

Great Falls

by Lee Blessing
Begins February 24

As Lee Blessing's *Great Falls* pulls onto the highway, we find two people driving near the Badlands of South Dakota, embarking on a road trip into the American West. But the tension between these travelers is palpable: while the middle-aged man in the driver's seat waxes poetic about the scenery, his angry young passenger tries her teenage best to ignore him, interjecting only to tell him what happens to kidnappers in prison. For a moment, we wonder: are we watching a familial disagreement, or an abduction in progress?

Out of this discordant (and often humorous) ambiguity, the situation starts to come into focus. The man is the young woman's stepfather, now divorced from her mother and hoping to retrieve something from their past together. Propelled by nostalgia for a childhood trip he once took with his own parents, and a desire to explain his side of the story, he's striking out on the open road with his fuming companion. The trouble is, she climbed into his car in Omaha thinking they were headed for a brief conversation... and now they're headed toward Wyoming.

As the pair make their way across broken and beautiful landscapes, the play gradually reveals the story of these two travelers—of who they are to one another, what they've lost and where they find themselves at this transitional place in their lives. Along the way, Blessing subtly unfolds the tale of their shattered connection with moving complexity. "The play is a fictional piece," the playwright explains, "but it's drawn from any number of marriages and divorces I've known—friends who've gone through all sorts of difficulties when they broke up,

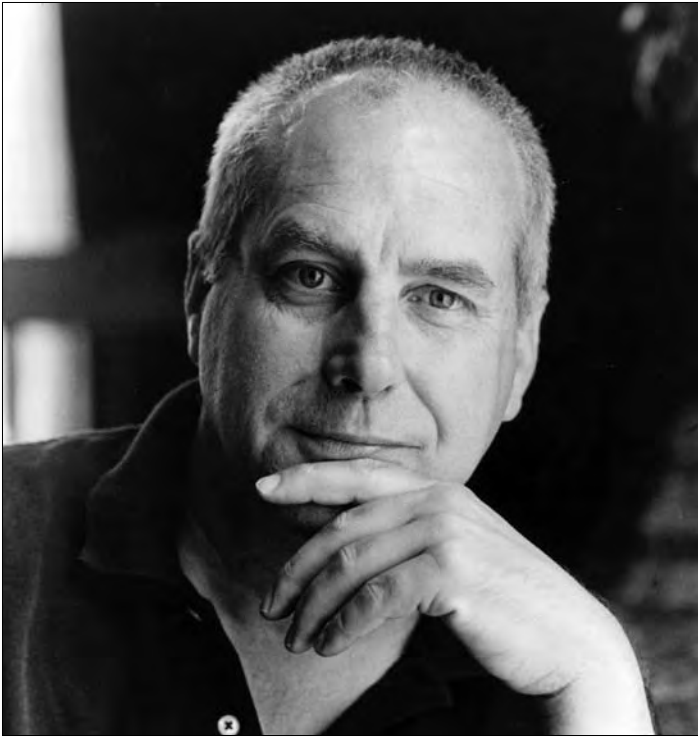
and different kinds of fractured families." It was not the image of a separated couple, but rather a different kind of familial fallout that intrigued Blessing. "People sometimes think of divorce in simplistic terms: they think only about the two spouses," he argues. "I thought it would be very useful to look at it from a slightly different perspective. Because when people divorce each other, in a sense they're usually divorcing other people as well."

In this case, the other person is a smart, resilient girl who's about to turn eighteen. And while her stepfather may be in the driver's seat, it becomes clear that he's not entirely in control of the wheel. There's something she needs too, and she's not going to make it easy for him to find the brand of acceptance or self-forgiveness that he hopes for, instead pushing them both to traverse a much more difficult territory. "I think the power dynamic is very important in the play," Blessing contends. "We make a few assumptions at the beginning that may or may not be true, and we keep learning things about that dynamic all the way through." In addition to proving herself a worthy adversary, the girl shares a talent with her stepfather: he's a successful novelist, and she's a very promising poet. This mutual interest in writing, says Blessing, provides them with a point of connection, if not exactly a bond. ("One of the most interesting challenges in the play was writing poetry that could have believably been written by an 18-year-old girl," the author laughingly admits.)

