‘I’m... Marsha Norman’

Behind the Scenes with the Pulitzer Prize-Winning Playwright

by David S. Thompson

Among the joys of serving as SETC’s President-Elect and program chair for the annual convention is proposing a recipient for the Distinguished Career Award. When I mentioned early in the process that my first choice -- indeed my only choice -- was Marsha Norman, I received unanimous agreement. Having the opportunity to honor a grand figure of the theatre and simultaneously greet someone I now call a friend provided a wonderful personal cap to a year of convention planning.

Upon learning that Marsha Norman is an acquaintance, people will sometimes ask the standard celebrity question, “What’s she like?” I am always careful to avoid saying that she’s just folk or regular people or just like you and me. Plainly someone who has earned the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award, among other honors, is not just like the rest of us.

However, while Marsha occupies an enviable position in the theatre community, she remains connected to the rest of the world. She is both a keen observer and a willing participant. She is personally unpretentious but as SETC members witnessed in her convention keynote address (you can read her remarks online at www.setc.org) and in her banquet remarks, she is an accomplished public speaker and a forceful theatre professional.

When I first met Marsha in 2000 we were at a reception for graduating students at the school where I teach, Agnes Scott College. I was chatting with one of the parents when a staffer mistakenly sensed a lull in my conversation and interrupted, saying that she wanted to introduce me to someone I would enjoy meeting. I took a few minutes to finish my conversation before turning to find Marsha, a member of both the Class of 1969 and the current board of trustees, waiting patiently. I was horrified that I had kept her waiting; she was not at all concerned.

Similarly, I happened to see her enter and approach the door at an alumnae gathering in New York where she was the guest of honor. She had made her way to a downstairs room at Trattoria Dell’Arte for the event during a rehearsal break of her play Last Dance at the nearby Manhattan Theatre Club. The event organizer at the door did not recognize the guest of honor and greeted her with the standard non-committal opening, “May I help you?” Her reply was simple and humble, “I’m... Marsha Norman.”

Each year for the last eight years, I’ve made annual treks to New York to watch the year’s crop of Broadway plays and write my annual “Tony Tour” predictions and related Broadway stories. During the last couple years of those trips, Marsha and I have solidified our friendship. We’ve met to see plays, eat dinner and talk. (Even when we cannot meet, the e-mail conversations are delightful.) One of my favorite theatrical memories involves dinner with Marsha in May 2005. We met at Hurley’s in New York across the street from the Walter Kerr Theatre. Using her tickets as a Tony voter, she had agreed to take me to see Doubt; I had agreed to arrange dinner. We had a table in the second floor window overlooking 48th Street. She was in meetings about the Broadway-bound musical version of The Color Purple, for which she had written the libretto. As we consumed drinks and an oversized steak each, she talked about having just met with “Jimmy” (James Nederlander Jr., the Broadway theatre owner and producer) about possible theatre spaces. It looked as if prime locations were available, she said, including the Broadway (the eventual choice) next to David Letterman’s home at the Ed Sullivan Theatre. The conversation flowed into talk about teaching, students, favorite theatre, home repairs and a million other things.

Fast forward a couple years to the SETC Convention in Atlanta. After exchanging greetings with Marsha on Saturday morning before her keynote address, I wanted to catch up on what was happening with audiences for The Color Purple. “Has it turned the corner?” I asked, referring...
to a Broadway-wide slump in ticket sales caused by waves of brutal winter weather. She said that the show had not only survived but thrived. With the news that American Idol winner Fantasia Barrino would join the cast in the lead role of Celie, the company recorded its third highest day at the box office and began an upswing in sales. A month after the convention, when the new leading lady premiered on April 10, an e-mail from Marsha confirmed the company’s faith in the popular singer as a well-rounded performer.

“Fantasia was fantastic last night,” raved Marsha. “Never seen anything like it, really. So moving and powerful. And it wasn’t the singing that put the audience out of their minds. It was the acting. [Director] Gary Griffin gets a million gold stars for convincing her she could do it.”

At the SETC Convention, I found myself thinking of Marsha’s work on The Color Purple as she talked in her keynote address about keys to success in writing plays. Convention attendees will recall that Marsha asserted that playwrights can be taught what an audience expects and how to write scenes that are useful in plays. She went on to explain that what some might consider “rules” are actually useful and reliable techniques for completing a variety of writing assignments.

Following her own advice was critical in her creation of The Color Purple because there was little time to waste. At the point when producer Scott Sanders and members of his production team at Creative Battery selected Marsha to pen the book, the creative process behind The Color Purple was already several years in the making. The producers had been presented with a script by another writer, but determined that it would not work. They sought a playwright with experience who could produce a strongly structured script that could also convey the spirit of Alice Walker’s novel.

