons notion that can exist only in Hollywood was introduced. Mr. Weinstein said the director, Mr. Shainberg, decided he would now make a new film, something in the vein of "Adaptation" or "Being John Malkovich," a "meta-film" that mixed the novel with the lives of its real and purported authors in a project touted in-house as "Sarah Plus."

But that required obtaining the rights to Ms. Albert's story -- a story of such apparent darkness that she herself had required a literary doppelganger to tell it.

She refused to grant the rights. "And that," Mr. Weinstein said, "is why we find ourselves here."

Best-Selling Memoir Draws Scrutiny

By **EDWARD WYATT**

January 10, 2006

NEW YORK TIMES

Police reports and other public records published online on Sunday have raised substantial questions about the truth of numerous incidents depicted in James Frey's best-selling memoir, "A Million Little Pieces."

The book, originally published in 2003 by the Nan A. Talese imprint of Doubleday, soared to the top of the best-seller lists in the fall after it was chosen by Oprah Winfrey for her television book club. Ms. Winfrey's enthusiastic endorsement helped the book to sell more than two million copies last year, making it the second-highest-selling book of 2005, behind only "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince." "A Million Little Pieces" currently tops the New York Times paperback best-seller list; Mr. Frey's second book, "My Friend Leonard," is on the paper's hardcover best-seller list.

Mr. Frey has repeatedly stated that his book is true. But a lengthy article posted Sunday by The Smoking Gun web site (www.thesmokinggun.com) quotes Mr. Frey as saying that events "were embellished in the book for obvious dramatic reasons." In particular, it quotes him as saying he did not spend nearly three months in jail after leaving an alcohol and drug rehabilitation center in the mid-1990's, as he contends in his book, but rather only a few days, at most. In "My Friend Leonard," Mr. Frey writes that his girlfriend, Lilly, whom he'd met in rehab, called him distraught just before the end of his sentence. Upon his release he races to her side, only to discover that she has committed suicide.

In "A Million Little Pieces" Mr. Frey says that the three-month sentence stemmed from a 1992 arrest on felony charges, including fighting with police officers and hitting an officer with his car, that could have landed him in jail for up to eight years. But the Smoking Gun article and supporting documents state that Mr. Frey was held for a few hours after an arrest on a drunken-driving charge and that he eventually paid a small fine, but otherwise spent no significant amount of time in jail.

The Smoking Gun article, which did not carry a byline, stated of Mr. Frey: "The 36-year-old author, these documents and interviews show, wholly fabricated or wildly embellished details of his purported criminal career, jail terms and status as an outlaw 'wanted in three states.' "

Yesterday, Mr. Frey did not respond to a telephone message left at his home in Manhattan. Officials at Random House, Doubleday's parent, would not comment on the Smoking Gun article but issued a statement saying, "We stand in support of our author, James Frey, and his book which has touched the lives of millions of readers." Ms. Winfrey and her representatives at Harpo Productions also did not return calls yesterday. Ms. Winfrey's promotion of Mr. Frey's book was among the most enthusiastic she has ever given to an author. When Ms. Winfrey announced her choice - the first work

of nonfiction she had selected - she called the book "a gut-wrenching memoir that is raw and it's so real."

Ms. Winfrey is scheduled to announce her next pick for her book club on Monday.

But given the response from viewers yesterday on Internet message boards devoted to Mr. Frey's book, Ms. Winfrey might find herself having to address questions about its truth. On Ms. Winfrey's site, some readers expressed dismay that they had been lied to. But on Mr. Frey's own site, bigjimindustries.com, one fan who identified herself as Julie wrote: "Even if his story is fake, he opened up the eyes of so many people. How about if we all focus on that instead of accusing him of being a liar?"

Mr. Frey's agent, Kassie Evashevski of Brillstein-Grey Entertainment, did not respond to requests for comment. A lawyer representing Mr. Frey, who wrote a letter to The Smoking Gun threatening legal action if it published a defamatory story about the author, did not return a phone call seeking comment. Also declining to respond to telephone messages were Sean McDonald, Mr. Frey's editor, who now works for Penguin's Riverhead imprint, and a spokesman for Penguin, which announced last week it had signed a contract to publish two additional books by Mr. Frey, including a novel.

The discrepancies and Mr. Frey's reported admissions of falsifying details of his life raise questions about the publishing industry's increasing reliance on nonfiction memoirs as a fast track to the best-seller list. It is not at all uncommon to see new books marketed as nonfiction containing notes to readers saying the author has altered the time sequence of events, created composite characters, changed names or otherwise made up details of a memoir. "A Million Little Pieces," however, contains no such disclaimer.

And the questions about Mr. Frey came at almost the same time as new revelations about the identity of JT Leroy, a writer whose supposedly autobiographical novels draw on a lifetime of prostitution and homelessness.

Since its publication in April 2003, "A Million Little Pieces" has attracted attention for its graphic descriptions of Mr. Frey's harrowing withdrawal from substance abuse and for its remarkable story of his redemption and sobriety. But aspects of the story, including the author's claim that he underwent root canal surgery without anesthesia, have drawn repeated questions at book readings, from fans of Ms. Winfrey's book club and from journalists.

In an interview with The New York Times last month, Mr. Frey said that he had provided extensive documentation of his account of events in "A Million Little Pieces" to lawyers at Random House Inc., the parent of Doubleday and Anchor Books, which published the paperback edition, and to lawyers at Harpo, the production company owned by Ms. Winfrey. But he declined to allow a reporter at The Times to view those materials or to ask his publisher or Ms. Winfrey to share them. Random House also refused to allow a reporter to review the materials or to discuss them.

In an interview with The Times last month, Mr. Frey said that he originally envisioned "A Million Little Pieces" not as a memoir but as a novel. "We were in discussions after we sold it as to whether to publish it as fiction or as nonfiction," he said. "And a lot of those issues had to do with following in a legacy of American writers." Mr. Frey noted that writers like Hemingway, Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac had written very autobiographical books that were published as fiction.

But when Doubleday decided to publish the book as nonfiction, Mr. Frey said, he did not have to change anything. "It was written exactly as it was published," he said.

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