

INTERVIEW THE LINE BETWEEN THOUGHT AND FEELING

WILL ENO IN CONVERSATION WITH JONATHAN KALB



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

As previews for *Gnit* approached in 2020, TFANA Resident Dramaturg **JONATHAN KALB** spoke with playwright **WILL ENO**.

JONATHAN KALB Let's begin with what motivated you to adapt Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. You once told me you had a "love-hate relationship" with this play. Can you elaborate?

WILL ENO Well, it was love, at first. When I started my version ten years ago it felt like a formal examination, a kind of theatrical inquiry into this play with such a long and storied theatrical history. I liked the excess and the way it didn't quite ever fit onto the stage. Which shouldn't be too surprising since *Peer Gynt* was originally written as a poem. I think Ibsen put it on the stage eight or ten years after it was initially published. I always sort of pictured a parent pushing a child who doesn't like acting out

into the light. You hear whispering and muffled conversation and then a loving but wrong-headed little shove: "You'll be great, Poem, just get out there."

As I continued working on *Gnit*, I realized I had a more personal and complicated relation to Ibsen's play. I hope I'm a good person and I try every day, but I know there were years and times when I wasn't and still might not be. And years I turned away from good people and things because I believed I was on this important search. And, maybe I was, but I think I was going on it in a fearful and closed-off way, instead of with both feet on the ground in the real world and with other people. I started thinking about *Peer Gynt* in that light and with that question: how do we do the long and private work some of us need to do, but not do it at the expense of other people? How do we find ourselves, without turning too far inward or slipping away from the world?

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I always felt for the character of Solvay, in Ibsen's play. She disappears for three acts and thirty years or so, and then comes on at the end to forgive him? I have been largely faithful to the original but the things I changed I changed with some vengeance. Now that I think about it, love/hate is probably a good thing to feel for your first or any adaptation, since you want to have strong-enough good feelings to sustain your interest, but enough doubts and misgivings to make some meaningful changes.

JONATHAN KALB *Gnit* is manifestly a Will Eno play as well as an adaptation. Does Ibsen's protagonist feel to you like a root or forerunner of one of your main characters?

WILL ENO Not strictly, and not by temperament, but I certainly am more drawn to people and characters who are trying to find their place in the

world. I mean that in a fairly real and basic way. When people mention existentialism, I think of—sure—of the French variety, the tilted beret and the cigarette, but I also think of it the way any kid might feel it. As in, “Can anyone see me? Do people know I'm here?” If I'm interested in existentialism at all, I think of it like a kid underneath the dinner table, at a party, wondering if she is visible. And I think, buried in a thicket of Norwegian poetry and Kierkegaardian notions, *Peer* has some of these simple questions. I like a character who feels thoughts and thinks feelings, from time to time. To say that another way, there is a point at which the line between Thought and Feeling is very thin, and I like characters who live in or at least understand that area. To be very plain, I feel more aligned with the story of *Peer*, now that the play has been adapted and he's Peter.

Jordan Bellow (*Reporter*) and Joe Curnutte (*Peter*). Photo by Gerry Goodstein.



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JONATHAN KALB Your Peter, like Ibsen's Peer, is on a calamitous quest for the "authentic self." Why is this quest calamitous?

WILL ENO Probably because the people who ask "Who am I?" are sort of a self-selecting group. They are people for whom the normal categories feel insufficient, or they themselves feel insufficient to the category, so they start off on this search. And a search or a journey is always riskier than not going on those things. Some people say, "Hey, I'm Wade Boggs, end of story." As for comparisons, Peer arrives at a different conclusion than Peter. I hope and believe that Peter's story is worse than a calamity but lends itself to something that might ultimately be more actionable, for us, if I may use that word. I think Peter is an amplification of some

Joe Curnutte (*Peter*). Photo by Henry Grossman.



qualities that are fairly common in the human. I include myself, with some pride and some humility, in that group.

JONATHAN KALB Does your pride mean that you see a way out of the trap of the self? Does your play point to one?

WILL ENO I hope it's both pride and humility that would help me see a way out. But there is a model of success in the play, yes, a meaningful approach to finding oneself, along with others, and to living, both in the mystery of the present and in the world of plans and futures.

JONATHAN KALB *Gnit*, like most of your plays, has a lot of laughter, but one isn't always sure why one is laughing. Can you share any general thoughts about what you find funny? And do you think of your humor as satirical?

WILL ENO I don't think of this play or much of what I write as satire, for the main reason that I feel very much like a participant and practitioner of anything human I might notice and write about. I'm not really a writer who says, "This is who you are—can't you see it!?" I hope I'm more of a "Do you ever do this?" sort of writer. To not see the whole picture is something that's potentially funny and is also at the core of being human. Language is an amazing tool for being funny, being so precise as it often is, and also so fleeting and re-tool-able. A great joke by an English comedian, goes something like: "They all laughed when I said I wanted to be a comedian; well, they're not laughing now." I don't mean to say that we are stupid and blind, I mean to say that we live in a gorgeously complicated and mysterious universe and, given that, given the difficulties, we do pretty well. If you place any human statement into a field of mathematical infinity, you start to see how the deck is stacked and start to see how much we all deserve a break.

