

Stephen Belber Head On

The playwright confronts messy reality, from politics to romance, with an unflinching eye and singular voice

BY KARA MANNING



Stephen Belber

FIRST MET STEPHEN BELBER AN ASTONISHING

16 years ago in director Jack Gelber's collaborative workshop at Playwrights Horizons's now-defunct theatre school (not affiliated with New York University's program there now). Sitting directly across from me that first night, in a room packed with actors, directors and writers, was a guy wearing the saddest pair of Nikes I'd ever seen. They were clumsily bandaged with silver electrical tape, the soles peeling off after years of apparent athletic torture. The sneakers belonged to Belber, who completed his grunge-era, tatterdemalion look, like a woebegone member of Soundgarden, with a threadbare flannel shirt and aggressively baggy cargo pants.

A Washington, D.C., native and a Trinity College graduate, Belber had coached football in Finland, bussed tables in San Francisco, written a novel on Nantucket and even worked for the Saudi Press Agency. At the time he started Gelber's class, he had only one Off-Off-Broadway credit to his name, a one-man show called *Psychotic Busboy Blues*.

But Belber's theatrical voice turned out to be as singular and offbeat as his footwear and résumé. From his nascence as an actor/playwright churning out quixotic one-acts and unabashedly emulating Eric Bogosian in verbose solo shows, Belber's fiercely intelligent writing has, in the years since we first met, quietly matured, resonating with more nuanced hues.

Frank Langella, who starred as the loquacious dance instructor in Belber's 2004 Broadway debut, *Match*, calls the New York-based playwright "original" and "thrilling." Director and playwright Moisés Kaufman, who collaborated with Belber and other Tectonic Theater Project members

on *The Laramie Project*, deems him one of theatre's "most beautiful writers." And Marsha Norman, who chose Belber for the first class she taught with Christopher Durang at the Juilliard School (a group that included David Auburn, Julia Jordan and Kira Obolensky), describes him as "an extraordinary being" who is "writing on a mythic level about commonplace things."

They also agree—with despair—that if myopic artistic directors and caustic critics continue to overlook and misunderstand Belber's passionate and politically muscular work, the theatre could lose one of its most promising playwrights. In one of many auspicious cinematic developments for the now 41-year-old writer, Belber's directorial film debut, the bittersweet romantic comedy *Management*, which he wrote and which stars Jennifer Aniston and Steve Zahn, is slated for release next year after debuting in September at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Aniston was so impressed by Belber's screenplay that she not only agreed to star in the film but also signed on as an executive producer. "It's so rare that you get so deeply touched by people in movies," says Aniston by phone in New York. "There was something about the humanistic approach that Steve took with these characters—the clumsiness, messiness and rawness, the unappealing part of them. In a world of gloss, it's nice and refreshing to de-gloss a bit and be real."

"After directing a movie, I know the freedom and power of articulating your vision that way," Belber tells me as he nurses a lager in a Chelsea restaurant on a recent August afternoon. Charming, success hasn't altered his dubious taste in footwear; today Belber wears dodgy, army-green Crocs



JOAN MARCUS

From left, Frank Langella, Ray Liotta and Jane Adams in Belber's *Match* in 2004.

with a Jets logo. "In theatre you do sometimes feel constrained," he continues, "not by the form, but by what your expectations of what theatres' and critics' expectations are—what you perceive they want. Unfortunately, I allow myself to be affected by that. Oddly, as a film director I feel I have the opportunity to do what I've always wanted to do in theatre—create complicated sociopolitical

work using characters coming at life from unexpected, disarming angles."

Belber's smart, unconventional writing has been readily embraced in Hollywood. In addition to the buzz over *Management*, Columbia Pictures recently snatched up his screenplay *The Long Run*, based on his 2005 play *McReele*, for seven figures. The film is in development with Will Smith's

Overbrook production company. Curiously, the *New York Times*'s Ben Brantley coolly dismissed the Roundabout Theatre Company's production of the play, about a charismatic, exonerated African-American prisoner running for political office, as being "generic" and "arduously topical"—though the ascendance of Barack Obama and Newark, N.J., mayor Cory Booker had only just entered the nation's consciousness. Belber recalls that three weeks after that dispiriting review, he sold another screenplay, *The Power of Duff*, about a news anchor with a spiritual bent, for nearly a million dollars to Universal Pictures. "That was nice," he adds, wryly.

