

In Providence: An Atlantic Avenue Proposal



If you go over to their house on a Saturday night, he'll fix dinner and she'll tell you the story about how he lost the engagement ring.

"He's the type where I'm always telling him not to put something off, and he's always putting things off, and that's how he got himself in trouble."

When they have company, he likes to cook something that fills the house up with the smells of pepper and pork and freshly poured wine.

"I knew he was going to propose. I had been telling my mother for two weeks- This man is getting ready to propose. I was waiting on it. One night, he comes home, he's got a bag with him. A shopping bag. I forget where it was from, but it was from no place I'd be interested in. Dick's Sporting Goods or something. That was his little plan. Put the ring in a bag that I wouldn't go looking through. We'd been living together for a year at this point in time. I asked him, 'What was in the bag?' and he gave me some answer, but I had my suspicions."

He chimes in from the kitchen that it wasn't a Dick's Sporting Goods bag, but he can't remember where it was from. She tells him that he can never remember details and that's why he does the cooking and she does the storytelling.

"Now what he didn't see was that the bag got wet, because it was raining, and so the bottom of the bag is wet, okay? He doesn't see that. I don't say anything, because I'm not supposed to be interested in the bag, but I see the hole at the bottom, and I'm thinking, My ring better not be out there getting wet on the lawn."

Wet would have been an improvement when she woke up the next morning.

"I wake up the next morning and there's two feet of snow on the ground."

What was supposed to be a rainy Saturday morning had instead turned into a full-on snowstorm. The kind that's made worse by the lack of anticipation. She looked out the window and launched into a panic.

"He's still asleep in bed, and I'm shaking him, *'Wake up! Wake up! It snowed!'* I'm not even pretending to not know that he must have had my ring in that bag. I'm hoping it didn't fall out, but when he wakes up and sees the snow, I can tell from looking at him that he thinks I'm being crazy, so I gotta say, *'There was a hole in your bag!'* He doesn't know what I'm talking about, and I have to say, *'There was a hole in that bag you brought home last night. On the bottom of it! There was a hole in the bag and now there's two feet of snow on the ground.'* Then I see him freak out, and that's when I know we have a problem."

They dispensed with pretending that maybe he hadn't gotten her an engagement ring, and instead, he ran out to the car, still wearing only what he'd had on in bed. A pair of boxer shorts and a tank. She managed to throw some boots on him before he stomped out to the car, only to report back that the ring wasn't there.

"That's when I was like, *'Okay, Code Red.'*"

The two of them put on hats, gloves and as many layers as they could, because the snow was still coming down and it was freezing out. They started digging from the driveway to the front door, but nothing turned up.

"I'm crying, because I'm thinking, *'My ring is gone. My engagement is ruined. We didn't even get to the part where he gets down on one knee. I'm freezing my #\$\$#'s off. Do you believe this?'*"

In the kitchen, I hear him laughing, because he already knows where the story is going.

"We dug a whole path to the front door, and nothing. We start digging around the path. We end up digging up the whole front yard almost. Just the two of us. I went inside to call my two brothers, and they came over to help us dig, but they almost got into a car accident on the way over, because the roads were so bad. We got four people now digging and shoveling, and no ring. My mother calls and I have to run into the house. She wants to know what he said when he proposed. I'm crying, *'Mama, he didn't propose yet! We gotta find the ring first! If he tries to propose to me before he finds the ring, I'll kill him before we even get married!'*"

Another foot of snow had accumulated while they'd been trying to dig past the first two feet, and they decided to take a break. The couple and the couple of brothers sat down in the kitchen to eat something and warm up. He started cooking something on the stove when he remarked that a stone in his boot had been bothering him the whole time they'd been out there.

"I looked at my brothers like *'Is he serious right now? Because if this is what I think it is...'*"

The boot came off, and there was the ring. It had to have landed in the footwear as he was taking off his shoes next to the front door the previous night while holding the decoy bag.

"We're all laughing, and I want to kill him, but then he gets down on his knee right there in the kitchen. He tells me he loves me more than anything in the world, and would I marry him? I should have said *'No'* because he gave me a heart attack with that ring, but I lost my mind the same way I would have if everything had gone perfect. That's how much I love him."