One of my favorite jokes is a knock-knock joke that my daughter Albertine and I devised. Nobody gets hurt in it, nobody is the fool. It relies, to get clinical for a second, only on our familiarity with a particular form of joke. It goes:

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Knock knock.

Who's there?

Lucy.

Lucy who?

Haberman.

JONATHAN KALB The characters who interact with your Peter (Mother, Solvay, and Town, for instance) seem to have a different status from those around Ibsen's Peer. They push back differently against him, seemingly with more agency. Was this recalibration deliberate?

WILL ENO Yes. It initially came about because of the simple difference between being in a poem and being in a play, and then later had more to do with the interrogation of Peter's (Peer's, Ibsen's) project.

JONATHAN KALB Does your Peter learn anything in the end?

WILL ENO I think he does. I'm excited for what those last moments will look and feel like at Polonsky Shakespeare Center and then elsewhere in the world. It'll be very clear to Peter how the chips have fallen, but what is a little more, maybe, suspended about the moment is we might not be sure what Peter will do with the knowledge he has acquired. We all probably agree that self-knowledge is a good thing, but then there's the next part, which is how we employ it. How we interpret and employ it. I think—and we're working toward making them this way—I hope those last moments of the play might be really complicated and true and rich, and something an audience member (meaning human being) can build on and move forward from.

Joe Curnutte (*Peter*) and Deborah Hedwall (*Mother*). Photo by Daniel Vasquez.



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JONATHAN KALB Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* is in the "cosmic drama" tradition of Goethe's *Faust* and other plays that consider BIG questions about being human by tracing the long arc of one whole, very eventful human life. You've written several plays encompassing a whole human life arc. But some critics have felt that the cosmic tradition is obsolete. Do you disagree? Do you feel a kinship with the cosmic tradition?

WILL ENO There are a lot of problems with the present age but I like to remember that, theoretically at least, we know more than we've ever known, we're living longer (in certain countries), and we are potentially capable of more than any humans who ever lived. It's hard, as a living person, to see the whole thing, beginning to end, and to ascribe, while still in the middle of its developments, a meaning to your own capital-L Life. So I think it's pretty handy, sometimes, to have Art that tries to do that. So, yeah, I guess I do feel a kinship with that approach.

I just wrote a play called *The Underlying Chris* that possibly covers a whole life, and it does it in a way that I hope is formally energized enough and particularized in such a way, so that the way the life is presented is expressive of what the life is.

I also just wrote a play called *The Plot* that only covers a few months in the life of a little piece of land and of a few people with some designs on it, and I see the value in presenting an excerpt and letting that stand for the whole.

Even though *Gnit* is the whole life, it's also—in some ways—an excerpt, an excerpt of the totality of consciousness, or an excerpt of 19th through 21st century literature. It is possibly a particular curse/blessing (mainly blessing) of the age, and maybe of the Art of Theater, that the excerpt can be seen and felt as the totality, and the totality can be broken apart and reduced (distilled) into the excerpt.

JONATHAN KALB Did you just pay a compliment to theater?

WILL ENO I did! I really love working on plays. It's that thing, of the incredibly mysterious, the lofty, the sort of all-around magic of consciousness, right alongside, just, the total reality of it all, the actual world. Real infinity, timelessness, all that stuff we can do with our minds and hearts, right there alongside all the good old facts: the weight of a hammer, the sound of shoes on a floor, the fact that we can't see through walls, a white flower against a mossy green background.

JONATHAN KALB Many of your plays reflect on drama and theater (on things like genre, intermission, prologue, pretending, impersonating). [You recently told an interviewer](#) that "genres are... expressive of a person's relationship to the world." Does the way the play *Gnit* works express a particular relationship to the world?

WILL ENO If you're doing things right, sometimes the mechanics of a play bleed right into the philosophy and the feeling of the whole thing. A big challenge with adapting *Peer Gynt* was, how do you get all that life and stuff and time on stage in a way that is true and also economical, because theater, at its best, is usually an art of economy. How do you get a bunch of townspeople onto a stage, how do you represent Egypt, with the truest feeling, and the simplest means?

I think this particular challenge and *Gnit*'s response to it represent a relation to the world that we all know, a challenge we all know: how do I get the most out of this life, my time in this world, given the means and time and hand I've been dealt, etc. How do I make life the most incredible and joyous thing it can be, for the next year, the next ten years, or, while my clothes are in the dryer?•

JONATHAN KALB is Professor of Theatre at Hunter College, CUNY, and is TFANA's Resident Dramaturg. The author of five books on theater, he has worked for more than three decades as a theatre scholar, critic, journalist and dramaturg. He has twice won the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism, and has also won the George Freedley Award for an outstanding theater book from the Theatre Library Association. He often writes about theater on his TheaterMatters blog (at www.jonathankalb.com).