

INTERVIEW WITH DANA GIOIA

DG: When did you first become interested in theatre?

DI: I played The Wolf opposite drop-dead-sexy Amy Skeehan in our third-grade production of “Little Red Riding Hood” at St. Mary Magdalene School in South Chicago. Basically it was all over after that. The show was so successful Amy and I took it on tour to the fourth and fifth grades. By then I had learned the Great Lesson of Theatre, which is: *theatre is a great way to hang out with girls*. It may be why Shakespeare became both an actor and a playwright: *more girls*.

DG: When did you discover that you could make people laugh?

DI: There’s some debate about this. An aunt of my mine, a few years ago, said to me, “You’re just like you were as a boy. Such a happy, funny child.” I reported this to my mother, who said without a pause, “I wouldn’t say that.” She didn’t seem to want to explain. One of my old high-school classmates recently mentioned that I was funny in high school. I only remember reading Russian novels about suicide in high school. Maybe I was funny between novels, but they were pretty thick.

DG: Tell us about your first play.

DI: I wrote my first play when I was nine. It was about gangsters and had lots of gunfire and a girl I based on Amy Skeehan. I wrote my second play in high school. It was about Russian-like people talking about suicide a lot. My third play was at college and was The

Worst Play Ever Written. From there, I had nowhere to go but up. My next play got produced, and suddenly I was a real-live playwright. I've been faking it ever since.

DG: When you see one of your plays onstage, how different is it from what you imagined while writing it?

DI: It's always better than I imagined it, unless it's worse.

DG: You are the master of the short comic play. What drew you to this unconventional form?

DI: Probably a shorter and shorter attention span, like everybody else. Also, my wife Martha is on the short side and I am very drawn to her, so it is only a short (so to speak) way to short plays. I'm fond in general of the concise, the compact, the jeweled, the specific and perfect as opposed to the verbose, the bloated, the baggy and general. A good rock-and-roll song can be three or four minutes long and when it's over, if it's been made right and played right, you feel like you've gotten into a barfight, had a love affair, and rode a convertible down Pacific Coast One on the most beautiful day of the year, all in three minutes. Imagine what you can do with a ten- or fifteen-minute play. You can make an audience feel like they've done all those things, plus they've gotten married, had kids, died, and went to heaven. There they are, breathless just inside the pearly gate with their heads still spinning, and only ten minutes have passed. As far as I'm concerned all plays, short or long, should aspire to the conditions of rock-and-roll, whose purpose is to make us aware of our mortality and the fact that we had better get with it before the song ends. Not a bad rule of thumb for art as a whole.

DG: Who are your favorite comic writers and comedians?

DI: Nothing depresses me like comedians. Maybe it's because people who try to make me laugh instantly put me in a really bad mood. I once shot a man in Tucson and spent 38 years in the penitentiary because he tried to tell me a joke that started "A priest, a minister and a rabbi walk into a bar...." As for funny playwrights, Joe Orton and Noel Coward and Chris Durang do it for me because they're not just trying to be funny. They have a vision of life that happens to be comic. They've also got *style*, which is the outward and visible sign of having a vision of life.

DG: Does comedy allow you to convey certain things about life that would be difficult to bring across in a serious play?

DI: There's an old saying that if three monkeys sat at three typewriters and typed for all infinity, sooner or later they'd produce *Hamlet*. So I wrote a play with three monkeys at three typewriters trying to write *Hamlet*. The problem is, the monkeys in question don't know what *Hamlet* is. Let's be upfront. This is not a premise for a serious play and yet those three monkeys turn out to be in a metaphysical, existential situation. So, abracadabra, my little comedy turns out to be a serious play after all and gets the best of both worlds. You could try to write a serious play with three monkeys at three typewriters. I tend to think it wouldn't seem too serious unless they were speaking Swedish. Actually, it might be (inadvertently) funnier than what I wrote, but in my experience, inadvertent comedy is not something to aspire to. It's like falling down a flight of stairs and causing mass hilarity. All of which is just to say that there's a thinner

line between comedy and “seriousness” than we think. What’s a Feydeau farce like *A Flea In Her Ear* if not a Samuel Beckett play with better jokes?

DG: Why do people need comedy?

DI: Comedy is important for three reasons. First, it’s funny. Second, it makes us laugh. Third, it’s easier to get a girl to go see a comedy than, let’s say, *Hamlet*. Fourth, it shows us what frigging idiots we can be under the right circumstances. As Wendell Berry once said, “It is not from ourselves that we will learn to be better.” Watching idiots cavort around onstage is one possible way to do that. First, of course, you have to be interested in being better.

DG: Comedy seems to get less critical respect than tragedy. Does that seem fair to you?

DI: Nothing seems fair to me. That’s why I write comedy. If you’ve ever met a critic you’ll understand why they give more respect to sadder plays: because critics are the saddest dogs you’ll ever meet. The fact is, comedy is much harder to do – to write, to act – than drama, the same way it’s harder to look at life and say, *Okay*, then it is to mope around thinking about Russian roulette all the time. But let’s get one thing clear:

Comedy is not jokes. It certainly isn’t sitcoms, which to me are about as funny as a sack of dead kittens. I’m talking about real comedy – human comedy, which is to say comedy that thinks and feels. I’m talking about *Twelfth Night*, or *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, or *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where there’s truth and sadness mixed in with the joy, just as there is in life. Theatre is life, and fails when it settles for merely being funny,

the same way life is not enough when it settles for just being funny. In the end, comedy is just tragedy without the sentimentality. Dostoievsky, anyone?

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