If you make a trip to their house on Atlantic Avenue some Saturday night in a few months when we'll all be ready to sit in kitchens and listen to stories again, you'll find it's a place with lots of cooking and music and noise. They have three kids, one dog and losing things is still commonplace.

"Our two sons are just like him. Can't hold onto anything. Our daughter is better. She's like me. Thank god I have at least one other girl in the house."

When she goes to put their youngest to bed, she hands the phone over to him and I ask if he minds hearing that story again, knowing she's told it a hundred times.

"Nah, I like hearing her tell it. I like the part where she says, *'Yes'* the most. That's the best part. Hang on, I think I got to help her out with storytime."

Meanwhile, on my end of the line, I can hear the food sizzling on the stove, and the sound of three kids all in various stages of getting ready for bed, and a song in the background I know I've heard before, but that sounds great all the same.

Kevin's Culture Picks: What's our cultural expert been watching?

Every week, I've been doing a deep dive into cultural issues, usually theater-related, that are bothering me or that deserve a second look. But who needs another thinkpiece, right?

I host two weekly programs on my theater company's Facebook page ([Facebook.com/EpicTheatreCo](https://www.facebook.com/EpicTheatreCo)) where I ask guests what has been keeping them creatively engaged or excited, and I thought I could put together some of the movies, television shows, books and music we discuss.

I'll do this at the beginning of every month (until we're out of ... this), and hopefully it'll keep you busy during as we start to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

So, here's what I enjoyed in the month of February:

Movies

I Care A Lot (Streaming on Netflix)

Barb and Star Go to Vista Del Mar (Streaming on Amazon)

Nomadland (On Hulu)

Minari (On Demand *and* at The Avon)

Television

“Search Party” (HBO Max)

“The Muppet Show” (Not exactly new, but now available on Disney+ which also gave us Brandy in

“Cinderella” this past month and-)

“WandaVision”

“It’s a Sin” (HBO Max)

“Dickinson” (Apple TV)

Books

Actress, by Anne Enright

Let’s Get Back to the Party, by Zak Salih

My Year Abroad, by Rae Lee

Music

Collapsed in Sunbeams, Arlo Parks

OK Human, Weezer

Sex, Addiction, & Everyone Else, Nicotine Dolls

Not Your Muse, Celeste

Herald, Odette

Three Little Words, Dominique Fils-Amie

Pink Planet, Pink Sweat\$

Revolutionary Love, Ani DiFranco

Ignorance, The Weather Station

Open Door Policy, The Hold Steady

Moonlit Fools, Sam Dew

American Silence, Chris Pierce

Best Streaming Theater of the Month

Hi, Are You Single? — Ryan J. Haddad’s one-man show directed by Laura Savia and Jess McLeod, and present by Woolly Mammoth, about navigating the waters of modern gay dating as a man with cerebral

palsy was a blast of irreverent fresh air at a time when many of us have grown used to expecting, well, not very much from any streaming theater we may be letting into our homes. Discovering a play like this, and a talent like Haddad's, is exactly why we shouldn't plan on chucking digital once in-person becomes available again.

In Providence: Falling in love on Smith Street



When I was in high school, I used to walk up Smith Street to my dad's office. I'd start at LaSalle Academy and make my way past the houses, law offices, gas stations and plazas. I'd pass the North Providence town line and haul my backpack almost to the end of the street. I never had a problem with doing the walk, because even on a busy road, you'd catch glimpses of people's lives as they walked past you or you stopped at a light and listened to the music coming out of their open car windows.

"I started walking last April when the weather warmed up, and I asked him if he wanted to join me. I live near the Walgreen's and he lives closer to where the college is, so we would meet up near my place and go from there."

They had dated briefly at the beginning of the year, but both their schedules were so tight, it was hard to ever make plans to see each other. They chose to interpret that as "the timing being off" and they let any chance of future dates go by the wayside.

"That would happen to me all the time. I kept saying, you know, that my work was my main priority — and it was, but I had, you know, convinced myself that I would meet someone who could fit into this crazy schedule I had, and now, looking back, I see that nobody was going to. There was nowhere to put anybody. My life from the time I woke up until I went to bed was work, work, work. I don't know how I thought I was going to be able to start a relationship with all that going on around me."

