

THE DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

APPLAUSE

VOLUME XXI ■ NUMBER 4
JANUARY – FEBRUARY 2010



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Kent Thompson

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Winter brings something deeply significant to new plays at the Denver Center: the annual Colorado New Play Summit. That's when we invite theatre industry leaders to join us for a weekend in mid-February to hear readings of new scripts and see new plays in full production.

This year—the fifth for the Summit—you'll see world premieres of two plays commissioned by the Denver Center Theatre Company (DCTC): Rogelio Martinez' imaginative retelling of the Russian and American hostile/friendly collaboration on the International Space Station in *When Tang Met Laika*, and Eric Schmiedl's heartfelt adaptation of Kent Haruf's wondrous novel, *Eventide*.

These are the finishing act of a process started two or three years ago. Each play was commissioned by the DCTC, but what does that mean? We contracted with each playwright to write two drafts of a new play. Eric had adapted Haruf's *Plainsong* for us; it was natural to ask him to follow up his success by adapting *Eventide*. As for Rogelio, our literary manager Doug Langworthy knew his work. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation had granted DCTC funds to help us commission

plays about science and technology. When we mentioned this to Rogelio he jumped on the idea of writing something about the Space Program, sparked in part by the knowledge that the Shuttle program ends in 2010.

Each script was written, workshopped for four days, then read aloud for an audience. New drafts were written (*Eventide* is up to Draft 5).

The Summit has grown faster than our wildest expectations and this year should be the largest, as the American Theatre Critics Association is holding its winter mini-meeting at the Summit.

Why do we believe in commissioning, developing and producing new plays? Think of them as the research and development arm of DCTC. New scripts are often on the cutting edge, provocative in content or very different in form. Playwrights write about what's on our minds as a society and a culture. They give us a fresh perspective on the world. They keep the theatre alive and relevant. It's also exciting to look at plays from the vantage point of the Rocky Mountain region. That's why we're committed not only to the best new American playwrighting, but also the new plays that explore the culture and people of Colorado and the West.

The playwright is the beginning of the process; directors and designers create a physical world for the play. The actors finish what the playwright started. But only you, the audience, can complete the process.

See you at the theatre,

Kent Thompson, Artistic Director,
Denver Center Theatre Company

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Life in Holt, Colorado, has its shocks and aftershocks, but its citizens know how to hit a grace note. In this companion piece to *Plainsong*, they hit quite a few.
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The author of this play about outer (and inner) space is as unconventional as its title, even as he attempts to explain how the play came to pass.
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APPLAUSE

M A G A Z I N E
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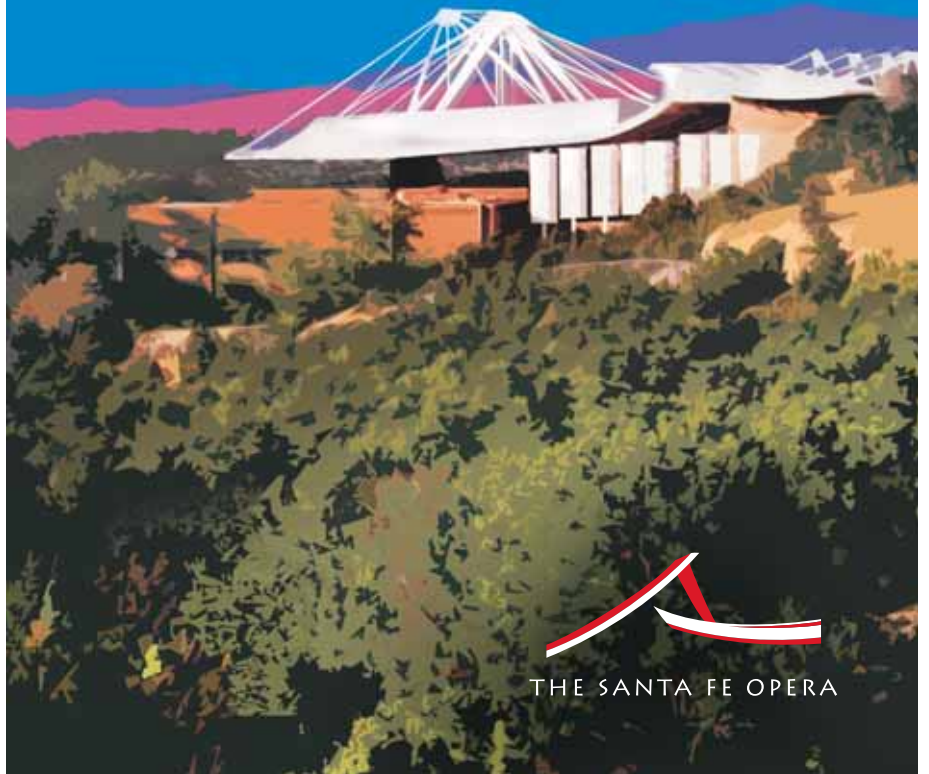
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IT HOME. THANK YOU.

