

Getting To Know Simon Stephens and His Work

By Susan Myer Silton, December 2014

After reading interviews with Simon Stephens, watching him on You Tube, following him on Twitter (#StephensSimon), reading many of his plays, and having the privilege to see one of his plays and get *this* close to seeing another, I know that I am one of the most fortunate people in the world to be able to call what I'm doing work. It has been a blast, because Simon Stephens is a blast. He's witty, eloquent, brash, profane and incredibly kind. His plays are peopled with characters who cling to your consciousness for a long time. He's a master storyteller at the top of his game, and we're lucky enough to be around for it. He's having his heyday – in December, he had two plays running in New York: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* on Broadway, and *Punk Rock Off-Christmas* was playing in London, and all got great reviews and full houses.

Some things about him are so interesting to me that I had to share them, though a few of them don't directly pertain to *Harper Regan*:

- He often uses women directors
- Outside of the UK, his plays are most often performed in Germany.
- *Christmas* is his only play without female characters, though he says that they're still in it, they just don't have lines.
- He was born February 6, 1971, which means he'll soon be 44. He has also written more than 30 plays. Do the math, or as they say in the UK, maths. He's wicked prolific.
- As you learned from the glossary, he grew up in Stockport, Greater Manchester, where many of his plays are set. Plays that aren't set in Stockport are often peopled with one or more characters from Manchester.
- When he writes, he doesn't see his characters in their setting in real life. He sees them on the stage. For those of us who direct, that's a fascinating, even weighty, concept.
- He started out wanting to be a songwriter. That's why there's so much about contemporary music in his plays. He used to play for, and now occasionally sits in with, a Scottish art punk band called Country Teasers. He even wrote a musical, *Marine Parade*, with Mark Eitzel, a songwriter and lead singer of the San Francisco band American Music Club. When Stephens approached him to collaborate, Eitzel told him he had wanted to be a playwright growing up.
- He's a dad. Here are two things he has to say about it, both from his Twitter account: The first is his profile, where he introduces himself thusly: "I am a playwright. I have three children. Three children. Fuck. I live in the East End and I ride a bicycle". A friend, Nick Gil, tweeted him on November 2, 2014, about anticipating the birth of his baby, who was 10 days overdue. "Remember all that stuff I talked about doing? Say goodbye to all that shit." Stephens replied, "No. Don't. You'll do all of it. And better."
- In an interview he did for White Bear Theatre before their October-November 2014 revival of his play, *Christmas*, first produced in 2003, Stephens said, "*Christmas* was the last of the plays written in this particular methodology, which was to start with a blank page and start with a notion of characters and just have those characters talk to one another without knowing what the story was going to be, without really

having any kind of intellectual ownership of the themes of the play but just carving the story from out of the interaction between these imaginary characters in this imaginary space ... after that I really changed my methodology. *Hérons* was a play I wrote after *Christmas*. It was the first of ten years of plays, which I planned methodically before writing a word of dialogue, in which dialogue was the last thing I wrote. But *Christmas* was the last of the plays I wrote from a position of exploration. I suspect that when I watch it, there will be part of me that will really mourn and cherish the type of writing that comes out of that position of exploration where the writer doesn't know what the characters are going to say next and quite often you can write things that are surprisingly tangential and alive."

- After he saw *Christmas* performed at the White Bear, he sent out these four tweets: "I would never trust a playwright who on some deep level didn't fucking love actors", followed by, "I mean I have a proper awe and gratitude for them", followed by, "Tonight I saw Christmas at White Bear Theatre. It's an early play of mine that I'm proud of but fuck me it was well acted. Real truth and grace", finished off with, "The sense of gratitude I have for that cast and that director is deep".
- He was profoundly influenced when he saw the David Cromer version of *Our Town*, which was at the Almeida Theatre in London from Oct. 10–Nov. 29, 2014. He tweeted on Nov 28 from the second interval, calling it "Utterly fucking magic". Forty-four minutes later, he tweeted, "One of the great nights in the theatre. Makes me want to try harder. As a writer and a human. I know that makes me sound like a dick." Then a minute later, "Fuck it. Our Town is simply sublime."
- When American playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis won the 2006 PEN/ Laura Pels Foundation Award for Drama, his judge's citation said, "Stephen is crafting a new kind of American Theater, one which is unique in its multiplicity of voices, rhythms, and beliefs. By giving voice to characters that America—and in turn the American theater—frequently chooses to exclude from the conversation, he is creating a theatre that feels vital, political, intimate, and undeniably of the moment ... clearly fueled by his own sense of truth, Guirgis creates characters who are all trapped within the urban landscape, but what comes flying out of their mouths is anything but abject surrender ... they all speak/shout/sing a language of defiance, its music in turns ribald, poetic, elegant, and outrageous." Take away the references to America and American Theater, and substitute Great Britain and British Theatre, and they could be talking about Simon Stephens. Both Guirgis and Stephens find the larger truths in the domestic drama of life, but each also finds it imperative to examine how current issues and controversies affect our lives.

