

## Out Goes the Tide, In Come the Youth

A commentary on *The Outgoing Tide* at In Tandem Theatre

By Helene Fischman

Several weeks ago, I brought my collective “Draw Write Here!” comprised of both youth and adult artists and writers, to see the **In Tandem Theatre** production of Bruce Graham’s, *The Outgoing Tide*. Taking high school students to a play prompts my radar to be up. As every dramatic detail unfolds, I am wondering if they can relate. What can they reap from the themes? In their worlds driven by technology and social media, are they finding this engaging? The **In Tandem Theatre** is a great place to take teenagers because of its size, they can connect to the work because they can practically reach out and touch it. It’s a small, 99-seat studio theatre, so wherever you are seated is right up in its grill – enmeshed in the physical space of the play. You are in the air the actors breathe in an almost uncomfortable intimacy.

The story of *The Outgoing Tide* is about how a family, rooted in old-world institutions, handles a non-traditional approach to aging and death: Gunner & Peg, a couple in their 70s and their son, Jack. Gunner himself is conscious of the onset of dementia and his mental decline. The dread of his impending helplessness prompts him to devise a plot wherein he stages his own accidental death (throwing himself off his boat mid-sail, making it appear as an accident) to activate an insurance windfall for his family. His life insurance policy will provide twice as much for them (his wife, Peg, and son, Jack) in the case of accidental death. This would relieve them of both having to care for him in a tragic state, and with enough funds to care for themselves.

Most reviewers of this play focus on the theme of memory-loss. With my youth-oriented lens, however, more compelling was the internal conflict of Peg’s religious values. Peg manifests the fixins of an old-school, traditional Catholic. As we learn throughout the play, she has betrayed these precepts in secret. So, let’s talk about premarital sex.

We learn that the son, Jack, was conceived out of wedlock. Peg became pregnant and Gunner proposed marriage as a result. The son, Jack, is shocked when he hears this; but less about the truth uncovered than about his parent’s dishonesty. Because premarital sex was unacceptable in their tight-knit Catholic community, they hid this truth from friends and family. His mother had lied, and Jack was pissed. Today, kids could care less about premarital sex, but as example of metaphor for cover-up? This they can relate to. They are exposed so frequently to the contradictory covers of old conventions. They are marching today, in Washington DC, after having watched successive, brutal classroom murders over their lifetime, against a gun lobby who uses second amendment rights as a cover for gun manufacturing contracts. (*The constitution itself was authored by those with direct economic interest in government control: manufacturers, moneylenders, land and slave owners. So how is that consolation?*) They are mobilized by the twisted priorities of our country’s administration, and neither religion nor the

constitution provide an answer. As a result of digital media culture, their loyalty lies in an adherence to eclecticism, openness and experimentation. Acceptance of non-traditional families and LGBTQ identity, both of which Peg's values reject, are central to that secularism. My young audience stood behind Jack and his consternation at hearing news of his mother's dishonesty.

Ironically, Jack is in the middle of a divorce. While he is questioning his mother about her disguised impropriety, she is questioning his choice to abandon a marriage which was entered into *freely*. Not entered, that is, out of the necessity of immodest behaviors. The son, although reared in Catholicism, is divorcing his wife because he's not fulfilled. The difference between his parent's marriage and his own marriage is a generation, separated by the 1960s and 70s. In Peg and Gunner's era, marriage may have contained love but was not as much a love-marriage as a marriage of contract. For them, marriage provided a sharing of resources, economics, maintaining inclusion in community. Jack's divorce represents the love-marriage borne from the era of "I'm Ok, You're OK." Marriage became less a contract and more a pathway to enlightenment, a gateway to real fulfillment and personal growth. From Jack's generation forward, if marriage falls short of those ideals, divorce is a reasonable option. Millennials don't care about marriage or divorce, and don't care about contracts. From single-parenthood to cooperative parenting to not having children at all, their identities are no longer caught up in these choices. Career, freedom, love – this is what's important. Sounds a lot like the 60s.

While Peg proclaims that her generation held fast to marriage and so should Jack's, Jack recalls from his childhood that there was a family in the neighborhood that he recalls getting a divorce. When he brings this up to his mother, Peg's retort is, wryly, that they were Jewish, and so dismisses it as an argument. What the playwright, Bruce Graham, does by adding in that quip, that offhand racist comment, was to add insult to injury: He cracks open the already brittle shell encapsulating this family's "values." Peg's veiled adherence to Catholicism not only covered up the lie of her early conception, but also facilitated maintenance of bigotry and anti-Semitism. Graham astutely addresses that historical legacy of the church is one that has used racism as power and cover-up. So can we talk about racism and bigotry today? Unfortunately, yes, as we can see by things like the mobilized Alt-right, the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, racist graffiti throughout the country. And our youth don't have room for this anymore. They have tremendous impatience with, for example, the outdated policy makers of our country who are clinging to an old sense of the American dream which no longer applies. There is a massive youthquake occurring now across not only gun control, but DACA, Black Lives Matter, and #metoo, which demonstrates the change in the way our kids are behaving. Just like Peg, Gunner and Jack's family, the foundation of our country is cracking. Just as Gunner is losing his memory, our society is teetering with a fundamental uncertainty growing every day.

**In Tandem's** production of *The Outgoing Tide* was meaningful for these kids because they were able to see an older person as change-maker. It was the old man, Gunner, who developed the idea for suicide, even in the midst of his wife's antiquated path. It was he who was willing to be

flexible, to self-sacrifice, to launch into the unknown: traits not typically ascribed to an older generation. At our talkback after the play, my students began to synthesize these ideas and talk about their own understanding of rules, the breaking of rules, and how to adapt to new circumstances.

Human beings live on a continuum; we bring forward the knowledge of those who came before us. Who we are and what we become is not just a consequence of our lifetime but an accumulation of years of collective knowledge, borne of the sweat of our predecessors. What I hope our students gleaned from this experience, above and beyond the direct themes of the play, is that we want them to succeed and grow past us. We want them to take the lessons we've learned and create new environments in which to see where we're going, where we've been. We want them to develop insight to make tough decisions about which value systems and traditions are worth holding on to. On those days when the fight seems insurmountable, I hope they know there are scores of us standing behind them, believing in them, needing them to be the new voice as ours begins to wane, like *The Outgoing Tide*.