Correction: A story on *Spring Awakening* in the November – December 2009 issue of *Applause* attributed D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to T. E. Lawrence. *Applause* regrets the error.



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EVENTIDE: NOT A SEQUEL BUT AN ONGOING SAGA

BY SYLVIE DRAKE



“In the book there’s this remarkable narrative voice that is Kent Haruf’s and what Eric has done is given the lyricism—the spare kind of poetic language of the novel that seems so much at the heart of it—to the entire acting company.”

~ Kent Thompson, director

When you see something you like, don’t you wish it would never end? Don’t you want it to go on forever?

Some of you may recall the Denver Center Theatre Company’s world premiere production of *Plainsong* three seasons ago, a panoramic tale about the daily life in the late 1980s of the denizens of a small town in fictional Holt County, Colorado. There were the ranching McPheron brothers who had never married and who lived and worked in solitude together; there was Victoria, the pregnant girl who came to live with them until she had her baby after her mother threw her out of the house. There were the two young Guthrie boys who lived with their dad, Tom, while their mother nursed some undisclosed breakdown up in Denver; and there was school teacher Maggie Jones, Tom Guthrie’s occasional date, who arranged for Victoria to live with the McPherons—an accidental relationship that turned out to be fortunate for all concerned.

And now comes *Eventide*, not a sequel to *Plainsong*, but what Denver Center Theatre Company Artistic Director Kent Thompson calls a “companion piece.” Kent Haruf, author of both novels from which the plays are adapted, has made this point very clear.

“I never use the word ‘sequel’ when I talk about *Eventide*,” he emphasized in a phone interview. “When people use the word sequel, it seems to me, they’re talking about someone’s attempt to cash in on a previous success and sequels are rarely as good as the originals. I think of *Eventide* and *Plainsong* as one big book—one long story divided in halves.”

Though not entirely. *Eventide*, set in the 1990s, lets go of some of the characters in *Plainsong* and introduces entirely new ones. The constants are the McPherons and Victoria.

“I knew, before I finished writing *Plainsong*, that there was more to the McPheron brothers’ story than I could or wanted to get into in that first book,” Haruf said. “I knew something difficult and significant would happen to the brothers and it would happen on the ranch and it would alter things forever. So I began to think about that as the prompt and genesis for writing *Eventide*.”

Unforeseen things do happen and lives change; Tom Guthrie and Maggie Jones are barely seen again, but we are introduced to the Wallaces, Betty June and Luther, a kind, well-meaning couple, yet mentally challenged to the point where they are unaware that they cannot take



Kent Haruf

PHOTO BY CATHY HARUF

proper care of their two children whom they dearly love. And then there's 11-year-old DJ and his aging grandfather, Walter Kephart, his only relative, who may or may not be around long enough to see the boy grow up.

"I don't have some kind of intellectual program or structure or story for this book," Haruf continued, acknowledging that there really was no reason why he dropped some characters, but not others and introduced new ones. "I was going on what I always go on, pretty much, which is intuition—some kind of... what," he mused, "a subconscious and heartfelt impulse? What I really mean is that I tried to follow my own emotional information about these characters and I suppose, in some ways, I felt as if I had said what I wanted to say about the Guthrie family and Maggie Jones. Their story's not ended, but it was complete for me in some intuitive way."

Haruf is not shy about admitting that, because of his disappointment with the movie that was made of *Plainsong*, he'd had serious reservations about letting the rights go again. But the good experience with *Plainsong* on stage also opened his mind to the possibilities of *Eventide*.

"One of the things that took me a little getting used to in *Plainsong* was that the play found more humor than I thought was in the book. But one night, when I couldn't sleep, I finally acknowledged to myself that even if I had everything to do with [the production] and had ten years to do it, I *still* could not somehow make an active story look and sound like what was in my head. There will always be things in an adaptation that the writer is going to be unhappy about or feel are not portrayed exactly right.

