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AUG
12

Meet Tom Block



Tom Block is a playwright living in “the graveyard” of the Washington, DC suburbs. His first play, [White Noise](#), was produced in Washington D.C. last June and will be produced in New York next summer as a Resident Theater Production of [Theater for the New City in the East Village](#). His second play, [Butterfly](#), had its world premiere in February 2013 in Takoma Park, MD. In addition to his plays, Tom is a published non-fiction author and visual artist whose work has been exhibited in the US and Europe.

With such a busy schedule, we asked Tom why he decided to participate in this year’s 31 Plays/31 Days challenge.

Tom Block: A story: I was in art school a couple of decades ago for a short time. During this short time, I took a six-hour drawing class which would run from 9-noon and then from 2-5 pm. It was autumn in Boston. The morning session was full of students, and then in the afternoon, the class would begin two-thirds full and then bleed students so that by the end of the day, only a handful of us remained. Add to this the dying winter sun and no electric light in the room. By the end of the class, the few of us left were pretty much drawing in the dark.

I drew straight through. By about three pm, I was exhausted and by four, with an hour left, I hated drawing more even than boiled cabbage. I was exhausted, my eyes ached, I hated the paper and charcoal. Yet, it was here, as I was so sick of drawing that I thought I would vomit, that I did my best work. I was beyond caring. I hated the act of drawing and therefore I stopped being, in any way, a conscious participant in the work. Yet I drew. The charcoal had to move across the paper.

And guess what? The next morning, when I opened my portfolio to look at what I had done, I saw some beautiful work. And I discovered that true art can emerge from the place beyond exhaustion, when the ego and caring and the self have all been quashed, and one is left with only the act of creation.

That is why I want to write a 10-minute play a day for 31 days. To reach such a level of disgust and hatred and misery. And art.

Adrienne Pender: That’s beautiful, Tom. And true. I wrote in last year’s challenge, and made it through the whole month. The plays that I wrote later in the month, when I was drained, were better than the ones I wrote earlier in the month. Because I didn’t censor myself, I was too tired. But... a 10-minute play a day IS ambitious... Are you sure you want to go that far?

TB: I reserve the right to beat myself senseless.

AP: Understood. Is there an overall theme to your work as a writer?

TB: The underlying premise of all of my work is that we (humans) have been given enough of a consciousness to understand that something is going on, but not enough to figure out what it is. That is to say, creation itself is “the rape of man by God.” I actually used this line in my first play, but as I have written more and more, I have buried this idea beneath layers of humor, metaphor, absurdist action, and other devices. Still.

AP: When did you start writing?

TB: I wrote my first poem when I was sixteen. (“Hope, hope, better than dope ...”) Happily, I have refined my craft since then. Actually, I am quite a late bloomer – I wrote dreck throughout my 20s and 30s; only in my 40s did I begin to finally produce writing of any worth. I published my first non-fiction book (of four which have been published or have contracts) when I was 47, and had my first play produced when I was 49. Now, at 50, I am rolling along, and finally think I understand the craft well enough to actually produce decent work on a regular basis.

AP: It seems as if everyone starts with poetry. What is it about poetry, do you think... or is it just that at 16, lovesick poetry is what you’re supposed to write?

TB: I think that the form is very manageable – short; it appears (to a sixteen year-old) not to have too many rules. Also, most students write poetry at some time or another in elementary and middle school. So, it’s a great place to start.

AP: What was the first play you wrote and what was it about?

TB: The first play I wrote I actually worked on in my 20s. It was a one-act called “Frank Johnson,” and concerned two people sharing a single life. It was very text driven, but 20 years after I wrote it, it was produced in a local one-act play festival. The first full-length play (“White Noise”), which was produced in both Washington DC and then off-off-Broadway in New York over the past year, concerns art, existential crisis, racism, sexual deviancy, and the ghost of a 20th-century prophet, Simone Weil.

AP: If you could re-write that first play now, as an experienced writer, what would you do it differently? Or would you re-write it at all?

TB: I think that I’ll just leave that one alone. I am applying what I learned in that rather successful failure to what I work on now. I am not one for beating a dead horse. However, I definitely like to apply what I learned from killing that horse to keeping subsequent horses alive. Metaphorically speaking, of course.

AP: But I WANT you to re-write that play now! It’s not really about beating a dead horse as much as it is about your growth. What HAVE you learned that would make that a different play?

TB: I am re-writing that play over and over again – in my new plays. Now, I am taking the ideas that explicitly explored and burying them in metaphor, bizarre action, a careening narrative arc, and other more theatrical devices (in a play that was just read in New York last night, for instance, it ends three times). In terms of re-writing the first play, it would become so different, that it would be a completely different play. Actually, my dream is that some filmmaker wants to make it into an Orson Welles-style film. Very “noir.”

AP: What do you struggle most with as a writer?

TB: My personal struggle at the writing desk is to create characters that are human, engaging, and sympathetic. Because my work is highly philosophical and absurdist – idea and action driven – the characters themselves sometimes get lost in the shuffle. If you want the audience to weep when the main character is crucified to the hood of a Volkswagen, then they have to have engaged the audience with that character along the way. Right?

AP: What do you hope to achieve while writing in August?

TB: I want to work on dialogue. I want to carry a story with dialogue. Little action. Dialogue.

AP: Do you have a strategy for finishing 31 Plays?

TB: Yes. To move beyond everything and force myself to write one 10-page play everyday. No questions. No excuses. That’s the strategy.

AP: Sink or swim, I like that! Finally, what’s one piece of advice would you give a new playwright?

TB: Write, write, write, write, and write.

You can see more of Tom’s work at: <http://www.tomblock.com/>

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