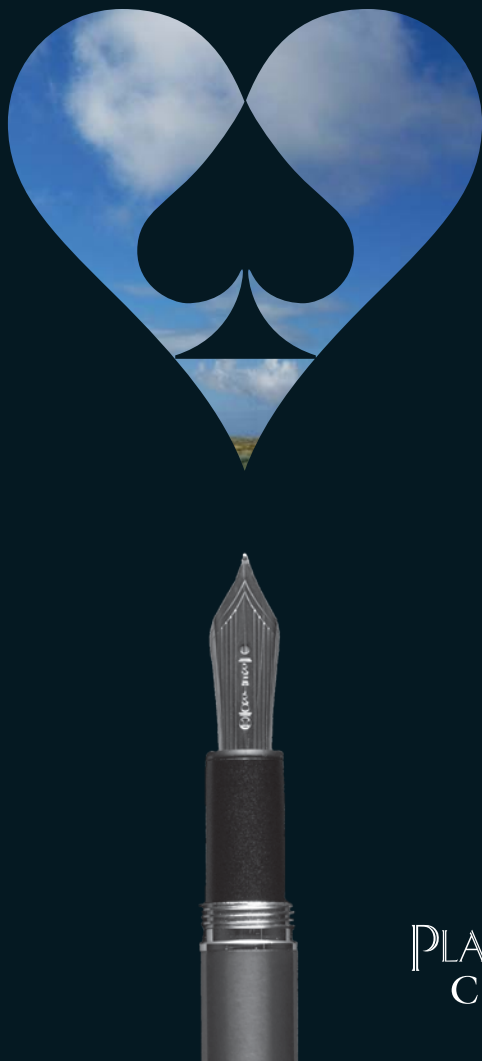


SEASON 08-09

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playwright interviews

Dialogue:

An Interview with Vincent Delaney



THE
PLAYWRIGHTS'
CENTER

The 2008-09 Ruth Easton New Play Series concludes at 7 p.m. on May 4 with Vincent Delaney's *T or C*.

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N^o8
Vincent Delaney

Your play, *T or C*, deals with the emotional aftermath of a school shooting, but it has many layers. What would you say it's about?

This play is about the gaping chasm between parents and children. I think it's about the terror of parenthood, but it also asks this really fundamental question—can we ever really know our children? And if the answer is no, what does that make us?

When did you start writing this play?

When my wife was pregnant with twins last summer. We were already parents, but kind of terrified of the idea of two more kids. So I wrote this during the pregnancy, which freaked her out. I mean, for obvious reasons.

But also, I've been interested in this whole Columbine thing, the school shooter mentality, but I always knew I was going to be writing it from the parents' point of view. I don't know that there are any plays about the parents of these children. There certainly are some about shooters; there's made-for-TV movies about shooters. But what about those who raised them?

Before starting work on this play, you said in an interview with InterAct Theatre that you were "scared to work on this one."

Totally. You know, the Columbine guys, Klebold and Harris, they left thousands of pages of material; they wanted to leave a copious record. The record is horrifying. And I spent many long nights looking at the Columbine files, which are everything from their doodlings on their little school notebooks to their silly little rhymes to their videos. Yeah, it was terrifying.

The setting of this play is intriguing. How did *T or C*, New Mexico get its name, and how does that relate to the play?

It really is true that the town had a different name, and in the '50s there was a game show called *Truth or Consequences*, and it was literally a deal where the

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SEASON 08-09

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In 2005, Vince Delaney wrote a dark comedy about the troubled political campaign of a right-wing female senator. It was refined in a handful of workshops—including at the Center in early 2007—but didn't attract a production until, as if on cue, two charismatic female politicians exploded onto the scene of the 2008 election.

That's the sort of writer Vince is—effortlessly tuned in to the American zeitgeist. On an emotional level, *T or C* is equally prescient. Our nation is entering an era of consequences, and a desert wasteland seems a frightening but not entirely far-fetched symbol of our collective future.

I'm sure in Vince's mind the play is precisely what it is—an intimate exploration of the parent-child relationship, a nightmare (with jokes) from the anxiety closet of a man just starting on that journey. In this context, he confronts staggering questions about our relationship with our children, our spouses, and ourselves. But writing, like our relationships with family, never exists in a vacuum. The power of Vince's work comes from his ability to deftly maneuver the complicated dance between culture and character.

—Polly K. Carl, Ph.D.

Curator, Ruth Easton New Play Series

Producing Artistic Director, the Playwrights' Center

host wanted a town that was willing to change its name to the name of the game show. It's been that ever since, even though no one even knows what that means anymore. But that's where it came from, a game show in the '50s. And they ended up getting a lot of tourism out of it.

But I've been through that town, and the thing about it is, it's just the most desolate place on earth. And not to beat up on New Mexico, but it has some of the most shocking poverty I've ever seen in my life, and desolation, and physical beauty, all rolled together. I knew the play wanted to be in the desert, because there's something very mysterious and fundamental about the desert; it's so unknown. But then the fact that the town has this name—*Truth or Consequences*. It just seemed a natural fit.

Also, you note in the play that there is a spaceport being built in the background.

And that's also true! We never really go there, but we hear it and we see it, and I hope it's got this mythic sense of something primal offstage. You hear the rumbling, you see the distant lights. So the symbolism is just dripping, and the danger, of course, is hitting it a little too hard, but I think since some of it comes out in a comic way, it isn't too heavy-handed.