Like many young professionals, she found herself having to reorganize her entire life once going into the office was no longer an option. Not only was she now working from home, but drinks with coworkers after hours and going out on weekends to try and maintain some semblance of a personal life was out the window as well.

"I thought, 'Let's try walking.' Everybody's walking. I live in this nice area. Let me go for a walk."

But she didn't want to walk alone.

"I had met him through a friend, and conveniently, we lived near each other. I don't know why, but I shot him a message one day, and I said, 'I'm going for a walk. Would you like to join me?' He said he would like that, and we started walking together every day after that."

If you're one of those people who started walking as the result of the pandemic, you might have noticed places you thought were familiar take on a new light. Driving by something and walking past it are two very different things. She was discovering that about her neighborhood, and about her walking partner

as well.

“The thing is, you go on a few dates with someone, and you think you’ve got a sense of who they are. We were walking every day, and I’m learning all these interesting things about him. Why didn’t I hear any of that before? I would stop him and say ‘Why didn’t you tell me that before?’ and either he had told me and I wasn’t listening or I hadn’t shown enough of an interest in him to the point where he even wanted to tell me anything. He knew things weren’t going anywhere because I was so preoccupied. I was so mad at myself, because he turned out to be this great guy, and I had written him off.”

She found herself in the odd position of falling in love with someone she had already dismissed from her life. Luckily for her, he was enjoying getting to know a different side of her. The two soon found themselves going walking more than once a day, running nearby errands on foot, even making trips to downtown and back.

“I tell everybody I got in great shape trying to make up for lost time. We both got addicted to it though, I think, to spending time with each other and to walking when we could. We couldn’t go in anywhere at first, because of COVID, but we would get fresh air, and see other people walking, and just get out of the house for a little bit and feel like we were taking back a small part of our lives.”

By the time things started to settle down, she had already determined that she wanted him to be more than a walking partner.

“We started to go for a walk. It was a Sunday afternoon. I kept trying to start the conversation, and I was so nervous about it, I almost walked into traffic. He knew something was up with me. When I told him that I wanted another shot at us dating, he was so relieved, because he thought I was going to cut him loose again. We were both feeling like we didn’t want to let this go this time around, and, you know, we both feel very appreciative that we got a second chance, because not everybody gets that.”

If you go walking down Smith Street, you may see two people walking by you or on the other side of the road. They might look like a couple that’s always been in love, but not every happy ending is the result of a fairy tale.

“We still walk every day. I still work hard. I love my work. I’m proud of my work. But this year has taught me that work isn’t going to be there for you when you’re having a hard time with the world. You need people for that. You need people.”

Sometimes you need to be forced to take a second look to see what it is you almost missed.

Adventures in Digital Theater: Or when the comments section strikes back

On President’s Day, I did a live digital reading of a play I’d written called *Mayor Pete*.

It's a one-man show about Pete Buttigieg, small-town mayor, former Presidential candidate, and current Secretary of Transportation, who recently made history as America's first openly gay cabinet member.

Because I've been a little wary of doing any long-form content on my theater's social media, I was ambivalent about the reading itself.

I thought it might be useful to practice performing the piece in front of the one or two people I assumed would be watching in preparation for an in-person production of the show later in the year. Then again, I thought assuming one or two people might show up was already setting the bar way too high.

The only marketing I did for the show was a press release I sent out that, as far as I can tell, got picked up by exactly one news outlet.

Of course, due to the wonder of Google alerts, sometimes one news outlet can be like the chimney in *Mary Poppins* — sending a ripped up note to a magical nanny land where Julie Andrews is just waiting to come down to earth so she can organize your nursery.

The resulting article was noticed by Pete's fan club, and they showed up in droves to watch me do a 90-minute play all about their idol.

Unfortunately for them — and I guess, for me — the play is not a cut-and-dried autobiography of Pete. In fact, it's an imagined version of Pete that presents a fantastical and unfiltered look at him and his brief time in public life. While it doesn't exactly make him look bad, it's not striving to present any kind of accurate picture of him.

Guess how well that went over with the fan club?

As I was reading the piece, I made an effort not to look at the comments section, but once I reached the ending, I knew the firing squad was already locked and loaded. It's funny how, even with a digital audience, you can tell when your work has landed like a parachute made out of titanium. In a moment of great wisdom, I had promised at the top of the reading that once it was over, I would do — deep breath — a Q&A.

