The life and work of Adam Rapp

A playwright's journey from reform school to the O'Neill Center

By Bruce Miller

JOHN SCHISLER

ADAM RAPP WAS STANDING at a music lectern. At six foot three and solidly built, he looked like the athlete he is. He didn't seem quite relaxed—his demeanor was more like that of a swimmer waiting for the starting gun than a playwright about to read the first act of a new play to a large group. Moments later, he was reading swiftly, but clearly—his voice bordering on monotone, but so specific in his understanding of the words and rhythms he had written that his reading created a true portal to his play. The script, *Red Light Winter*, sounded the way young people actually talk.

Two days later Rapp was sitting on a porch overlooking the ocean view campus of the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut. This is the same landscape in which O'Neill himself might have idled in his youth when the events that inspired *Long Day's Journey into Night* were unfolding. Rapp was there for the 2003 O'Neill Playwrights' Conference.

Held each summer since 1965 at the center, the conference is dedicated to supporting emerging playwrights by giving them the opportunity to hear their works in progress. During the course of the month-long festival, the selected scripts are given staged readings, performed and directed by theatre professionals. The intent is to allow the playwrights to focus on their plays, as the actors, scripts in hand, bring the new works to life. Each play is given two public readings after a four-day rehearsal period.

Adam Rapp at Pittsburgh City Theatre during rehearsal for his play Blackbird.

Finer Noble Gases *at Atlanta's Pushpush Theatre Company.*

Nearly six hundred plays have been given a voice at the O'Neill since the Playwrights' Conference was founded. In 2003, almost nine hundred proposals were received. Eventually the entries were narrowed to eleven that were given staged readings. In addition to the featured works, three playwrights are invited each year to work on new or unfinished plays and given the opportunity to live—all expenses paid—on the beautiful seaside grounds of the O'Neill.

Rapp was one of those writers-in-residence for the summer of 2003. He took time out on the porch to talk to *Dramatics*.

"Last year I was a writer-in-residence for ten days," he said, "when I started *Gompers,* which was commissioned by the Pittsburgh City Theatre. This year, I'm here for the full term, and I've written the first act of *Red Light Winter* in the two weeks I've been here and am well along on the second."

Besides the two summers as writer-in-residence, Rapp has workshopped *Ghosts in the Cottonwoods, Trueblinka,* and *Finer Noble Gases* in 1996, 1997, and 2001 respectively at the O'Neill Center. Low key and direct, he was open, even eager, to talk about his life and work. Once he began talking, Rapp barely needed any prompting.

"That's the way I write, too," he said. "I am sort of obsessive. Compulsive, maybe. Once an idea takes off I can hardly focus on anything else. Sometimes I have to force myself to take a day off—to not think about what I'm working on, to get back with people."

Asked how he gets ideas for plays, Rapp explained that he starts with an image, or a title, or a small piece of dialogue. His recent play, *Gompers* (opening this month at Pittsburgh City Theatre), for instance, began with a conversation he overheard on a bus ride. "Two young teenage girls were talking on the bus, and this one girl publicly announces that she is pregnant and she is gonna have the baby," he said. "These were tough, hard girls, but for a moment they looked really scared."

Sometimes it's a title or phrase that pops into the playwright's head and won't leave him alone. "An image or a title can be the door or portal to walk through," said Rapp. "All I have to do is frame it with an action or two."

Rapp said he lets the work gestate for a month or so, and when it's ready, the play just pours out. "The characters take charge. Then, when it's all over, I usually just need to tweak it a bit here and there," he continued, describing the process "like running down a rabbit hole and seeing what's down there."

RAPP'S APPROACH to playwriting has worked well for him in recent years. His fast-growing reputation is fueled by a body of work that is difficult to categorize, with a voice that many critics consider unique. His dialogue—a potpourri of the vulgar and the poetic—and his situations include hints of magic realism as well as echoes of Pinter, Shepard, and Mamet. The result is pure Rapp, a unique voice that is quite unlike anyone else working in American theatre today.

