REP Stage presents
THE WHALE
BY SAMUEL D. HUNTER
DIRECTED BY KASI CAMPBELL

“Do you ever get the feeling that people are incapable of not caring?” - Charlie from The Whale

To embrace with empathy and love those who surround us; to speak with a voice authentic to our deepest selves --at the end of the day, perhaps there is little else that really matters. For our morbidly obese hero, Charlie, his understanding of this essential truth has indeed been forged “in the belly of the whale,” and his desire to present this boon to his estranged daughter an act of determined courage.

I so appreciate that playwright Samuel Hunter has given us a story that strikes such deep emotional chords without relying on sentimentality -- that these characters dare us to care about them despite the fierce, protective walls they’ve erected around their hearts, and that we witnesses are challenged to overcome the depths of our own prejudices and limits of our empathy. The whale of Jonah and the whale of Moby Dick have been analyzed and labeled with so many symbolic options, but Charlie has led me to view the breaching whale as a rebirth of all that is vital and intuitive in the human spirit.

“I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person.” - Walt Whitman, Song of Myself

-Kasi Campbell, Director

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**INTERVIEW**

**Adam Greenfield:** One of the first things one realizes about your plays when looking at them as a body of work is that they're all set in Idaho or around Idaho. And I know you grew up in Idaho yourself -- I believe in Moscow?

**Sam Hunter:** Yeah.

*Can you talk a little bit about the Idaho you grew up in?*

Yeah. I mean it bears less and less resemblance to the plays that I'm writing as I continue to write them. I mean they're obviously set in Idaho, but there's nothing that's really quintessentially Idahoan about most of the plays. Like, there are some references that, sure, are Idahoan, but I think the plays actually are trying to be sort of non-regional, in a way. They could be anywhere in America.

But the Idaho that I grew up in... I mean, I obviously pull from the place I grew up. And, I guess, more than just “the place I grew up” it does still feel like home. Like when I go back, I kind of settle into it in a certain way -- In a similar way that I feel at home in New York. But in both places, in both Idaho and New York, I think I feel a sense of isolation. I feel like both New York and Moscow have become homes to me, but simultaneously I don't feel completely at home in either place. And I think the plays are kind of about that. I don't think a lot of the characters I write feel at home in any way. I don't think they feel at home in their bodies. I don't think they feel at home spiritually. There's a sense of disconnect and isolation that I think a lot of the characters feel... and I guess maybe that's rooted in my own. Not that I'm generally a depressed person, but I've never lived in a place where it's like,“Aha! This fits me like a glove!” Like,“Everything about this place is exactly what it needs to be!” I always feel a little bit on the outside in some way. Maybe that's self-imposed. Probably is.

Yet, when I think about the place where I grew up, it's very normal, very nice. It's a town of 20,000 people, a university town. My parents went to that university. My brother went to that university. My grandparents went to that university. Mame Hunter went to that university in 1908, or 1912 or something. But there is something just in the margins (and maybe every small town feels this way) that, like -- by the time I graduated high school I knew three kids who had killed themselves. The first one in seventh grade. And I'm not trying to say, you know, “Oh, there's a kind of desperation and a loneliness that's not in New York,” because people kill themselves in New York too, but there's just something a little more... fringe or something. Something that feels a little different.

And my dad has stories of his hometown. He grew up ten miles away in this town called Troy that, when he was growing up, was mostly Swedish-speaking, and had a population of like 350 people, and he has incredible stories from that town. And he works in an emergency room, he's a physician in an emergency room in Lewiston, which is this town in a valley where there's a big paper mill. And paper mills smell terrible, so the stench just sits in this valley -- and it's got a terrible drug problem and a terrible homelessness problem. And I remember him telling me this story of a guy who came in, this homeless guy in this small town in Idaho, a quadriplegic whose spine was exposed because the bottom half of his body was rotting and there were maggots living in his body. And he has many, many stories like that.

I think I just, I grew up hearing a lot of these stories and being completely fascinated by them. And they seem so at odds in a way with our normal concept of what it's like to live in a small town. Like, I think in New York people sort of accept the fact that there's a lot of grunge and a lot of weirdness around. But I think in small town America there's this pride that doesn't allow people to accept the weirdness. ... it's like, “No, no no! We're fine! This is a great town!” And so I even find myself... like even talking now, I find myself self-censoring and apologizing for my hometown in a way. Again, it's a great town and great place to grow up -- but it's also a really complex place. Like any place in the country, I guess.

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Well, I think that from our vantage point living on the coasts, we have this idea of the middle of the country being, you know, dailies on the coffee table and early-to-bed-early-to-rise people, and people who wear cat sweaters... and there are a lot of those people, they definitely exist.

*But those aren't the people that are in your plays. I mean, in*
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some cases you find those people in your plays. But they're never actually…

Yeah, they're revealed not to be those people. As all those people are always revealed to be not those people. I mean, I don’t know if I’ve really met somebody who like… I mean I’m sure there are some truly genuinely happy people who have simple lives and really love their simple lives. But I’m less interested in that, I guess.

It sounds like Idaho had so much mystery for you as a kid. Your dad’s description of Lewiston, which is where parts of Norway (2009) are set…

…Yeah, that's right. And Jack’s Precious Moment (2009).

And the difference between the surface of these people and the darkness underneath them, was that something thing you were always aware of, or is that a thing that you're retroactively aware of now?

No, I think I felt it actively. I mean I think the way I grew up -- and I feel like I’ve talked about this endlessly in interviews -- but, like, going to a Christian fundamentalist high school, and being gay, and learning about the weird scandals at that school that had been swept under the rug, and just like… By the time I was 15 or 16 I don’t think I really had either a spiritual or a social foundation, you know what I mean? Because I felt like I was in this school and I was kind of living a lie. Because I had come out to myself years earlier and had a few friends who didn’t go to that school who knew. And I didn’t really know what I thought about God. I was getting taught something that I knew I didn’t believe, and I had to sort of feign agreement over everything. I mean, like, on tests when it asked questions like, you know, “the Fall of Rome was due to homosexuality,” I had to appease that.

That was really a question on a test?