Reader, there were so many Qs and I had so few As.

For one thing, many of the people watching the livestream had little-to-no knowledge of theater. That isn't me being a gatekeeper, but just someone pointing out that some of these people really expected me to simply repeat things Pete has said or read sections of his book *Trust* like a witness reading a statement into the public record.

Others were more open to the idea that I would be taking liberties, but they felt that I was misrepresenting some of Pete's views, and they wondered why I would use Pete at all and not just write a play called *Generic Gay Mayor Who Runs for President*. I tried to think of a tactful way to say "Nobody would watch that" while not exactly admitting that playwrights use public figures in their work to draw interest to it, because I've done that once before, and it turns out that while those people are fair game, there's nothing preventing them from sending you a cease and desist letter all the same.

After about a half hour, I found that most of the people commenting were quite nice, even if they weren't fans of what I had done. Most thought the play needed to be cut (they're right) and some openly

espoused their love for Pete. I had to be frank and say that I don't think it's a wise idea to idolize any politician. One woman accused me of being a "Bernie Bro" and while I was trying to stay cool and collected, I felt steam coming out of my ears like one of those cartoon wolves watching a pretty girl perform in a nightclub act.

Performing to that kind of hostile audience is exactly the kind of thing I *shouldn't* miss about doing theater, but the truth is, it felt more like theater than anything I've done since the start of the pandemic, because if you were trying to embody what stand-up comedy feels like, you'd be dishonest if you told yourself it felt like the time when everybody was laughing and you were nailing every joke.

It's the same for theater.

While we're tempted to remember only the good things, I think it's safe to say that at this point, I've started to miss even the bad stuff — like that audience that just isn't into what you're doing. The talkback where you feel as though you're defending your work like it's a child being bullied on a playground because the kid talks a little too much. Having to grapple with the fact that any new work that elicits a strong response is always preferable to everybody saying, "*Good job,*" then high-tailing it out of the lobby.

For a half hour after I was finished reading my new play, I was harangued, insulted and criticized. For most people, it would have been a nightmare. An entire comments section that you can't look away from regaling you with negativity. I had a moment where I wondered if I should simply throw water on my laptop in the hopes that it would be destroyed and I could stop having to explain myself.

It wasn't until I was on the way home that I thought to myself-

Wow, I missed that.

In Providence: Falling in love on Federal Hill

If you took the chance to walk down Federal Hill on a cold February night a few years ago, you might have seen her showing him how to change a tire.

"He wanted to go out on our first date. I knew it was Valentine's Day, but I didn't want to bring it up, because I thought he knew what day it was, and that's why he was asking me. I get to the date, and he says, 'Did you know it was Valentine's Day?' He didn't know, but here we are, no reservations anywhere and all the prices were up, because of what day it was. He hadn't planned for any of that."

They found a place that would take them, but the table was near the kitchen, and they couldn't hear each other over the sound of the Valentine's Day rush.

"You know how you're on a bad date and you know it's a bad date and they know it's a bad date? That's what this was. It was a bad date. I felt bad for him, to tell you the truth. He knew it was a disaster."

Afterward, he tried to salvage the date by taking her to an upscale bar, and the two of them were walking in as a brawl was spilling out onto the street.

“Some guy thought some other guy was hitting on his girl, and they come flying out, and the manager’s behind them, and some of the other drunks were getting in on it. I think he caught a fist to the side of his head, if I remember it right. The side of his head or his cheek. But he got hit. Somebody called the police. Him and me were sitting on the sidewalk — me in this new dress I got — and I’m holding snow up to the side of his face to try and stop the swelling.”

When it was clear this date wasn’t just bad, but historically bad, he offered to walk her back to her car so they could call it a night.

“We got to talking as we were walking down Atwells, and he made me laugh more in that walk back, talking about the night we just had, then I had laughed in a long time. I had been through a lot that year, and I was not laughing a lot. My mom had gotten sick, and we lost a cousin of mine, and the only reason I went out on the date is because we had a mutual friend who told me that she thought the two of us would get along, but I wasn’t buying it. Then we’re going down the street, and I notice that I’m walking slower, because I want to keep talking to him.”