Rapp's first and best-known work is the widely praised *Nocturne,* probably the

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Above, Dierdre O'Connell, Mathew Stadelman, and Guy Boyd in Adam Rapp's Stone Cold Dead Serious *at American Repertory Theatre. Below, Anthony Rapp performs in brother Adam's play* Nocturne *at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.*

KEN FRIEDMAN

most traditional of his oeuvre, and a play that has been produced throughout country. It centers on a tortured young writer who returns home after years of carrying the burden of having accidentally killed his younger sister when the brakes on his car failed. This monologue-driven play expresses the main character's pain with empathetic humor and in language that is idiosyncratic and lovely.

Michael Kuchwara of the *Associated Press* called *Nocturne* "intensely lyrical, musical in its sounds and in its silences. Make no mistake. Rapp is an original—a distinctive voice unafraid to be too descriptive."

Rapp's poetic language permeates his other work as well. In plays like *Animals and Plants* and *Blackbird*, we find characters isolated, lonely, and living in squalor, yet somehow there is humor and a lyric quality in what they have to say. In *Blackbird*, for instance a drug addict and a disabled war vet try to survive and transcend their pain and poverty through love.

In *Animals and Plants*, a lost and bewildered drug dealer almost finds salvation during a snowstorm with a spaced-out head shop clerk who dreams of escaping to Mexico. The offbeat relationship that Rapp creates between the two young men makes the play reminiscent, as several critics have pointed out, of *The Dumb Waiter,* if *The Dumb Waiter* had been written by Sam Shepard. Markland Taylor, writing in *Variety,* observed that *Animals and Plants* is "rough-spoken, raunchy, and sometimes guffawingly funny… The sheer liveliness of Rapp's dialogue and his multifaceted characters keep his play afloat… a lurid comic phantasmagoria of life on the underside of Middle America."

In the more recent *Stone Cold Dead Serious*, a computer game wizard tries to escape his dysfunctional family by playing out his computer gaming skills in a violent real-life Kung Fu simulation that leads, sometimes hilariously, to bloodshed and ultimately death. The play veers back and forth from farcical to realistic to satirical, but manages to remain true to its own dark vision that somehow transcends our disbelief.

Rapp's talents have not gone unnoticed. He has been the recipient of the Herbert and Patricia Brodkin Scholarship, two Lincoln Center le Comte de Nouy awards, a 2002 Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays, and the 2001 Helen Merrill Award for Emerging Playwrights. He has also won Boston's Elliot Norton Award for Best New Play as well as Best New Play by the Independent Reviewers of New England. His plays have been given productions all over the world. This spring he is completing final editing on *Winter Passing*, a feature film he wrote and directed.

Considering the harsh yet comic grimness and pain that permeates his dramatic work, it is a bit surprising to find out that today Rapp is known as much for his fiction writing as for his plays. He's written several novels for young adults that focus on a troubled male central character.

The Buffalo Tree, for instance, is about a twelve-year old who spends hard time in a reform school after being caught stealing hood ornaments. *Little Chicago* follows the troubled life of a middle school child trying to recover from sexual molestation. His most recent

novel, *Under the Wolf, Under the Dog*, centers on a young man trying to survive his mother's death due to cancer and a brother's suicide. Though his subject matter is rough, Rapp feels his work speaks to young adults in ways that gentler books fail to do. "Adolescence is filled with uncertainty," he commented. "Kids are resilient and much smarter about the world than we think."

Rapp loves writing for a young audience and feels that his own life has given him a voice that speaks to kids. "I want to give them something that they will want to read. I want them to fall in love with reading and writing the way I did," he said. "It saved me. The world is a dark place and it is designed to destroy you. That's why people are always trying to connect—despite the world. I guess you could call me a supreme anti-sentimentalist."

While Rapp's novels are distinctly different from one another in content and style, his voice—and obvious love of the sound of language—is always apparent in the writing.

"My work always starts with the voice. Sometimes I'll hear someone talking and I'll become obsessed with the voice. Even a single word can set me off. It's the musicality or rhythm that interests me. The language itself constructs the world of the play or novel."