"I think critics have drubbed him unfairly," says Norman. "I think they've failed to see what is so powerful in him. That might change with a change in critics. It also may be that over time, Stephen simply survives them. As Lanford Wilson once said to me, 'Once the critics realize that you're not going to go away, then you've made it.'"

Belber isn't going away quite yet. His play *Fault Lines*, directed by David Schwimmer and produced by Naked Angels, opened

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From Stephen Belber's *Geometry of Fire*:

MEL: (beat) Do you know how many guys in Iraq are getting Prozac shoved down their throat right now just so that they don't have to think about what they're doing?

WANDA: I'm not sure that's true—

MEL: It's like 40 percent. The army's *bleeding* money on meds. Iraq's the best thing that ever happened to the big pharmaceuticals—

WANDA: I'm sensing a little resistance here, Mel.

MEL: It's actually rejection.

WANDA: Bad memories are manageable.

MEL: I don't *wanna* manage my memory.

WANDA: What do you want to do with it?

MEL: Wear it around my fucking neck.



Jodi Long and Anthony Mackie in Belber's *McRee* in 2005.

earlier this fall at New York City's Cherry Lane Theatre, and, after a long developmental journey, *Geometry of Fire* opens at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater this month. But Belber is frustrated with what he feels is antipathy in this country for political plays, unless they've been imported from

London. Despite *Geometry of Fire*'s successful workshops in 2006 at the Sundance Institute Theatre Laboratory and a production the following summer at New York Stage and Film's Powerhouse season at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, Belber struggled to secure a reading—let alone a production—of the

play in New York until Rattlestick's artistic director David Van Asselt stepped in.

The eloquent yet uneasy drama focuses on a terse series of encounters between a recently returned Iraq War veteran and an Arab American searching for the cause of his father's cancer, which might have to do with chemical warfare research done on the American University campus during World War I. Writing the play—which Belber based on extensive interviews with a former Marine sniper—also enabled him to deal with his mother's long battle with multiple myeloma. She passed away in 2007.

"It's the best play I've ever written," says Belber, a bit sadly. "It's strange to me that comedies like *Match* or *Fault Lines* can get numerous production offers, but no one wants to touch this except for one small, downtown theatre. I'm hugely grateful for that and it makes me think of [Van Asselt] as somewhat courageous. But it is disappointing. Even Hollywood has had a spate of Iraq movies, but in New York theatre—other than at the Culture Project—there has been almost nothing about this war. The fact is, more than half of the playwrights I know have written or are writing Iraq plays."

Geometry of Fire stars Logan Marshall-Green, Reed Birney, Donnie Keshawarz and Jennifer Mudge and is directed by Belber's wife and longtime collaborator Lucie Tiberghien, who describes their artistic partnership as fearlessly argumentative and inspired by "passionate discussions."

Joe Kraemer, Juilliard's literary manager, notes that a ferocious spirit informs the play: "There's such integrity to the storytelling.

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Dominic Fumusa, left, and Stephen Kunken in *Tape* at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

How it connects to the situation in Iraq is visceral and tough.”

Although Belber is willing to declare that he’d “like to be a great political dramatist,” he’s also aware that good political plays, which satisfy theatrically as well as theoretically, are difficult to write. “I get very caught up in my ideas,” he says, almost apologetically. “I think I try to jam a hundred ideas that I read about or think about into a play at the cost of classic dramatic conflict and tension. My undergraduate philosophy degree serves me badly in those cases because I try to talk about the human condition as opposed to examining the human condition through good character conflict.”

