

LES WATERS

Explorer with an Ear

For the director, every play—new or not—is terra incognita

BY CHLOE VELTMAN



Les Waters with Rita Moreno at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

In March 2005, Tony Taccone, artistic director of California's Berkeley Repertory Theatre, asked Les Waters if he'd be interested in staging *The Glass Menagerie* for the company's upcoming season. It wasn't meant to be a difficult question.

Long before his arrival as associate artistic director at Berkeley Rep in 2003, the British-born Waters had proved himself adept at staging the classics, not to mention world premieres by the likes of Caryl Churchill, Wallace Shawn and Charles L. Mee. He'd mounted productions of everything from *Romeo and Juliet* at New York's Public Theater to *The House of Bernarda Alba* at Minneapolis's Guthrie Theatre. He'd even done Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* in 2003 as his "audition piece" for the associate job at Berkeley Rep.

But Taccone's proposition was met by an unexpected pause from his second in command. "I don't know," Waters eventually responded. "I'll have to read it first."

That Waters could have worked for so long on the American stage and not be familiar with *Menagerie*—he'd neither read the play nor seen it produced when Taccone called—at first startled everyone at Berkeley Rep. Then it

became a cause for excitement. "Les had no preconception of the piece—to him it was like a brand-new play," says Taccone. When it opened in April '06, Waters's take on Williams's semi-autobiographical drama about the fractured relationship between a pushy mother, her fragile daughter and maladjusted son in 1930s St. Louis sent the mothballs flying.

For one thing, it was bleedin'ly funny. Larger than life in gaudy frocks that had—like the spindly matron inside them—seen better days, Rita Moreno's Amanda Wingfield bounded about the threadbare set smothering and goading her children without once upstaging them. For another, Waters's production took the drama beyond the usual, potentially dull autobiographical revelations about the playwright. Both claustrophobic and sparkingly translucent, Waters's *Menagerie* was as delicate as a tiny glass animal and as potent as the myth of the upstanding South. Audiences loved it, and the production received two extensions.

All plays are, in a sense, new plays to Waters, regardless of when they were written or whether he's read or seen them on stage. The director embraces dramatic texts like an explorer



KEN FRIEDMAN

Charles L. Mee's *Fêtes de la Nuit*, directed by Waters in 2005 at Berkeley Rep.

surveys terra incognita and approaches each one in the same way: by listening to it very, very closely. Waters's extraordinary ear is the one thing that his collaborators comment on time and time again. It's the quality that enables him to tackle both the architectural rhythms of classical plays such as *Woyzeck* and *School for Scandal* and the evasive shades of complex new works like Adele Edling Shank's adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice*.

"His real power as a director is as a listener," says actor Erik Lochtefeld, who appeared in Waters's *Menagerie* and *The Pillowman* at Berkeley Rep. "Les is very attentive to the play as it is written," says Ruhl. "He keeps distilling until he approaches the essence of what is intended textually." Meanwhile, Mee compares Waters to a friend of his who always reads a poem 10 times before making his mind up about it. "Les has an openness to listen to something for a long time before passing judgment on it. He lets ideas emerge from a text rather than imposing some hasty preconception on it."

What this means in rehearsal terms is a lot of table work. Waters's desire to absorb the words of a play fully before attempting to block it and his mistrust of approaching a project with a pre-determined vision impresses playwrights in particular. Before Jordan Harrison worked with Waters on *Finn in the Underworld* at Berkeley Rep in 2005, the dramatist had spent time with directors from what he terms the "let's get this thing on its feet school," or the "bada bing bada boom school." He wasn't prepared for Waters's method of creating theatre as

an Englishman might a cup of strong, black tea—through slow steeping. "I was really floored that this director who had worked with Caryl Churchill and Chuck Mee was diving that deeply into my play," says Harrison. "He really seemed to be at the beginning of a long search."

The long search can be an ordeal for some of Waters's collaborators, though. Especially actors. "We were there for a week in a four-week rehearsal period just reading the play over and over again," recalls Moreno of the *Menagerie* process. "I was dying to get up on my feet, but Les just sat there listening and listening. He wouldn't look at the actors' faces, he was so busy listening."

