



# Dialogue:

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
LEE BLESSING



THE  
PLAYWRIGHTS'  
CENTER

The 2007-08 Ruth Easton New Play Series concludes May 19 at 7:30 p.m. with Lee Blessing's *When We Go Upon the Sea*.

Nº 6  
Lee Blessing



## WHAT IS YOUR PLAY, *WHEN WE GO UPON THE SEA*, ABOUT?

Of course, no playwright is ever competent to say what her or his play is “about”—that’s for every spectator to decide. What I intend is an experience with George W. Bush unlike those we’ve all been having over the last eight years. It’s just a public service, in a way.

## WHEN AND HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO WRITE THIS PLAY?

I probably began writing this play in my head a year and a half ago or so. I’d pointedly ignored writing about the present administration for seven years. Finally I broke down.

## WHAT RESEARCH DID YOU DO TO GET INSIDE THE HEAD OF GEORGE W. BUSH? WERE THE OTHER TWO CHARACTERS, PIET AND ANNA-LISA, INFLUENCED OR INSPIRED BY ANYTHING?

The characters in this play spring pretty much wholly from my imagination. George W. Bush has been impossible to avoid for the last eight years (longer in Texas). Still, I’ve spent most of that period not listening to him and not watching him, living as I do in the era of the remote control. Even so, as “remote” as I’ve tried to stay, it’s impossible for the man’s personality (or that of any two-term president) not to seep into my consciousness and trouble my dreams. He’s been more omnipresent than Coca-Cola.

One of America’s best contemporary playwrights tackles America’s most difficult political questions. In *When We Go Upon The Sea*, Lee Blessing imagines the night before George Bush is tried before The Hague. I’m always compelled by Lee’s unique ability to mix savvy commentary with vivid characters motivated by basic needs. Lee writes plays that resonate with our times. He embraces the complexities and contradictions of the world, and he does it boldly and without apologies. It’s a real treat to have Lee Blessing back home at The Playwrights’ Center, where he’s been developing plays since the August Wilson days. You owe it to yourself to see what he’s working on.

—Polly K. Carl, Ph.D.

Curator, Ruth Easton New Play Series

Producing Artistic Director, The Playwrights’ Center

I haven’t tried to imitate the man’s speech patterns or personal iconography. These things don’t interest me all that much, and I’m sure they’ll be largely discarded as cultural touchstones once he leaves office. But the decisions he’s made and why he’s made them do interest me and will, I think, fascinate commentators and historians for a very long time.

So any research I’ve done has more to do with that than with the man personally. As it is, it’s taken me nearly his whole term of office even to start my “Bush play.” I suppose I’ve been resistant to involving myself in the subject at all. This also means, since the play is set in the future, that the George Bush of the play has yet to be.

The characters of Piet and Anna-Lisa are also completely fictional (which I’m coming to understand is a disappointment to the literal-minded theatergoer of our day). It’s a funny thing about fiction. Melville wrote the “based on a true story” novels *Omoo* and *Typee* early in his career, yet I think he’s a little better remembered for a completely fictional narrative called *Moby Dick*. Somehow we’ve stopped trusting fiction, and it’s made us boring.

Piet and Anna-Lisa do come from something. They come from Europe—a continent encompassing both the wealth, security and stability of its countries in the north and west and the deeply insecure, poor and violent areas in the south and east. Their story reflects the deep gap between these regions.

George’s relationship with Piet and Anna-Lisa is naturally something that evolves during the play. I feel the role they occupy in his life is a real one, a “true” one, which is variously occupied by nearly all of us, to one degree or another. Without them—without their special connection to each other and without their connections to George—I doubt that George, or anyone like him, could exist at all.



## WHAT IS YOUR TYPICAL WRITING PROCESS? HOW LONG DOES IT NORMALLY TAKE YOU, FROM IDEA TO FINAL DRAFT?

One play took twenty years. One took only a couple months from conception to completion. All the others are somewhere in between those. I have no fixed term of gestation, unlike other mammals.

Also, I can't really say I ever get done writing a play. I'd continue to tinker forever if I didn't impose the artificial rule never to revise a play of mine once it's been published.

