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GOING HOME TO FIND GOOD PEOPLE

PLAYWRIGHT DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE TALKS
SOUTHIE, FORAYS INTO NATURALISTIC DRAMA AND
STRONG WOMEN. BY KELUNDRA SMITH.

David Lindsay-Abair's *Good People* is the most produced play in the country, being staged at 17 theatres across the nation this season. A native of South Boston, Lindsay-Abair wanted to write about his hometown for a long time, but did not because he was afraid of portraying the people he grew up with as working class caricatures. But after the success of *Rabbit Hole*, about a couple grieving the loss of their child, he found a new niche in writing realistic dramas.

Lindsay-Abair grew up in a working class family. His father had a fruit truck that he used to park across the street from the Huntington Theatre Company building, and Lindsay-Abair would see show marquee and wonder who August Wilson

was. His mother sold flower pot rabbits with Styrofoam heads at the local flea market, a detail that makes its way into *Good People*. Though this play is not autobiographical, there are pieces of Lindsay-Abair, throughout this and all of his plays. The playwright, who occasionally ventures into screenwriting (*Oz: The Great and Powerful* and *Rabbit Hole*), says he will stay in the theatre and never leave it because unlike film, which has "too many cooks in the kitchen," the work is truly his.

Lindsay-Abair talks about how writing *Good People* about his native Southie was a dive into the familiar that forced him to reconsider the role of luck in his life as the one who "got out" of the old neighborhood.



KS: According to American Theatre Magazine *Good People* is the most produced play in the country right now. You were recently talking about it on NPR. How does that feel for you?

DLA: It's incredibly gratifying, but also feels a little odd because I think one of the reasons it's so produced is because it's reflecting what's going on in the country, which is bad. So I have mixed feelings about it. You know the country is not in a very good place economically, which is very much what the play is about. Of course I'm happy people are producing



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the play, but in the bigger picture I wish the play was less relevant than it is, for the country, not for my art.

KS: For this play you had a return home to South Boston, and over the past ten years a lot of film and TV shows have used South Boston as the setting. What do you think this trend is of using Southie as a microcosm?

DLA: I'm not sure. My approach to Southie is very different than other portrayals in film and books and TV. I wanted to write about a Southie that I grew up with, that was just regular

people that were struggling to pay their rent and trying to feed their kids. That of course doesn't make a splashy Hollywood movie, but it could make, I hope, an interesting play for people to watch, that touches on what's happening in the country.

KS: *Good People* is very different from your earlier plays. It's very different from *Fuddy Meers* and *Kimberly Akimbo*, and definitely not as somber as *Rabbit Hole*. Could you talk a little more about what inspired you to write this play?

DLA: Before I talk about *Good People* I have to talk

about *Rabbit Hole* because it was such a departure from those earlier comedies. *Rabbit Hole* was a conscious decision to try writing a different type of play, writing a naturalistic play. So then when it came to *Good People*, because *Rabbit Hole* went well, I felt I had flexed muscles that I had never flexed before and had permission to write naturalistically if I so chose. I didn't feel like I had to, but because it was about my old neighborhood, I was terrified of anyone seeing the characters as being outlandish or cartoonish or not real.

In addition, everyone I

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grew up with, they were incredibly funny people so I knew humor had to be in there. My friends and family all used humor in a very specific way. Often as a coping mechanism to assuage hardships they were going through. No matter how horrible things got, humor was always present.

KS: Along those lines, as a single mother in a working class neighborhood I think it's safe for us to assume that Margie has been in financial straits before. Why does she reach out to Mikey now?

DLA: She *has* struggled for years and years, but things are more dire than they have ever been. Again, the economy doing what it is doing, it is harder and harder to find a job. So in the past when she lost a crappy job it wasn't that hard to go up the block and find another crappy job up on Broadway, which is the main strip in

South Boston. But because the economy is so bad, the landlady's son has had trouble finding a job and his wife gets fired over the course of the play, so the landlady says well my son and his wife, if things get terrible I might have to let them move in here, which means kicking Margie out. So she reaches out to Mikey for a job. In the middle of the second act his wife [Kate] says oh you could babysit our daughter, and that's what she [Margie] wants—to feed her own kid. Then Mike snatches it away and says no I don't feel comfortable with that.

KS: In talking about Mikey's wife, it seems to me making his wife African American was used to add some shock value to the play. Was this your intention or is there another reason why you chose to make her black?

DLA: I hope people aren't shocked that he's mar-

LEFT: Kate Hodge, Elizabeth Rich and Denny Dillon in *Good People*. Photo: Roger Mastroianni.

As a writer you have to put pieces of yourself in your characters otherwise they won't be alive.

- David Lindsay-Abaire

ried to a black woman. I wanted to tell the truth about South Boston, and if anyone knows anything about South Boston, they know it was a hot bed of negativity during the forced busing era. I didn't want to write a play about race... not yet at least. But I did want to acknowledge some of the ugliness from the neighborhood, and I wanted to complicate Margaret as a character. I think by making the wife African American it puts Margaret in a strange place when she walks into this beautiful home and it's full of money, and she meets a character who comes from money who happens to be African American. I think it makes her go 'Oh God, wait a minute, this is strange. This wealthy black woman thinks that I'm the caterer's assistant.'

KS: When Margie first comes to their house she brings this rabbit. For some reason the flower pot rabbit seems so cryptic to me.

What is the significance of the rabbit for you in the context of this play and her bringing this gift to them?

DLA: For me there are several significant off stage characters, and two of the most important offstage characters are those daughters. Margie's daughter, who has disabilities, and Mike's daughter who is sort of an idealized suburban, perfect, little girl. My way of bringing those girls on stage is through that rabbit. She [Margie] brings this gift to him [Mike] and it's this cheesy, cheap thing that gets put up on the mantle in this gorgeous house, and you see how out of place that stupid, cheap rabbit is, and it becomes Margaret in that moment. And because we also know that it's a rabbit with a lopsided head, we know that rabbit was made by her daughter, because it's established in the first act that the landlady gets help from Margaret's daughter, but she puts the heads on lopsided.

KS: Throughout the play we are never told whether Margie's daughter is actually Mikey's and whether you've decided whether she is or not, but it seems like you have.

DLA: I wasn't interested in writing a play of 'is he or isn't he?' because it's not *Doubt*, which is very much about did he or didn't he molest that boy. This is about something completely different. And yet I say that, and still there were people who would ask during talkbacks when the show was on Broadway "Is he the father or isn't he?" And usually it was a man who said it and the women would all groan "Of course he's the father! He's horrible!"

KS: I noticed with all of these plays your protagonists tend to be women who are at some pivotal point in their lives—Claire in *Fuddy Meers*, Becca in *Rabbit Hole*, Kimberly Akimbo—what is it about writing female protagonists that appeals to you?