

## Collaborators in Conversation - The Writers

**Walt:** Where do you start when you begin a play?

**Lydia:** I find that I do default to some things over and over, but those are the things that stay relevant in my life. I write about family or historical fiction and in those stories there's always going to be race, class, gender and sexuality. Those things don't write themselves, so I remain both flabbergasted and engaged in those conversations in a very personal way. So I usually start from character, since my characters, start to probe me and I probe them and they talk to one another and a play starts to take shape. And out of that it starts to dictate the structure.

**Walt:** Do you generally start with the characters in isolation? Are you meeting them one at a time and putting them together or do you just have them?

**Lydia:** Sometimes they start in isolation for me. For *Smart People*, I knew I was going to be talking about race in a way I never had before. I knew that I wanted the protagonist to be a white man who studied race and around him his world would be diverse. Beyond that I didn't know who they would be. They introduced themselves to me.

**Walt:** I usually start from the outside in. I start with a conversation, an idea I latch onto, get really fascinated by, and really want to talk about with other people. But I'm not great at just sitting down with people because I tend to be more shy. So I write a play about it. I'll find the conversation I want to have like for *Brawler* I was reading these articles about hockey enforcers and this sort of concussion and physical disability crisis going on in many professional sports today. It was not a topic that was native to me. I was a fan of hockey and I enjoyed it but I had never studied it. I knew that was the conversation I wanted to have but didn't have the personal connection to the material so I started trying to figure out how to have the conversation. For *Brawler* I also happened to be reading *Ajax* which is essentially a play about PTSD, and a very physical guy being abandoned by his higher ups. Those two thoughts percolated for a while and the play rose up from that. Coming from a position as a person and as an artist where my life can be blissfully unaware of a lot of systemic and societal issues I think starting with the conversation to me is a way to be able to focus in on and make sure that I am not easing into a default setting.

**Lydia:** It sounds like you really enjoy the research part.

**Walt:** I try to do a lot of that and have as many conversations as possible. I'm just trying to get people in the room who are going to be able to bring different perspectives to what I'm doing.

**Lydia:** How do you do that? How do you actually sit down with Hockey players?

**Walt:** It's tough. Making that approach is really hard. Especially because I want to write a play about Hockey that's not necessarily super excited about hockey. You don't want to have people coming in on the defensive. With *Brawler* there are a lot of documentaries and written material specifically about the role of hockey enforcers. Which is a really fascinating role. You're in sports but your job is to beat up other people.

And then I have people in my orbit who are more intensely hockey oriented and talking to them about why they love the sport. Then the biography about Derek Boogaard, an enforcer who unfortunately died of a drug overdose came out. Right when I was starting to write the play. All of a sudden this supplemental material dropped onto my desk. How do you go about your research?

**Lydia:** I read a lot actually. Especially with *Smart People* and I would say that was the toughest learning curve I've ever had. I spent about a year and half reading these scientific papers that were barely written in English. And I had to humbly give over to it. There were a lot of highlighters involved. And after I'd done that for a long time I made myself forget it. The play was going to be an extrapolation on real science but I knew my downfall would be try and actually presume to live in the world of actual neuroscience. I had to trust that enough went in there to not come out completely insane and then move forward.

**Walt:** I know I think during any research process you'd doing like you said all the highlighting and underlining and then you wind up using so little of it. for that I'm doing you know you're doing what he said or highlight it for. A while and then I go every time I read something I'm going to go with the grain and that I want you to actually do this by using so little of it. All right.

**Lydia:** Right. It's true. I do sometimes find I'm smarter than I think I am. I think I'm making up something absolutely outrageous then I run it by a scientist and they'll say "Oh yeah you got the science right." And I'll think "Wow"

**Walt:** Look at me I choose the wrong field!

**Lydia:** So that goes back to the whole thing about letting your characters talk. They are always smarter than I am. In any play. Their vocabularies are better, their wittier. I've learned that letting my characters speak and not controlling them too much it helps the work not be didactic and feel like I have some sort of agenda. Because I don't. I want to see what happens when these interesting people with strong opinions interact. My first scene where Brian, our protagonist, this isn't a spoiler because we see this right away, but I didn't see right away that

I was writing a meet-cute scene. I went onto that scene saying what would be interesting would be these two people who are very much at the top of their professions; an Asian-American woman and this white man both of whom have some discussion of race in their work. What would happen if they were both put on the diversity committee at this university? Which strikes me as funny. I always find being in diversity committee meetings, by its very nature ridiculous. And futile. But that's what the scene wanted to be, I thought it would be about deconstructing this dynamic but all of a sudden he was asking her out for dinner! And there was all this sexual tension flying around. And the characters did that all by themselves. And before I knew it I had written this meet-cute scene in this deep play about important things. On the back end I come in and structure it. Because it doesn't just all happen accidentally. The dialogue is created very organically then the nuts and bolts of the writing of the play happen on the back end.

**Walt:** Absolutely. You're building the skeleton after you have everything else. All the meat and the muscle. And if you try to track it while you're writing or if you're thinking "oh this character hasn't talked in awhile" you'll drive yourself insane. But if you just let it happen and then go back and say "why wasn't that character talking for a long stretch?"