I don’t remember if that was on a test, but I remember taking it down as notes, or it was an essay topic or something. And I remember really betraying myself in English classes, because the amazing thing about that school was that they really believed we shouldn’t shield ourselves from secular literature or evolution because we need to know about that stuff so we can battle it spiritually and learn how to defeat it. So we would learn about evolution for the purpose of revealing it as a farce, as a total lie.

But the more important thing for me was in this English class, I remember reading The Waste Land. And the teacher would read parts of it out loud in class and everybody would laugh at it because it was so terrible and Godless -- but I was like, woah, this poem is amazing. It had the opposite effect on me I guess. For me it was…like, the first time reading The Waste Land, when I was 16, was monumental. And there was this one poem that I got really obsessed with: “Dolor” [by Theodore Roethke], and the first line is, “I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils.” And again, we read it in class to be, like, “Now, isn’t this ridiculous?” But I just remember really connecting with it in such a profound way but not being able to talk about it with anybody.

And so I started writing poetry in class as assignments. But I had to write poetry that was acceptable for them, so it was like in sonnet form and other structures like that, and they were really bad, and I didn’t like writing them. But later I listened to this Philip Glass album where all the lyrics were Allen Ginsberg poems. And so I went to the university library and sat in the stacks and read a whole bunch of Allen Ginsberg and became obsessed and then started writing all of this free-verse poetry. But I couldn’t really show it to anybody until I left that school. Later on, I finally transferred to a public school and there was this English teacher who was like one of the patron saints of my high school years, this guy named Crag Hill. (He had taken out the “i” in his name “Craig” so he could be “Crag Hill”), and he was this former Bay Area poet, and he had been this heroin addict for many years there, but poetry saved his life. And I gave him this twelve-page poem I wrote. And he was really the first person to like grab me and say, “Keep doing this.”

God, isn’t it amazing how we always have that person. It’s amazing that somehow they find us, or we find them.

Yeah this, like, former heroin addict Bay Area poet who knew Allen Ginsberg was teaching at a high school in Moscow, Idaho. It was almost like I had like sort of trepidatiously turned the faucet on just a little bit and there was this, like, trickle going, and he was the guy to like grab
it and turn it full blast. And so I spent the rest of my high school years writing and writing and writing and I wrote all of this poetry, you know, these crazy like thirty-word-line punctuation-less twenty page poems that really had no direction but were just like these like huge flows of energy that I didn’t really know what to do with. And then I realized that I really liked reading them out loud, so that led to playwriting, and then I saw the first part of Angels in America at University of Idaho and that was kind of it.

Were you writing character in poems, or was it...

They were pretty much all first person, like from me. Some of them were narrative but they were very loosely narrative. It was basically me seeing what, like, The Waste Land was doing and what Kaddish by Allen Ginsberg was doing and Howl and like all these things that were really affecting me. And James Joyce, definitely. I guess I was sort of emulating different forms. But no, it was idea driven, it wasn’t really character driven, and so actually for me to start writing plays it actually took a long time to negotiate those two things.

Do you remember what your very first stab at writing plays was like?

Yes. It was a play that was called Sixth Armageddon, it was nearly three hours long and I got Moscow Community Theater to give me a $300 dollar budget to present it in the summer of 1999, when I was in high school, and I got some very gracious local actors to be in it, and it was terrible, it was terrible. It was the story of a poet living in New York (I had never been to New York in my life) and there was also an unrelated B-story line about a heroin addict and her hallucinations. And there was some other character, too, who played different roles, he was a priest at one point… but I don’t remember what the point of the play was.

And when you say you started experimenting formally, what were you getting excited about?

In high school I was fed a lot of very formally structured poems and, I mean, I liked them, but I never really got passionate about them. And it wasn’t really until I started reading stuff that for me was exploding form that I got really excited, and um, so I think I was looking for the same experience with theater. The theater I knew and had done at Moscow Community Theater and in high school was like, Neil Simon or Ten Little Indians or Arsenic and Old Lace, and a little bit of Shakespeare, you know, to make it arty. So I guess I was really hungry to see something different. And then I saw Richard Foreman, which was probably about as different as you could go, and that just really appealed to me at the time. Still does, actually.

I still really love theater that confounds me -- but in a way that’s deliberate, where it’s just presenting something and allowing you to make connections -- and I mean I tried a lot of different things in college, and I wrote a lot of realism too, like I wrote a historical drama about Robert Schumann called Requiem in Endenich -- that crowd pleasing title. [Laughter] In my freshman year I set a play in Idaho for the first time. It was this weird play called American Breakfast about a series of these breakfast scenes that sort of like exposed the underbelly of a family. But then when I got into Foreman I started experimenting around and not finishing a lot of plays, you know what I mean? Like, I wrote a play that I called This Is A Play, as probably a lot of college-aged playwrights do. [Laughter] I was just emulating things that I liked, you know, like I wrote this play called Grand View Boise, which was very much like a David Lynch movie and it had this character who was a logger and he had a bag full of severed tongues that was never really explained. And then there were my plays that were like Richard Foreman, like one I wrote called Abraham (A Shot in the Head) that was in the Blueprint Series at the Ontological-Hysteric in 2004, that was this strange, absurdist remix of the biblical story of Abraham.

And then I started writing this play called Norman Rockwell Killed My Father, and it was this weird family drama-slash-comedy about this like, this kid whose father had just died, and he has this obsession with Norman Rockwell and we realize halfway through the play that the father’s body is in this chest that’s onstage, and the kid’s like desperately trying to paint a version of “Freedom From Want” [Rockwell’s famous painting], where his father is the father character and his mother is the mother, but in real life she’s this meth’d out weird woman and
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-- anyway, that play got into the O'Neill Festival, where I went in 2005, right after I graduated college. And it was at O'Neill that I think I learned how to re-write a play, which is something I didn't know before. Because I had this great dramaturg named Max Wilk, and he was just very honest with me and told me my second act wasn't worth two cents. And nobody had ever really confronted me with that kind of criticism and that kind of set me on a certain track right there.

Seems like there's a kind of instinct or compulsion, maybe, to expose another side to what we see, to the veneer. To expose the underbelly.

