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Playwright's advice: Get out of there

By [Bob Fischbach](#)

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

David Lindsay-Abaire, Pulitzer-winning author of "Rabbit Hole," has often felt like an outsider, and it shows in his plays. Lindsay-Abaire, 40, will be the honored playwright at this year's Great Plains Theatre Conference. The weeklong conference opens Saturday, featuring two of Lindsay-Abaire's plays. We talked to him by phone last week about his career and the state of American theater.

Q. Where are you as we speak?

A. In my office in Brooklyn. It's in my home. We live in Boerum Hill but will soon move to Prospect Park South. It's a landmark Victorian neighborhood full of amazing houses. Doesn't look like Brooklyn at all. My wife and I have rented every apartment we've had, and the landlords kept selling the building. We're finally able to buy, and nobody can sell our home out from under us any more.

Q. Omahans have had a chance to see many of your plays on local stages, including "Fuddy Meers," "Wonder of the World," "Kimberly Akimbo" and, soon, "Rabbit Hole." Which of your plays most often get produced across the country?

A. It was "Fuddy Meers" for a long time, but I think "Rabbit Hole" has surpassed it now. "Rabbit Hole" is my first big play that has very quickly gotten out into the regional theaters. Obviously, the Pulitzer helps that sort of thing. "Wonder of the World" wasn't critically praised in New York but is incredibly popular in regional theater. It's a fun play.

Q. Your plays often deal with people who are displaced within their own lives. Do you have a theory on why that theme is something you often seek to explore?

A. I do. I grew up in a very working-class neighborhood (in Boston), with parents and two siblings I love dearly. I was always an odd kid growing up in that neighborhood, a bit of a smarty pants. That sort of outsidersness, I always had. I got a scholarship to a private school in the suburbs when I was 11. So I got on the train every day in seventh grade to go to this toney, prestigious private school. Being this poor working-class kid, I was, of course, again an outsider. It changed me as a person, I hope in good ways, but then I was an outsider in my own neighborhood and home as well. I felt welcome in both worlds but not entirely at home in either one. I also think that's universal, isn't it? We all feel like outsiders most of the time.

Q. "Rabbit Hole" was seen as a departure for you, since it is very realistic and restrained, whereas your other plays have had an absurdist streak and featured bizarre characters and circumstances. What made you decide to change things up?

A. There were a lot of reasons, actually. One shouldn't pay attention to reviews, but I'm interested in them, even though not all are intelligent or valuable. But I noticed a trend in how people wrote about my plays. People who didn't like them really didn't like them. They wouldn't bother to take them apart in any way or examine what I was trying to do thematically. They would just dismiss it as a silly comedy not worthy of talking about. But I'd see those same critics writing about naturalistic plays in a much more respectful way. They weren't necessarily great plays but were approached differently. Being bold stylistically put people off. Part of "Rabbit Hole" was my responding to that: I can write a naturalistic play if I want to. But I had to wait for a subject that sparked me as a writer, that I could embrace and get behind, not just write something to spite people. I also wanted to expand my repertoire as a writer and write in a different style. I saw pigeonholing when my name came up in other people's reviews to describe what their play was. People thought I wrote a certain kind of play. Well, I don't want to write just one kind of play.

Q. What informed you to write so intimately in "Rabbit Hole" about the process of grieving and the loss of a child?

A. It's always a few things coming together. When I was studying at Juilliard, (playwright) Marsha Norman ("Night, Mother") said if you want to write a good play, you should write about the thing that most terrifies you in the world. When you're in your early 20s, I genuinely couldn't think what that might be. Then I became a dad, and I began to hear stories about children dying suddenly. They were stories from friends of friends. As a new parent, you put yourself in the heads of those parents and imagine the most horrible thing that could happen. I understood fear in a way I never had, to lose someone I loved like I never loved before. It was the thing I was most afraid of. So I thought, "Is this a play?"

Q. How do you feel so far about the movie version of Rabbit Hole?

A. So far, so good. The casting was fantastic (Nicole Kidman, Aaron Eckhart, Dianne Wiest, Sandra Oh). I've seen a rough cut, and it looks amazing, but I've only seen it once. I was on set a lot, so it wasn't too surprising. But things happen in the editing process. I couldn't really watch the movie, because I was so intrigued by how they had moved things around. I'm quite hopeful. But a movie is a different animal.

