

# DUCK: Interview with Playwright Tom Block

By **Meagan J. Meehan** - October 6, 2019

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DUCK is a new play by Tom Block that focuses on an ex-CIA operative who has gone off the deep end. Spending his days in a public park, he quacks like a duck to communicate; an unfortunate side effect of a downward emotional spiral.

Duck frequently hangs out in the park with his older brother, Crumb, who is also an ex-CIA agent. One day, a woman named Abbie stumbles upon Duck in the park and decides to befriend him. Although Duck initially only quacks at her, Addie finds a way to communicate with Duck using Crumb as a translator.

This quirky play comes from the mind of playwright, author, and visual artist Tom Block who is also the founding producer of the International Human Rights Art Festival whose work has been produced all over the world.

Tom recently discussed this play and its inspirations via an exclusive interview.

**Meagan Meehan (MM):** How did you get into writing and what drew you to playwriting in particular?

**Tom Block (TB):** I have written all of my life, since my first poem at sixteen: "Hope, Hope, Better than Dope." It remains unpublished and is lost. Since that time, I have written, with my output being in various forms. Keeping in mind that I was also an exhibiting artist (painter) for 25 years, and that the two activities cross-pollinated (I attribute a lot of my non-linear theatre aesthetic to my drawing practice). More recently, I have moved out of the studio and concentrated entirely on writing. I began my writing career as a feature journalist (published in major markets such as the Dallas Morning News, Denver Post, Newsday, Atlanta Journal and Constitution, Denver Post and many others from 1984-1990); I published five books between 2010 and 2014 (four non-fiction and one novel). I had my first play produced in an art gallery in Washington DC (in conjunction with an art exhibit of mine) in 2012. This garnered some acclaim, got a very interesting review and was brought to Theatre for the New City (June-July 2013). At that time and immediately, I was hooked on live theatre. Since then, I have written 50 short plays, 15 full-length pieces and have had numerous readings and productions in NYC and Washington DC. After spending 25 years in a garret painting and writing, the collaboration, the passion, the energy of theatre was completely intoxicating to me.

**MM:** How would you describe your style and what are some of your most outlandish plays about?

**TB:** My plays are way out on the edge — I describe them as “Absurdist-Philosophical.” I would hold that they are more realistic than today’s “neo-realism” theatre (all you need for verification of that is to watch/read the news every day). This play, “Duck,” definitely fits into my aesthetic, with fluid time, a Virgil like character who is generally unseen except by the main character, abundant dark humor. However, there is deep significance to my work, and I use the absurdism and humor to wrestle with life’s deepest (and unanswerable) questions: “Who are we and why are we here?” I have a handful of plays which are even more out on the edge, and have yet to find a home. *Comic Book*, *Jung’s Chair*, *Bankus*, *Language of the Birds* and *Oud Player on the Tel* have all been through many rewrites, some readings and are honed to my personal aesthetic. These treat everything from the nature of reality (*Comic Book*) to our banking/financial system (*Bankus*) to the Palestinian/Israeli situation (*Oud Player on the Tel*). But in all of these, absurdism and dark humor offer the framing for the exploration of ideas.

**MM:** So...quack! Why “quack”? Why not chirp, or tweet, or meow, howl, bark, etc.? Did you get the idea for this play while near a pond or duck?

**TB:** True story: I knew a guy in college who walked around campus quacking. He demanded that we call him Duck. And then, within a year, I had met and was dating a woman with sensual lips who my friends affectionately referred to as “Duck Lips.” So I guess Duck was stuck in my craw somewhere. In terms of the play, the Duck motif sprinkles throughout, as Duck (the main character) spent two years at Swarthmore only quacking (the mark at that college not of insanity, but of an iconoclast). Additionally, when Duck receives his promotion at the CIA due to his stellar work “rounding up,” his commanding officer informs him that his code name is now “Duck.” And it’s also really cool to see how many different meanings our actor, Michael Sean Cirelli, can give to a quack!

**MM:** As funny as it is, "DUCK" explores some deep themes. Was it tough to layer the piece?

*"Duck" was written by playwright Tom Block.*

**TB:** This piece went through a lot of development, dating back to 2013, when I began it. Here is the true joy of theatre — there has been input from numerous actors, several directors and a few theatre companies, all of which helped me develop and hone the piece, find the right pitch for the humor, clean up inferences and meaning yet still retain the absurdist framing.

**MM:** How did you go about getting this play cast and staged?

**TB:** I was very fortunate to be accepted into the IRT 3B Residency Program for four weeks, a strong supporter of developing new works. It is always easier to attract strong talent when there is a great venue for the production. The first thing I did was reach out to Katrin Hilbe, a director who not only "gets" my strange work and the mystical and philosophical ideas behind it, but has a deft hand for the subtle humor and pacing needed to make this play really shine. Katrin is extremely well respected in our community, so she reached out to the crew for the play. Then, we held five days of auditions at the end of July to put our cast together — and after going through more than 700 submissions for 5 roles (one role — Weigert/Doctor of Euthanasia — was already cast with Annemarie Hagenars, who had been in the most recent reading of the play at Dixon Place), we came out with an extremely strong, seasoned and professional cast. Gotta love New York!

