

OUT OF ORBIT – PLAYWRIGHT STATEMENT

Jennifer Maisel

OUT OF ORBIT's journey has been a long, rich and complicated one. After reading an article in the LA Times about the Mars Exploration Rover mission, explaining how the people working on the mission were working on Mars time while living on Earth time, I was intoxicated with the theatrical possibilities. A Mars day – a sol – is about 38 minutes longer than our Earth day, and that meant anyone on the Spirit and Opportunity mission was experiencing a mounting jet lag of about an hour a day as they went out of sync with their families and world. The idea of a mother trying to juggle her life as a rare female Project Scientist on the mission with solo-parenting a teenage daughter took hold and I began to research, assuming that the mission would last the planned 90 sols and I would know the arc of the play within a few months.

So first I needed to learn the science – which was challenging, because I don't consider myself a science person. The biggest stroke of luck for me was meeting Nagin Cox, an engineer on the Spirit mission, at an alumni event for our college. I kind of stalked her – and over the years she has been extraordinarily helpful with me getting the science right. But what complicated the writing for me was the phenomenal success of the rovers. Phenomenal because the rovers went far longer than the 90 planned sols...they went for years, they were the little engines that did, and as excited as I was about them thriving on the red planet, that kind of screwed up my plan for knowing what end of the play was going to be. I decided to put the play away for a while and in the interim I wrote another play, THERE OR HERE, hoping the rovers would give me an indication of what I should do.

So I had the first act of the play and a few scattered scenes of the second act and I was accepted for the 2010 Sundance Theatre Lab. There's nothing like a deadline to make you finish a draft of a play. I went in with a full draft and then immersed myself in the workshop, rewriting every night after rehearsing all day. During Sundance the announcement was made that Spirit had finally gone silent, years and years after expected. After Sundance the play was awarded an Ensemble Studio Theatre/Alfred P Sloan rewrite commission for plays about Science and Technology and was subsequently workshopped in EST's First Light series, at Cal Tech (with a cast and audience full of people who worked at Jet Propulsions Lab which was quite nerve-wracking), in the Gulf Shore New Play Festival and the Berkshire Playwrights Lab. There were a couple of productions planned that went away for unfortunate reasons and then Cal Rep/Cal State Long Beach did a lovely educational production. Through each of these processes I learned, rewrote and refined the script.

In 2016 OUT OF ORBIT was honored by the Kilroy List --- and a reading that came out of that resulted in the upcoming premiere at Williamston Theatre in Michigan. It also won the Woodward- Newman Award from Bloomington Playwrights Project and will also have a production there this spring. When I think about how many people along the way have

contributed to OUT OF ORBIT – actors, artists, scientists, engineers, directors, producers, dramaturgs - I am intensely grateful.