I think in the beginning that maybe there was. But I think it's evolved away from “expose the underbelly,” evolved into wanting to shed some light upon a corner we don’t normally see. And without judgment, hopefully. I don’t think my early plays actually had a lot of judgment in them but I think they did feel much more like, “Oh, look at this!” you know, like, “Bet you didn’t expect that!” But I think it’s evolved hopefully into something where I’m not there pulling the strings.

Describe what you mean by pulling the strings.

I think that in the early plays it was sort of like “Heeeere’s the veneeeeeeer! They’re sitting down and having breakfast but NOW look what happened!! She had an affair and an abortion!” You know, like, “Look at that, bet you didn’t see that coming!” Like I was hiding something and then all of a sudden I just pulled the curtain away and everybody’s supposed to be shocked, like, “You thought these people were normal but noowww, now you knowww!” And I don’t think my plays right now really work like that. They’re up front about the flaws in these characters. And then the process is learning that the flaws are what makes them human.

So it sounds like the difference is that you, as you’ve continued writing – as opposed to sort of taking a position of knowing it all, knowing exactly what you want to say, or knowing the experience you want to create as you sit down to write – like, now you’re kind of sitting with the family at the breakfast table as opposed to sitting in the corner of the room with your arms folded. If that make sense.

It’s almost like -- this is going to be a really weird metaphor -- but in my earlier plays, it was like I was inviting the audience into a darkened room, sat them in a chair, and told them there was someone in the room with them sitting across the table. And then they start having a conversation with this person, they’re learning things about the person, and the person seems normal -- but then I flip the lights on and that person is covered in blood and has a knife! [Laughter.] You know what I mean? But the way that the plays work right now, I think, is like, the audience comes into the room and the lights are already on and they’re like “Oh Jesus, there’s somebody covered in blood with a knife sitting at the table.” But then the person starts talking to us and we’re like “Okay, maybe I can sit in this chair and talk to them, but I still don’t know.” But then hopefully by the end of the play we’re thinking, “Oh, I totally understand why you’re sitting there covered in blood with a knife,” you know what I mean? “And I’m relating to you as if you weren’t sitting there covered in blood with a knife.” I guess that’s a weird metaphor.

No, but it makes sense. And it also seems really germane to The Whale. I mean, the lights come up and we see a man who weighs 600 pounds and he’s sitting there. And in the second scene he’s jerking off to gay porn from a laptop. And we make these judgments about them initially, but then over the course of the hour and fifty minutes they become so much more dimensional.

The more I think about it, I’m trying now to never keep the audience in a dark room. Where they’re never like, “When is the playwright going to turn on the lights? Okay, he turned on the lights.” Not that there aren’t revelations in my plays. In The Whale, we learn about Alan, and that he’s Liz’s brother, and there are revelations -- but I think the play is very up front. In the beginning, it’s like, “Here’s this 600-pound man, and yes he’s dying, so tonight here’s how you will know when this play is over. This man is going to die. Okay? All right. See you later.” [Laughter.] Rather than a sense, like an earlier play of mine, of being like, “What’s going to happen...I don’t know.” [Laughter] You know? Like, being coy about it. The play is very up front about where we’re going. It’s not surprising when he dies.

A lot of your characters are going through a spiritual journey.
What's your relationship to the spiritual journey that your characters take in your plays? In The Whale and A Bright New Boise (2010), characters have been essentially abandoned by the church, or they themselves abandoned the church, and they're left searching. In Five Genocides (2009), we meet a character who's chronically conscious of the cruelty and injustice of the world. In A Permanent Image (2011), a couple forms a suicide pact after they read about the big bang theory.

A few years ago, I kind of just realized if I'm going to write good plays, I have to really put something on the line. It has to be a play that's hard for me to write, where I'm really struggling to work something out. Because if I'm not doing that, if I'm not struggling with something, if I'm not engaged in an active way, then I can't expect an audience member to be.

My brain, for whatever reason, was built for religion. Religion, for some reason, settles in really nicely. Like, the belief that there is this afterlife, and here's what the afterlife will look like. And there's pain in the world, yes, but there's a reason there's pain in the world. And it's okay, the earth isn't billions of years old, it's only six thousand years old, and sure there's a lot of crap happening but, you know, the earthly world will perish and you'll have eternal life with God the Father. There's just something about that that is so comforting to me, and a huge part of me wants to believe it in a really active way.

But then I've got the critical part of my brain which knows that that's facile in a way, and simple. Not that I'm saying all religion is facile and simple. I'm really not saying that. But there is a way to be religious which I think is facile and simple, which is, "Oh I don't need to ask anymore questions because I've got all the answers. And if I have a question that comes up, I can just ask my priest or my rabbi, and it will be answered. And then I can go about my day-to-day life." And, honestly, I think that's actually a pretty effective way to live. And functional.

It's probably a smarter way to live than the way I live, which is living in a space that's between that pull toward organized religion but also a deep need to reconcile my humanity -- not my soul, but my human condition -- with the rest of the world. With the hurricane, with genocide, you know what I mean? And I think that the plays I've written all, in a way, flow from that tension. I don't know if any of the plays I've written in the last five years don't come from that place.

And yet they're all set in these places that are distinctly not associated with religious thought or searching. There aren't cathedrals in Sam Hunter plays. These people are stuck in a Wal-mart or an Olive Garden, or a parking lot, or a cramped little office, or an unexceptional living room.

I think that's the tension. The times I most think about God are when I'm on the subway. Not when I'm on a mountaintop. If anything, when I'm on a mountaintop I'm marveling at creation. I think about worldly things, I think about objects, I think about dirt, I think about landscape, I think about planets. But I don't necessarily move toward the divine when I'm in majesterial places. When I'm in a really amazing church, I do think about God, but mostly I'm marveling at the religion, not the God. I'm marveling at the organization of it, the human part of it, the physical rather than the metaphysical. So I find when I worked at Walmart and was in the break room, and when I'm on the subway, and when I'm walking down Tenth Avenue, or when I'm home in Idaho and in a Walmart, which seems like such an inconsequential place in what the nation might consider an inconsequential town -- then I look to the divine much more. You know what I mean?

Yeah, it's more in situations where you're miserable that you start thinking about God. It makes you feel more helpless to be in those places, and it makes you look for life to be bigger. Um, you mentioned that there were people you knew when you were growing up who committed suicide. That suicide was, or became, part of the landscape. And it's noteworthy that suicide is present in a lot of your plays.

