

Lab Theater Project Interviews
Playwright Peter A. Balaskas
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Q: What compelled you to write this story? Where did the idea come from and how did you piece it together?

A: The inspiration of this story comes from two standpoints: thematic and creative. From a thematic standpoint, throughout my 30 years as a writer (26 as a published fiction writer and four years as a playwright), I have never written a love story. A few of my stories and plays have romantic elements, but I have never written anything in-depth about how two people's unconditional love for each other can help them evolve and grow emotionally and spiritually. So, ever since I segued from fiction to playwrighting, I would give myself a series of "creative constraints" where every full-length play has certain "rules" that must not be broken as I begin to write it. After completing my second full-length play, one of the rules I had for my third full-length play was to write a love story.



And this is where the creative standpoint comes in. I had absolutely no idea where to start. I began writing short plays just to get the inspirational juices flowing. After writing a couple of short crime dramas, the idea to create an intergenerational love story came into the mix: an 85-year old man and a 65-year old woman. He's a poet; she's a deputy district attorney. And the key ingredient to their love and chemistry as a couple is their ability to create poetry together and complete an entire work, as though their spirits were so intertwined that their bond was flawless and almost telepathic. I planned it originally as a one-act and I wanted it to be at their end of their journey where one of the characters is dying and they create their final work together before he passes on...a wonderful ending to their journey as a couple. A simple plot and character piece. It was called, *A Waltz Between Winter and Spring*, which is not only the title of their last poem they wrote together, but also the first act of what would be *Out of the Mouths of Poets*.

After completing this one-act play and letting it digest, I realized that I loved the characters so much that they deserved a full-length play of their own. But then we come back to the "constraints." I created the framework of a love story, but I didn't want to start at the beginning when they first met, fall in love, etc. I wanted the work to be non-traditional by starting where Cosmo sheds his mortal coil, and yet, their journey and bond continues, even after his death. And another constraint I wanted to include was a different playwrighting technique that I had never used before: a three-act structure where all three acts can work together as a full-length play OR (with a little bit of tweaking) they can work independently of each other as three separate one-acts. It's like a theatrical triptych: a set of three dramatic pieces that work artistically together or separately (trivia note: Triptych was going to be the original title of the play, but it happened to be the name of my fourth published book. So I chose *Out of the Mouths of Poets* instead, which I

like better, honestly.) I didn't realize that Neil Simon did something similar with *Plaza Suite*. And then after watching *5800 Bluebird Lane* at Lab Theater Project (it was the first time I saw a show there), I wanted to create something unique for that space and therefore, *Out of the Mouths of Poets* was born. And I know for a fact that this work has helped my writing grow: from a playwrighting and a poetry standpoint (which I like to dabble with occasionally).

Q: Why do you think it will appeal to Tampa audiences?

A: I feel that this play can appeal to all ages, religious beliefs, and emotional temperaments because of the likability of the characters and how each act of the play can pique the interests of the audiences. The first act is a tragedy. But it's a poignant tragedy where, although it can bring tears, they are tears of joy because of the love that these two show for each other, through their witty banter and their poetry creations. In the second act, we have a mystery. Why is the wonderfully frustrated Cosmo stranded in limbo? Who is the enigmatic Deidre? How are they connected? And the final act is a comedy, plain and simple. But it's a tender moment where the compassionate Tosca and the scoundrel Laurence "Butch" Kerwin get to learn more about each other, and they discover it is possible to find love again. And to express that love with poetry is a powerful feat because, in a way, it's an extension of a person's soul. And I feel that any romantic cynic who sees this play, that person's heart will absolutely melt and feel a sense of optimism that romance is not dead in our society.

Q: What does this particular play mean to you personally?

A: Cool! Let's talk about romance. I wanted to write a love story that is unlike any love story that is being created NOW in this day and age. Specifically, I wanted to craft a love story that is grounded in realism but especially in OPTIMISM. I have recently noticed that there are a lot of love stories these days – on film and theatre – where the foundation of the story contains nothing but anger and resentment, where the characters are talking AT each other (well, actually, YELLING at each other) rather than communicating WITH each other. Any love story must have conflict, of course. But this saturation of anger/resentment-filled tales is just too much. After 30 years of experiencing the 7th circle of hell (aka: The Los Angeles Dating Scene), I wanted to escape that kind of poison, not relive it while watching a dysfunctional love story on the screen or on the stage...although I did write a one-act comedy that was produced by TheatreOne (at the Hickman Theatre in Gulfport) about the LA Dating scene called *The Boulder of Sisyphus Rolls Upon Me Yet Again* (aka *The 12 Dates of Christmas*), and it was fun for both me as a writer and to the audiences (It won the "Audience Favorite Best Play" Award). So, there are exceptions.

What was really important to me as a writer was I wanted to walk that fine line where I avoid writing a gooey-love story that is so sweet it could give you diabetes, but I also wanted to avoid the negative, angry, self-destructive love stories that make you want to break out the razor blades and end it all. I wanted to resurrect the kind of love stories that were popular in the Golden Age of Hollywood, to the 1940s-50s, where there is a sense of adventure, mystery, innocence and optimism when it comes to falling in love. I hope I brought that back with *Poets*.

Q: How has it been working with Lab on getting this play ready for production?

A: It has been the most creatively fulfilling and stimulating experience in my entire writing career, and it's ongoing. I have been EXTREMELY impressed with the plays that Lab Theater Project has produced and it is an honor to have my first full-length play production here at this theater. I have learned so much about playwriting and many other aspects of the play production process from Owen Robertson (the director), who has been PHENOMENAL. The one thing that blew me away about LTP is how involved I am with the creative process of this production: the pre-audition meeting, the auditions, the readings and next the rehearsals. I am learning so much about theatre through these talented artists. On my Facebook posts, I've been posting a "Creative Journal" for everyone to read regarding my experiences with the production, to show, from a playwright's point of view, how Lab Theater Project works with their playwrights to transform what's on the page into something magical that will be on the stage. A theatre who gives a damn about its playwright, especially a new one! Wow, what a concept!

Q: Any parting thoughts?

A: Before I moved out here to Florida, I was a theatre critic in Southern California. And I reviewed over 100 shows from the most well-renowned venues on the West Coast, if not in the nation (see my website for a sampling of those reviews---www.peterabalaskas.com). And I can say unequivocally that the work Lab Theater Project produces here matches, if not surpasses, many of the productions I have seen and reviewed in California. And I am so proud that my work is a part of this artistic shining gem in Tampa.