

# An Outsider Comes In

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## BOSTON-BRED PLAYWRIGHT DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE

never suspected he'd see his work on Broadway, let alone on the Huntington's mainstage. "I grew up loving the Huntington," he says, "and when I became a playwright, that's where I wanted to have my plays produced — it's my hometown." After this year, he can scratch both those items off his to-do list. With productions not only in New York and Boston, but around the country at theatres like the Geffen in Los Angeles, the Cleveland Playhouse, and the Goodman in Chicago, *Rabbit Hole* is earning him a well-deserved reputation as one of this country's most imaginative theatrical voices. His numerous honors include the LA Drama Critics Circle Award, a Garland Award, the Kesselring Prize, awards from the Berrilla Kerr Foundation, the LeComte du Nuoy Fund, Mixed Blood Theater, Primary Stages, the Tennessee Williams Literary Festival, and the South Carolina Playwrights Festival. He has received commissions from South Coast Rep, Dance Theater Workshop, and the Jerome Foundation.



David Lindsay-Abair

Lindsay-Abair's other work, such as *Kimberly Akimbo* and *Fuddy Meers*, has demonstrated a characteristically quirky world-view. His plays are ones in which amnesiacs find themselves starting life anew every morning, women with aphasia lock wills with lispers and criminals, girls with rare diseases age four-and-a-half times faster than they should ... and yet life goes hilariously on. It's a mode that has served him well as a writer, earning him critical and popular accolades alike. But Lindsay-Abair found himself wanting to stretch the boundaries of what came easily to him — it was a journey that began with advice from a mentor to "write what scares you," and ended with the completion of *Rabbit Hole*, a play clearly descended from his previous work, but also one that lives in an entirely new theatrical space. Literary Manager Ilana M. Brownstein explored David Lindsay-Abair's trip down the rabbit hole and his passage through to the other side.

The role of the outsider is central to the majority of your work.

What draws you to those kinds of stories?

I'm not sure entirely, except that I've always felt, in some way, like an outsider.

We all do, to some extent. I read once that most writers go back to a time when they were eleven or twelve, when something very traumatic, significant, or dramatic happened in their lives. I read that I thought: well, what is that to me?

Where was I at eleven or twelve? Aside from going through puberty — which is everybody's trauma — I got a scholarship to a private school out in the suburbs. I grew up in a very blue-collar, rough and tumble neighborhood, Southie, and for me to get up everyday and get on a train and go out into the suburbs to this very tony, prestigious, hallowed campus where everybody, it seemed, was wealthier than I was, different than I was — it was defining to me as a person. I felt like I didn't belong there, and after a couple of years, that I didn't really belong back where I grew up, either. I had a foot in each world, shuttling between the two, but not really belonging to either one. It's not dissimilar to *Kimberly Akimbo*, *Fuddy Meers*, or anything that I've written about people finding themselves in an upside-down world where they have to maneuver through it and figure out who they are and how they fit in.

Your plays are deeply theatrical; is that sense of theatricality something you've always had at your fingertips?

It is natural. It's just what I do, and it's certainly how I look at the world. When I first started writing, I thought, this is just how I write. I write in a very theatrical, often absurdist way. And I didn't know that I would have interest in writing any other way. Mostly I found naturalistic plays less engaging, I guess, for me as an audience member.

And yet *Rabbit Hole* is most definitely a more naturalistic play than those you made your name with. How did you make that transition?

I started to look a little more closely at plays that were naturalistic, that, for whatever reason, I started to enjoy. I don't know if it meant that I was changing as a person and engaged theatre in a different way, but at some point, at the back of my head I had this little seed planted, a voice saying "maybe you should write a naturalistic play. What would that be like? Could you find a topic that would engage you enough to support that?" Then it was always just lurking in the background as something that might be interesting or challenging to me as a writer. I didn't know if I would ever land on a play that would take care of that little thing that I once put on my check-off list.

What ended up being the spark that got your fire going?

When I was a student at Juilliard, Marsha Norman said, “if you want to write a good play, write about the thing that frightens you most in the world.” I was all of twenty-six at the time and I thought, what is that? I didn’t know. A few years later, I became a dad. When my son Nicholas was three, I had heard a couple awful stories about children who had died suddenly — friends of friends — and it was in that moment that I thought: oh! That is what Marsha was talking about. Being a relatively new dad, I understood fear in a profound way, in a way that I had never understood it before. That became the seed of *Rabbit Hole*, and while I was sure there was an absurdist, funny way to explore grief, for whatever reason I was not ready to write it in that way yet. This ended up being my way into writing a naturalistic play.

Was it a struggle to not employ the wacky situational humor that feeds the engine of some of your other plays?

I wasn’t quite sure what this play was when I wrote it. Honestly, I didn’t even know if it was funny at all, which worried me. Given the topic, a part of me worried: good Lord, is this play just unbearably sad? After its first reading in the Pacific Playwrights Festival at South Coast Rep, it was a huge relief to know that as sad as the play is, it’s also really funny. And maybe that’s just because, you know, inevitably, I’m going to come out, no matter what. David Lindsay-Abaire is going to come to the floor, and his view of the world will come to the floor, and it will be funny. And, inevitably, you will end up having a riff about the Kennedys somewhere in there. •



photo: William Eggleston