THE ONLY CHILD OF A STEELWORKER father and homemaker mother, Waters was born in 1952 in the northern English seaside town of Cleethorpes. When he was two years old, his family moved to Scunthorpe, which, with the possible exception of Cleethorpes, is the most frequently lambasted place in the whole of the British Isles. (When in 1981 Scunthorpe residents voiced anger at the inclusion of the town's name in comedian Spike Milligan's book *Indefinite Articles and Scunthorpe*, Milligan replied, "We should like the people of Scunthorpe to know that the references to Scunthorpe are nothing personal. It is a joke, as is Scunthorpe.") Waters calls his hometown "Scunny," articulating the word like it's something gray and sticky he found

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Anna Kapte and Andy Philip in *The White Devil*, 2003.

under his shoe. He hasn't been back to Scunny in years. The last time he was in England was 2003, the year his father died.

In some ways, Waters's appearance and manner reveal little of his roots. His accent is English, but not especially northern. He dresses with care: the expensive-looking navy jeans say "casual." The dark, rectangular-framed glasses say "intellectual." The red-and-pink-striped, cowboy-style, button-down shirt with the embroidered floral motif says "I dare." Yet Waters's physique and conduct still suggest something of his native Lincolnshire. It's there in the unruly mop of graying hair that froths above his temples like waves scuttering across the North Sea, as well as in his wiry build, aquiline nose and North Wind-chapped complexion. He could be a character in an Alan Sillitoe novel. He even behaved like a Sillitoe-esque misfit as a teenager, distressing his mother by hitchhiking down to London on his own on the weekends to see shows like Ted Hughes's adaptation of Seneca's *Oedipus*, directed by Peter Brook. He'd sleep in the forecourt at Euston station ("the floor was heated there") before hitching back up north for a week of school.



From left, Michael Ray Wisely, Susan Wilder and Michelle Morain in *Shaw's Heartbreak House*, directed by Waters at Berkeley Rep this past fall.

Waters sometimes has trouble wrapping his head around his journey from his grammar school days in Scunthorpe to directing plays on many of the U.K. and the U.S.'s most prestigious stages. Waters directed the world premieres of Wallace Shawn's *Marie and Bruce* at London's Royal Court Theatre in

1979, and, for Joint Stock Theatre Company in 1984, Churchill's *Fen*, which he mounted on both sides of the Atlantic, at the Public in New York and the Almeida and Royal Court in London. Joseph Papp subsequently invited him to stage Keith Reddin's *Rum and Coke* at the Public.

Having found himself a U.S. agent, Waters spent some years living and working in England, while moonlighting in the U.S., undertaking directing gigs for American impresarios such as Robert Falls and Des McAnuff. The last production he staged in London before accepting a position as head of the graduate directing program at the University of California–San Diego and moving to the West Coast with his wife, theatre designer Annie Smart, in 1995, was Churchill's *The Skriker* at the National Theatre in 1994. That production, with its malevolent sense of humor and twisted worldview, left a mark on many people, including American Repertory Theatre's acting artistic director Gideon Lester. "I still remember Les's production of *The Skriker* as if it were yesterday," says Lester. "It was one of the strangest, funniest, scariest moments I've ever had in the theatre."

"Before he left, Waters looked like he was going to be picked for one of the big directing jobs in England," says *New Yorker* senior theatre critic John Lahr, who followed Waters's trajectory on the London stage through the 1980s and early '90s. It's taken some years, but Waters's career now seems poised for a similar leap in this country. Since winning an Obie for his world premiere production of Mee's *Big Love*, which he first

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KEVIN BERNIE

Monique Fowler, left, and the cast of Adele Edling Shank's adaptation of *To the Lighthouse*, directed by Waters at Berkeley Rep in 2006.

developed with his students at UCSD in 1999, Waters has earned a formidable reputation for his work on contemporary drama. *Time Out New York* named his Off-Broadway staging of Anne Washburn's *Apparition* as one of the best plays of 2005, and his *Eurymache* appeared on Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times*'s

list of top 2006 plays. "Ruhl has found her director in Les," Lahr says. "She should sign him to a contract." In the coming months, Waters will stage the American premiere of Will Eno's *Tragedy: a tragedy* in March and a workshop of Ruhl's new play about the use of vibrators as a treatment for female hysteria

in the 19th century, tentatively entitled *The Vibrator Play*, at Berkeley Rep. Elsewhere, he will oversee the premiere of *Cardenio*, Mee and Stephen Greenblatt's romantic comedy about Shakespeare's lost play, at A.R.T. in May. His production of Harrison's pop music-inspired *Doris to Darlene, A Cautionary Valentine* is currently playing at Playwrights Horizons through Dec. 23.