They got to his car first, and he offered to drive her to her car. That’s when she noticed the flat tire.

“I thought he was going to run away. He was so embarrassed. I said, ‘You got a spare?’ He said he could call AAA, but his card was expired. I told him, ‘Let’s walk to my car. I have a jack. I can change the tire.’ My father ran an autobody shop. I had everything I needed to change the tire. Changing a tire is nothing to me.”

She was expecting him to put up some sort of macho fight about it, but he was nothing but grateful. That resonated with her.

“I said, ‘If he puts up a fight about this’ — because I’ve had guys not like it when they find out I’ve worked on cars and I’ve played sports my whole life growing up, but he thought it was great. He kept complimenting me on being able to do something like that, and I said I could teach him, and next thing I know, we’re kind of flirting with each other about it.”

That was how they ended up making out in his car.

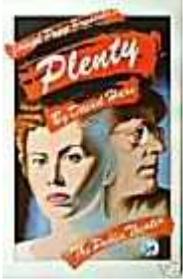
“I put a new tire on it. I may as well get paid for my work, right?”

That was several years ago, and this year, they celebrated Valentine’s Day in their apartment together.

“Every Valentine’s Day since then has been great. No problems, but that first one is my favorite, because it was the first, and because, even though it all went wrong, it didn’t matter. I didn’t realize it until we started that walk back, but I was never going to wind up with anybody else. He had me the minute I saw him standing outside that restaurant without a reservation. I thought, ‘Look at this dope,’ but what I really thought was, ‘That dope’s all mine.’”

If you’re looking for love in Providence, it might not look exactly how you thought it would, but that’s why it’s good to keep an open mind and a spare in your backseat.

On “Plenty”: The play to read right now



There are certain plays I reread every year, because in some ways, it's the best way to remind yourself how to write.

David Hare has, sadly, become a rarely produced playwright. It's partly because he's not scared of being topical, leaning into the moment and creating something that's so specific it feels out of place even a year or two later.

He's more accessible (and much more emotional) than Stoppard, but Stoppard is more fun to perform, and much more witty, whereas Hare prefers unabashed intensity.

If I had to give you a title to introduce you to Hare, it would be *Skylight*, but it's yet another love story between a younger woman and an older man (on Broadway it was Carey Mulligan and Bill Nighy, which ... eek), and I don't think it gives you the full scope of Hare's abilities.

For that, I would recommend *Plenty*.

And upon my annual re-reading of the play, I found that not only is it Hare at his best, but it's a forty-three year-old play that is so perfectly suited, not to the moment we're in, but the moment I believe we're *about* to be in.

Plenty is the story of Susan Traherne, a former government agent, as she tries to adjust to life post-war, while flashing back to some of the most exciting and traumatic events of her past. The title refers to the promise of England after the war, that there would be "plenty." Those promises fell flat, and those called to serve their country were told they should be glad those days are behind them, even as the rush from being of service lingers on.

A few weeks ago, I wrote about plays I'd like to see produced once the pandemic is over. *Plenty* could be on that list, but it's also a play you could benefit from reading right now, because it'll take some time to process.

It makes the unusual argument that when exiting a catastrophe, you might find yourself missing the circumstances of the catastrophe, and what it does to the human psyche to feel nostalgic for periods of hardship and danger.

We now have more information about trauma than we did when David Hare wrote *Plenty*. We understand that it's not the conflict we miss, but the feeling of importance people might have as they

navigate a significant moment in history, particularly if they assist in the battle for what's right or put themselves in the line of fire.

As I read *Plenty*, Susan called up the image of frontline workers to me. People who give selflessly and who, when all this is over, will most likely be expected to deal with the years-long struggle of having lived through this time without much help, because it's what was expected of them.

There's a joke in a play I love (Bernard Slade's *Same Time, Next Year*) where a woman complains to her lover that her husband misses being in the armed forces. Her lover replies that many men have fond memories of that time in their lives. She then counters by saying that her husband was a prisoner of war.

The idea of longing for a time in your life where you were woefully unhappy, but perhaps, also feeling of use, is a complex one. It's one of those internal struggles that theater so often avoids tackling, because first you have to clear the hurdle of *explaining* the conflict to an audience, then explore the issue, then, most of the time, leave them without an answer.