**Lydia:** It's more of a muscle then we give ourselves credit for. That's a hard thing to teach.

**Walt:** Yeah. You're totally right. You have to think of your characters as people and not viewpoints, if you don't it will all fall apart. I meet my characters a lot through rhythm. I was lucky with *Brawler* because *Ajax* has such a high stakes opening where he's in a tent having just killed a bunch of cows after just having killed a bunch of cows and is freaking out. So the play starts with this really high emotional level and everybody outside of the tent needs to figure out what to do about it. I transported that to a locker room, with a character who's locked himself in the bathroom after trashing the locker room and the other characters you trying to figure out what to do about him.

**Lydia:** Oh, I love that.

**Walt:** Once you get a situation like that you really just let them find their rhythm and let them talk about what they're going to talk about. You ride it for awhile and then go back, like you said and work on the practicalities after the fact.

**Lydia:** Do you outline, Walt?

**Walt:** No I'm terrible at outlining. Do you outline?

**Lydia:** Me too.

**Walt:** Oh, thank god.

**Lydia:** I do make my students! I had to suffer through outlining in college so I choose to inflict that pain on others. But I don't. I can't.

**Walt:** There so much freedom when you're writing a play to not know where you're headed when you're writing. Partly because that's the way theater works, nobody's waiting on it.

**Lydia:** How do you deal with endings, Walt?

**Walt:** Poorly.

**Lydia:** I struggle with them. It can take me years to find the last scene.

**Walt:** And I'll spend a lot of time writing scenes that shouldn't actually be final scenes or try to wrap everything up really nicely or not wrapup anything it all. and then um. It's gets really easy to get lost in the weeds on what you're trying to say with the ending. Yeah, it's hard. I feel like climaxes I can usually figure out.

**Lydia:** Those are fun to write, aren't they?

**Walt:** Right! That's when everything goes the most wrong. And so that's great. But then how do you pick up the pieces at the end enough that people feel resolved by it? My best endings are ones I stumbled into by accident. Do you do have a strategy?

**Lydia:** Oh, I wish! There was one play where I wrote the final scene first. That was nice. But usually I've written a play that I think is beautiful and then something has to happen to make us stop watching it. That eludes me. I want to leave the audience thinking, I don't want to tie it up in a bow but then I don't want them to feel like I gave up on them. And so if I want them to walk away going "I don't know what happened," I want for them to know I meant for them to feel that way.

**Walt:** That it was intentional and you're really sticking them with it. Not to get to spoiler-y but did you know that *Smart People* would end at the moment that it wraps up at when you sat down to write it?

**Lydia:** *Smart People* took me two years to write. When I started writing it Obama hadn't run for office yet, so I was writing this play about race in a completely different paradigm. Then

when he was running for office the way we were talking about race started shifting. Then when he won. And I was called upon in a lot of interviews to talk about what I thought and about all the post racial business and blah blah blah. It asked me to up my game and then the ending happen organically.

**Walt:** I love the ending. It's really powerful.

**Lydia:** It it resonates differently now. Depending and where we are in history, depending on where a person sits in the audience I don't know how the ending works. What about you? Where are you with your play?

**Walt:** I'm still finding my finding my ending. This play will be the world-premiere, so much is changing. The casting for one of the characters as a younger actor shifted how the character is being written. It opened up a whole lot of possibilities. There's a reason Sophocles ended *Ajax* the way that he did and I need to find a reason that my play ends the way that it does as well. It's a fun little mystery game that I've been playing.

**Lydia:** I've been lucky enough in my career to have so many invitations to do development in various places, so I've been able to see how a Baltimore audience reacts to a certain play and how a Chicago audience reacts to the same play and how a Boston audience reacts. While I'm not fine tuning it for that specific audience it certainly is informative in answering the question, is it satisfying for all of those audiences? I don't have an agenda for my audience. I don't ever want them to have had a certain experience. I would like them to be entertained. But I would like them to have radically different opinions of what they've seen from one another. I want them to laugh and have had an enjoyable evening at the theatre. I do sometimes think when something deals with race and the writer is the person of color, there can be a tenancy for people to think that the writer has an agenda or is making a point. I write. My ass off to make that not so. Everybody has a valid struggle and journey in trying to understand this thing that none of us can figure out.

**Walt:** I write my plays to try to have a conversation, so I'm really interested in what the audience thinks. But, as a writer who's not a writer of color or a woman I find I get a weird reactions sometimes where they assume I'm coming at it from a position of authority, even when I've written characters of color or talking about specific issues. I'm the person who knows the least about these things, I rely on my collaborators. It's incredibly strange and frustrating when the audience makes assumptions about who can be a neutral story teller.

**Lydia:** It's nice to hear you say that because I don't that I would necessarily have assumed you have a similar version of my experience. And there is something in there about how how we're

asked to do our job well enough that we keep an audience comfortable enough to know that we're not trying to manipulate. We're not writing carelessly.

**Walt:** It's just an observation and something to be aware of. The act of coming to a play and giving up your evening, buying dinner, buying a ticket, baby sitters, gasoline and sitting in a space for 2½ hours is such an act of generosity from an audience, I want them to feel they got their money's worth.

**Lydia:** Absolutely. And wanting the company that took the chance on you and produced you to fare well.

**Walt:** Exactly, because it's such a huge risk on everybody's part. Especially now with the Netflix and the Hulu.

**Lydia:** There's always something really good to watch from your house.

**Walt:** So there is something really special about people who go to theatre. And so I look for audiences that just. So guess I just really like it when audiences engaging with it and when they walk out they feel they've gotten something they didn't have before. ■