But this place really exists, and it really is wrapped up in all these contradictions. And it allowed me to have this character who was so street-smart and perceptive and brilliant, and yet so utterly lost. And that's Soledad. It's rife with imagery but it's also truthful.

Soledad is only 17, but she surprises Sheridan with her skill at poker. Are you a poker fan yourself?

[Laughs] You don't know about the playwright poker table that used to happen at [playwright] Dominic Orlando's house. For four years it was the weekly ritual, and there was something about playwrights sitting around the table for four hours, fighting over quarters ... I always knew I was going to write a play with poker. So there's that. Personally, I love the game.



But then there's this thing about bluffing, the way kids can read us and we can't read them, the way they manipulate us. And that's Soledad. And she's so *good* at it. And Sheridan is so *bad* at it. Again, that's what it's like to be a dad. And my daughter's only five, so I don't have a teenage daughter yet, but I'm imagining what it's going to be like. She's already getting whatever she wants out of me and just working me over and I don't even know she's doing it.

What are you planning on working on in this upcoming workshop?

Well, you know, I've worked with Hayley [Finn] before. She's the director, and she's really, really smart and perceptive, and she's got that good combination of dramaturgy and director's eye, so I'm really excited about that collaboration. I think we might work on a few tonal things. We might explore if there's a missing scene or two. The main knock-down, drag-out between Jane and Sheridan is so scorched-earth, and then there's one more scene and the play is over. And in some ways that's good—"Oh my god, it's over?!"—but there may be room for something else in there. A little more redemption, maybe. I think we're going to explore that. The nice thing is to be in this position where it isn't about cutting. It's about adding, which I find easier.

You recently developed your play *Writer 1272* here at the Playwrights' Center.

Yeah, my whole career kind of centers around you guys. *Writer 1272* is now in production at the Guthrie because of Polly Carl. It was amazing. Thursday they said, "Polly, do you have a play?" She said, "Yeah. Read this." Friday they called me and said, "We want to do your play." And Saturday they started rehearsal. It's also about to open at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, which is a New Plays on Campus production. *Perpetua* [produced at St. Olaf College in 2004 through New Plays on Campus] happened because of the Playwrights' Center. And *War Party*, which just had two productions last fall, in Philadelphia and in Seattle, was pretty much created when I was a McKnight Advancement Grant fellow. Those four years at the Center were just unbelievably productive and stimulating, and I'm still reaping the benefits of it.

How did you get started as a writer?

I started as an actor. I still do some acting, but not as much as I'd like to. I went to conservatory and acted through all those years, but all along knew I was probably going to be a playwright. Just kind of knew it. That may be why I'm so into character. I mean, I do play with structure, but I'm more interested in, "What would it be like to act this particular character?" I try to write things I know actors would enjoy doing. And that probably pushes me toward naturalism, and just slightly toward magic realism. I don't play with weird things happening in spotlights, that sort of thing.

What do you like or dislike in a play?

I love provocative questions that get raised in surprising ways. I don't ever want to see them answered. I dislike the answers. I love complex characters, I love contradiction, I love to be provoked. I don't like to be screwed with; I don't want things that are arbitrarily ambiguous. I like powerful things raised in provocative ways, and then I just want to go think about it. So, theater that forces discussion. Another thing that I hate is cleverness for its own sake, things that are witty and utterly forgettable—there's a lot of that. And I understand it, because those things are easier to get produced.

I'm always amazed when anybody produces my plays. When *War Party* got produced, I understand it was an election year, but that's kind of a dangerous piece of work, you know? But I just loved the danger of the characters in that play, the shifting sands underneath them, and the way we have to reappraise them. I feel that some of that is happening in this play. This play is by far the most ... I just have to keep saying *primal*. The most primal play I've got.

Vince Delaney and some friends packed up two cars in spring of 2001 and drove to Minneapolis to join the Center. They did not come on fellowships; they had no jobs or money. They came because of the national reputation and a desire to be a part of something. We find that many of our members come to the Center with a similar desire.

Vince considers the community and the shared support of fellow writers to be the best part of his membership. He believes that working with high-level artists who care deeply about their work and are gracious enough to give to each other is invaluable. The Playwrights' Center continues to support Vince, and all of our members, with connections, workshops, readings, feedback, productions, and new colleagues ... everything a playwright could ask for.

—Anna Peterson
Membership Manager & Literary Associate
The Playwrights' Center

TAKE NOTE Upcoming Events

June 1	Jerome ManyVoices Showcase by ManyVoices Fellows Lorena Duarte, Ike Holter, Anton Jones, May Lee-Yang, and Rebecca Nicholson The Playwrights' Center's 2008-09 ManyVoices Fellows read selections from their recent work. 7 p.m. at the Playwrights' Center A free , ticketed event For reservations call 612.332.7481 x10 or email info@pwcenter.org.
June 5	McKnight National Residency & Commission Reading by Kia Corthron A reading of a new play by 2008-09 National Residency & Commission winner Kia Corthron. 3 p.m. at the Playwrights' Center A free , ticketed event For reservations call 612.332.7481 x10 or email info@pwcenter.org.

"Play the person, not the cards."

Vincent Delaney,
Core Writer