

Q&A WITH GARY MORGENSTEIN

How do you define your creative process as a playwright? What is your process? Do you have a specific space where you write?

As I sit in my easy chair every morning (and afternoon) with my muse and beloved pug Tiger on my lap, I remember that all writing starts with the characters who must always drive the play forward. Occasionally I've allowed the plot to take the lead. The characters grow quiet, punishing me until I come to my senses. Yes, my characters and I talk. A lot. That's why God made red wine. A playwright must create flawed characters, not avatars of their own personalities. I don't always like or agree with what my characters do, but the key is creating relatable stories with sympathetic, complicated characters with whom the audience can identify. This 1968 Bronx Jewish family of my play has all the drama and conflicts and humor of any family, anywhere, featuring young people bravely coming of age, the middle-aged couple afraid they have no future but must try, and the seniors looking back with regret yet refusing to let that be the last word on their lives. There's a lot of love and hope and pain. A typical family.

What are the first four words that come to mind describing the play?

Poignant. Emotional. Funny. Real. What's important in **A Tomato Can't Grow in the Bronx** is the humor. Despite the seriousness, the pathos produces humor because a play must take a breath and find the laughter even in the most difficult times. Too often plays forget that. You need an orchestra of emotional notes to give the audience a moment to absorb.

What was your inspiration in writing this piece? How long did it take to write?

Growing up in the Bronx, Sundays would often be filled with drives out to New Jersey or Long Island, my ear pressed to a transistor radio to listen to the Yankees or Giants game, with my parents looking to buy a home they couldn't afford. While some of these characters had a little inspiration in real people, my characters are way nicer. The sad magic of being a writer is that you can make things come out the way you wished. I also wanted to dramatize a struggling Jewish working-class family, which is rarely if ever portrayed on stage anymore. Too often, it's only the Jewish middle or upper class that's depicted. Others should have their voices, too. Like tough Jews.

Art/theater is a reflection of its time, even though this play is set in 1968, many of the same issues resonate today. Do you feel this play resonates/timely even more so as in this COVID era that we're all living through?

If anything, the family is more important than ever because so much has been lost over the years as families splinter and move away. Remember that we'd put ourselves in silos through social media before the tragic imperative of Covid. I think human relationships, that warmth, that connection, is more important and necessary than ever. There are all different ways to wear a mask. And I think Baby Boomers will warm to the memories of those tumultuous 1960s. As a history buff, I'm always amazed by how much history repeats itself if only we'd shut up and listen.

Explain your collaboration with the Center Players? Did you find them? They found you? Have you been in rehearsals/making any rewrite or edits based on cast?

Jackie Kusher, who plays the patriarch Harry Simms, starred in my web series **Joyland**. Jackie had worked with Center Players and brought the play to Bernice Garfield-Szita, the artistic director. They've been an absolute joy: smart, supportive and professional. The experience has embodied the best for a playwright. I haven't been in rehearsals because I trust them. Believe me, that hasn't always been the case in my career! I also don't think it's healthy for a playwright to be at rehearsals. As soon as you give the play to someone else, it becomes their vision. Bernice is a tremendous director full of sharp insights and broad sensitivities. I let her and the very gifted cast take it away. How I hear the words in my head doesn't mean that's how they should be acted. That's up to the performer to give their unique perspective, the beauty of theater. I've also written six novels. Good or bad, my name's the only one on the book jacket. But theater is collaborative. That's why you write plays. And a writer should respect that process.

What do you hope the audience will take away from this production?

The audience makes the magic. Without those wonderful people who give their time in the theater, there is no play. Like the actors and director who infuse a play with their own voices, so each member of the audience sees the work from their point of view. My blue is not your blue. All I hope is that

we touch someone. Make them laugh. Maybe evoke some tears. Ultimately it's the heart of the characters who'll reach the hearts of the audience. In these unsettling times, we all need a reminder that we need to love the people we love even more. Why not find that on a stage in Freehold, New Jersey?

Gary Morgenstein's novels and plays have been featured in national media from The New York Times, Entertainment Weekly, Parade Magazine, the New York Post, and Sports Illustrated to NPR. An award-winning playwright, Morgenstein's drama *A Black and White Cookie*, about the unlikely friendship between a conservative African American newsstand owner and a politically radical Jew, won the 2021 Broadway World award for Best Play and Best Actor for its October premiere at Silver Spring Stage outside Washington. Morgenstein's latest play is *Free Palestine*, about the firing of a Jewish teacher of Israeli-Palestinian studies. An accomplished novelist, his six novels include the critically-acclaimed dystopian political novels *A Mound Over Hell* ("1984 Meets *Shoeless Joe*") and *A Fastball for Freedom* ("a dystopian *Field of Dreams*") [A Mound Over Hell | Gary Morgenstein \(bhcpres.com\)](#). Morgenstein also wrote the book for the off-Broadway sci-fi rock musical *The Anthem*. He lives in Brooklyn, the Center of the Known Universe.