Q. Where were you when you learned "Rabbit Hole" had won the Pulitzer?

A. I was in this very room I'm talking to you from.

Q. What was your reaction?

A. It was genuine shock. Of course it was incredibly gratifying and happy-making. But I had always heard if you're a finalist you'll get a call on the Friday before telling you to be by the phone Monday when the announcement is made. I thought "Rabbit Hole" was a long shot. They had just changed the schedule of the Pulitzer, from theater season to calendar year. By the time it was eligible, a year had passed since it closed. The momentum was gone. We weren't on the short lists. And the Friday call didn't come. I didn't have my fingers crossed. I had forgotten about it. I was working on "Shrek the Musical," writing a lyric when the call came from my producer. The reason I didn't get the call Friday was, I wasn't a nominee. The nominators put forth three names. But the Pulitzer selection committee took a vote and chose a play not on the short list. That's how "Rabbit Hole" won.

Q. What does winning a Pulitzer mean to you, and how has it changed your writing career, if at all?

A. It's really hard to know. The biggest change has nothing to do with me but people's perception of me. My name is no longer David Lindsay-Abaire, it's David Lindsay-Abaire, Pulitzer winner. At the end of the day, I'm still at the desk writing as I've always written. You get wonderful things like this playwright conference, when they ask can we give you a platter and have you speak to us. That probably wouldn't have happened if I hadn't won a Pulitzer. I'm honored to have it, but when it's just me and the computer, it doesn't write the plays.

Q. People who see "Rabbit Hole" might be surprised the same writer worked on the book and lyrics for "Shrek the Musical" or the screenplay for "Spider-Man 4." How did those projects come to you?

A. "Spider-Man 4" came to me because (director) Sam Raimi was attached to (the movie) "Rabbit Hole" before (director) John Cameron Mitchell. Sam's schedule got so crazy he had to drop out of "Rabbit Hole." But his wife suggested me for "Spider-Man 4." I said yes, yes immediately. I love the Spider-Man movies because they're so much more than dumb superhero movies. Peter Parker is a great character, and Sam really wanted to make him more grounded and complicated, to send him in a new direction. I had a great time working on it. Of course, the studio went in a different direction, and the whole thing got canceled.

But in same way I wanted to write "Rabbit Hole," I thought why not do a big action movie just to try something different, to see if I could do it. "Shrek the Musical" was like that, too. I'm getting older, so why continue to do the same things I've already done? The difference with "Shrek" was they asked me to do the lyrics. I had never been a lyricist before, and it was an incredible challenge. I loved learning how to do that.

Q. What, if anything, do these projects have in common?

A. All those stories are about outsiders searching for clarity, people at a point where their worlds get turned upside down. Everything they knew was true isn't anymore, and they have to fit into a new world. With "Rabbit Hole," this family has a perfect life, and one day that world is exploded when a boy steps in front of a car. Shrek was a guy who could not be more set in his ways. He'd accepted how people look at him and treat him. But one day someone says go be something else, a hero. And he finds maybe he can be both an ogre and a hero, and find love. Spider-Man is a loser high school student who learns he, too, can be a hero and find love. They're all on a spectrum, at the heart of it.

Q. You've had very different outcomes as far as commercial success when working on the book or lyrics for musicals. ("High Fidelity" tanked. "Shrek" is going on national tour after a year-plus on Broadway.) Would you like to work in that genre again?

A. Yeah. I've learned so much on both those projects. I don't know that I'd want to adapt a movie again. But musicals are so much harder than any play I've written. It's so mysterious about how they work and why they work, such a strange alchemy. They can look totally right on the page, but in front of an audience, they laugh where you didn't see a laugh, and things you thought were perfect just sit there. Or a song's not working, you move it earlier in the show and suddenly it does work. It's so strange. Also, people came to the theater with ideas about those titles. It was hard to overcome their assumptions. They got in the way of seeing the show clearly. Maybe they were wanting it to be like the movie, or maybe they were dreading another animated movie being turned into a musical. But come see what we've added to it: 19 brand new songs that aren't in the movie. It's hard to battle those perceptions. I'd love to do an original musical where people don't have ideas walking into the room. With a new play, people sit down and have no idea what they're going to see. But it was so valuable and useful to get my feet wet on those shows.

Q. Family dysfunction seems to be a favorite theme of yours. What was the family you grew up in like?

A. They were dysfunctional in a normal way. No violence, nothing dramatic or scarring. A lot of love in the house, too. I wish I had a great ugly story to tell, but I don't. The family was happily boring. We all had our little mash-ups. I was a middle child, a mediator.

Q. What made you want to be a playwright, and when did you begin that journey?

A. The first play I wrote was in fourth grade, a class assignment. But my play was the one chosen to be performed for the Christmas pageant. The first real play happened in high school. It was a tradition to have a ninth-grade play. We did a Christopher Durang play. We had an amazing time. Someone said, "We should do a 10th-grade play, and you should write it because you're the funny one." So I did, and that's how I became a playwright. The next year I wrote an 11th-grade play, then a 12th-grade play. They were terrible, terrible plays, ridiculously fun and funny with parts for 25 16-year-olds. They were ripoffs of other plays I had read. I continued to take playwriting classes at Sarah Lawrence (University), even though I thought of myself primarily as an actor. Not until Juilliard did I think playwriting might work out.

