Becky Shaw
by Gina Gionfriddo

Commissioned by Actors Theatre of Louisville with the support of the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust

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Suzanna doesn't know much about Becky when she sets her up on a blind date with Max, her closest friend. Becky's in her mid-thirties, works with newlywed Suzanna's husband Andrew, and seems like a good catch to him. Suzanna's first impression of her own comes with the dress Becky wears to the date. As Gina Gionfriddo's stage directions describe our first look at the eponymous Becky Shaw, she's wearing a "slightly puffy, pastel-colored cocktail dress. Maybe it's satin and bare. A great dress for another occasion… New Year's Eve, for example." The dress, and the prep time it suggests, was the first image Gionfriddo had for the play: "It really evoked Becky's humiliation, and the dynamic of one person being very, very invested in a situation where other people aren't as invested. Then I got interested in what could happen from that dynamic."

Becky Shaw is a moral mystery with a crackerjack plot, equal parts ethical conundrum and unsettling comedy about the Darwinian cruelty of relationships. Becky shows up overdressed and admits in short and inadvertent order that she's a college dropout without a cell phone, car or relationship with her family; Max smells desperation and begins some not-so-friendly kidding. When Max and Becky are mugged on their date, Becky wants Max to be there for her, Andrew wants Suzanna to hold Max accountable and Max wants to be left alone to his friendship with Suzanna. Suzanna, for her part, wants to do the right thing. But not quite as much as she wants Becky to leave her—and her life—alone. At the heart of the play is a shrewd and often funny look at how hard it can be to act charitably, especially to people you don't particularly like.

Gionfriddo dilates Becky's moment of unsettling awkwardness to investigate the ethical choices of these characters, who are poised at their last decent moment to really grow up. The characters live with a range of economic realities. Becky is still temping, well into her thirties. Suzanna's late father's generosity to others has left her with much less money than she was raised with, and the newlyweds are trying to balance Andrew's writing with their rent payments as she finishes graduate school. Considering Suzanna the now-struggling grad student, Andrew the writer with a day job and Max the successful money manager with intimacy issues ("it's a sleep disorder," he protests), Gionfriddo observes: "These people are in their mid-thirties, a little too old to be scraping by. It's not edgy any more; it's humiliating."

When Becky crashes into the characters' world, they are forced to clarify the adult lives they envision for themselves. "The play asks to what extent Becky's desperation and investment obligates the other people to rise to the occasion," Gionfriddo says. "What do you owe a desperate stranger? What do you owe her when you invited her in?" Some characters have an immediate answer. Max runs his life by unambiguous rules: he's unfailingly loyal to the people he cares about and ends his obligations there. Andrew sees his choices just as plainly: people in need need help. For Suzanna, the question is murkier, and Becky's insistent presence in her life and friendships doesn't make behaving charitably any easier.

Becky's sense of what she's entitled to ask of strangers is broader and provocative, and extends both ways. Even when she is held up, she considers her obligations to her mugger: "All your focus goes to the gun. You can't look past the gun to the person holding it. The detective said it's survival instinct: keep your eyes on the gun. Focusing on the gun will not keep it from killing you. But maybe if you tried to see the person holding it, really see them…" A survival instinct is important, of course, and there are times when compassion isn't an appropriate response—perhaps when there's a gun trained on you, or when someone's need threatens to upend the stability of your friendships or new marriage. But this is the challenge these characters face: to see the threat and the person behind the threat and to react—in defense or empathy. In that reaction, they learn who they've chosen to be, as well as the values of the people around them.

As the plot races on, and the consequences of each character's reaction to the date cascade beyond their control, Gionfriddo doesn't give the audience time to catch our breath or enough stable moral ground to side with one character over another. *Becky Shaw* plays as much on emotion as on ideas or adrenalin, with characters trying to make sense of their world through a full helping of human passion and confusion, partnered with sharply observed cultural critique. "I wouldn't call what I do satire," says Gionfriddo. "I care too much about my characters to poke at them for the betterment of culture." While she thinks Americans should take a more rigorous look at the complications of class and charity, "I'm not interested in a play where the writer hates everybody on stage," she insists. *Becky Shaw* spins the stories of characters who are as charismatic as they are cruel or in pain, and whose struggle to live a thoughtful, responsible life challenges the audience to consider our own response to other people's desperate acts—as inconveniencing as they may be.

