

Playwright Joshua Scher and Director Claudia Zelevansky met in The Flea's green room on an October morning to talk about THE FOOTAGE, which begins performances Downstairs @ The Flea on October 23rd.

Josh, tell us about how this play came to The Flea?

SCHER: Originally I had submitted a couple of plays, which followed the New York theatre trend – two actors, one set, no intermission. Carol [Ostrow, the Producing Director of The Flea] turned around and shocked me by asking for a play for a dozen young actors – No theaters ask for this. I got to shift my entire approach – I had been so used to reducing – but now I could unpack the scale and I wrote *THE FOOTAGE*.

Was it a pleasure to be able to think big, in terms of cast?

SCHER: It was great! The play can open itself up to multiple stories – dovetailing back and forth into each other. I wasn't limited; it was really fun to find the connection between the lives of these characters. Originally I thought it was more Chance's story [Chance is a character in *THE FOOTAGE*], but through writing and rewriting and rehearsing, especially because of our large ensemble, all the characters have taken over, each with their own set of wants and stakes..

ZELEVANSKY: In fact having a sick actor actually becomes a problem, because it's such an ensemble play.

SCHER: It was a very nice opportunity to be able to write this – especially with a viable production possibility for it.

You two have a very long standing relationship. How did you meet?

ZELEVANSKY: We were in the same class at graduate school, ten years ago. At Yale Drama School, you don't pick the play you work on, and the first play I was handed was Joshua's play. That play – which was called *IS* – makes this play look simple! That play was so complex, conceptually, technically, and since it was grad school we have limited resources, so we had to make the play come to life with very limited means. Adrian Jones [the set designer for *THE FOOTAGE*] did set design for *IS* – and that design had such a fluid, complex form. He's really smart and gets Josh's work. His design is both about problem-solving and telling the story.

SCHER: It was my first play in grad school – so of course it was very 'meta' – and Claudia used words like 'liminal' so I fell in love with her! [Group laughs.]

ZELEVANSKY: The play was radical in terms of content, and my background was avant-garde, so I was excited. I came to grad school expecting to have to make one well-made play after another. When they handed me Josh's play, I could see it had challenges.

SCHER: Claudia and I did a reading of *IS* here at The Flea actually, via Mac Wellman, years ago.

Have you two worked together since grad school?

SCHER: We've talked about projects, done readings. Claudia is my go-to director/dramaturg.

ZELEVANSKY: I was in Dallas for years, but we stayed in touch and talked about Josh's work.

Did you know about The Flea's acting company, The Bats?

ZELEVANSKY: When Josh said Bats to me, I didn't completely know, and when I first talked to Carol, she told me these were serious, gifted, emerging young theatre artists.

SCHER: Of course I'm familiar with the Bats; I wrote the play with them in mind. The characters in *The Footage* come from the same pool we were auditioning - young 20-somethings.

ZELEVANSKY: Once I read the play, its rhythms and its language, the concept of using the Bats started to get exciting. They are at the very beginning of moving into professional life, they are hungry for good work, and they are collaborative. Their team-building and relationship-building has been interesting to watch. I would describe them as very resourceful-

SCHER: Committed-

ZELEVANSKY: Creative. A lot of them are further along than they think they are. They are in control of their talents more than they realize.

SCHER: The Bats are consistently bringing intriguing choices to the table. We we're in a unique position too, as almost all of our Bats are new, so we [Scher and Zelevansky] were a part of the selection process.

ZELEVANSKY: They've shown a lot of initiative outside the rehearsals to make the show happen. Also, this play is unusually challenging for actors, because they have to maintain dimensional character work while huge tech elements are going on around them.

SCHER: They are genuinely excited by the tech elements!

ZELEVANSKY: They are helping me – helping us with their interest and enthusiasm.

Downstairs @ The Flea is an unusual space, to say the least. What is it like to work in there?

SCHER: As you say, it is a very unique space. The trick is to work with it, not hide what it is. The show is written to have fluidity, with several locations. Because I had Downstairs @ The Flea in mind when I wrote it, it was written to have this inevitable bleed. One location is a basement, the other is a New York apartment, both are believable in the downstairs space. What is really working is the emphasis on the abstract nature of space – the form and content of the play work well with the unusual form of the space.

ZELEVANSKY: We've been pretty rigorous to tell the story of the play using the space. And in these final rehearsals we will be fixing, changing and responding to the idiosyncrasies of the space.

SCHER: One element that has been unique and surprising, my concept of *machinima* was to show them via projection. Claudia and Adrian's solution of using five monitors is a much more exciting delivery method.

ZELEVANSKY: Our lighting designer said something about how live theater mixed with video can look very clunky – it can really work for you or really not. He thought the *machinima* should work in such a way that we move forward each time. One projection would be too disruptive.

SCHER: The monitors are more all encompassing.

ZELEVANSKY: We started talking about the way we process technology – 5 monitors, visually, how that would feel. At least one would be in each audience member's immediate visual range, and two peripherally, and two farther away. This experience of the monitors mimics the emotional experience of 2008.

SCHER: The design solution has amplified the play's themes of voyeurism and implicating the voyeur.

ZELEVANSKY: The machinima in certain ways are totally seductive. If you've ever been inside World of Warcraft, each character can only do things one way. There is a seduction and a repetition. They are both emotional and disconnected. They contract and expand, as does the world of the play.

In a few sentences, what would each of you say if you were telling someone why they should see this play?

SCHER: If the person were younger, I would say you have to come see this play because this is theater for you, for the YouTube generation. Your experiences are reflected in this show. If the person were older, I would say

this show is a portal into this younger generation; you can access them, without needing to know Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, etc.

ZELEVANSKY: To a younger person, like one of my acting students at Queens College, I would say this play reflects you and your experiences, and hopefully opens up the world to you in a way you never saw it before. Your behaviors, texting, YouTube, etc – we're bringing those in and putting them under a mirror. For people who are not of that generation, who are theatre patrons or theatre makers, who have grown frustrated with the lack of theatricality in plays, which have come to ape television and film, I would tell them *THE FOOTAGE* is absolutely not that. We are using varied and strong elements to bring this play to life, using multimedia resources and classical techniques. It is a very theatrical experience. No one will ever make a movie of this. It's an intimate space and the play is visceral, emotional, sexual.

Anything else to add about the play or your process?

ZELEVANSKY: We're living in a moment – opening this play at the time of the election – a dynamic and scary time to be living in. And I'm glad this play highlights issues of morality and social accountability. That's one of the ways I can connect to it as a director, separate from the technology, is that the play is about the concept of connection.

SCHER: A lot of theatre that focuses on technology have taken a judgmental approach, i.e. see how technology is making us dumber or worse as people. This play is not judgmental, it is an exploration.

ZELEVANSKY: How technology supports and undermines us.

SCHER: How are our experiences are mediated by this? How much more do break-ups hurt or don't if they are done via text message?

ZELEVANSKY: The play is also very funny, sexy and entertaining. Additionally it is an exploration of that moment, age 17 – 25, when you are pushing through the membrane of childhood to adulthood, and finding your voice.