Yeah. The Whale has a long form of suicide in it. And A Permanent Image, Jack's Precious Moment, Five Genocides…

But in your plays, suicide doesn't feel like suicide. It doesn't seem like the right word to use. There's something about eating yourself to death, or starving yourself to death, that feels different from suicide. In Jack's Precious Moment, a character tries suicide by standing up on a carnival ride. It somehow feels un-violent or un-selfish.

I think suicide -- God, this has turned into such a weird, maudlin conversation [Laughter] -- I think suicide factors
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into my work a lot because... If the work is flowing from the struggle to understand your place as a human in America in 2012, then suicide is almost like the ultimate thesis statement on that idea. I don’t think about suicide in terms of, “Oh I’m very depressed, or I’m bipolar, or something very bad just happened so I can’t take it anymore.” I don’t think the suicides in these plays come from the place of “I can’t take it anymore.” I think the suicides in the plays I’m writing -- or, what are suicidal acts -- come from a place of clarity and reason. In a certain way, it’s a conclusion to the question these plays struggle with. If you’re really concerned about what your place is in 2012, and you can’t reconcile the divine with the quotidian, then to release yourself from the quotidian is a very viable option. And it’s one which can be arrived at with a great amount of clarity and reason, rather than impulse and a bottle of pills and whiskey. And I think the way that I look at suicide, when it’s a successful suicide, most of the time it’s very thought out. And it’s gone about cheerfully. It’s the conclusion they’ve come to, they’ve struggled with the questions, and here is the conclusion. For me, I know that’s not the conclusion I want to the questions I ask myself or the questions I’m thinking about on the subway. So by presenting those decisions onstage, it brings a clarity.

That’s a great way to describe it. It’s like suicide in your plays is a conscientious objection to life, as opposed to something that comes out of despair. So, in The Whale, it’s clear from the very beginning that we’re in the last week of this person’s life. But in some of your other plays it seems like there’s a chance that a character might push through and make sense out of things. In A Permanent Image, a husband and wife have a suicide pact. I found when I was reading the play that it seems like she might not go through with it. But then she did. And it made me wonder…

And that’s why nobody produces it! [Laughter] Seriously, I’m not joking! Because really, if we went on the ride of that play, and then at the end she’s like, “You know what, I’ve come to the conclusion that I shouldn’t.” Then that’s a different play. All of a sudden it’s a play about how life is worth living. And I’m not interested in that thesis statement, because I think that’s easy. And I thought it was more interesting to say, “No, the conclusion is that she’s going to do it. And it’s going to be really nice, and she’s going to put on some Christmas carols, and the kids are going to watch.”

Whereas in The Few, it’s the opposite. A character’s sitting there drunk, and he’s contemplating drinking a gallon of antifreeze, and I actually thought, “he’s going to drink it,” but in the end he doesn’t. He found something.

Because it’s very different. In A Permanent Image she comes to this conclusion and is like, “Awesome. This is great. Now my obstacle is getting my kids to understand why I’m doing this, and getting them to accept why.” And she gets what she wants at the end. She’s able to cross over. But in The Few, he wants to live. He has faith in other people, in life, but he’s lost it. The obstacle for him there is having no reason, no validation for that faith anymore. So maybe, “that faith is actually misplaced and I should drink this bottle of antifreeze.” But then he gets a reason to maintain that faith and cling onto that faith. So I think in a way, both endings are hopeful. But that’s the hard thing with A Permanent Image -- and that’s why I think people aren’t really touching it right now -- because I’m asking people to have faith that this ending, in which a woman kills herself onstage, is hopeful. In The Few, the hopeful ending is him choosing to move forward, which is something that is much more acceptable.

What was the initial instinct to write The Whale?

I feel like A Bright New Boise was a big turning point for me as a writer. Because I had a deadline, and I had to write something really really fast. So I sat down, and I got out of my own way, and I wrote a play. Without bringing it to nine different workshops and bringing in five pages here and five pages there, I sat down and I wrote this entire two-act play because I was writing for this imminent production in three months. And all of a sudden, it was almost like I shook the cobwebs out of my writing. I looked at it and I was like, “Oh shit. That’s what I’m doing.” It was the first time I really articulated to myself that I’m writing plays that are about empathy. Here’s some people, and I know you don’t know who they are, and you probably have some preconceptions about them and some judgments about them, but listen to them, here they are. So when I wrote that play, it was very instruc-
tive. And I was working on *The Whale* about the same time. And the confluence of those two plays really started to teach me something about my own writing. Even with *Jack's Precious Moment*, I was very conscious of, “Okay, this is a lot of heavy material, so I want a lot of comedy.” And I think of course there is comedy in *A Bright New Boise* and *The Whale*, but it’s a different kind of comedy than *Five Genocides* and *Jack’s Precious Moment*. It’s more kind of absurdist, it’s more on the surface. So, in *Five Genocides*, if this was the content…

...(If you’re reading this, he’s holding one hand up down around his chin)…

[Laughter.]

...(And this was the comedy in these two plays…)  

...(And another hand up around his forehead)…

If in *Five Genocides*, here’s the comedy [higher hand] and here’s the tonal weirdness of the content [lower hand], then in *A Bright New Boise* and *The Whale* they’re sort of meeting in a way [both hands meet in the center], where there can be comedy and there can content, and they’re not two opposing forces that I’m trying to reconcile, they’re more sort of wrapped up in one another. So when I realized that I was writing about empathy, and I began working more and more on *The Whale*, I realized it was just about me getting out of the way and allowing these people to walk into this play, warts and all, from the very beginning, but then trying to be incredibly honest and non-judgmental about who they are. Telling an honest story about these people and not worrying about it. When I was first writing this play, I was like, “Jesus Christ, am I really writing a play where a guy’s going to die in the last seconds?” And I really had to get past my own -- Because maybe a few years ago I wouldn’t have had the confidence to do that, and I would have deadened everything with comedy that was really heightened, so then the death at the end would have been less real, and we would have been seeing it from a distance. Hopefully by the end of this play there is very little distance between the character and the audience member. So the writing of the play came out of that.

What were the biggest changes that happened along the way?