When Rapp talks about his work, whether it's his novels or plays, he seems to have a strong and perhaps personally painful relationship to each. At first glance, it would seem that this engaging young writer is one of those blessedly inspired creatures who, with talent, brains, and good looks, has been given the world on a platter. In actuality, his story is something completely different. Rapp's life, in fact, reads more like one of his novels. It has, if you like to think in those terms, a lot of pain, a terrific dramatic arc, and a good deal of satisfying irony. It also has a central character who struggles with life, and to make connections with other human beings. And invariably that character, metaphorically at least, has had to struggle to find his way home.

Born in Chicago, the middle of three siblings and the product of a broken home at five, Rapp became a bit player in his younger brother Anthony's burgeoning acting career. He was in middle school when Anthony became the family breadwinner. Adam and older sister Ann were forced to join their mother and Anthony on the road. Anthony had become a successful child actor, and their mo-ther, a former prison nurse, had no choice but to uproot the family in order to keep them together. Where Anthony's theatre work took him, so went the family.

"I was in eighth grade," recalled Rapp, "and I was going be the starting point guard for the school basketball team, and just as the season is about to begin, my whole life is just yanked away."

Though his brother's theatre career was able to keep the family going, it meant that the basketball-loving Joliet street kid would be pulled from his friends and from the pick-up games that he lived for. This created in Adam a rock-sized chip on the shoulder and a burning hostility toward the theatre.

During those years, the family's life, by necessity, often revolved around kid brother Anthony. "He was the little genius," said Rapp, with absolutely no sense of resentment toward his brother. "Went to special schools. Was an amazing reader and writer. And he had the brains and the acting career. So I went with sports and girls,"

Not that the older Rapp son wasn't smart. He just chose not to apply himself in spite of the "work hard, play hard, pray hard" Catholic environment he grew up in. "I remember one time while in detention," he said, "I had to write an essay about why I'm always in detention. The detention teacher was so impressed by my writing that I ended up in advanced classes. But that wasn't for me." The move became a formula for academic failure.

Like the character Jerry in Edward Albee's *Zoo Story*, an individual who struggles to connect with others and find a spiritual home, Rapp has had to work hard to become the person he is today. Unlike his brother, for Rapp there would be no smooth path to success, and his unique voice would come at the expense of a difficult journey. There was a miserable childhood, failure in public school, time spent in reformatory—the Glenwood, Illinois School for Boys—and four years at St. John's, a military boarding school that finally turned him around.

"I lived for basketball and was really good in high school," said Rapp. "I actually ended up winning a basketball scholarship to Clark College. But I was big trouble when I started high school and my mom finally had enough. My father picked me up one day to what I thought was going to be his house to live for a while, and twenty minutes into the ride he tells me that he's driving me to military school. It was his new wife's idea, not his. He didn't even tell me."

St. John's proved to be a long way from home. Rapp's first year in the military school was filled with hazing and abuse. "That first year was really tough, but after a while you learn the ropes," he said. But by playing the game at St. John's on and off the basketball court, Rapp's life got easier after that first year, though even today he is still unresolved as to whether the experience, in spite of his turn-around, was a positive one.

"I ended up president of my class and I found two father figures while I was there, my coach and my English teacher. But I'm still not sure how I feel." Rapp's first novel *Missing the Piano* bears a striking similarity to his own life. It centers on a young man who ends up in military school when his actor sister hits the road in the national tour of *Les Misérables*, and his father, newly married, has a wife who doesn't want him living with them.

Rapp regularly uses his own life as source material for both his novels and plays. His first major dramatic success, *Nocturne,* which was produced at the American Repertory Theatre (ART) in Boston in 2000 is a case in point. Though not directly autobiographical—Rapp did not accidentally kill a sibling—there is a lonely central character who is scarred by his past and estranged from his father, and who becomes a struggling New York novelist using his life as source material. *Ani-*

mals and Plants, also produced at ART, was based on an experience Rapp had with his best friend during a blizzard when they were trapped in a hotel in Boone, North Carolina. And *Red Light Winter* was inspired by a trip to Amsterdam with a friend who had been downed by love, and Rapp's strategy for curing his buddy.