WATERS'S GROWING SUCCESS STEMS

from several factors beyond his strength as a listener. One is his subtle yet powerful relationship with actors and playwrights. Dramatist Paula Vogel (who teamed up with the director for her play *Hot 'n' Throbbing*) has dubbed Waters "the Zen director" because of the way he gets the nuances he wants from actors and playwrights, seemingly without trying. Ruhl is transfixed by the director's way with actors. "He tends to give actors a great deal of freedom and gives very few notes," Ruhl says. "Call it Svengali or some strange kind of mind meld, but I swear that the actors become better simply by being watched quietly by Les." Moreno corroborates Ruhl's observations: "I never heard Les say 'don't do

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it that way' or 'do it this way' in rehearsal. As I got to know him and understand what he was after, I began editing myself in a way that I thought would be pleasing to him." Harrison's collaborations with Waters follow a similar vein. "If a director or dramaturg comes to me like a trial lawyer with a list of very logical reasons to make a change in the script, I'll be inclined to mount an equally logical defense of the problem area. Les knows that if he simply directs my eye towards something by saying, 'What do you think about X?'—I'll be exacting on my own."

Waters, for his part, takes a less benign view of his process. "Really, I'm manipulative. I'll let people think they're making choices, but what they don't realize is that I've quietly closed doors around them."

Another aspect of Waters's formidable talent is his ability to preserve the complexities of a play while inviting the audience in through the seamless marriage of visual and textual metaphors. In *Eurydice*, for instance, Ruhl's blurring of certainty and enigma was memorably visualized in a vast shower-room set, where blue-green wall-tiles inscribed with letters morphed over time to become

Waters creates theatre as an Englishman might a cup of strong, black tea—through slow steeping.



Emily Donahoe in Waters's production of *The Glass Menagerie* at Berkeley Rep in 2006.

messages from the dead in Hades to the living. Meanwhile, in the mesmerizing dinner party scene in *To the Lighthouse*, the characters articulated their internal thoughts out loud, while miming their external conversations with each other. This conceit simply and sublimely dramatized Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique, while allowing the characters and their conflicts space to dance, like the flickering candle flames endlessly reflected in the mirrors on the stage walls.

Waters's personal connection with his material further strengthens his directorial vision. "I have to stick myself to the play in some sense," the director says. "I have to find something that I'm obsessed with in it." Sometimes patterns in his work emerge subliminally from the director's own life, often recognized only in retrospect. Seeing *Eurydice* as "a conversation with one's father," *The Glass Menagerie* as "a conversation with one's mother" and *To the Lighthouse*

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as “a conversation with one’s family,” Waters acknowledges the resonance of these works with where he was in his own life at the time he created them, as the father of three growing children and a son adjusting to the loss of his parents. Sometimes he feels such a strong personal link to a project that it informs the creative process explicitly. Churchill’s *Fen*, for instance, contains references and direct quotes from Waters’s mother and her family. “In no sense could I say that the play was based on my mother, but she did come from a long line of deferential workers, and the theme of thwarted desires and ambitions resonated with her in a deep way,” Waters says. Unsurprisingly, Waters’s mother felt betrayed by the play when she saw it at the Court.

During his eight years at UCSD, Waters would sometimes walk across campus to the cliffs in the sunshine, look out across the Pacific Ocean and say to himself, “I’m a working-class kid from Lincolnshire who became a theatre professor at a southern Californian university. This is bizarre.” It’s been more than 12 years since Waters left England, but he still feels ambivalent about his homeland. London, he thinks, “beats the shit out of people,” and he wouldn’t want to live there again permanently.

But there are things—and people—he misses. The founder of Joint Stock Theatre Company and artistic director of the Royal Court from 1979 to 1993, Max Stafford-Clark, for one, hasn’t forgotten Waters, even though the relationship between the director and his former protégé has seen its ups and downs since Stafford-Clark first singled out the young Manchester University graduate to be his assistant from a pool of mostly wealthy Oxford- and Cambridge-educated directorial hopefuls. “My relationship with Les was close—he was very promising,” Stafford-Clark reminisces. When Stafford-Clark was in New York this past fall directing J.T. Rogers’s *The Overwhelming* at Roundabout Theatre Company, Waters popped in to say hello. It was the first time the two men had seen each other in over a decade. The reunion was brief but friendly. Reached over the phone, Stafford-Clark sounded pleased about Waters’s success in the U.S.: “I backed the right horse all those years ago. I’m glad he turned out to be a winner.” ☒

Chloe Veltman is a San Francisco-based arts writer and chief theatre critic for *SF Weekly*.

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