

FEATURE

ABOVE:
JD Scalzo and Ed Berkeley in rehearsal,
Photo by Ben Randle.
BELOW: JC Lee.

WARPLAY ON WORDS

BY BEN RANDLE



JC Lee is one of the most exciting new playwrights and screenwriters working today. He received raves for his play *Luce* at Lincoln Center Theater, has written for HBO (*Looking, Girls*) and ABC (*How to Get Away with Murder*), is currently writing the film version of *Pippin*, and his next play, *Relevance*, premieres at MCC Theater in New York next year. This interview was done during *warplay*'s development in NCTC's New Play Development Lab, which commissioned the play.

You've a funny story about where the idea for *warplay* came from. Would you share it?

Like a proper gay, I was at the gym once, and the movie *Troy* was on. This was a couple of years ago. I was still in grad school in New York. And I was struck by just how bad the movie was. I remember thinking, "God, this movie features Brad Pitt, Orlando Bloom and Jared Leto all in various states of undress, and I cannot even deal with how bored I am. It made me start

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to think about the love story between Achilles and Patroclus, a story the movie heteronormalizes but is actually one of the oldest same-sex love stories in Western literature. I did a little bit of research (very little research; research is not my strong suit) and came to find no one had adapted their story. I thought, what the fuck? I might as well do that.

Was there an unexpected challenge during the development of this play?

Writing a two-person play is fucking hard. It requires deeply mining the emotional journey the two characters are on and dramatizing the nuance. That's not an easy thing to do. When I worked on *Looking* with [writer & director] Andrew Haigh, I was always impressed with his ability to maneuver the camera into the most intimate moments that two people share — be they embarrassing, sexy or horrifying in their revelations — and what you find in theatre is that you just don't have that tool. You can't move the audience in. You've got to make the moment bigger, so everyone in the theatre can experience it. That's a really hard thing to do without compromising the truth of the emotional moment.

Most of your work is original. Was it different to write an adaptation?

It wasn't really different for me because I have almost no respect for source material. That makes me sound like an asshole, but it's true. Anything I work on is a ripoff of something I thought was cool or inspiring or underserved. I use the word "ripoff" really deliberately because I think of the writing process as ripping a literal piece of something I like off of what it was and running with it to make something new. My play *Luce* was a rewrite of David Mamet's *Oleanna*, my play *Crane*,

which they just did at Ferocious Lotus in San Francisco, was a rewrite of the Decemberists album *The Crane Wife*. I don't subscribe to originality in art. I think artists owe constant debts of lineage to the art they're raised on.

A process question: how do you think working on TV and films changed your playwrighting? Or has it?

Television is about economy: what's the most efficient and interesting way to tell the story? Film is about structure: how do we tell this story in two hours in the most commercial way possible? Theatre is about language and action: what's the most interesting vocabulary with which to tell the story? These obviously overlap and inform one another, but exercising one's writing muscles in each form makes the others better, I think. The trick is balance. If you just write television for a long time, you forget how to let characters talk and breathe. If you write features too long, you don't remember that structure isn't the paramount concern of storytelling. If all you write are plays, you wind up hewing to a very small demographic of people, which limits the scope of what you can write about.

What did you want to keep from *The Iliad*, and what did you hope to add?

I'm always driven by story, so for me, the only stuff that was essential to keep was what helped tell the story in the most interesting way. I do that because the play isn't meant to be performed for only those people who are steeped in knowledge of Homer's poem. It's meant for everyone. I always write for my father. He's a blue collar guy. If he can watch a play I wrote and get the story and have a good time, I've done my job. Sure, if you know Greek mythology and literature, you'll be rewarded more deeply, but that should never come at a cost to other people in the audience. ■