It wasn't until his sophomore year at Clark College in Dubuque, Iowa that Rapp took his first steps toward home. While he was exploring a part of campus that he had wandered into for no particular reason one day, Rapp was drawn by the sound of sitar music and followed his ears. Before long he had made his way into a studio where a creative writing class was being held. Rapp was instantly fascinated. Bill Pauly, the professor running the class, invited him to join the group. Rapp was immediately willing, but there was a time conflict, so instead he signed up for a class in fiction writing taught by Don Knefel. Knefel would soon become one of Rapp's mentors.

From the moment he began to write, there was no stopping him. "I couldn't help it. Once it began, it just poured out of me." he recalled. "That's when I began reading seriously, too. For the first time in my life."

Among Rapp's early influences were J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, by Kurt Vonnegut, and John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*. At the same time he began writing novels and poetry. But there was no inclination toward drama until after his senior thesis defense.

"For some reason at the end of my defense, Don (Knefel) says to me 'good luck with the playwriting in New York,'" said Rapp. "I had never written a play in my life. I still don't know if he was confused or what, but when I asked him he just said that he thought that's what I'd be doing. It was so strange."

Rapp didn't write his first play until he was twenty-four, however, after seeing his brother in a production of John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*. He liked the play and before long he was reading plays by Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Harold Pinter, Arthur Miller, and Maria Irene Fornes. But what Rapp really liked when he went to see his brother was the way the theatre gang hung out after the performance. Unlike the isolated and solitary work of writing novels, the theatre was a convivial place, and that attracted Rapp. "I liked the idea of hanging out with actors. I figured if I wrote a play I could be one of the guys too." So the theatre provided Rapp with an opportunity to make the human connections he felt had been missing, and began to provide him with a sense of home—for his writing and for himself. And in a chunk of irony, the brother whose success on stage drove Rapp away from theatre was now instrumental in bringing him back.

But success as a playwright did not come too fast or easy either. In the five years between writing his first play and getting his first big production, Rapp spent time as a bouncer and a furniture mover, and did odd jobs in the publishing business. His best job, he said, was playing professional basketball in France—yes, he really is that good. It wasn't until he was twenty-nine, however, while at Juilliard as a two-year writing fellow, that ART decided to produce *Nocturne*.

"Some people think it all happened overnight, but it was my *thirteenth* play," said Rapp. "I was ready to give it up and focus on my novel writing, where I was being successful. I didn't even apply to Juilliard. They contacted me. I'm not even sure how they got my plays, but they did. It wound up being an amazing experience and I fell back in love with playwriting."

Rapp's stint at Juilliard gave him the opportunity to work with great playwrights and "this great group of actors." It also gave him the chance to be mentored by Marsha Norman and Christopher Durang, who went out of their way to help him professionally.

And now it is Rapp's turn to give something back to the theatre that has nurtured him and given him his spiritual and creative home. One way he has begun to do that is by dedicating a good deal of time to finding ways of making sure that kids get to see plays. He makes it a part of any production he is involved with.

"How about $15 theatre tickets across the board for kids under twenty-five?," he said, citing one example. "Or anyone under thirty pays half their age? We need to do *something* to cultivate a younger audience. Theatre is too important to be left only to the people who can afford it. We have to find a way to get past the beige overcoat crowd. If that means the kind of stuff critics won't like, then let the critics do features on the plays, but not review them."

So the dramatic irony here is definitely real—the kid who once hated the theatre is now a vocal advocate trying to save it. And though brother Anthony continues to be a powerful force on stage (his work in the Broadway production of *Rent* was highly praised), big brother Adam at the age of thirty-six has become no less respected. And that same angry kid who once hated theatre is now on a mission to find ways to get other kids into the seats he once detested.

And in a brilliant piece of dramatic closure (though certainly not the last chapter), the kid without a home has finally found a very good one. "Ten years from now I can see myself directing my own work for the stage, or becoming film director," Rapp said. "I know I want to help promote new works. I know I'll still be writing fiction, too." Only time can tell us what Rapp will do. But if the next chapters of his life are like the ones already lived, there will be an interesting journey to read about—more than likely as part of his plays or novels.

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