And what about *Geometry of Fire*? “I’ve found the balance between characters and ideas,” he quickly responds. In fact, Belber’s dialogue can be taut and disturbing, as in 1999’s *Tape* (which became a film featuring Ethan Hawke, Robert Sean Leonard and Uma Thurman), or, in the case of the eloquent *A Small, Melodramatic Story* (2006), simply heartbreaking. He excels at witty, circumspect, testosterone-driven comedies like *Fault Lines* and *Match*, which garnered a Tony nomination for Langella. “I can’t think of very many playwrights his age and in our time who can write these giant, wonderful speeches,” says Langella. “They’re beautifully constructed; they’re not difficult at all once you own them. To get a playwright with this sense of grandeur in modern times is a great gift for an actor.”

Aniston concurs; she and Belber have even been discussing possible theatre projects. She says that tackling a realistically drawn romance, such as *Management*, is ultimately what makes her feel “alive” as an actress. “I

was tapped into that kind of awkward love the characters were struggling through,” admits Aniston. “It’s not pretty—it’s messy, insecure and defensive.”

The same can be said of politics in Belber’s plays. Over the past decade, since collaborating on *The Laramie Project*, he has explored storylines with more expansive political or sociological mettle. Kaufman, Belber and other Tectonic members returned to Laramie in September, as the Wyoming town neared the 10th anniversary of Matthew Shepard’s death, to reconnect with residents and add an epilogue to the play. “He has this kind of daring,” Kaufman says, recalling the project’s on-the-scene genesis. “Steve was always the one who wanted to talk to people he thought that no one else wanted to talk to. He would go into a bar and spend a free morning talking to everyone. He would find the people who knew the perpetrators. He always felt like the most Hemingway of all of us.”

“Having a tape recorder in my hand compelled me to listen in a way I never had before,” recalls Belber, who wrote the first draft of *Tape* between trips to Laramie. “That was the first time I got out of my own head

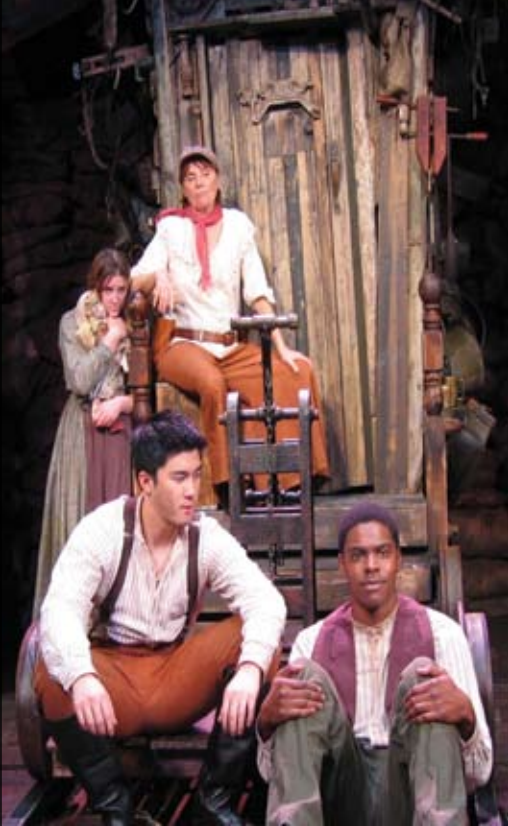
as a writer. I think up until then I had always superimposed upon characters what I wanted them to say. Following *Laramie*, even though I was writing fictional characters, I allowed them to speak to me more—I had learned to perceive them on a different level.”

Belber is admittedly nervous about the reception of *Geometry of Fire*. “Frankly, I have a little more faith in film than in theatre right now,” he says bluntly. “If New York’s greatest effort in addressing this war is *Journey’s End*, that’s not great. If we need to go back to World War I because we’re too afraid to confront it head on, then we need to try harder.”

Norman, though, remains hopeful that Belber’s cinematic detour will be more akin to that of David Mamet or Clifford Odets—that he’ll straddle stage and screen. “He’s one of those people that I count on for my life in the retirement home,” she says, laughing. “I hope there are Steve Belber plays that they’ll take me to see.” ❧

Kara Manning has written for *Rolling Stone*, *MTV News* and *State*. She received the 2007 Princess Grace Award in playwriting.

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