**MM:** What is your favorite scene and line from "DUCK" and why do they stand out to you so much?

**TB:** Of course, like my children, I love them all equally — but if I have to choose (and I would only do this for theatre, BTW, not my children— who I really do love equally), I'd say that my favorite scene (which can still make me laugh and cry) is the second euthanasia scene, when Duck and Crumb's father is actually put down. It is dark, absurd, full of humor and at the end, deeply sad. A lot of the pathos is dependent on the acting in this one (since the emotional arc is so vast and quick), but we are fortunate to have Robert Meksin in the role of Marvin (getting his "braces"), and he brings an extremely amber note at the end of the scene. My favorite line? That's a bit more difficult, as it is the interplay between the characters where the humor really emerges, so I'll include one of many exchanges that I like:

*Priest:*

Let me get this straight. You're Jewish. But you want to confess.

*Duck:*

Father please. I need someone to talk to. Someone with a sense of reality. Right and wrong. Truth. That can give me —

*Priest:*

And your people —

*Duck:*

I'm afraid they would just ask why I don't go to synagogue any more.

*Priest:*

And why don't you?

**MM:** What do you hope audiences take away from it?

**TB:** I have a very clear sense of what I want from my plays: that my audience is sitting in a bar an hour after the production, arguing about what it meant ("No! it was about loyalty!" "No! It was about personal realization!" "No, look at the brother. It was about following the known path, or else." "No, you're all wrong — it was about morality." "Truth!" "Consequences!"). This is why I create all my art — not to offer riddles to be solved, but to raise timeless questions in new and creative ways, so we are touched by them again, turn them over in our minds, reconsider ideas that we'd thought we'd settled long ago ("I hadn't thought about that since philosophy class in college.") This is the purpose of my work.

**MM:** You are the founder of the International Human Rights Arts Festival?

**TB:** I am the founder of this festival, which is ongoing and growing here in New York City. All of my work operates at the intersection of classical mystical ideas and contemporary society. Specifically, how to apply ideals underpinning “Legislative Prophecy” (developed in the 13th century by Moses Maimonides, Jewish; Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, Muslim; and St. Francis of Assisi, Christian) to today’s social and political worlds. Briefly, Legislative Prophecy posited that mystics had a social role to play — they were not fulfilling their highest duty if they simply moved to the top of a mountain, meditated and lived on acai bowls and mineral water. They not only had to engage with society, but they had to channel the highest form of spirituality into society through their actions. So, when I was solely a painter, I moved my own work in the direction of this kind of engagement, creating the Human Rights Painting Project, in conjunction with Amnesty International. I showed work from this series of portraits I painted more than 40 times around the US, Canada and Europe. In so doing, I met many artists who were committed to these same ideals — though they didn’t necessarily call it “legislative prophecy.” And in each case, I saw artists who had collected a small audience around them. It struck me that if we brought all of this energy together, we could have a much larger social impact. So, I produced the first Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival, outside of Washington DC in 2010. Then, I started working in New York, so I began producing the International Human Rights Art Festival, which has become an ongoing and growing manner of using art to open a space for engagement, conversation and expression of our most important social concerns.

**MM:** Do you have other theatrical or writing projects coming up that you would like to discuss?

**TB:** I am the co-founder of the Experimental Theatre Writing Workshop, in which myself and Suzanne Willett (Founder of Silver Glass Productions theatre company) convene writers and actors to hear our work outside the bounds of normative theatre. As we say in our call for writers, the Workshop offers a chance for playwrights to explore non-traditional theatre making. The work must challenge theatrical conventions in some manner. This can include dialogue, structure, staging, character and/or character development, format

or any other manner of pushing at normative theatrical boundaries. We are meeting monthly to hear new work. And just this week, we held our first salon to kick ideas of philosophy, theatre, art movements and how to bring them together, sitting in an outdoor space not far from Penn Station. We found that experimental theatre actually isn't being much supported in NYC right now, so we are providing a space to nurture the work, as well as the ideas behind it.

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To learn more about Tom Block, visit his [official website](#).

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Meagan J. Meehan is a published author, poet, cartoonist, and produced playwright. She pens columns for the Great South Bay Magazine, Blasting News, KidskinthaBlog, and Entertainment Vine. She is also a stop-motion animator and an award-winning abstract artist. Meagan holds a Bachelors in English Literature, a Masters in Communication, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Educational Psychology. She is an animal advocate and a fledgling toy, game, and shoe designer.

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