—Adrien-Alice Hansel

Gina Gionfriddo

"There are a lot of nasty things people would like to say to each other," writer Gina Gionfriddo opines, referring to her characters. "Their way of doing this without getting punched or looking like a jerk is saying them as a joke. But after you finish laughing, you realize, 'Oh. They probably meant that.'" No less than Gionfriddo means it, of course, as the humor in her plays is as candid as the author herself. A witness to American culture, whether she's writing plays like 2004 Humana Festival premiere *After Ashley*, working on *Law & Order* or contributing essays to *The Believer*, she endeavors to observe a frequently confounding world with straightforward honesty and galvanizing wit.

Gionfriddo's punchlines, and more broadly her works, are incisively frank, designed to cut deep whether they examine the contradictions around being charitable in a class-conscious culture or the slipperiness of the word "victim." In recent years, she has brought this eye for ethical paradox to her work as writer and producer on *Law & Order* and *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*. "Ninety percent of television I would have a very hard time writing, but these shows are a really good fit for me," she observes. "At *Law & Order*, we focus on what the show was designed to be—'a moral mystery.'" The situations are recognizable, but the ethical boundaries are blurred, if present at all, a trait shared by her work for the stage. Her play *U.S. Drag*, winner of the 2001 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, found Gionfriddo mulling on unsettling questions about safety: if serial killers target the friendly, isn't it prudent to just stop helping strangers? When people begin to hunt for a murderer, can they think of the bounty as a get-rich-quick scheme?

"On some level I'm conscious that humor is going to make palatable some of the difficult stuff I want to talk about," Gionfriddo asserts. "But more immediately, I write characters who use humor to survive whatever darkness or disappointment has befallen them." She approaches her characters with a sense of empathy, leading her to fictive subjects who are often bracing in their dimensionality.

After Ashley, a thoughtful dissection of how private grief can become co-opted as public property, centers on the death of a woman far too complicated for simple martyrdom. The audience sees Ashley in only a single comic scene—a bizarrely inappropriate conversation with her son—so after her brutal, headline-grabbing death, we wonder: what responsibility does that son have to represent her as she was? Particularly to strangers who are often focused on their own self-centered motives? "A big deal for me with *After Ashley* was the language that people were using after 9/11," Gionfriddo recalls. "I would start to cringe at the word 'victim.' If a person lost somebody they met at a party a couple of times, they're using the same language—'I lost someone'—as someone who lost a spouse or a child. The truth of the moment is obscured when everyone is using the same language."

In 2004, Gionfriddo wrote the first of two pieces she has contributed to *The Believer*. Her essay, "XO Elliott," looks deeply into the reasons for singer-songwriter Elliott Smith's cultural caché and the ways in which Gionfriddo's own reverent fandom took on new complexity in light of Smith's chilling death. Remembering his work, she writes: "Smith's songs were fearlessly holistic: complicated and confounding, rife with internal contradictions and mood swings. Truthful." She's writing about Elliott Smith, but in the messiness she applauds in Smith's work, there are echoes of the unsayable truths in her own. Her second piece for *The Believer*, about Nine Inch Nails frontman Trent Reznor and the undercurrents of Romantic literature in his work, appeared in June of last year.

Last fall, the New York company stageFARM premiered *Squalor*, a short play by Gionfriddo about internet vigilantes. The company also presented the off-Broadway premiere of *U.S. Drag* in February of 2008. In the midst of all this activity, the Obie winner is already working on a commission for Playwrights Horizons and examining the foundations of her work: "I *do* think characters in a play need to galvanize around a crisis. I *am* frustrated by plays in which I don't see that people change. Whether I would write a play that didn't use humor, I don't know…Probably not."

—Charles Haugland