"Once I realized that, I was able to be

delighted with what was happening. There were differences in emphasis that, if I were writing the script or directing the play, I would want to see changed, but in the same breath I have to say that Kent Thompson and Eric Schmiedl have been very generous in allowing me to put in my two bits about the script. The script is Eric's. Adaptation is a different but tremendous talent and I think Eric's terrific."

Two decisions were made early about *Eventide*: to involve all three principals in the same synergistic triangulation—Haruf the author, Schmiedl the adaptor, Thompson the director—and to follow a similar of not identical production path.

"The stories [of both plays] spring from the same community," Schmiedl offered



Eric Schmiedl

from his home in Cleveland. "They share the same sort of story-telling style, so we wanted to remain consistent. It seemed a very acceptable way to move people quickly from place to place and it allowed us to get a sense of the language that Kent had in the novel, which also gives us a window into the community. So you'll see that same style and that same vernacular."

But you'll see and hear it in a slightly different framework, thanks to a leaner production and a greater emphasis on Story Theatre technique, wherein the actors in the company become the play's narrators as well.

"Some of the issues we faced were economic," added Kent Thompson. "We didn't have as many resources to put into the production, but also I think there's a sense in our heads that, OK, we defined the scenes where we needed the most scenery. They are still the McPherson kitchen, and Betty June and Luther's trailer. What we've figured out thanks to *Plainsong*, is that we can set up a scene, but as the play goes on we need less and

less from the scenery for the audience to know where we are.

"Once we've set up the language of place, they don't need to see all of the scenic devices they've seen before and we can be suggestive rather than literal."

Thompson believes that the power of the piece rests in two "almost contradictory" things: the sense of the small town and the very personal connection with just a few stories. "The danger with a piece that is so sprawling in terms of the number of scenes and locations is that you can lose focus," he said. "It can be about... nothing or it can be about everything at once.

"What is so authentic about this stage adaptation, and so remarkable about the book, is that on stage it feels like the community is telling the story. In the book there's this remarkable narrative voice that is Kent Haruf's and what Eric has done is given the lyricism—the spare kind of poetic language of the novel that seems so much at the heart of it—to the entire acting company.

"It actually allows the audience to have a more imagined connection to the material, because we don't represent trucks; it's just a bench. We don't have a cow on stage, we don't have a bull that kills someone on stage. We can't. That allows us, in a way, to focus on the more important moments, which are not about the bull, but about the character that gets killed. As in the tradition of Story Theatre or in the tradition of Thornton Wilder, it allows us to open up our imaginations in a different way. The piece works beautifully as a kind of contemporary *Our Town*." ■

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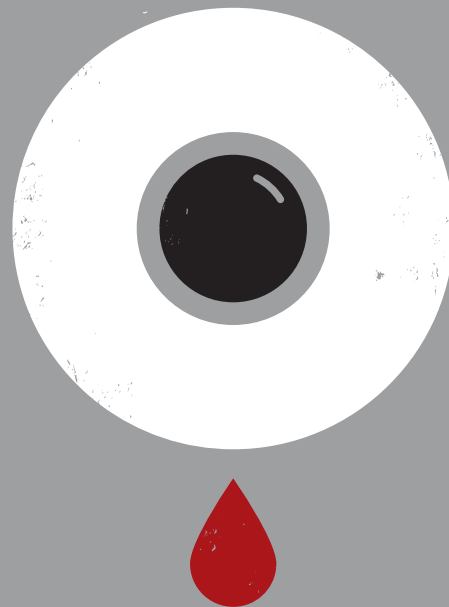
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Monroe Hodder, *Sisyphus Rocks*, oil on canvas

When **ROGELIO** *Met* **SPACE**

The author of *When Tang Met Laika* explains it all for you. As much as he can. It's a mystery.

BY **ROGELIO MARTINEZ**

Rogelio Martinez



What kind of emotional toll does space exploration take on someone who has decided to give his or her life to it? How does one return to "ordinary" life after experiencing extraordinary things?

In a play that is so much about people traveling to distant places both physically and emotionally, it seems right to ask one question: how did I come to write these characters? What kind of journey did I have to take to get here?

It begins with a phone call from Doug Langworthy, literary manager and dramaturg at the Denver Center Theatre Company.

"Rogelio, any chance you'd be interested in writing a play for us?" Silence. Then I burst out with *absolutelymostcertainlyyes!* The chance to work at one of the big regional houses in the country with people I've always admired is a dream. Doug asks me to give some thought to what I want to write about and to call him back.

