BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival

INTERVIEW: LET'S GET PHYSICAL

Festival Dramaturg Kee-Yoon Nahm (KN) speaks with director Doug Finlayson (DF) about comic style and *One Man, Two Guvnors* in the Illinois Shakespeare Festival's 2020 season. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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WRITTEN BY:
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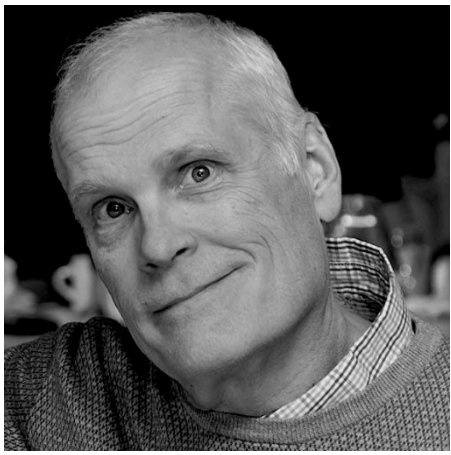
KN: First of all, I know you have directed many productions at ISF over the years. Would you talk about that history?

DF: My first production at ISF was *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 1989. I was in Chicago from 1981 to 1993, and Cal Pritner, the founding Artistic Director, asked if I would direct. I was nervous because I had never directed Shakespeare before, but I could not have had a friendlier play than *Merry Wives*. I also lucked out because I had a great cast. This was on the old tennis court at Ewing Manor, before they built the new theatre. A few years later, I spoke to John Sipes, the next Artistic Director, about bringing American Sign Language and Shakespeare together. John proposed *Pericles*. I had the idea and he had the play. So in 1993, we did the play with Peter Cook as Pericles, who was

a deaf actor from Chicago. By the way, that was my first encounter with John Stark, who was my set designer. I also directed *Hamlet* in 1997 and *Romeo and Juliet* in 2011. *Romeo and Juliet* was my first time in the new theatre. I am excited to come back and work there again. That is a long time to be connected with a theatre. I do not have anything else that goes back that far, which is one of the reasons that ISF feels like one of my artistic homes.

KN: I want to move on to *One Man, Two Guvnors.* Could you give me a summary of this comedy for readers who may not be familiar with it?



Doug Finlayson (director)

DF: *One Man, Two Guvnors* is an updated version of Carlo Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters*, which has tremendous amounts of *commedia dell'arte* comedy in it. This style of comedy involves slapstick, acrobatics, physical action, and, in many ways, the pursuit of a single objective. In *The Servant of Two Masters*, the main character's objective is simply food. In *One Man, Two Guvnors*, Francis says at the end of Act 1, "Okay, I have got food. What do we do now?" The implication is that he is going to pursue sexual interests in the second act. The style is ridiculous and simple. I feel that you cannot scratch too deeply into the material because that is not what it is about. The plot is not deep. It is the way in which the plot is pursued that makes it funny.

KN: The adaptation chooses an interesting setting: Brighton in 1963. Richard Bean, the adapter, includes many references to the period, such as the Beatles before they became famous. *One Man, Two Guvnors* does seem to want to explore the historical setting. But at the same time, it closely follows the structure and characters of *The Servant of Two Masters*. For example, the character descriptions in the published script include in parentheses the *commedia* mask that each character is based on. So the play mixes classical comedy with a modern setting. How will you address that as the director?

DF: Many audience members will find the "footnotes" to *commedia* hidden in the play interesting. But I think you can

still enjoy the performance without any knowledge of Italian *commedia dell'arte* or *The Servant of Two Masters*. Also, I imagine there are things in the play that are specifically British. I have started a glossary to understand the British expressions. I thought it would be a couple of pages, but it is now about twenty pages long. An interesting example is the word "geezer." To me, a geezer is an old guy, but in British English, a geezer is an eccentric fuddy-duddy. So you can call a young person a geezer. I just take it for granted that I know what a geezer is when it comes up in the play, but that may not be the case. There is a lot of that. Still, you can have crazy good fun without that knowledge—people loved the play on Broadway!

