PENN STATE ALTOONA’S DIVISION OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES PRESENTS

ROBIN REESE, DIRECTOR  LEILA MCCRUMB, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Two Rooms

By Lee Blessing

PERFORMING VIA ZOOM
April 29 – May 1 • 7:00 p.m.
and
May 2 at 3:00 p.m.

ORIGINALY COMMISSIONED AND PRODUCED BY
LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE
DES MCANUFF, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
ALAN LEVEY, MANAGING DIRECTOR

PennState Altoona

TWO ROOMS is presented by special arrangement with Dramatists Play Service, Inc., New York.
Two Rooms
By Lee Blessing

Cast List

MICHAEL WELLS ................................................. Aaron James
LAINE WELLS .................................................. Makenzie Arone
WALKER HARRIS .............................................. Noah Webb
ELLEN VAN OSS .............................................. Sydney Frank

Originally Commissioned and Produced by
LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE
Des McAnuff, Artistic Director
Alan Levey, Managing Director

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$250,000.00 fine.
Dramaturg's Note

At the beginning of Act 2, the playwright suggests that images of “young Shi’ite terrorist(s)” be shown during a speech that Ellen is giving. These images are repeated to provide visual proof to Americans that terrorists are an evident threat, as well as a way to justify government action (and, in some cases, inaction). However, we have made the decision not to include them in our production.

The last time Penn State Altoona presented this play, in 2008 (I actually played Ellen), we projected the images. However, in this production, as the conversation around representation in media continues to evolve, a conscious decision has been made to exclude them. We didn’t arrive at this decision lightly; we felt like we needed to really look at what the original purpose of the images was, and what they offer our world today.

For some historical context--this piece was written in 1987, in the middle of the Lebanese Civil War and the “Lebanese Hostage Crisis.” Even after the hostages were released, the American public’s fascination with government motivations, media intentions, and the effects of waiting and loss on family members left behind remained. That is partially what makes this piece so effective today--even without the images of terrorists.

Each of the four characters (the U.S. government, the media, a hostage, and his wife) can be viewed as individuals within the context of Michael’s story as well as representative of something larger than themselves. Noticeably absent, however, is representation from the Middle East. If we inserted the pictures (as indicated by a non-Arab author), that would provide Middle East inclusion, but the representation is one-sided and would reinforce the criminalization the media and popular culture has perpetuated so well. This criminalization was documented by Dr. Jack Shaheen, whose work focused on racism and orientalism in popular culture. He analyzed 1,000 films between the years 1896 and 2000, and found only 12 positive portrayals of Arab and/or Muslim characters. This context indicates that Arabs have been negatively portrayed for more than a century before 9/11. I began to notice the effects of this when I went to Beirut in 2011. I was struck by how many Americans thought that Lebanon is one big desert where camel is the primary mode of transportation instead of a place that richly deserves its nickname, “The Paris of the Middle East.” Without realizing it, many Americans could not imagine daily life in Beirut because they had never seen it portrayed--they had only seen images of empty deserts, veiled women, and men with guns. The research I conduct focuses on the Arab world, and the internalized stereotypes that I notice from well-intentioned, but media-saturated people, makes me confident that the decision to leave out terrorist imagery is the most ethical.

In the play, Walker posits that the United States hasn’t fought a war on its own soil in over a century. The wars in which the U.S. engages are in distant locales and knowable only through the images that the government and the media curate and dispense. The media tends to show images of men wielding guns in order to make their audiences feel an “us vs. them” mentality. It’s easier to support wars when the false idea is circulated that it’s all justified and we have to get “them” before they get “us.” Instead of thinking about the circumstances behind the image (including who took it, why, and what politics and policies have led to this point), the image becomes a way to be able to shoot the “enemy” without having to look at the real issues at hand.

In the end, we realized that we’ve all already seen unnecessarily violent, potentially damaging graphics of the Middle East; we don’t need to present any more. Lainie, Ellen, Walker, and Michael are all complex, nuanced characters. Their discussions around U.S. politics and foreign policy are engaging, thought-provoking, and important, and they remain so, even in the absence of these images. Blessing has stated: “Even choosing to ignore politics completely is, at base, an intensely political decision.” We appreciate you reading about our own political decision and hope that you enjoy this intense and beautifully thought-provoking production of Two Rooms.

- Guest Dramaturg, Marina J. Bergenstock
**Cast Bios**

**Makenzie Arone** (Laine Wells) is from Homer City, Pennsylvania. She is a freshman at Penn State Altoona, and this is her first show on the campus. Makenzie was involved in theatre throughout high school playing roles such as the Cat in the Hat in *Seussical* and The Fairy Godmother in *Cinderella*. She is thrilled to be a part of this production and wishes the best of luck to the rest of the cast and the crew.

