

JOE CURNUTTE IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHNNY G. LLOYD



Joe Curnutte (*Peter*) in Theatre for a New Audience's production of *Gnit* by Will Eno, directed by Oliver Butler. Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

During the 2020 rehearsals for *Gnit*, playwright **Johnny G. Lloyd**, then the assistant to Will Eno, sat down with **Joe Curnutte**, playing the eponymous Peter *Gnit*, to discuss the process, the play, and the production.

JOHNNY G. LLOYD How has your work with [your theatre company] [The Mad Ones](#) as a creator/collaborator/performer influenced your work and process coming into *Gnit*?

JOE CURNUTTE I think what super helps me as an actor on other projects is, the *Mad Ones* is very character driven—we make drama, dramedies, comedies that are really character focused, working on the minutiae of human behavior. I like to think we work in uber specificity—we will spend a couple of hours in a given rehearsal on

one or two very small physical moments because we know that has huge resonance.

And so, when I then pick up a script to play another character, it makes me hungry to know more about the guts of the character—even more than what's on the page. With Will [Eno] there, it's amazing because we talk about the things that you don't see—what he means by this line or this other line; if they seem to be contradictory, what that is. He's always keeping me on my toes in an effort to learn more about a character. That hunger for depth of character is what I've carried over the most.

JOHNNY G. LLOYD Peter *Gnit*, the title character of *Gnit*, is both the protagonist of the piece and

somewhat of an anti-hero. How have you crafted his character journey?

JOE CURNUTTE I'd asked Will a bunch of questions at first [about] which parts of this are autobiographical at all, and if so, what. He said a couple of things which are personal to him but that I also found resonance within my own life—just about certain ways that we went through our twenties and thirties and things that happened along the way. I think that helps to ground it, and not look at it as a typical Joseph Campbell's hero journey which can often seem pat.

The anti-hero nature of it is more true to how we walk around the planet as individuals. No one is wholly good or wholly evil—they can present as being a malicious person, but the underpinning there is something that could be excusable just by being a human. A lack of focus; this magpie nature that Peter has in this play, like 'oh, there's a shiny thing over there, I want to go see what the shiny thing is,' and then you become obsessed with the shiny thing and you don't pay attention to the collateral damage. That's something that I can identify with.

So I think finding the most human qualities in these things, which can seem mythic in proportion and are sort of folk tales—I do think *Gnit* is an American Modern folktale, which is calling on ancient Norwegian tales—and I think at the core of not seeming like paper dolls up there, is returning to the human thing.

And I would say, Oliver has been an amazing person to work with on this too, because, a phrase of his that I'm taking with me as I go into other work is "how do we scuff this up." As an actor I think you—I, personally, get trapped sometimes in this idea of polish. If it's something that even resembles classical text, there's this presentational quality, this forward facing the audience thing, and Oliver is always challenging me and the rest of the cast like, how do we scuff this up, make it more human? What is a little behavior or a little oddity that we throw in there that takes us by

surprise? Those two gentlemen's forces as we've been crafting this character have been amazing.

JOHNNY G. LLOYD There's been a lot of talk in the rehearsal room about the 'Norwegian Farmer' aesthetic. Can you talk about the idea behind that and how it's influenced your work?

JOE CURNUTTE This is such a unique piece because it is—I believe we're calling it a very rough translation of *Peer Gynt*, and that couldn't be more true. It varies from the source text in amazing ways and disregards it towards the second half of the play, and plus we're not speaking in translated text—it was an English-speaking playwright who wrote modern-day English language for us to say. So, it's not like there's pentameter to get over in this piece. But because it still has these elements that seep through the floorboards of this original Norwegian thing, there's a specific style that the piece takes on.

Something that we were talking about towards the beginning is—what would this play be if it was a company of Norwegian farmers who like to put on plays, and they get up on stage and they just like, throw on a coat and they're a character, and then they take that coat off and they're another character? It adds this element of the scuff-ness that Oliver talks about, or this non-polished way of doing it, or this like—you can see the seams. It's prevalent in the stage design and I think it's prevalent a little bit in the acting—it's a very unique style that I think we're all partaking in.

So that's my interpretation of the Norwegian farmer. That idea and aesthetic isn't necessarily what we're [exclusively] playing, but I think it's helped us all create the world inside of the play. •

This interview has been edited and condensed.

JOHNNY G. LLOYD is a New York-based writer and producer. Johnny was the winner of the Bay Area Playwrights Festival (*The Problem With Magic, Is:*) and has been commissioned by Clubbed Thumb and Second Stage Theatre. Johnny is a collaborator with Theater in Quarantine and SalonSéance. He is the Director of Artistic Development at The Tank and Producing Director for InVersion Theatre. MFA: Columbia University. jglloyd.com