There weren’t huge changes, actually. It was a lot of engineering of reveals, so the rewriting process on this play was scene work. There wasn’t a lot of, “Oh God, let’s delete that storyline and move this over here.” The only storyline that I had to work a lot with was the B-storyline in the play, the Elder Thomas storyline. Because so much of that story is about happens offstage, what he’s doing, what he’s trying to find out. So there was a lot of orchestrating of what Charlie is trying to find out, what exactly happened that day. That sort of thing changed a lot.

So the story didn’t change, but the telling of the story changed.

The telling of the story changed a lot. Like, the Mary scene went through twenty drafts probably. You know, trying to calibrate that scene in such a way, where I’m trying to narrate a fifteen year gap and also a four year marriage in the thirteen or fourteen minutes she’s onstage.

What’s your next play about?

I have a few. I have, well, *The Few*. [laughter] Which we mentioned before. It’s a play about, it’s basically a three-hander set in this office space off of a highway in Idaho. It’s about a newspaper for truckers. Basically, a guy, a former trucker, comes back to this now-defunct paper that he started for truckers to create a sense of community and home for them, but has now turned into just personal ads. So he feels incredibly isolated, and is searching for a reason to live throughout the play. There’s no religion in it, which is a little different for me. It sounds really dark, but it’s actually much less dark than *The Whale*. But it’s still pretty dark.

Yeah, it’s pretty dark.

But it’s bouncy or something! It sails along a little bit more. And *The Whale* kind of sinks at a certain point, you know? (Laughter)

(first published by PlaywrightsHorizons.org)
The Book of Jonah is a short (4 chapters or books) book in the Old Testament. Jonah attempts to flee God’s calling to testify to the people of Nineveh about their evil ways. He ships out but the boat is plagued with a giant storm and the sailors toss Jonah overboard. He is promptly swallowed by a whale or great fish and spends three days and three nights in the belly of the beast. Jonah prays to God for forgiveness. The whale vomits him up, and, while on land, Jonah seeks shade under a giant gourd. God destroys the plant and Jonah complains, to which God responds “why should I show mercy to the plant and not towards Nineveh?” Jonah does go to Nineveh but is unhappy with having to speak to them. Sermons on this book often focus on the human attempt to hide or distance oneself from an all-knowing and all-merciful God. Jonah and his story also appear in the Qur’an. A long-established expression among sailors uses the term “a Jonah” to mean a person (either a sailor or a passenger) whose presence on board brings bad luck and endangers the ship. In *Moby Dick*, the sermon on Jonah focuses on the terrible punishment resulting from refusing God’s anointment as a prophet to preach the truth, as Jonah did.

*Moby Dick* is Herman Melville’s nineteenth-century compendium/novel that follows the whaling adventures of the book’s narrator, Ishmael (“Call me Ishmael” is the famous first line of the book). He travels to New Bedford, MA where he meets the tattooed and strange companion, Queequeg, an aboriginal Polynesian harpooner who becomes Ishmael’s at first uncomfortable and then cozy bedmate (much has been made of the homoerotic nature of this couple). They attend a sermon on the biblical Jonah and the Whale in New Bedford before finding places on the whaling ship, *The Pequod*, led by the obsessed madman Captain Ahab. Ahab is pursuing revenge on the quasi mythical albino sperm whale Moby Dick, which on a previous voyage destroyed Ahab’s ship and severed his leg at the knee. At times, Melville interrupts the narrative to offer encyclopedic information on whales and sperm oil. In the
final scenes of the book, Ahab finds Moby Dick. Ahab plants his harpoon in the whale's flank. Moby Dick smites the whaleboat, tossing its men into the sea. Only Ishmael survives. The whale now fatally attacks the Pequod. The whale returns to Ahab, who stabs at him again. The line loops around Ahab's neck, and as the stricken whale swims away, the captain is drawn with him out of sight. Queequeg's coffin comes to the surface, the only thing to escape the vortex when Pequod sank. For an entire day Ishmael floats on it, and then the Rachel, still looking for its lost seamen, rescues him.

The novel is based on the real-life wreck of the whaleship Essex as well as Melville's own experiences as a merchant marine. Reading the book often feels like being on a nautical voyage – exciting scenes are interspersed with long repetitive lists and facts and hiatuses from the action, and include meditative sections on the natural world and the events and people on the Pequod. Some have read the book as both a sermon on sin and failed redemption; a warning about America's fatal march towards civil war crippled by slavery; and an obsession with whiteness, "the most meaning symbol of spiritual things," as Melville wrote. Reviewer Kathryn Harrison writes "More capacious than ponderous, "Moby-Dick" has the wild and unpredictable energy of the great white whale itself, more than enough to heave its significance out of what Melville called "the universal cannibalism of the sea" and into the light. Melville challenged the form of the novel decades before James Joyce and a century before Thomas Pynchon or David Foster Wallace. Calling for tools befitting the ambition of his task — "Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius's crater for an ink stand!" — Melville substituted dialogue and stage direction for a chapter's worth of prose. He halted the action to include a parody of the scientific classification of whales, a treatise on the whale as represented in art, a meditation on the complexity of rope, whatever snagged his attention." The book also creates a microcosm of the melting pot of American immigration as northern Europeans, Polynesians, Africans and Native Americans all find themselves trapped in Ahab's doomed mission.
Morbid Obesity

According to the National Health Statistics Obesity is defined as having a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or greater. There is a subset of obesity called morbid or extreme obesity which is defined as having a BMI of 40 or greater or weighing in excess of 100 pounds of one’s ideal weight. The National Center for Health Statistics does not track that number.

However several of our scientists, writing in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) do report on this particular condition. For the period 2003-2004 almost 5 percent of adults were extremely obese.

Basis for Morbid Obesity

The basis of eating disorders and obesity usually lies in some combination of psychosocial, environmental, and genetic or biological attributes. Individuals who suffer from psychological disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, and eating disorders) may have more difficulty controlling their consumption of food, exercising an adequate amount, and maintaining a healthy weight.

