

New Work at The Theatre School

MFA 17

Dramaturgy by
Trisha Mahoney,
BFA3/Dramaturgy/Criticism;
Mariah Schultz, BFA3/Dramaturgy/Criticism

World Premiere!

Michael Jordan in Lilliput

by Mickle Maher, directed by Erica Weiss

Featuring the Class of 2017 Master of Fine Arts in Acting candidates in their final casting assignment. This world premiere production is commissioned from an exciting playwright and directed by a guest artist from the Chicago theatre community. It is presented as the final production in the Healy Theatre.

An Interview with Dexter Bullard, Head of Graduate Acting

Trisha Mahoney: *Could you explain the inspiration for this program?*

Dexter Bullard: When we imagined this ensemble project, no one knew how we'd find the material to suit it. At first, we selected a play with the right cast number and gender breakdown and hired a faculty or guest director to lead it.

I am a dedicated director of new plays, so the idea worked: what if a professional playwright got a commission to work on a new play, with no commercial pressure or reviews, writing the play based on the ensemble? Dean Culbert found the funds and now we offer the students a "tailor-made" play for them.

TM: *What are the benefits of the MFA production that you have seen arise in past years?*

DB: The biggest benefit by far is connecting the graduating actors, designers, technicians, stage managers, playwright assistants, and dramaturgs with the professional playwright and director. From these connections, Theatre School students have gone on to get paid work after graduation. From these connections, the professionals introduce our students to many others in the theatre network. Another benefit has been the inclusion of a "risk-taking" original show in our season. MFA directors and faculty directors often focus on well-known works; the MFA play is always fresh, today, and subject to controversy.

TM: *How do you feel the program ties into the overall mission of The Theatre School in training young theatre professionals with the ideas of diversity and equality at the forefront?*

DB: When we cast our plays, we often have to do so with color-blind, color-conscious or color-specific justifications for who plays who. Since the material is based on the composition of the graduating class, the MFA play is perfectly inclusive. Laura Jacqmin's *We Are Going to Be Fine* had Vahishta Vafadari (MFA '15) as a lead character who was South Asian. This was the only South Asian role that that actor got to play while in our program.

TM: *What feedback have you received from students and faculty about the benefits as well as challenges that the program poses?*

DB: The student actors can feel "unmoored" in a new play. That's to be expected, but they are very proud of the work. It is a critical training link to have actors put themselves fully into new work. I think, compared to our other offerings, the MFA production can seem rogue or unfinished, but that's because a dead white man from years ago in another country (Shakespeare, Chekhov, etc.) didn't write it and have the script pass the test of time and cultural expectation. Personally, I find new work always to be more interesting than "museum" plays. Others get anxious that new things might not "work" or be "good." I feel gesture is gesture, and art is art. At school we are not working for ticket sales or awards; we are working to find truth in ourselves and the now.



Dexter Bullard
(Photo by Andrea Tichy)

A Conversation with the Playwright, Mickle Maher

Playwright Mickle Maher chats with co-dramaturgs Mariah Schultz and Trisha Mahoney on the search for inspiration, binge-watching television shows, and the importance of drawing from classical works.

Mariah Schultz: *What interests you about theatrical arenas in our day-to-day life?*

Mickle Maher: I put my characters into theatrical arenas that are not strictly theatre not because I find those arenas interesting, but because they're funny and dramatic. Funny because duh, and dramatic because drama arrives best when there's something in the room that resists its arrival. The whole point behind the not strictly theatrical theatre space of a Presidential debate, for example, is that the debaters (and moderator) are there to show how in-human, how undramatic, they can be. Laughing too loud is out. Crying is absolutely out. Saying what's actually in their hearts and minds is way, way out. I just think most playwrights make it too easy on themselves and start in the burning building with the alcoholic dad beating off on his pile of dead babies or whatever.

Trisha Mahoney: *You mention how the reason you are drawn to these arenas, like forums and public debates, is due to the opportunity for humor and drama. What opportunities for humor and drama do you see in the setting of your new play?*

MM: So, this new play is set in a basketball post-game press conference. The pronounced thing that's funny and potentially dramatic about sports reporters is that the person being questioned by the press comes in front of the cameras with a persona, a mask, a mask that is obvious to both the person wearing it and the ones they're addressing (the press).

This distinguishes it from, say, a police interrogation where it's not clear if the suspect is hiding something (masking) or not. It's also different from a Presidential debate, where it's clear everyone's wearing a mask, but where there's not a newly existing loss or victory hovering over the stage to highlight that mask's ridiculousness.

With the sports reporter we're immediately in a kind of comedy of manners. It's taboo to show too much emotion, whether you've won or lost, but especially if you've lost. You can look bummed, but you can't cry. You can be sullen about a bad call that cost you the game, but you can't start throwing chairs or screaming about it. Likewise, your language has to be (for some reason!) constrained: clichéd, platitudinous, and unrevealing.

It gets dramatic where there's an unspoken objective of the interrogating reporters: get behind that mask. Get it to drop. They (and most of us, the viewers) want to see some genuine pain (or joy) come out. So there's an immediate tension and conflict — and the ultimate action of the reporter is the same as a good play: through their resistance, get the main character to know and speak their true heart. In a sports press conference this doesn't happen so often. In a play, it's the expectation.

MS: *What do you do to keep inspired throughout the process?*

MM: When I get enough sleep and read poetry, I do okay. When I stay up too late eye-vacuuming mediocre TV shows, not so much.

TM: *What draws you to a certain work, such as Gulliver's Travels, and how do you integrate them into the world that you are creating with your new work?*

Almost without exception the works that I end up throwing into a piece are 1) works that I read when I was younger, and loved as only a young person can, and 2) works I feel no compunction about making fun of or egregiously misinterpreting, because a) I love them, and you always make fun of and misinterpret what (or who) you love, and b) all their authors are dead and can take it.

I steal the parts that are helpful to my story and leave out the parts that aren't.



Mickle Maher
(Photo by Joe Mazza)