After hiring Marsha in early 2004, the

Marsha Norman: 2007 SETC Distinguished Career Award Winner

Personal:

- Born in Louisville, KY
- Bachelor of Arts, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA
- Master of Arts, University of Louisville (KY)
- Lives in New York and Long Island
- Two children

Plays include:

- Getting Out
- ’night, Mother (1983 Pulitzer Prize)
- The Secret Garden, (1991 Tony Award, Best Book of a Musical; Drama Desk Award, Best Book of a Musical)
- The Color Purple (musical version)
- Currently librettist for Princess Caraboo, a new musical in development

Screenwriting credits include:

- Audrey Hepburn (ABC) starring Jennifer Love Hewitt
- Custody of the Heart (Lifetime) starring Lorraine Braco
- Law and Order: Criminal Intent (NBC)

Novel:

- The Fortune Teller

Interesting fact:

Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for The Color Purple on the same day that Marsha Norman won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for ‘night, Mother.
producers made few adjustments to the schedule of readings, rehearsals, workshops and an out-of-town tryout slated for the remainder of the year, pressing ahead with a planned premiere at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta in September 2004. As a result, Marsha had only a few weeks to adapt one of America’s most cherished novels and deliver a draft to the production team.

Part of what made this task manageable was that Marsha loved the material.

“The Color Purple is a sexy, funny story,” Norman said in an interview that appears on the website for the Broadway production. “The people in it are alive at the absolute limit of their existence. If they are mad, they are really mad. If they are sad, that anguish is there, that loss is there. If they are joyful, they are just going to walk around the stage shouting.”

Another factor in her success with the play was Marsha’s keen analysis. She quickly realized that she did not have to remain faithful to the original novel, but only had to create an experience that was faithful to the spirit of the book. She also noted that the placement of songs versus dialogue was a key component. Jubilant moments create obvious musical opportunities. However, Marsha solved problems of seeming passivity or reflective introspection by crafting such scenes as songs. She also found ways of keeping Celie’s sister Nettie in the minds of audiences through selective references. Plus she avoided the problem of alternating scenes between Africa and Georgia, choosing to build the effect of Africa to a more singular moment.

Despite her many awards and her outward confidence, Marsha suffers from the same jitters as the rest of us. At the opening night of the regional tryout at Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre, the performance was going very well and the audience was responding enthusiastically. I saw Marsha in the lobby at intermission and noticed that she was not standing near anyone. I sauntered over and asked if she had been watching.

“Here and there,” she replied. “I’ll watch a scene and then I’ll come out to the lobby.”

She had little reason to fear. The evening ended with Alice Walker coming on stage to take a bow and offer her own applause. The show opened on Broadway on December 1, 2005 and won a Tony nomination for Best Book of a Musical in 2006.

As much impact as Marsha has had
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already on today’s theatrical world, she will continue to leave her mark for years to come – through her roles as a vice president of the Dramatists Guild and as a teacher of playwriting. Along with Christopher Durang (SETC’s Distinguished Career Award recipient in 2004), she chairs the playwriting program at the Juilliard School. In 2004, she and Durang received the prestigious Margo Jones Award for their continuing impact on playwriting and their lifetime commitments to theatre.

And what a “continuing impact” they have had! If you don’t know the names Daphne Greaves, Tanya Barfield, Brian Tucker and Darren Canady, you soon will. They are all products of the Juilliard playwriting program. Among them they have received numerous grants and awards, won many new play contests, received prominent commissions and had works published.

The names David Lindsay-Abaire and David Auburn, also alumni of Juilliard, may be a bit more familiar. Auburn has written a number of plays, including the adaptation of the late Jonathan Larson’s *tick...tick...BOOM!* However, he is best known for *Proof*, winner of the 2001 Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award.

Lindsay-Abaire has written a number of wonderful works, including *Kimberly Akimbo* and last year’s Tony-nominated *Rabbit Hole*. As I was finishing this article, word came in that he had won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Rabbit Hole*.

“… great about David, great great great!!!!!!!” Marsha enthused in an e-mail.

What she didn’t say is that Lindsay-Abaire’s inspiration for the play was a direct result of a suggestion she made during a playwriting class at the Juilliard School. Marsha had told her students that a play built around one’s greatest fear would likely have tremendous emotional impact and resonance. Lindsay-Abaire thought that the death of a couple’s child would surely be the most frightening occurrence possible. During interviews prior to the play’s 2006 Tony-nominated Broadway run, he generously offered credit to his mentor.

So now, Marsha Norman is a two-time “grandmother” to a Pulitzer winner. In addition to receiving both a Pulitzer and a Tony herself, she also has the rare accomplishment of mentoring a Tony winner and two Pulitzer winners.

No, Marsha is not just like the rest of us – but she does share the same passions as many of us in SETC.

‘Teaching people to write plays is the best thing in my life, next to talking to my children,” Marsha told her SETC audience. “I am pleased to be here with a group of people who believe as I do, that theatre is essential in our lives, and that teaching it will help them say what it has felt like to be alive in their time.”

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