

TAR BEACH

A new play by Tammy Ryan

Supporting Materials for
The Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival
Dramaturgy Through Design 2016/2017

Description of the Play

Tar Beach takes place over a few days in July 1977 in a working class neighborhood in Queens, New York. The serial killer, Son of Sam is on the loose and New York City is in the midst of a brutal heat wave. Sixteen year old Mary Claire and her best friend Mary Francis start the play sunning themselves on the roof of an Ozone Park row house. Younger sister Reenie is searching for her lost Greek Mythology class project, while their parents are consumed by the battles of their troubled marriage. The boy crazy Marys hatch a plan to stay out all night, but an overstressed electrical grid leads to a city-wide blackout and a sudden loss of innocence.

Tar Beach is a work of imagination which emerged almost fully grown out of a playwriting exercise from Connie Congdon at Primary Stages, which I call "On the Roof." I was sixteen years old during the "Summer of Sam" and have vivid memories of the heatwave and city wide blackout happening in the midst of an anxiety ridden summer. The characters sprung out of my subconscious and onto the roof of the Ozone Park row house of my adolescence, demanding their story be told.

As a memory play, the reality of what we see is not always certain, since it is narrated by Reenie, who begins the action talking to us from inside her "mother's closet" looking back from a vantage point we never see. We have to trust that Reenie knows how to tell her story, and that this is the only way she can tell it. My hope is that the play captures the very specific reality of these characters in this place and time period and that it will resonate with audiences -- whether or not they lived through the 1970s!

What I'm Interested in Learning from Designers about the Play

The playwright Jose Rivera, in his *36 Assumptions About Playwriting*, says it is important to always have one impossible to stage element in your play. In my experience, designers love the challenges of those moments, and I'm excited to see what student designers come up with. Some of the questions I have about how to bring *Tar Beach* to life onstage include:

How does scenic, lighting and sound design create a balance between the specificity of the time period with the poetry of Reenie's memory? How can the design leave room for both the naturalism of the characters, and the theatricality of a memory play? How can the set facilitate movement from real time/scene to memory/monologue and back again? Can design help define point of view for the audience -- that what we are seeing comes from Reenie's memory/imagination? How to solve the challenge of the two locations: up on the roof and inside the house? And what are some of the ways to solve the physically impossible (i.e. Roger flying over the diningroom table!)?

I look forward to being surprised by the variety of solutions your student designers come up with, including perhaps, examples of prop design, such as the Medusa Head, as well as how to capture the wider environment of Brooklyn burning, the pull of the ocean waves, and the sense of the star(s) or the airplanes flying overhead.

Biography of the Playwright

TAMMY RYAN is a playwright and librettist whose work has been performed across the United States and abroad. She was awarded the Francesca Primus Prize by the American Theater Critics Association for her play *Lost Boy Found in Whole Foods* (Premiere Stages/Playwrights Theater of New Jersey.) Other plays include *Soldier's Heart*, *Dark Part of the Forest* (Premiere Stages) *A Confluence of Dreaming*, *Baby's Blues*, *FBI Girl* (Pittsburgh Playhouse), and *The Music Lesson* (Florida Stage/2001 Carbonell Award Best Production/2004 AATE Distinguished New Play Award.) *Tar Beach*, (Luna Stage) was a Jane Chambers Playwriting Award honoree, finalist for the Terrence McNally Award, included on "The List" compiled by the Kilroys in 2014 and nominated for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 2015. *Molly's Hammer* (The Repertory Theater of St. Louis) also nominated for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize that year. Ryan is based in Pittsburgh where she teaches playwriting at Point Park University.

Artistic Statement from the Playwright

I've always believed playwriting was closer to poetry than any other kind of writing and each play I write has its own poetic heart beat that I need to discover before I can tell the story. I write character driven, theatrical plays intended to be seen and heard on the stage with what I hope are juicy, layered, complex roles for actors. I strive to write socially conscious work that desires a conversation with the community in which I live. I believe, as Bertolt Brecht said, that "art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."

Collaboration is at the core of my artistic philosophy. I love the collaboration that takes place between writer, director, actors, and designers to bring a play before an audience. But I also see playwriting as a process that begins privately in the conception/generation of that first draft. It begins with an image, a character, a situation, a line of dialogue – which then has to be “dreamt up” for a period of time, usually with extensive research before I am able to type the words AT RISE. I write the first draft quickly in order to capture the integrity of that initial artistic impulse. As soon as I have a workable draft and other people can get on board my project, either around a table or in the rehearsal studio, I am happiest. Rewriting in rehearsal with input from all the collaborators is what I love and do best.

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