**Sydney Frank** (Ellen Van Oss) is a sophomore at Penn State Altoona and currently majoring in early childhood education with a minor in special education. She has enjoyed performing in plays since she was 12, including Altoona Community Theatre's (ACT) production of *Romeo & Juliet* in 2018. Sydney feels great to be back in the theatre after over a year, even if it is different due to COVID-19. She would like to thank her family, friends, and boyfriend Matthew for all of the love and support they have given her. Sydney would also like to thank Robin Reese for casting her in her first major role in this unique opportunity.

**Aaron James** (Michael Wells) is thrilled to be back on stage as Michael after a long year without theatre. He is a 2018 graduate of Penn State Altoona where he studied theatre as part of his degree in letters, arts, and sciences. He was previously seen on stage with Altoona Community Theatre (ACT) as Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and at Things Unseen Theatre company as Billy/Jack in *A Feminine Ending*. He wants to thank Robin Reese for giving him the opportunity to join the cast of *Two Rooms*. He also wants to thank his family and friends for their constant support.

**Noah Webb** (Walker Harris) is a freshman majoring in engineering at Penn State Altoona. This is his first production on campus. He graduated from Moshannon Valley High School in Houtzdale, Pennsylvania. Some of Noah’s favorite roles and productions that he was cast in are as Curly in *Oklahoma!*!, Moonface Martin in *Anything Goes*, and Marcellus Washburn in *The Music Man*. Noah is thrilled to be doing his first ever play, and credits his success to his fellow cast, Robin Reese, and Leila McCrumb.
Production Team Bios

Marina J. Bergenstock (guest dramaturg) is a director, dramaturg, and educator. She is pursuing her Ph.D. in theatre and performance studies at Stanford. She received her M.F.A. in directing at the University of Iowa and is a proud Penn State alumna. Marina’s research interests include hyphenated/diasporic identities and the performance of them in the Arab world and in the United States and theatre as a catalyst for political, structural, and social reform. Her work has been published in Mid-America Theatre Conference’s *Theatre/Practice, Eumenica*, and in *Arab Stages*.

John Conner (technical director) While still recovering from the shock of relocating from Austin, Texas, he is enjoying himself here in Altoona. John brings knowledge of a variety of types of theatre and performance art. In addition to degrees from Stephen F. Austin State University and Texas Tech, John has experience in regional, touring, and summer stock theatre. He also has experience from working cruise ships, concerts, and industrial shows. John is a proud member of International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Local 205.

Cassie Ross Green (video editor) is an interdisciplinary filmmaker with years of Hollywood experience producing, writing, and editing numerous projects from idea conception to distribution and as coordinator in worldwide promotions for Miramax & Dimension Films (The Weinstein Company). Returning to her Pennsylvania roots, she lectures screenwriting and film production at University Park. She is also the managing director for the Centre Film Festival.

Leila McCrumb (assistant director) graduated from Penn State Altoona in 2017 with a bachelor's degree in integrative arts with a focus in theatre and voice. Then she graduated from Rose Bruford College of London in 2018 with a master's degree in acting. While there she performed in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Favorite credits include Flora in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*, Li'l Bit in *How I Learned to Drive*, and Amanda in *A Feminine Ending*. Usually in front of the audience, she would like to thank Robin Reese for the opportunity to jump back stage and assistant direct.

Robin Reese (director) associate professor of theatre arts at Penn State Altoona, is a professional actor, director, and playwright who has performed in a variety of theatre from cabaret, musicals, dramas, and comedies from Shakespeare to post-modern. She holds her M.F.A. from the Actors Studio Drama School where she was the teaching fellow and received voice and acting scholarships. She is a recipient of new theatre and performance grants from the DIA Center for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and the Bread and Roses Community Fund. She served as a Panelist for the PA Council on the Arts, Inter-Disciplinary. Robin is a recipient of Merit Awards for Distinction in
Production Team Bios

Directing from The Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival for her Penn State Altoona productions: The Tempest, Medea, and Big Love, which was also selected to be fully presented at the Region II Festival in 2009. New York City directing credits include: Othello, Troilus and Cressida, Rosemary with Ginger; and the Actors Studio premiere workshop reading of her own play, The Inquisition, with Tony Award winning actress Carlyn Glynn. Robin directed Robert Auletta’s adaptation of The Persians for New York City’s Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute/New York University and directed her own play Mamma Was an Andalusian Jet Skier at The Players Club in New York City. Robin is also a successful playwright and screenwriter. She was named a semi-finalist for the prestigious O’Neill Playwright’s Conference and was selected as one of five national playwrights to compete in The Cardboard Box Collaborative’s SPEED THE MUSE competition where her new play, Fungible, was performed at The Philadelphia Fringe Festival. Robin’s one-act play, The Inquisition, was produced at The Looking Glass Theatre in New York City.