Following the route traveled by Lewis and Clark, the stepfather tries to forge more

lines of connection by retracing his own travel memories, from the natural wonders of Wyoming's hot springs to Yellowstone and all the way into Montana. But while the characters look back, there's also a forward momentum to this terrain, one ingrained in our national sensibility. "I think it's an amazing part of the country," says Blessing, who remembers visiting these sights as a boy. "And I love the image of striking west, the whole concept that somehow going west is going toward one's future." The play also vividly depicts the spaces travelers inhabit on our way to a destination; in fact, Blessing began writing in response to a prompt from Lucie Tiberghien (who directs this Humana Festival premiere) when she asked him to contribute a scene for an evening of pieces set in motel rooms. The in-between places that form the world of the play are an apt metaphor for the characters' position betwixt past and future, between who they were and who they'll be. "There is something gently existential about any story that takes place in that peripheral landscape," Blessing says. "It's a strange relationship that Americans have with all the space we have in this country. We feel a pressure, but also an exhilaration, when we travel through it. There's something a little too real about the evanescent experience of being on the road."

—Amy Wegener



Lee Blessing

Balancing a successful playwriting career, teaching and a recent marriage, Lee Blessing has more on his plate these days than most can imagine. "I have absolutely no idea how it all works," he admits. "Someone asked me what my writing pattern was like and I said that it's totally chaotic. I never feel as if I'm getting anything done, and yet I look back and I've written almost a dozen plays since 2000. It's sort of like the elves in Santa's workshop: you're sleeping and somehow..." But when one considers that his twenty-first century achievements alone constitute an impressive body of work—not to mention a career spanning over twenty-five years—just how busy is busy?

Back when Blessing was a young, promising playwright from Minnesota, not too long after earning his graduate degree from the University of Iowa, he got a break. "Jon Jory picked a play called *Oldtimers Game* for the Humana Festival. It turned me from somebody who thought he might someday become a playwright into a playwright," Blessing recalls. The year was 1982, and Blessing's play turned out to be one of the best-received offerings in that year's festival.

Over the next three years, three of Blessing's plays were produced at Actors Theatre: *Nice People Dancing to Good Country Music* appeared in the 1982 Shorts Festival, and *Independence* and *War of the Roses* (now titled *Riches*) were seen in the 1984 and 1985 Humana Festivals. His work has appeared at Actors three more times since the early days of the festival: *Down the Road* was produced in 1991, Blessing was a contributor to the 2002 anthology project, *Snapshot*, and

he returned with a ten-minute play, *The Roads that Lead Here*, in 2003. With *Great Falls*, Blessing will be one of only a few playwrights to have a play performed in every space at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

Blessing has had productions in New York and at numerous regional theatres around the country. The Guthrie Theater, La Jolla Playhouse and Florida Stage are among the many theatres that can count premieres of his work. In 1988, Broadway and West End productions of *A Walk in the Woods* garnered critical acclaim, and the play went on to be nominated for a Pulitzer, a Tony Award, an Olivier Award and the George and Elizabeth Marton Award. In the decades that followed, Blessing's plays—acclaimed works like *Eleemosynary*, *Going to St. Ives* and *A Body of Water*—have continued to be produced widely.

Flash forward to now, and Blessing has written close to thirty plays. Currently, he is developing four new works. The Cleveland Play House has commissioned an adaptation of Thornton Wilder's *Heaven's My Destination*. A second commission, from the Weissberger Theatre Group, is called *Moderation*, and adapts Linda Greenhouse's book detailing the lives and times of Warren Burger and Harry Blackmun and their years on the Supreme Court. *Perilous Night*, a commission from Denver Center Theatre, will be read at the Colorado New Play Summit this February. While being sought out by so many theatres, Blessing is also finding time to develop an additional project—a play about President Bush. "I am very proud of that," says Blessing. "I'd like to finish up about the time he

finishes up." Titled *When We Go Upon the Sea*, the play will receive a workshop at The Playwrights' Center, culminating in a reading at the Guthrie Theater.

In addition to juggling so many writing projects, Blessing heads the graduate playwriting program at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts, where he is training the next generation of writers. "I've been blessed recently with some terrific young writers. It's satisfying, a real pleasure, to see students developing the knack, which is what any playwright hopes to do," says Blessing. "It's really a habit of mind that you have to cultivate, to understand what the genre of dramatic writing requires." With his graduates making names for themselves, Blessing's impact on new work extends far beyond his own pursuits to the support of new voices.

With at least one production for almost every year he has been writing (sometimes several), Blessing sustains an agile theatrical imagination. "I think the ambition of any truly serious playwright," he says, "is to write things that people will remember twenty years after they've seen them. You remember that which shapes and changes your life, and I think theatre is the forum for those kinds of experiences." Twenty-five years after his first Humana Festival production, the theatre community is still buzzing about his next new play, in addition to frequent productions from his body of work. And so for Blessing, the ambition to write plays that endure has become a reality.

—Devon LaBelle