## DO YOU FIND A THEME FIRST AND THEN A STORY, OR A STORY FIRST AND THEN A THEME?

Theme generally follows story for me. Something I experience in life arrests my attention—something quite literal, usually. Only then does the question of theme arise. Story X occurs to me, and at some point I ask, "what can I make Story X mean to someone else?" That's when I'm forced to consider theme.

## HAS YOUR VIEW OF HUMANITY CHANGED OVER THE COURSE OF YOUR CAREER? IF SO, HOW?

I think I'm not unusual in finding that humans as a species tend to drop lower and lower in one's esteem as the years pass. I suppose it's because we have so much potential to improve things throughout the world yet display such little ability or inclination actually to do it. It's constantly inspiring that we keep trying, however.

On the other hand, certain other species (pugs and anchovies, for example) seem to grow on me.

## WHY AND HOW DID YOU GET STARTED AS A PLAYWRIGHT?

I began writing plays to get out of writing term papers in high school. Later I thought of myself as a poet who acted. Finally I traded in those two activities for playwriting, since it was the only form of artistic expression anyone had ever given me money for.

I learned playwriting from Oscar Brownstein at the University of Iowa. Before that, I had no idea how to go about it. So in a real sense, he was the reason I became a playwright. We can blame him. He lives in Pennsylvania; let's all go there and blame him now.

To be fair, I also found in playwriting a form in which I felt a tremendous freedom and facility of expression. While I could write publishable poems, they always felt like work compared with playwriting, which for some reason comes much more easily.

So—on the whole easier and more profitable. Not a hard choice in the end.

## WHAT IS YOUR GOAL AS A PLAYWRIGHT?

I didn't realize playwrights were required to have goals. It may be that I'm a playwright because I have no goal.

## WHAT DO YOU KNOW NOW THAT YOU WISH YOU KNEW WHEN YOU BEGAN PLAYWRITING?

That kissing ass is a life-skill.

## WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR THE UPCOMING WORKSHOP?

To improve the play and work with theater artists I esteem. It's hard to think of even that as a goal, though. Feels more like a way of life.

Political plays seem to be making a comeback. In the last few years, it seems that more and more plays are being written and produced on political themes—plays about the war in Iraq, plays about the Bush administration, plays that look at today through the lens of history, and plays with an increasingly sophisticated perspective on the complexities of international relations. I think some writers hesitate when it comes time to write a play about recent political events. But these are heavy times we're living in, and no matter your political orientation, there's plenty to write about. Lee Blessing resisted writing about George W. Bush for seven years. How long will it be before you decide to put something on paper?

—**Steve Moulds**  
Membership & Literary Associate,  
The Playwrights' Center

come

Reserve seats now...  
Phone: call the numbers below  
Email: [info@pwcenter.org](mailto:info@pwcenter.org)

May 8 &  
May 15

Walker Art Center Presentation  
**Permanence Collection**  
by Kira Obolensky and Ed Bok Lee; dir. Hayley Finn

Inspired by works of art in the Walker's permanent collection, *Permanence Collection* by Kira Obolensky and Ed Bok Lee is a humorous, elliptical and ironic exploration of class and the ways in which we attempt the impossible transformation of our realities into works of art. Listen in as this short play comes to life through actors stationed amongst the artworks.

(at the Walker Art Center, 1750 Hennepin Ave., Minneapolis)

Copresented by The Playwrights' Center and Walker Art Center  
7 p.m. & 8 p.m. FREE

May 19

The Ruth Easton New Play Series:  
**When We Go Upon the Sea** by Lee Blessing  
dir. Lucie Tiberghien  
Michael Bigelow Dixon, dramaturg

A man named George Bush arrives one evening in The Hague, Netherlands, where he faces the difficult task of going on trial the next day. Before that, however, he has an equally difficult job: getting through the night.

(at the Guthrie Theater, 818 South 2nd St., Minneapolis)

Copresented by The Playwrights' Center and the Guthrie Theater  
7:30 p.m. \$10 call 612-377-2224 or 1-877-44-STAGE  
or visit [www.guthrietheater.org](http://www.guthrietheater.org)

As Eugene O'Neill once put it:  
"Don't be a fool—buy me a drink.  
Or at least come to my play  
reading."

Lee Blessing,  
Core Member