THE SPACE SHUTTLE.

But why the space shuttle?

Flashback to high school. I'm walking into Madame Quiro's French class when I learn that the Challenger has exploded. I sit down devastated by the news. *Un. Deux. Trois.* I can't concentrate. Is that the moment I started to write this play?

Scratch that.

The journey begins earlier than that. Fifth grade. My class has gathered around the TV to watch the space shuttle Columbia on its maiden voyage. I sit amazed at what America is, and what it can do. I have only arrived a year earlier from Cuba and I am wowed by American ingenuity. It's a plane. No. It's a rocket. It's going up into space and coming back down, landing the same way my Piedmont Airlines flight from Grand Rapids, Michigan, to Union City, New Jersey, landed just a month earlier. I remember how on that flight my heart was beating wildly with anticipation because I had never been up in

the clouds.

Maybe that's when I started to write the play. Maybe at that moment I fell in love with the sensation of seeing the world from a completely different point of view—a point of view new to the 20th century.

But, of course, the journey to the stage doesn't really begin there either.

It begins earlier than that.

I'm a six-year-old boy in Cuba obsessed with the Soviet Union. I want to visit Moscow (perhaps my love of Chekhov begins there, but that's a different story). In Cuba I am in awe of a man named Yuri Gagarin. He looks nothing like my relatives but he's...well, he's cool. He beat the Americans to space and he has a Paul Newman smile.

Why stop there though? Why not go back even further to the moment I held a plastic rocket in my hand, tossed it up in the air, high up in the air, and learned that gravity is a powerful and dangerous force.

As you can clearly see, a play begins in one's childhood, it blossoms in one's youth, and explodes onto the page when one becomes an adult. Those feelings we had no words for when we were kids are still part of us when, as adults, intelligence rears its ugly head and tries to muscle instinct out of the way. It's that dance between instinct and intelligence that brings us to the second part of this essay.

APRIL 2008

I NEED A TITLE—CAN SOMEONE FIND ME A TITLE?!!!

I was finishing a first draft of the play when Doug asked me if I was interested in workshopping it at Perry Mansfield courtesy of The Denver Center. Again, I immediately said yes. I was almost done with the play but I had no title, so once again I returned to my childhood.

Flashback:

I'm living in Union City and mixing my first container of Tang (first of many) thinking this is that special stuff astronauts drink when they're up in space. Perhaps part of the title comes from that time. Probably.

But Tang was not enough. It only covered one side of the play. I knew I had to find an equally potent symbol for the Soviet Union. Laika? Poor little Laika. The dog that went up in space with no chance of returning alive. Laika was my potent symbol for the Soviet Union. *Tang Met Laika?* *WHEN TANG MET LAIKA?!* GOT IT!!!

WHEN TANG MET LAIKA - SUMMER 2008

Armed with 120 pages and a title, I headed west on US 40.

Perry Mansfield is a magical place, a performing arts center in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where artists go every summer to develop new work. It was the best thing that could happen to the play. Enter director Terry Nolen. I didn't know Terry before we met the first day of rehearsals, but we approached the play the same way. What is this unwieldy thing before us and how can we make it work?

With Doug asking the right questions and Terry guiding us along we were able to discover the tone of the piece—is it a comedy? Is it a drama? Is this section here vaudeville? With no time to spare, we discovered a way of working that made sense for everyone. Every morning I would work on a scene, send it

along to the stage manager, and the actors would arrive to new pages. That night I would write down several questions I was interested in pursuing the next morning, and I would hope that my subconscious would kick in while I was sleeping.

The time at Perry Mansfield was idyllic. Away from all those things that can pull us away from our work, I had time to dream. We managed to do a great deal of work without ever destroying the mystery of the play.

MYSTERY

A recent email from Terry: "Read an article in *Newsweek* about the future of the space program. The following jumped out: 'A nurse who treated the early astronauts after their missions said it was 'as if they had fallen in love with a mystery up there.'"

When Tang Met Laika is a mystery.

Why do brave men and women take such huge risks with their lives? What kind of emotional toll does space exploration take on someone who has decided to give his or her life to it? How does one return to "ordinary" life after experiencing extraordinary things?

The play doesn't offer up answers as much as it reminds us that heroes have lives. When the spotlight is turned off, they have to resume living their lives, which means driving to the grocery store, picking up the kids after school and, in the long hours of the night, wondering if they still have something in common with those who waved goodbye to them when they left and were there to welcome them back with open arms when they returned.