Q. With the wisdom of experience, what advice might you like to whisper into the ear of an aspiring playwright you meet in Omaha?

A. The main advice is to put yourself out there as much as humanly possible. Meet as many people as you can meet, read as many plays as you can,

submit your stuff, put it out there. Because you never know what will lead to the next thing. It's been such a circuitous road to where I am, I could never have planned it. What I did well was put myself out there at every opportunity. For example I submitted a play to the South Carolina Playwrights Festival. (Playwright) Stephen Belber was there, and he suggested the Juilliard playwriting program. If hadn't gotten to Juilliard, I wouldn't have written "Fuddy Meers." I have 12 stories like that. I submitted a play to New Dramatists. They didn't let me in, but the script was passed to Soho Rep, and they produced it. It often goes like that.

Q. Among your writing teachers at Juilliard were Marsha Norman and Christopher Durang. Any lasting notion of what you learned from them?

A. So many things. Marsha's words of wisdom to write what you fear most got me a Pulitzer, I owe her that. Mostly they taught me to keep going as a playwright. It's not just about writing a play but sustaining a career and creating a body of work, rather than rewriting the same play forever. To keep going and diversify. To take other jobs, a Hollywood job to feed your kids. But always come back to theater. I don't know if they taught that in class as much as by example. We saw that every day, how a real playwright lives.

Q. What other playwrights have informed your work?

A. John Guare, who could write something hilarious and heartbreaking in the same play ("Six Degrees of Separation"). Christopher Durang ("Beyond Therapy," "The Marriage of Bette and Boo") and Tina Howe ("Pride's Crossing," "The Art of Dining") did that too. Feydeau, Ionesco definitely influenced my writing. As did Chekhov. I will add Edward Albee as well.

Q. What trends in New York theater today discourage or challenge you as a playwright?

A. I guess what discourages most is the money aspect of it all. For a play to be produced, even off Broadway, it costs a tremendous amount of money. That means they're going to be more reluctant to take a risk on a play. I'm in a lucky position. I can't imagine what an emerging writer feels like. There's that reluctance to produce plays that are more challenging to an audience. So you need a celebrity in the cast. It makes it more complicated than just writing a really good play. That used to be enough. Now it's not.

Q. What trends encourage you as a playwright?

A. I'm in a rare place, having a theatrical home, the Manhattan Theatre Club, embracing me and producing all my plays in New York. When I go to the theater and see a good play, I see the audience engaged and hungry for good stories. Everybody's always wanted that, but it's good to be reminded when you see it.

Q. Have you seen anything onstage recently that you really liked?

I'm so ashamed. "A View From the Bridge" is what I've loved most this season. I get as upset as any playwright when they mount another revival. But it's a great play, and the production is so artful and relevant and alive, the actors so engaged. It just felt new and fresh, and I had seen the play many times. But it's exciting when that happens, when something that's been around that long can be so alive. I saw "Fences" a few nights ago, and it was thrilling in that same way. Last night I saw "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity," by Christopher Diaz, and it was so full of energy and youth. It's a very exciting play, and there was an energy in the room. Something exciting was happening in that room, a new voice in American theater.

Q. Do you have favorite television shows, movies or books right now?

A. I love and am frustrated by "Lost," and I can't wait for it to be over so I can stop thinking about it. It's my son's favorite show. He's 9. I love watching through his eyes. His approach to story structure is so different. I do this in a very linear fashion. I'm conditioned to look at a story in that way. But "Lost" doesn't work that way. My son, Nicholas, will pick up on a detail from the story and know that the skeleton in the van is from two years ago. He retains bits of information I cannot. He goes backward and forward in time.

I haven't seen a good movie in a long time. I don't read as much as I should, but right now I'm enjoying "Olive Kitteridge," by Elizabeth Strout. It's a collection of connected short stories. They are so beautiful and simple and human and heartbreaking and fantastic.

Q. Ever been to Omaha before?

A. Never been to Nebraska.

Q. What made you say yes to coming now?

A. They asked me. I'm very much looking forward to being there. I love any gathering of playwrights. They live such solitary lives. It's great to lament together and debate and inspire and be together as a group of people. We're all loners by nature.

Q. What are you working on now?

A. I'm in rehearsal for the "Shrek the Musical" tour, and we're reworking the show quite a bit. It was our first day of rehearsal yesterday. I'm writing a movie for DreamWorks, "The Guardians of Childhood." And my new play opens on Broadway next season, so I'm also rewriting that. It's called "Good People." It starts previews in February and will open in March.

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