- In many obese individuals there appears to be a perpetual cycle of mood disturbance, overeating, and weight gain followed by guilt which reactivates the cycle. This pattern is particularly applicable if there is a genetic predisposition for obesity or a “toxic” environment in which calorically dense foods are readily available and physical activity is limited.
- In addition to depression and anxiety, other risk factors include problematic eating behaviors such as “mindless eating,” frequent snacking on high calories foods, overeating, and night eating.
- Binge eating disorder (BED) is characterized by: recurrent episodes of eating during a discrete period of time (at least 2 days a week over a 6 month period); eating quantities of food that are larger than most people would eat during a similar amount of time; a sense of lack of control during the episodes; and guilt or distress following the episodes.
- BED is estimated to occur in approximately 2% of the general population and between 10% and 25% of the bariatric population.
- Night eating is another disorder that can lead to significant weight gain, though night eating syndrome (NES) is not currently recognized as a distinct diagnosis in the DSM-IV-TR. First identified in 1955, NES is characterized by excessive nighttime consumption (> 35% of daily calories after the evening meal), unhealthy eating patterns, “morning anorexia,” insomnia, and distress. NES occurs in approximately 1% of the general population and an estimated 5-20% of the bariatric population.
Morbid Obesity

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

- Society views obesity very negatively and tends to believe that people who are obese are “weak-willed” and “unmotivated”.
- Obese individuals are often aware of these negative views, and internalize them, putting themselves at risk for disorders of mood, anxiety, and substance abuse.
- They perceive interpersonal and work-related discrimination, often suffer from low self-esteem as a result, and feel uncomfortable with their bodies (i.e. body image dissatisfaction). These feelings may lead to strain on their intimate and romantic relationships.
- 20-70% of obese individuals considering bariatric surgery suffer from a current and/or past psychiatric disorder, of which Major Depressive Disorder is the most prominent.

Jennifer C. Collins, M.A., M.S. and Jon E. Bentz, Ph.D.
- Lancaster General Neuropsychology Specialists

Side Effects

Shortened Life Span

Heart Disease
Severely obese persons are approximately 6 times as likely to develop heart disease as those who are normal-weighted. Severely obese persons are 40 times as likely to suffer sudden death, in many cases due to cardiac rhythm disturbances.

High Blood Pressure
Essential hypertension, the progressive elevation of blood pressure, is much more common in obese persons, and leads to development of heart disease, and damage to the blood vessels throughout the body, causing susceptibility to strokes, kidney damage, and hardening of the arteries. Normal blood pressure is 120/80.
Morbid Obesity

Side Effects

**High Blood Cholesterol**
Cholesterol levels are commonly elevated in the severely obese -- another factor predisposing to development of heart and blood vessel disease. This abnormality is not just related to diet, but is an effect of the massive imbalance in body chemistry which obesity causes.

**Diabetes Mellitus**
Overweight persons are 40 times as likely to develop Type II, Adult-Onset, Diabetes. Elevation of the blood sugar, the essential feature of diabetes, leads to damage to tissues throughout the body. Diabetes is the leading cause of adult-onset blindness, a major cause of kidney failure, and the cause of over one-half of all amputations. It is the #4 cause of death in the United States.

**Sleep Apnea Syndrome**
Sleep apnea -- the stoppage of breathing during sleep -- is commonly caused in the obese, by compression of the neck, closing the air passage to the lungs. It leads to loud snoring, interspersed with periods of complete obstruction, during which no air gets in at all. The sleeping person sounds to an observer like he is holding his breath, but the sleeper is, himself, usually unaware that the problem is occurring at all, or only notices that he sleeps poorly, and awakens repeatedly during the night. The health effects of this condition may be severe, high blood pressure, cardiac rhythm disturbances, and sudden death. Affected persons awaken exhausted and often fall asleep during the day -- sometimes even at the wheel of their car, and complain of being tired all the time. This condition really has a high mortality rate, and is a life-threatening problem.

**Obesity Hypoventilation Syndrome**
This condition occurs primarily in the very severely obese -- over 350 lbs. It is characterized by episodes of drowsiness, or narcosis, occurring during awake hours, and is caused by abnormalities of breathing and accumulation of toxic levels of carbon dioxide in the blood. It is often associated with sleep apnea, and may be hard to distinguish from it.

**Respiratory Insufficiency**
Obese persons find that exercise causes them to be out of breath very quickly, during ordinary activities. The lungs are decreased in size, and the chest wall is very heavy and difficult to lift. At the same time, the demand for oxygen is greater, with any physical activity. This condition prevents normal physical activities and exercise, often interferes with usual daily activities, such as shopping, yard-work or stair climbing, making even ordinary living difficult or miserable, and it can become completely disabling.

**Heartburn - Reflux Disease and Reflux Nocturnal Aspiration**
Acid belongs in the stomach, which makes it to help digest your food, and it seldom causes any problem when it stays there. When it escapes into the esophagus, through a weak or overloaded valve at the top of the stomach, the result is called "heartburn", or "acid indigestion". The real problem is not with digestion, but with the burning of the esophagus by the powerful stomach acid, getting to where it doesn’t belong. When one belches, the acid may bubble up into the back of the throat, causing a fiery feeling there as well. Often this occurs at night, especially after a large or late meal, and if one is asleep when the acid regurgitates, it may actually be inhaled, causing a searing of the airway, and violent coughing and gasping.

This condition is dangerous, because of the possibility of pneumonia or lung injury. The esophagus may become strictureed, or scarred and constricted, causing trouble with swallowing. Approximately 10 - 15% of patients with even mild sporadic symptoms of heartburn will develop a condition called Barrett's esophagus, which is a pre-malignant change in the lining
Side Effects

membrane of the esophagus, a cause of esophageal cancer. The incidence of this type of cancer is increasing in the United States, in parallel with the increase in obesity.

Asthma and Bronchitis

Obesity is associated with a higher rate of asthma, about 3 times normal. Much of this effect is probably due to acid reflux (described above), which can irritate a sensitive airway and provoke an asthmatic attack.

Gallbladder Disease

Gallbladder disease occurs several times as frequently in the obese, in part due to repeated efforts at dieting, which predispose to this problem. When stones form in the gallbladder, and cause abdominal pain or jaundice, the gallbladder must be removed.

Stress Urinary Incontinence

A large heavy abdomen, and relaxation of the pelvic muscles, especially associated with the effects of childbirth, may cause the valve on the urinary bladder to be weakened, leading to leakage of urine with coughing, sneezing, or laughing. This condition is strongly associated with being overweight, and is usually relieved by weight loss.