Harper Regan and the "Library"

Sir Nicholas Robert Hytner, or as he is known to Stephens, Nick Hytner, is the director of the National Theatre in London, and a theatre, film and opera director. He had a substantial and direct influence on *Harper Regan*. Stephens writes in his Introduction to *Simon Stephens Plays: 3* that when he was [the first] resident dramatist at the National Theatre in 2005, Hytner made a provocative statement at a script meeting of his associates when he asked why no playwrights wrote substantial roles for actresses in their forties and fifties. Stephens writes:

I was annoyed by his comment.

I was halfway through conceiving a play about somebody on the borderlines of the Sex Offenders Register. My play was going to be called *Seth Regan*. I was drawn to the uncontrollable catastrophe of sexual desire. I was haunted by the moral hysteria surrounding crimes of paedophilia over the past decade. This wasn't an attempt to justify the crime so much as a sense of being troubled by moral hysteria in any form. Our sexual drives can be so often unconscious. They also drive more of our behaviour than sometimes we wish they would. I wanted to write about paedophilia if not with sympathy than at least with empathy. I'd done a fair amount of plotting of this play. I was furious as I tried to conceive of the play told from the point of view not of Seth Regan, but of his wife, for example. And then surprised and inspired by the way in which every scene I'd conceived seemed much more alive and alert from her perspective than from his. The play quickly became a play about his wife, whom I christened Harper.

Harper Regan was written when my wife was in the second term of her third pregnancy. For the first time we decided to find out the gender of our baby, and we were, both of us, fairly staggered that we were going to have a daughter. The complicated nature of fathering a daughter and the strange relationships between fathers and daughters crystallised the play. Hytner, who had encouraged me to read Eugene O'Neill as I wrote *On The Shore [of the Wide, Wide World]* had for this play suggested to me that I read O'Neill's main source, Euripides. I read fifteen Euripides plays in two weeks in preparation for *Harper*. I was drawn to the emotionally wrought family dramas playing out awful transgressions under the whims of the gods. I wanted to make a play in which a similarly wrought family transgression played out under an absence of a God. I decided, fairly consciously, to return to the three generations I'd used for *On the Shore*. But with *Harper Regan*, I wrote about three generations of daughters.

Bill Peters asked that I create a "library" of plays that are relevant to *Harper Regan* and that you might want to read. While making my choices, I was guided by Stephens' recurrent themes of home and family and the attachment, connection, but also the detachment experienced there; how we are affected by death, especially in the family; coming full circle/connecting the dots in our lives; and taking a journey or a kind of journey in response to the events in our lives, a main one being a death in the family.

On the Shore of the Wide, Wide World contains all of these themes. In the Introduction to *The Methuen Drama Book of Twentieth Century British Plays*, Alex Sierz writes that "Like *On the Shore of the Wide, Wide World*, Stephens' *Harper Regan* (2008) shifted its gaze onto more middle-class families and their familiar anguish". Because of that, because the themes of both *Harper* and *On the Shore* align together and also because *On the Shore* is set in Stockport, I added it to the library.

Christmas has also been added to the library. The isolation and despair *Harper Regan* faces because of circumstances beyond her control are very much represented in *Christmas*, which Stephens describes in a recent interview on Nov 21, 2014 about the play, which was

enjoying a revival at White Bear Theatre at the time. The interview can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YASQTnsW6BI&spfreload=10>

Christmas will also be of particular interest to Patrick Edwards, whose character, Mickey, could easily be a denizen of the bar where the play is set, and is also the same age as Billy Lee Russell, one of the characters.

In the interview, Stephens says *Christmas* is about “four men who in very different ways are isolated and lost and whose lives have kind of passed them by and getting a sense that their lives are disappearing and not being able to articulate the sense of loneliness or fear they feel in the wake of this disappearance.”

He compares *Christmas* with *The Cherry Orchard*, an Anton Chekov play, Stephens’ translation of which opened at the Young Vic in London on October 10, 2014. Conceiving the play *Cherry Orchard*, he says, “really defined my sense of what theatre can be, what plays can be”. He “became fascinated by the relationship between the Russian aristocracy at the start of the 20th century and the white working class of Britain at the end of the 20th century: two kind of cultural pockets for reasons outside their control were becoming increasingly redundant and powerless and lost. And I was fascinated by the melancholia of that sense of isolation and despair and so transposed a lot of the dramatic engine of *The Cherry Orchard* into this kind of decrepit boozier on the cusp of Christmas Eve.”

