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Interview with James D. Waedekin

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J A M E S D.

Q: During its fairly short life thus far, *Blue Plains* has undergone several revisions. How has the play changed, and why have you made so many changes?

Interview:

James D. Waedekin



BY MELISSA BRUNER

Artist Georgia O'Keeffe spent many productive years in New Mexico; each year numerous admirers of her work travel to Abiquiu to view the place that provided her with so much inspiration. But O'Keeffe's love of vast, open sky, and its influence on her work, had its beginnings when she was a college art instructor in Canyon, Texas: a place less well-known and less often visited, if not less impressive, than her home in New Mexico. The stark, harsh beauty of west Texas, while providing O'Keeffe with inspiration for her work, was also a place where she suffered from debilitating depression, social ostracism, and constant battles with the administration of West Texas State Teachers College. It is this period of O'Keeffe's life and career that is the focus of *Blue Plains*, a play written by Oklahoma playwright James D. Waedekin.

A: "*Blue Plains* began as a project when I was in graduate school. As a writer in residence at UCLA, I was there to write, write, write. It was perhaps one of the most prolific periods of my life thus far: two years, three one-act plays, and two full-length plays. But the true development of the piece began when it was produced. Writing the words and seeing the play on paper is one thing. But no matter how beautiful the type or the quality of the laser printing, the play has to work on stage.

"My first taste of professional theater came less than a year out of graduate school. While I was living in Los Angeles, a New York acting company expressed an interest in *Blue Plains*. Before I knew it, it was presented in a staged public reading at The Writers' Theater. This reading resulted in many people telling me how to make my script better. From this experience, I learned to 'listen for the itch.' If enough people were coming up with similar elements of confusion, something was wrong. I didn't listen to their solutions, however, because people don't always know the source of the itch. I just dug down and tried to tackle the itches in my play so that I could continue to tell the story I wanted to tell.

"After rewrites and a structure change, *Blue Plains* opened in New York City on 42nd Street (theater row). The Off-Off Broadway scene, in which my play was produced, is where today's writers are turning and finding more production possibilities. It is a respected and legitimate venue in New York City, fast growing and affordable. To be

W A E D E K I N

a New York-produced playwright is nearly every playwright's dream; many wait a long time for this to happen. For me, it was an opportunity to see what worked and what didn't, to get a little press, and to go on with my writing.

"Readings of the play followed in Chicago and Los Angeles. More changes and a return to the play's original structure led to a production in Newport Beach, California. A big budget, and a strong director and cast, led me to the play's present incarnation. The addition of two new characters and some fifty new pages brings *Blue Plains* to its present, completed form. At last, I feel that Georgia's story is complete."

Q: O'Keeffe's environment and its influence on her work is emphasized in *Blue Plains*. Were you motivated to write the play because of a longtime admiration of her work, or did other factors influence you?

A: "While I was at UCLA, I was looking for an idea for a full-length play. I had toyed with the idea of a historical drama, but basically had no idea what to write about. I had been given a book with O'Keeffe's drawings and had picked up a copy of *Portrait of an Artist*. This book encompassed Georgia's whole life: ninety-eight years. So at first I had no plan whatsoever to write about her. Not with ninety-eight years to look at. Who could sit through it all? Not me, that's for sure. But one chapter of the book discussed what were, in my eyes, perhaps the most dramatic years of her life. And in a way, those were years I could relate to. Forced to support herself, she left the east coast to teach in

a small Texas town near Palo Duro Canyon. This was just months after her mother's death from consumption, and was during the plague of 1918. Georgia had given up painting and nearly died herself. I asked myself, 'What made her pick up the paintbrush and paint again?' Painting as a profession was the most unrealistic vocation a woman could choose in 1918, kind of like playwriting today.

"Ironically, my first draft was written while I was sick: eight weeks of walking pneumonia. I had been working two jobs, not taking care of myself, and I collapsed. At the time, I was debating dropping out of graduate school and dismissing playwriting. And when my fever broke, Georgia emerged. Close friends who knew me at this time in my life swear the play is really about me and my struggle with my need to write."

Q: Apart from your personal identification with Georgia's struggle, why did you choose this period of her life as the focus of *Blue Plains*?

A: "Perhaps famous people are most interesting before they're famous. Their struggle at this time is maybe a little more human, and we can most relate to them at this point of their lives. That's what I think it's like with Georgia in my play. So I concentrated on a short time in her life, with the hope that people seeing my play would get a sense of her, of the times, and of me as a writer—and, if they were interested, would then pick up more of her work, or mine.

"I think the play is about artistic struggle and the sacrifices we make to become writers, poets, artists, musicians, professors—actually, just the human experience against adversity. Georgia just happened to be a little closer to home for some of us."

Q: Since 'home,' for you, includes Texas, has this region influenced your work in any way apart from Georgia O'Keeffe's years in Canyon?

A: "My plays are set in Oklahoma and Texas. I moved to Texas at thirteen, and Oklahoma at sixteen. My plays are environmental pieces that deal with the Southwest, the land and language, and I hope to hold on to that. I relate to Sam Shephard, Tennessee Williams, and Horton Foote because they have chosen 'worlds to write about.' I tackle some heavy issues in my pieces, and they tend to be more palatable tucked away in the Oklahoma desert, the ravines of Palo Duro Canyon, or on a red dirt farm, because contemporary audiences don't always like 'in-your-face' theater. Often unfamiliar with these environments, they can be led into my worlds through storytelling, and once they're snagged, and they feel safe in my world, I can turn the tables and let the drama begin.

"I have been told jokingly by my family and friends that if my writing sprees continue, Oklahoma and Texas may never let me come back. But I love the characters I create, and they in no way reflect any dislike or distaste for the lands I grew up in and that shaped me as I grew up. So it's a connection I plan to hold on to, and I hope that connection nurtures my continued success."

Q: Since you have decided that *Blue Plains* is now in its final and complete form, what's next?

A: "My newest play is called *Side Stream*. Set in western Oklahoma, it is an interracial story of a wandering roadside preacher, Abram, and his common-law wife, Jessie. It tests the boundaries of love when their relationship is tested by tragedy. At the encouragement of my agent, I am also working on two screenplays. One is in the Hollywood fashion, meaning action with suspense and comedy and romance and thrills all in the same movie; and one in my quirky sort of storytelling way, which means drama, a good story, and characters that I like, kinder and gentler and with less box-office appeal.

"Long-term, I'd like my work viewed and known on a national level. This, of course, could take my whole life to accomplish. I do know I want my work to matter, and if I choose topics that are significant and reflective of our times, and I try never to cease to amaze myself no matter how hard I work, this could be possible.

"Thirty years young, I look forward to this journey. Ultimately, my love of teaching runs neck and neck with my love of the theater. I hope to find a university or small college somewhere that will hire me, allow me to teach acting/playwriting, and continue to develop my own new work." ■