Degenerative Disease of Lumbo-Sacral Spine

The entire weight of the upper body falls on the base of the spine, and overweight causes it to wear out, or to fail. The consequence may be accelerated arthritis of the spine, or “slipped disk”, when the cartilage between the vertebrae squeezes out. Either of these conditions can cause irritation or compression of the nerve roots, and lead to sciatica -- a dull, intense pain down the outside of the leg.

Degenerative Arthritis of Weight-Bearing Joints

The hips, knees, ankles and feet have to bear most of the weight of the body. These joints tend to wear out more quickly, or to develop degenerative arthritis much earlier and more frequently, than in the normal-weighted person. Eventually, joint replacement surgery may be needed, to relieve the severe pain. Unfortunately, the obese person faces a disadvantage there too -- joint replacement has much poorer results in the obese, and complications are more likely. Many orthopedic surgeons refuse to perform the surgery in severely overweight patients.

Venous Stasis Disease

The veins of the lower legs carry blood back to the heart, and they are equipped with an elaborate system of delicate one-way valves, to allow them to carry blood “uphill”. The pressure of a large abdomen may increase the load on these valves, eventually causing damage or destruction. The blood pressure in the lower legs then increases, causing swelling,
Morbid Obesity

**Side Effects**

thickening of the skin, and sometimes ulceration of the skin. Blood clots also can form in the legs, further damaging the veins, and can also break free and float into the lungs -- called a pulmonary embolism -- a serious or even fatal event.

**Emotional/Psychological Illness**

Seriously overweight persons face constant challenges to their emotions: repeated failure with dieting, disapproval from family and friends, sneers and remarks from strangers. They often experience discrimination at work, and cannot enjoy theatre seats, or a ride in a bus or airliner. There is no wonder, that anxiety and depression might accompany years of suffering from the effects of a genetic condition -- one which skinny people all believe should be controlled easily by will power.

**Social Effects**

Seriously obese persons suffer inability to qualify for many types of employment, and discrimination in employment opportunities, as well. They tend to have higher rates of unemployment, and a lower socioeconomic status. Ignorant persons often make rude and disparaging comments, and there is a general societal belief that obesity is a consequence of a lack of self-discipline, or moral weakness. Many severely obese persons find it preferable to avoid social interactions or public places, choosing to limit their own freedom, rather than suffer embarrassment.

(Source: http://www.gastricbypass.com/hemo.htm)
References

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS

Joseph Smith Jr. was born in 1805 in Sharon, Windsor County, Vermont, to Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith. He had 10 brothers and sisters. His parents taught him to pray, read the Bible, and to have faith in God. At age 14, as an answer to fervent prayer, Joseph saw God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, in his First Vision. At age 17, Joseph began to receive heavenly messengers who prepared him for his role in the Restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ to the earth. Mormons believe that the teachings of the first Christians after the death of Jesus and the apostles were incorrect or apostasy, and that their prophets have the messages about re-creating the “True Church”.

Initial converts were drawn to the church in part because of the newly published Book of Mormon, a self-described chronicle of indigenous American prophets that Smith said he had translated from golden plates. Smith intended to establish the New Jerusalem in North America, called Zion. In 1831, the church moved to Kirtland, Ohio (the eastern boundary of Zion) and began establishing an outpost in Jackson County, Missouri (Zion’s “center place”), where he planned to eventually move the church headquarters. However, in 1833, Missouri settlers brutally expelled the Latter Day Saints from Jackson County. In 1839, the Saints converted a swampland on the banks of the Mississippi River into Nauvoo, Illinois, which became the church’s new headquarters.

Nauvoo grew rapidly as missionaries sent to Europe and elsewhere gained new converts who then flooded into Nauvoo. Meanwhile, Smith introduced polygamy to his closest associates. On June 27, 1844, Smith and his brother Hyrum were murdered by a mob in Carthage, Illinois, while being held on charges of treason. Eventually Brigham Young assumed leadership and settled the church in Salt Lake City. It currently has over 11 million followers worldwide.

What Missionaries Do

“You might wonder what, exactly, a Mormon missionary does, other than ride a bike and knock on doors, or how a young man or woman just out of high school might end up on a mission. Here are the basics.

Most of the Church’s missionaries are around twenty years old, though many members also volunteer to serve after they’ve retired. All prospective missionaries turn in applications to Church headquarters and they receive a call to a specific mission around the world. They spend a few weeks in a training center where some of them learn a new language and all of them rigorously study and practice teaching the gospel. Then they set off to their assigned locations and begin their service. Missionaries’ lives are completely dedicated to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They pay their own way and put off school, dating and work for two years in order to focus entirely on doing the Lord’s work.

A common morning for a missionary might consist of waking up at 6:30 a.m., studying the scriptures, and meeting new people to share the gospel with. The afternoon might include discussing gospel lessons with people they meet and volunteering for service in the community. A good night has them teaching the gospel to interested individuals and helping them learn and keep God’s commandments or attending a baptismal service for someone who’s decided to join the Church. They return home around 9:30 p.m. and fall into bed, usually exhausted and happy.” - (Mormon.org)
What is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ attitude regarding homosexuality and same sex marriage?

“In the Bible, Paul preached to the Romans that homosexual behavior was sinful (see Romans 1:24-32). In Old Testament times Moses included in his law that homosexual relations were against God’s law (see Leviticus 20:13)

Gordon B. Hinckley, prior President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, issued the following statement about homosexuality: “We believe that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God. We believe that marriage may be eternal through exercise of the power of the everlasting priesthood in the house of the Lord. (“The Family: A Proclamation to the World” which was written by twelve modern Apostles through inspiration from the Lord)

“People inquire about our position on those who consider themselves so-called gays and lesbians. My response is that we love them as sons and daughters of God. They may have certain inclinations which are powerful and which may be difficult to control. Most people have inclinations of one kind or another at various times. If they do not act upon these inclinations, then they can go forward as do all other members of the Church. If they violate the law of chastity and the moral standards of the Church, then they are subject to the discipline of the Church, just as others are.

