

The Playwright**Intellect or Heart? Don LaPlant's Riveting Play Makes Us Choose**

by Lisa Soland

When Ben Clarke, a gifted but naïve graduate student, begins a relationship with Jude Reed, the daughter of one of his professors, he ignites a number of long-smoldering tensions within her family. As they grow closer, Ben and Jude struggle to balance the needs of their relationship and their careers—a struggle that has continually plagued the relationship between Jude's parents. Winner of the 2007 Charles M. Getchell New Play Award, Don LaPlant's riveting play, *Two Body Problems*, confronts the emotional, intellectual and even physical damage suffered in the struggle to balance one's personal and professional lives.

In his play, LaPlant holds up a mirror for us to figure out what's most important—intellect or heart—and we are able to do so by seeing his fully developed characters in extreme situations, dealing with this very issue. "On a deeper level," he says, "*Two Body Problems* is about the personal costs and sacrifices people must make as they try to have it all in contemporary society."

When asked where he gets his ideas LaPlant responds without hesitation, "Aren't they just floating around you at all times? And don't they just stick to you?"

The conception of *Two Body Problems* came when "a friend of mine told me the story of how, when she was young, her dad's car caught fire as he was driving and he climbed into the backseat of the burning car to save her mother's almost finished dissertation, and I thought to myself, 'That story would be so much cooler if my friend were in the car,' which she wasn't. And of course, that would suck in real life, but it makes for a better play," says LaPlant. And he would know. His play *Two Body Problems* not only received the 2007 Getchell Award, but was also chosen as a finalist for the 2003 Last Frontier Theatre Conference in Valdez,

AK, and the 2006 Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) PlayWorks Competition.

LaPlant started writing the play in 2002 and had the first completed draft by 2003. "My first step was to put the lead character, Jude, into the car and then I had to figure out what happened for her to grow up in a family where work was so much more important than feelings or heart. And then when I started thinking about the parents, it made sense to me that the sins of our fathers get passed down."

LaPlant created a love interest for Jude so he could parallel the relationship of her parents to see if she would follow in their same footsteps. "It's like a Greek tragedy—even trying to avoid your destiny gets you into trouble," LaPlant says. "I love talking with my students about if you're Oedipus and you meet a really hot woman who's about the same age as your mother would be... just say no. And also, don't get into a fight with a man your father's age. It seems so simple but people always get themselves into the same stupid problems when they know better. That's what theatre's for—to give people a vocabulary to talk about their own lives."

With *Two Body Problems*, LaPlant says,



Don LaPlant (left), winner of the 2007 Charles M. Getchell New Play Award, is shown at the SETC Convention with Lisa Soland (right).

"I benefited from lots of readings and feedback, more than I have on some of my more recent things. I watch the audience to see where they lose interest and to see where they really get locked in."

LaPlant is grateful for the Getchell Award and the opportunities it has brought him. He found the audience and respondents at the SETC Convention staged reading of the play to be especially helpful. Their input enabled him to make some valuable changes since the reading in Atlanta.

"People thought the character of Meg was this unforgivable bitch, but I couldn't figure out why this was because I liked her," LaPlant says. "But then I went back and

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SETC's Charles M. Getchell New Play Award recognizes worthy new scripts by playwrights who reside in the SETC region. Application information for the 2008 award is available on the SETC Web site at www.setc.org/scholarship/newplay.asp.

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The SETC Playwriting Committee has created a playwriting contest just for high school students, the High School Play Contest. The winner receives a \$250 prize and an invitation to attend the SETC Convention. The winning one-act script is presented in a staged reading and receives a response from a distinguished panel of critics. Those entering must reside in the 10-state SETC region. Submissions are accepted between October 1 and December 1. For more information, visit www.setc.org/scholarship/secondary.asp.

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thought, 'I can soften this here.' I love how language can totally change our perception of a character."

One of LaPlant's favorite quotes is from Oscar Wilde. When asked how his day was going, Wilde replied, "Terrible. I spent all morning putting in a comma and all afternoon taking it out." This seems to apply to the work this playwright puts into each of his scripts. The version of *Two Body Problems* that he submitted to the Getchell competition was his fourteenth draft. Figuring out the most effective structure seems to take him the most time.

He calls himself "an old-fashioned playwright who actually pays attention to traditional format and structure." With Ibsen as his hero, LaPlant constantly **works to achieve perfect timing for the revelation of key information in his stories.** This fastidiousness has paid off for the

playwright in *Two Body Problems*, a dramatic story full of subtle humor, great dialogue and characters that an audience grows to like.


So what's next for *Two Body Problems*? "I have started to submit it to more theatres," he says. "I'm still hoping that the script being published in *Southern Theatre* magazine will attract some attention. I've talked with some theatre folk I know here in Virginia about doing a reading of the newly revised edition and seeing if they would be interested in producing it."

LaPlant, a professor at Emory & Henry College in Virginia, has numerous writing projects he wants to complete over the summer. His play *Appalachian Reality*, the recipient of the Appalachian Festival of Plays and Playwrights Award, will receive a reading this August, hosted by the Barter Theatre, the State Theatre of Virginia. "I'm quite excited about it, actually," LaPlant

says. "The festival has a good record of doing fully-staged productions of plays that are developed in their festival. I've also been writing a yet-to-be-titled **textbook for script analysis classes that I'm hoping to get published.**"

His advice for playwrights who may not have as many irons in the fire is both simple and applicable: "Read and watch a lot of plays so you can see stuff work, see what you like and are interested in, and develop your own voice. It really comes down to writers have to write. It's one thing to talk about this really cool idea to your friends but if you can't sit your butt down on a chair and write, you're not going to be a playwright." ■

Lisa Soland, one of the respondents at SETC's staged reading of *Two Body Problems*, is a published, award-winning playwright who also works as the artistic director of The All Original Playwright Workshop in Los Angeles and online.



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