Stephens writes that his early plays “could be loosely described as naturalistic”, as he wrote in his introduction to *Simon Stephens Plays: 1*. This style of theatre applies to more than his early works, as theatre critic and playwright Dan Rebellato remarks in his essay “Simon Stephens” in *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*. “*Hérons* (2001), *Port* (2002), *One Minute* (2003), *Country Music* (2004), and *Harper Regan* (2008) are domestic, somewhat naturalistic dramas”, he writes, “depicting the effect on ordinary people of violence, scandal, and loss”. *The Cherry Orchard*, like another of Stephens’ translations, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (2013), could be included in that description. Both plays have a strong woman at their core as *Harper Regan* does, and all share parallel themes, so I’ve added both plays to the library. Those of you who have seen or read other interpretations of *The Cherry Orchard* and *A Doll’s House* might recognize Stephens’ unique spin, how Stephens, as Alex Sierz writes in the aforementioned *The Methuen Drama Book of Twentieth Century British Plays*, “looks at life’s brutal losers and desperate victims but always with hope, honesty and humour. All of them are trapped, but all manage to rattle the bars of their cages”.

Medea does far more than rattle her cage, bringing us back around to Euripides, a major influence on Stephens when he wrote *Harper Regan*. *Medea* is based upon the ancient legend of Jason and Medea. It portrays these traditional, mythical characters – as Euripides’ plays do – as ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. *Medea* could be called the ultimate domestic drama. Bernard M. W. Knox, in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature: Volume 1, Greek Literature, Part 2, Greek Drama*, identifies Euripides as “a realist who brought tragic action down to the level of everyday life”, calling him “the creator of...that cage which is the theatre of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Racine’s *Phèdre*, of Ibsen and Strindberg,” in which “...imprisoned men and women destroy each other by the intensity of their loves and hates”. The same could be said of the theatre of Simon Stephens.

Medea destroys, and though she survives, it's a most unhappy end. Ultimately, she never breaks free of her prison. Harper Regan embarks upon a journey that could easily lead to self-destruction, yet it brings her to a place of understanding and acceptance – not just of herself, but of those she loves. She sees the cage she has chosen with a new light, and opts to return to it.

Despite the differences in the outcomes of *Medea* and *Harper Regan*, and despite the extreme of one and the simplicity of the other, both playwrights share a focus on “the inner lives and motives of [their] characters”, something both Moses Hadas and A.S. Owen acknowledge in their respective writings about Euripides. They agree that this focus was unknown before Euripides and that it profoundly influenced future playwrights. Stephens is among them: Harper Regan’s inner life, in response to her extraordinary circumstances, defines every syllable she utters, every action she takes. The specter of Seth’s deed hovers over each of her defenses, dodges and reactions, including the most (seemingly) prosaic, as well as those she doesn’t speak. The omnipresence of Harper’s inner life is what struck me the most when I read the play for the second time, both for the depth it gave the character and how carefully Stephens crafted each circumstance to color Harper’s sometimes knee-jerk inner responses. As I read and reread the play, the lyrics to Sting’s song, *Every Breath You Take*, were in my head for exactly that reason. Every breath Harper took, every move she made, every bond and vow she broke, smile she faked and claim she staked were motivated by her inner turmoil, choices, and constrictions – her “cage” – as a result of what Seth had done.

I’ve added *Medea* to the library because of the elements that it shares with *Harper Regan*, the influence it clearly had on the play, and both playwrights’ mutual sympathetic attitude towards women, which for Euripides’ time was unique in.

Ports is the seventh play in the library; other pieces written by Stephens, which I will describe later, will complete the selection. I’ve included *Ports* because, like *Harper Regan* and/or parts of *Harper Regan*, 1) it has a female protagonist; 2) it is set in Stockport; 3) the heroine, Rachael Keats, is compelled to “escape” her surroundings as a way of rectifying their effect, per a remark Stephens made in a July 2012 interview with *The Arts Desk*: “The early professional plays - *Hérons*, *Christmas*, *Bluebird*, *Port* – are absolutely charged with the character’s desire to flee and to leave home”; and, 4) how both plays’ main female character’s respective choices are informed by their class status – working class for Rachael and middle class for Harper.

The remaining articles in the library are not plays, but writings by Stephens. They are his Introductions to *Simon Stephens Plays: 1*, *Plays: 2* and *Plays: 3*.

An up-to-date list of Simon Stephens plays, including initial production dates, notes and summaries, can be found here:

www.doollee.com/PlaywrightsS/stephens-simon.html#33264

I hope what I’ve written will help you in your process, or at the very least, familiarize you with a playwright I’ve had the supreme pleasure getting to know.