“We want to help these people, to strengthen them, to assist them with their problems and to help them with their difficulties. But we cannot stand idle if they indulge in immoral activity, if they try to uphold and defend and live in a so-called same-sex marriage situation. To permit such would be to make light of the very serious and sacred foundation of God-sanctioned marriage and its very purpose, the rearing of families.” (Ensign, Nov. 1998, 71)

- (Mormon.org)
Themes

EMPATHY

In 2014, Samuel Hunter received the MacArthur “genius” grant and described his work as follows: “Samuel D. Hunter is a playwright who crafts moving portraits of unlikely protagonists and explores the human capacity for empathy through the prism of his characters’ struggles. Born and raised in a small Idaho town, he sets much of his work in his native region, within the nondescript confines of staff break rooms, cramped apartments, and retirement homes inhabited by ordinary people in search of more meaningful human connections. Despite the stark realism of his settings, Hunter leavens his plays with humor and compassion for the lives he depicts, while juxtaposing the banal circumstances of his characters with literary allusions and larger themes of faith and doubt.” - www.macfound.org/fellows. In The Whale, Samuel Hunter has created a protagonist who is beyond morbidly obese, a characteristic that many judge or even find disgusting and then proceeds to explore his journey and challenge us not to identify with him or feel empathy for him.

JOURNEY OF THE HERO

Joseph Campbell created a seminal work of anthropology and literary analysis called The Hero With A Thousand Faces. Based on the work of Carl Jung and Frazier’s The Golden Bough. These writers had noticed that there were certain patterns and characters or archetypes common to many cultures and transcending cultural, geographical and historical boundaries. This “journey of the hero” was most common with epic heroes and spiritual leaders. In very basic terms, each of these “heroes’” stories followed the following pattern:

The hero is introduced in his ordinary world (1), where he receives the call to adventure (2). He is reluctant at first (3) but is encouraged by the wise old man or woman to cross the first threshold (4), where he encounters tests and helpers (5). He reaches the innermost cave, where he endures the supreme ordeal (6). He seizes the sword or the treasure and is pursued on the road back to his world (7). He is resurrected and transformed by his experience (8). He returns to his ordinary world with a treasure, boon, or elixir to benefit his world (9).

George Lucas used these ideas for the basis of the Star Wars movies, and many adventure movies such as Indiana Jones are based on these steps, as well. Jonah and Ishmael certainly also follow these steps, as do most divine heroes such as Jesus. The innermost cave is often called “the belly of the beast” or “harrowing hell” or spending time in the underworld. Several of the characters in Hunter’s play seem to also experience aspects of this journey. How would you match Charlie and Ellie, for example, to these steps?

SPIRITUAL YEARNING

Samuel Hunter has written that he is “built for religion” and a yearning for the spiritual -- a yearning directly in conflict with the increasing banality, anomy and big box sameness of American small towns. Many of his plays feature suicides and thus have been characterized as bleak. Hunter has responded by saying: “I think the suicides in the plays I’m writing -- or, what are suicidal acts -- come from a place of clarity and reason. In a certain way, it’s a conclusion to the question these plays struggle with. If you’re really concerned about what your place is in 2012, and you can’t reconcile the divine with the quotidian, then to release yourself from the quotidian is a very viable option.”

How can we continue to find the divine and beautiful in an increasingly corporatized and commercial culture?
Design

SET DESIGN, By James Fouchard
The Whale Cast

Megan Anderson (Liz) *
Michael Russotto (Charlie) *
Jenna Rossman (Ellie) **
Wood Van Meter (Elder Thomas) **

Susan Rome (Mary) *

* Denotes Member of Actors’ Equity Association
** Denotes Equity Membership Candidate
On Cephalopods

“Call me Ishmael” begins Moby Dick, Herman Melville’s nineteenth-century encyclopedic on whales and whaling. His tale chronicles the adventures of Ishmael and his companions, including his bedmate Queequeg and the harpooner Starbuck, on the ill-fated ship the Pequod captained by the obsessed one-legged Captain Ahab. Ahab is in pursuit of the quasi-mythical white whale, Moby Dyck. Before setting out, Ishmael and Queequeg attend a fiery sermon on the travails of the biblical Jonah, who was tossed overboard by sailors when he attempted to flee from God’s mission, and then spent three nights and three days in the belly of a whale, isolated, and seemingly abandoned by all.

Melville’s so-called “novel” begins in a coastal whaling village and continues through a number of exotic seas, a far cry from the desiccated and landlocked small towns of Idaho that playwright Samuel Hunter uses as the inspirations and settings of his plays Pocatello, A Bright New Boise, and The Whale. Hunter has written that the plays explore the tension between “small town pride and parking lot desolation” and between “the divine and the quotidian.”

The mysterious wildernesses that Melville explored and described have here been replaced by the soul-numbing sameness of big box stores and corporatized packaged experiences. Hunter suggests that the desire for epic quests has not gone, but that the journey has become internalized for his immobilized characters. The play’s title seems at first to be a pejorative reference to the massive size of Charlie, the main character. A deeper reading suggests a mythic universe in which characters continue to reach out for connection and meaning in a world that seems to devalue both their identities and their desires. His characters exist on the fringe of the fringes; individuals who have been easy targets for caricature in popular culture because of their beliefs, appearance or class, but in Hunter’s cosmos are offered up with sincerity and compassion.

In the end, the whale disgorges Jonah to deliver his message to the disinterested people of Nineveh, and Ishmael, the lone survivor of the Pequod, is rescued clinging to a coffin to narrate a book that is almost unreadable in its conventions. At the end of such epic struggles toward transcendence, who is left to tell the tale and who is willing to hear it?

- Lisa A. Wilde, Production Dramaturg
Theater Etiquette

Attending the theater will be a positive experience for everyone if you observe a few simple courtesies:

- Turn off and put away all electronic devices prior to entering the theater.
- Taking photographs and video recording in the theater is prohibited.
- Do not place your feet on the seat in front of you.
- The actors onstage can see and hear the audience just as well as the audience can see and hear them. Please refrain from talking or moving around during the performance as it can be distracting to the actors, as well as to other audience members.
- Feel free to respond to the action of the play through appropriate laughter and applause. The actors enjoy this type of communication from the audience!
- Have fun! Attending theater should be an enjoyable experience.