Currently, Robin is pursuing her M.A. in leadership in diversity & inclusion at The University of Kansas. “I am so grateful to be working with such a stellar cast and crew. Thank you for your passion, dedication, and hard work. You all rock!”

Laurencio Carlos Ruiz (costume designer, set designer, props specialist, scenic artist) is resident scenic designer at Penn State Altoona and instructor in theatre and integrative arts. He holds an M.F.A. in scenic design from Penn State University, and a B.A. in graphic design from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana of Mexico, where he also studied industrial design and visual arts. His experience as a multi-disciplinary designer and artist includes sets, costumes, puppets, masks, and props for cabaret, theatre, and television. His photography, installations, and performance art work have been exhibited in the United States, Mexico, Japan, Germany, and the Czech Republic. Since his involvement with puppetry, he has been performing at academic conferences, museums, theatres and festivals, and offering multiple puppet-making and puppet-manipulation workshops at universities for art and theatre students.

A. David Villani (video and audio recorder) is recognized by many as one of the top audio professionals in the region. He has been recording and engineering music for almost three decades and has mixed and edited musical content alongside Grammy Award winners Paul Winter, Mike Reid, and David Gates (Bread). He has composed and scored numerous orchestral commissions, regional jingles, commercial music titles, and has arranged music for orchestras and various other music ensembles. His national television credits include work for the Miss America Pageant and Honda America. A recent project included editing and engineering voice tracks with actor TJ Miller for the popular videogame Call of Duty by Activision. He has studied electronic music with
Robert Moog, the legendary pioneer and inventor of the Moog Synthesizer. As a synthesist, he programmed two MIDI books for Technics Corporation published by Hal Leonard Publishing. He has designed sound for numerous local theatre productions as well as performed in pit orchestras as a keyboardist for theatrical productions. In addition to teaching audio production, music theory, the history of jazz, and the history of the Beatles, he maintains and manages Data Music Services, a state-of-art commercial audio/video editing facility that is based in Altoona. He was one of the early adopters of non-linear digital technologies, and is recognized for his expertise in Pro Tools software. He holds a Bachelors of Music degree in jazz arranging/composition from Temple University, a Master of Arts degree in music theory/composition from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and a D.M.A. (Doctorate of Music Arts) degree in music education from Boston University. He has also studied acoustics at North Carolina University/Ashville, and North Texas State University. His dissertation studied the implementation of music software among high school music educators. His research interests focus on the integration of technology in music education.

Production Team Bios

Robert Moog, the legendary pioneer and inventor of the Moog Synthesizer. As a synthesist, he programmed two MIDI books for Technics Corporation published by Hal Leonard Publishing. He has designed sound for numerous local theatre productions as well as performed in pit orchestras as a keyboardist for theatrical productions. In addition to teaching audio production, music theory, the history of jazz, and the history of the Beatles, he maintains and manages Data Music Services, a state-of-art commercial audio/video editing facility that is based in Altoona. He was one of the early adopters of non-linear digital technologies, and is recognized for his expertise in Pro Tools software. He holds a Bachelors of Music degree in jazz arranging/composition from Temple University, a Master of Arts degree in music theory/composition from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and a D.M.A. (Doctorate of Music Arts) degree in music education from Boston University. He has also studied acoustics at North Carolina University/Ashville, and North Texas State University. His dissertation studied the implementation of music software among high school music educators. His research interests focus on the integration of technology in music education.

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Director ................................................. Robin Reese
Assistant Director .............................. Leila McCrumb
Technical Director ................................. John Conner
Set Designer ............................... Laurencio Carlos Ruiz
Props Specialist ............................ Laurencio Carlos Ruiz
Scenic Artist ............................... Laurencio Carlos Ruiz
Guest Dramaturg .............................. Marina J. Bergenstock
Video Editor ................................. Cassie Ross Green
Video and Audio Recorder ................ A. David Villani
Costume Designer ........................ Laurencio Carlos Ruiz
Technical Crew .......................... Alex Horowitz
Technical Crew ......................... Seth Horowitz
Technical Crew ........................ Sam Winand
Upcoming at the Misciagna Family Center for Performing Arts

April 22, 2021—May 2, 2021
VAST Senior Exhibitions

Saturday, May 1, 2021, 2:30 p.m.
University Jazz Performance Streaming

May 7, 2021 —May 14, 2021, 7:30 p.m.
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Acknowledgements

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Melissa Wilt, graphic designer, Strategic Communications
Brenda Berry, faculty and program assistant, Misciagna Family Center
Deborah L. Flinn, part time faculty administrative assistant, Misciagna Family Center
Karen Isenberg, part time faculty administrative assistant, Misciagna Family Center
Kylea Myers, interim theatre coordinator, Misciagna Family Center
Diane Kilmer, theatre and gallery assistant, Misciagna Family Center
John Conner, technical director, Misciagna Family Center
Sofie Riley, janitorial worker, Facilities and Operations

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