

AN INTERVIEW WITH TOMMY MURPHY

An interview with Tommy Murphy, playwright of *Gwen in Purgatory* – he talks to Tahni Froudist, Education Coordinator, Company B Belvoir, at Belvoir's Warehouse on Tuesday 22 June, 2010.

TAHNI: You've said previously that you came to this script with an idea for the beginning & end, how did you take those ideas and put them into a play? Do you have a specific intention for this play?

TOMMY: It's always strange the way a play emerges, even for the playwright. I've always found writing plays to be very intuitive. That means that I sometimes don't know my deeper needs for writing the play. Sometimes I can trace those things during a process, but sometimes it's actually a retrospective thing. Sometimes I look back at plays and I can see my deeper needs for writing. Also beyond those introspective things I think I'm able to spot what I was responding to in the world around me. Those things aren't always clear to the playwright. That's why I think playwrights can't write in isolation; playwrights require the sort of process we've used here at Belvoir where we meet regularly with the director and the dramaturge. I met with actors to try a performance, a closed room performance, a reading of the play, so we can see what's actually going on in the work. And sometimes what's going on at the heart of the play is something that is more than the playwright's intentions. You seek out those moments when an actor or the director or the dramaturge, or any one of other collaborators in the process tell you what your play is about or how your play is functioning.

In terms of the title, *Gwen in Purgatory*, did that come after the play was written or was it something you always had?

That came certainly after I had a few drafts. And when I put it on the front of the draft, it was just a working title, because it was a way for me to clarify what I thought was happening in the play. It was a way of clarifying for me where Gwen had found herself, and I found that it not only clarified Gwen's predicament but the entire play. And I've gone on to find that all the characters are experiencing a kind of purgatory.

Did you create those characters to aid in Gwen's story, or even if it wasn't deliberate to place them in purgatory?

They all evolved to serve the drama and the drama centres on Gwen, they all evolved according to that purpose I have to say. In simple terms, the play did emerge for me character first. Most of the work early on was a character study. And of course as you find character, the plot evolves with them, because you find character through their actions. What they do to each other to get what they want – that is how we know them in the play, in any play.

In terms of your process generally, is that something - do you start with the character studies always, or has this been a very kind of individual work?

Every play has its particular requirements so the process changes project to project. The first thing that I really had was an image of this elderly person trying to answer a phone, and that remains the opening image of the play. The next glimpse of the play that arrived was the final moment of the drama, and that also remains. In between that I tried many, many options. I even had characters that found their way on to page that were discarded before we reached the stage. They didn't hold their place in this work. Lots of different possibilities were attempted, for who would come to Gwen's house on this day and what would eventuate.

In terms of it being set in Queanbeyan, how does it fit, how true to your experience of the town is it?

Well I hope that if people from Queanbeyan see the play they will spot something accurate, and hopefully something respectful of my home town. My parents still live there and my grandmother, and I go there a lot, and there's a great theatre in Queanbeyan too. I guess the thematic reasons why the play is set there is that Queanbeyan was this little town that happened to be the place next to where they built the nation's capital. So within her lifespan, Gwen would have experienced that change. This place of national importance was just plonked on the limestone plains near Queanbeyan. The landscape where the play takes place is emblematic somehow of Gwen's experience of change. Gwen has embraced change, particularly recently. Her husband has recently died and she has sold up, or is in the process of selling up the family home. But on day one in this new house, she finds that not being able to operate the telephone or microwave or the new TV, stands for a lot more and she finds herself in purgatory. Some of her experiences of change are about resistance and some of them have been courageously embracing change. Ezekiel is also dealing with parallel problems including a recent change. Canberra is a lonely place in his eyes, heightening his isolation and inability to connect with community in Australia.

In terms of the religious content, by naming it *Gwen in Purgatory*, that gives it a definite, 'this is going to touch on religion'. Can you talk about that?

I was trying to paint a picture of the Australian Catholic Church right now, drawing on my own experience. I believe the church is challenged with its potential irrelevance right now, and evidence of that is the lack of younger people wanting to join the priesthood. Rather than dealing with those questions of its relevance, rather than dealing with big questions, like whether to change the celibacy laws or to invite women to be priests or to invite priests who have left the priesthood to return, rather than even considering for a moment those options, the church is going to developing nations where there is a surfeit of young priests. They're bringing these young men to fill the post, particularly in regional Australia. I interviewed a lot of priests in that situation, several of them from Africa, a couple from Nigeria where my character is from, and I sensed they're suffering from chronic homesickness. They came from a church that is booming. They held a position of influence in their community, and now they come here to experience a very elderly congregation, very thin on numbers, and probably a less celebratory version of the liturgy, probably a more progressive version of Catholicism than they find comfortable. So all of these things are confronting for them I felt it would be interesting if Gwen's priest isn't from her own generation, someone she has access to emotionally and culturally, but that it's a young Nigerian priest that comes to the door to bless the house this day. She struggles to communicate with him, she struggles to understand him and I think she's also struggling with this sense of being abandoned today.

And I suppose that struggle with communication is through all the characters and that creates that sense of isolation and purgatory I suppose, and the dialogue between the priest and Daniel, they communicate on that kind of younger generation level, but the religion creates the divide. It's really interesting.

This is a family who actively rewrite history. Families are made of people who share a common history but often have different perspectives on that memory of who they are. Memory is a big part of identity, so if you have a disputed memory, you have a disputed identity in the family. Some of those disputed memories will be challenged on this day in Gwen's new house. I understand purgatory as a place on earth. Purgatory is an in-between place, it is also a place between life and death, where someone might find themselves

trapped. In Dante it's via the intercession of prayers that 'shades' can find an escape from purgatory and progress to paradise, but the other thing they have to do is purge their sins. So there might be a sense that Gwen is calling out for her loved ones but also purging her sins today.

How have you found coming from Queanbeyan, having shows on in Sydney, on the West End, how have you found your experience as a young playwright in Australia?

Really good. I'm really grateful to find continual encouragement and nurture. That's something that happened here at Belvoir. The play came out of an award for another play I wrote. The prize was money to write this play. I think that's a really good example of how there's that sort of encouragement but also the nurture to help playwrights along. So I've been really lucky.

What was the step between being a teenage writer and now?

I was writing in Queanbeyan. I started when I was sixteen. There was a community group I was involved in, a sort of adult amateur theatre group, and there was a guy there who had written a play, so then I wrote a play to emulate him. He encouraged me and helped me get it to the stage as well. I eventually left Queanbeyan to study in Sydney and continued to write. I joined ATYP and SUDS before studying at NIDA.

Is there anything you would like to say to wrap up about *Gwen in Purgatory*, or your experience as a playwright?

I suppose I just want to say how exciting it is to be working here with this almighty cast. They just bring such insight to these roles. They're bringing the play to life. I've just been aching to begin. So it's really exciting this week to start rehearsal led by director Neil Armfield.

Do you think that's particularly exciting with a new work, for this to be the first performance, as opposed to something that has been done, that there's room for the text and roles to evolve?

Yes. It keeps on evolving throughout rehearsals and through the previews. It's pretty thrilling because some things you get wrong and some things you get right. It's a dangerous task but also really rewarding. There are so many things that are unpredictable. We need the audience response to help refine the play.

Well I think that's it. Thank you Tommy.