KN: Speaking of British culture, the play calls specifically for a "skiffle band," which was a popular genre in England at the time that is comparable to jug bands and washboard bands in the United States. Could you talk about your ideas for music in the production?

DF: The text does not really say what the skiffle band is doing during the performance, besides play a song at the end. But if you watch clips of the National Theatre production, you see that music was very integrated in the premiere. The cast sings and plays instruments. In our production, we have decided that the skiffle band will always be onstage in the "above." I also hope that we find some ways for the cast to join in the music. I think the music is very important for establishing the time period as well, since skiffle bands influenced 1960s pop music, including the Beatles.

KN: The idea of integrating the band into the action also reminds me of vaudeville and other forms of variety entertainment. People went to a vaudeville show expecting to be entertained through a variety of means, rather than *just* theatre, or *just* music, or *just* stand-up comedy. I know that you had previously mentioned British music hall as a reference for this play's style of comedy, which is similar to vaudeville. You also said that *One Man, Two Guvnors* relies heavily on physical comedy. If we imagined the physical abuse in the play happing in real life, it could be

uncomfortable and painful to watch. As a director of comedy, how do you create that sense of safety? How do you reassure the audience that it is okay to treat the violence as physical humor rather than worry about the real-world implications?

DF: I think the Brits are far less concerned about such things. Also, the amount of violence we see in cartoons, television, and video games today surpasses anything that happens to the characters in this play. But the question remains: can we laugh at it? I was watching some Buster Keaton recently and some terrible things happen to him. But he just pops right back up. Now, I personally love that kind of humor.

KN: Yes, I do too. And I think there is value in it. I am actually teaching a course on modern comedy right now and we have been reading a lot of comic theory. Right now, I am interested in the idea that the ability to laugh at something uncomfortable can grant you a sense of relief. We all have a fear of being harmed or of dying. But when you translate that into physical comedy or gallows humor, you can conquer that fear for just a moment by laughing at it. The uncomfortable thought becomes a little more manageable. That is one way that I think about slapstick comedy that depicts physical violence or pain.

DF: I have had experiences where I am directing something that is not supposed to be comedy and the audience laughs. The cast then wonders, "Why are they laughing?" In those situations, I say that it is for the same reason that audiences laugh at funny things: there is a release of something. That is our human response to what is happening. However, I do think that in any play—*One Man, Two Guvnors* in particular—we have to establish the play's physical vocabulary fairly early so that an audience becomes familiar with it. The audience has to understand that these are the rules of this world—a world that is broad and ridiculous in our case. Speaking of physicality and movement, one of the things that came up in our design meetings is the architectural characteristics of the Ewing Theatre. If a

character is entering from one of the vaums (the aisles in the audience), it is quite the hike.

KN: Yes, they have to enter quite quickly to cover that distance. I think that can give the performers the right kind of momentum for this comedy.

DF: I love the fact that I can use vaums and not have all the entrances be from the right and left of the stage. When I saw *As You Like It* at ISF last summer, I enjoyed the interactivity of the space itself, with a lot of movement on the stairs and down the vaums. There is a feeling that the performance permeates out into the audience.

KN: To me, it feels different when an actor addresses the audience directly in a theatre where you have audiences on three sides or in the round, compared to a proscenium stage. In either case, you are still breaking *a* fourth wall. But when you have to turn around and address people in all directions, it feels like everyone is pulled into a shared space, as opposed to the actor simply walking across an imaginary line.

DF: Right, exactly. It does raise some serious challenges when the play you are trying to do has several scenes in which the comedy involves two doors, with characters blocking entrances and pushing people back in. But I think Dan Robinson, the scenic designer, has a good solution.

KN: I am sure. I think that this play will be fun to experience in an open-air theatre. I look forward to seeing how your ideas develop.