Giacometti once said that art is never finished, it's only abandoned. I don't think theatre works quite the same way. I've shared this long road with you, the reader, because I believe a play ends with you. A play is never abandoned, it's simply handed over to the audience. ■

Rogelio Martinez is a winner of the Princess Grace Award. Other plays include *Will In Space*, about Pluto being kicked out of one child's universe, and *Fizz*, a wild riff on New Coke. He teaches playwriting at Goddard College and Primary Stages. Unlike the Soviets, he would never consider sending his dog, Kaya, on a rocket into space.

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Here come the Cats!



In case you were wondering where that loud, collective *MEEE-OOOO-OWWWW* you just heard came from, it came from the direction of The Buell Theatre, where the *Cats* cast (say that three times, fast) has been flexing and arching for another run in Denver. One of the most popular shows in the history of the theatre, Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, based on T.S. Eliot's delectable *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, tells the musical story of the Jellicle cats who, as darlings of the dumpsters and allies of the alleys, know a kitty by its stripes and the grave implications of the number nine.

Besides which, they can caterwaul, sing and dance.

...if you look over Lloyd Webber's string of shows, you will find that, with the notable exception of *The Phantom of the Opera*, it is precisely the shows that have child appeal ... that also have the widest audience appeal.

None of this would have come as less than a very major surprise to Thomas Stearns ("T.S.") Eliot—were he still alive. Most of his work ("The Waste Land," "The Love Song J. Arthur Prufrock," etc.) was written in a much more serious vein than this whimsical collection of verse about our feline friends, how they think, how they act and how they practice to deceive...

Considering its age—*Old Possum's Book* was first published in 1939—it's a testament to its timeless sense of humor that the book has survived all these years outside the nursery or the hallowed halls of the kindergarten. The original publication of Eliot's book

had cover illustrations by Eliot himself, but in 1940 was illustrated more fully by author/cartoonist Nicolas Bentley, the godson of another famous British author, G. K. Chesterton (to whom Bentley sold his first drawing). A later edition published in 1982 featured illustrations by that incomparable master of the macabre, Edward Gorey, which shows, if nothing else, how vivid our interest in this book remains.

Not only has *Old Possum's Book* survived, but it may well prove deathless in its most recent, bouncing, muscular musical form. (Who said cats have nine lives? And why just nine?)

Okay, so *Cats* has been criticized for its almost total absence of plot. That has not stopped the show from having tremendous success with each new generation. Besides, if you look over Lloyd Webber's string of shows, you will find that, with the notable exception of *The Phantom of the Opera*, it is precisely the shows that have child appeal (*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Starlight Express* and *Cats*) that also have the widest audience appeal. A good thing, all in all, as children grow up, have children of their own and the audiences for these shows replenish themselves with regularity.

Cats does have a slender thread of events that strings its athletic musical numbers together, and that was achieved (as much of Lloyd Webber's *oeuvre* often is) by skillfully plundering other Eliot poems and works.

The Jellicles have come together at a junkyard for their annual Jellicle Ball, when they will make the annual Jellicle Choice and announce which cat will be singled out to be reborn that year. Each cat auditions with a different song and/or dance number for the honor of being resurrected.

Minor complications involve the abduction of the Jellicle patriarch, Old Deuteronomy, before a cat is chosen. The chosen feline eventually turns out to be Grizabella,

famously known—and envied—among cat populations as "the Glamour Cat" (whose now-faded charms do not prevent her from singing the show's best-known song, "Memory").

Grizabella is a testament to Lloyd Webber's cut-and-paste approach to putting a show together. Her character is nowhere to be found in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. She's pure invention, down to her name which is probably derived from the word "grizzle," meaning "grey" or "disheveled," and "bella," which means "beauty."

The lyrics of the show's signature song, "Memory," are based on two Eliot poems—"Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and "Preludes"—neither of which is part of *Old Possum's Book* either. But the song itself is a hit, a moving and even haunting, composition.

It is worth noting that *Cats* was never beloved of critics who by and large find it less than the sum of its promise. But its popularity remains unchallenged thanks to its overwhelming family appeal—an appeal that is worldwide, since the show by now has been translated into more than 20 languages and has been performed, well, pretty much everywhere. ■

Suzanne Blandon, Sylvie Drake and Teri Downard contributed to this article.

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