



Interview with Fin Kennedy

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We ask some of Off West End's theatre folk 9 questions

Bio

Fin Kennedy's first play PROTECTION was produced at Soho Theatre in 2003, where he was also Pearson writer-in-residence. His second play HOW TO DISAPPEAR COMPLETELY AND NEVER BE FOUND won the 2006 Arts Council John Whiting Award, the first time in 40 years that an unproduced play had won. It was subsequently produced at Sheffield Crucible to critical acclaim.

Fin's first play for teenagers, LOCKED IN, was produced by Half Moon Young People's Theatre in 2006 and toured nationally. His second play for Half Moon, WE ARE SHADOWS opens at the end of this month before setting off on tour.

Fin also writes for community groups, and has been writer-in-residence all year at Mulberry School in Tower Hamlets, for whom he wrote MEHNDI NIGHT, a sell-out smash hit at this year's Edinburgh Festival. Find out more on his website www.finkennedy.co.uk

What first attracted you to the theatre?

I suppose first of all it was youth theatres and acting in school plays when I was a kid. Then later, during A-level Drama, I decided I wanted more control over a production and got interested in directing. But it soon occurred to me that I was still working with other people's material when what I actually wanted to do was produce my own. So I started writing. I've always been fascinated by storytelling and with language, especially accents, slang and speech patterns. But there's something special about playwriting in particular as it's such an ancient tradition; it occupies a place outside of society looking in. Playwrights are the nearest we get in the modern world to state funded philosophers. For me playwriting is very much part of democracy, it's about taking part in a social discourse about who we are and where we're going.

If you could pick any one person or theatre company to work with on your next project, who/which would it be?
I wouldn't like to narrow it down to just one! In terms of directors I'd love to do something new with Ellie Jones who directed HOW TO DISAPPEAR in Sheffield. I'm also a big fan of Rufus Norris and Lisa Goldman. As for companies, I'd be intrigued to explore new ways to tell stories with some of the less text-based companies like Complicité, De La Guarda, Shunt or Frantic Assembly. I also love it when companies take their work out into the community, like The Red Room did with Hoxton Story and Soho is about to do with Moonwalking In Chinatown. To be involved from scratch with a project like that would be really exciting.

What is your opinion of Off West End theatre, in general?

Well it's certainly better than the West End right now! But there's always more that could be done. The precarious economics of working as a freelancer in the theatre mean that there's still a profusion of practitioners from the sorts of backgrounds where they can afford to take a financial knock or two, at the expense of some of London's more culturally diverse communities being represented. The result is that the work that gets on isn't always as accurate a reflection of

our city as it could be. And that's a shame not just in a box-ticking sense but because it's important that everyone feels they have a stake in the culture we all pay for through our taxes. There's also a great untapped source of stories in London's incoming communities. That said, this sort of work does go on, it's just invisible to the mainstream media. I'd like to see the sort of pioneering work with young people which Half Moon (and companies like it) undertake given more recognition and column inches. This is why sites OffWestEnd.com are so important.

What was the most inspiring performance you have ever seen? Why?

The Red Room's HOXTON STORY completely blew me away. It was a promenade performance through the backstreets and estates of Hoxton and on into the 'gentrified' art galleries and cinemas of Shoreditch, with actors and locals popping up to play out scenes together. It was such a devastating political critique of the short-sightedness of the 'regeneration' agenda, and the whole spirit and form of the show was geared towards giving the locals from that community a voice to answer back. It was like a glimpse of the next stage in theatre's evolution, where it will become part of reality so you can't tell what's real and what's part of the show. It was brilliantly disorientating and affecting, and showed just how powerful an inclusive political theatre could be. Every east London local politician should have been made to go.

What piece of work are you the most proud of?

It has to be MEHNDI NIGHT, my play for Bengali girls at this year's Edinburgh Fringe. Me and the director Jools Voce worked with ten teenagers from Mulberry School for eight months on coming up with the story and characters. We felt so privileged to be allowed into those kids' lives, and so proud to be able to give them a voice. We gave a professional structure and form to their ideas and within that they were able to give life to their own characters and story. In an economical single act of 40 minutes we took in all the messy contradictions and joys of third generation Bengali female identity. I still haven't managed to sit through it with dry eyes! We're hoping to revive it in London this autumn at Southwark Playhouse so keep an eye on my website www.finkennedy.co.uk

What makes a really good character?

Lots of things. Empathy is pretty important, and for me that comes from spending time with people like that character, hearing how they speak, understanding what makes them tick, getting inside their heads. 'Real life' research not only triggers the creative process but also ensures the end result has the ring of truth. There's a big element of psychology to good characterisation - I've found Jung quite useful, and theories about personality like the Myers Briggs test. Even the hateful characters with views most contrary to your own you should totally believe in and sympathise with in the moment in which you are writing them. A facility with language is pretty essential too, being able to capture that character's energy through the way they speak - practice is the only way to get that right I've found.

Are there any actors/actresses you would like to write a play for?

This country's acting talent is perhaps its greatest artistic asset so I'm spoilt for choice! There's also so much amazing new talent coming through the drama schools every year. But off the top of my head, I'm a big fan of Sophie Okonedo, Nicola Walker, Paterson Joseph, Danny Cerqueira, Danny Mays, Alun Armstrong, Pete Postlethwaite, Jonny Lee Miller, Chipu Chung, Zawe Ashton... I could go on all afternoon. I'm also a big fan of THE WIRE so I'd love to do something for the brilliant (and criminally under-employed in this country) Idris Elba, though I might be a bit scared of him.

What play do you wish you'd written?

ATTEMPTS ON HER LIFE by Martin Crimp. He'll go down in history for that play, for showing us all that there is another way.

Can you tell our readers about what you're doing now/next?

I'm working on an as-yet-untitled huge new play for Liquid Theatre, the concept of which is that it's a modern Jacobean revenge tragedy for the 21st century, complete with sex, death and poetry. I've got another play at second draft stage called SOUTH OF THE RIVER which I'm hoping to find a home for soon. I'm also developing new ideas for Half Moon and Radio 4, plus I'll be doing another play with the girls of Mulberry School at next year's Edinburgh Fringe.

We Are Shadows is on at the Half Moon from 27 September. For details and tickets, [click here](#)>

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