You have to throw the word "bravery" around, but that's probably as close as writing comes to bravery, and it's what theater has the potential to do so well—better than any other medium. There's something about witnessing a character in crisis while surrounded by people who might be in the midst of that same crisis themselves that lands in a different way.

We are all in the middle of a crisis. We can't wait until we're on the other side of it. And yet, nothing of this magnitude can be construed as simple.

When prisoners are released, many of them report that in addition to the expected troubles they face, the one that surprises them the most are the times they miss being locked up, because while logically they can understand that life on the outside is better, they had trained themselves to enjoy whatever they could about being imprisoned as a means of staying sane. It's like silver lining survival.

I've had artists confess to me that during this period of time, while others have seen their creativity numb, they've made more work than ever before out of a lack of anything else to do.

Will they be able to keep that up once the pandemic is over and that grind we all hated so much returns — and perhaps even intensifies?

Are there things about this period that we could possibly take in the after-times? Not just the obvious lessons we've learned about savoring life and community, but personal things about ourselves and how we make ourselves feel valuable?

Can we miss how good it felt to be the person we were during a war without missing the war itself?

What I've heard over and over again lately is "*Wait until somebody writes a play about all this,*" but as is so often the case, somebody already did and they didn't even realize that's what they were doing.

Kevin's Culture Picks: Stay entertained like Kevin does this month



Cobra Kai - Season 2 - Episode 203

Every week, I've been doing a deep dive into cultural issues, usually theater-related, that are bothering me or that deserve a second look. But who needs another thinkpiece, right?

I host two weekly programs on my theater company's Facebook page (www.Facebook.com/EpicTheatreCo) where I ask guests what has been keeping them creatively engaged or excited, and I thought I could put together some of the movies, television shows, books, and music we discuss.

I'll do this at the beginning of every month (until we're out of ... this), and hopefully it'll keep you busy during these endless winter months.

So, here's what I'm enjoying so far this month:

Movies

Herself (Streaming on Amazon)

One Night in Miami (Streaming on Amazon)

MLK/FBI (On Demand)

The White Tiger (Streaming on Netflix)

Television

“Cobra Kai”

“Blown Away”

“Lupin”

“Pretend It’s a City”

“The Night Stalker”

(All Streaming on Netflix)

Books

Detransition, Baby, by Torrey Peters

A Swim in a Pond in the Rain, by George Saunders

Hades, Argentina, by Daniel Loedel

Music

Heaux Tales, Jasmine Sullivan

Magic Mirror, Pearl Charles

Collapsed in Sunbeams, Arlo Parks

OK Human, Weezer

Sex, Addiction, and Everyone Else, Nictone Dolls

Not Your Muse, Celeste

I Need a Freak, Harassment

Best Streaming Theater of the Month

In and Of Itself — Normally I’m not all that into shows that are built around magic, but this is a gorgeous reflection on identity and storytelling that’ll leave you stunned by its powerful ending. Check it out on Hulu.

In Providence: Falling in Love on Thayer Street



If you love someone, it's romantic to say that you'd stand outside in the cold for them, but when put to the test, he really was willing to freeze.

"The thing you have to understand about this woman is that she's only hot. She only ever gets hot. You touch her skin and you can feel it. Like she's burning up all the time. Constant fever. She was always like that. When she was younger, her mother thought it was because she was a teenager and the hormones and all that, but she's still that way. You cannot hug her without feeling that heat. It's always there."

That heat was what allowed her to stand outside on Thayer Street all winter back in the '90s when standing around was about all you could do.

"She'd go up there at nine in the morning and she'd go home at midnight or 1am. Ask her if I'm lying. The first time I saw her, I walked by her on the way to dropping my sister off at her job, because she worked at the consignment store, and when I walked back, she was still there, and I don't know why, but the second time is when she caught my eye. She was smoking a cigarette and she had this little

jacket on and — you always wore the wildest ****, nothing matched, all different colors and whatnot, but when I tell you, this woman — she was a girl then, and I was a kid- She was so beautiful. You saw it. It didn't matter what she had on. You saw it."

He started volunteering to drop his sister off at work more often, and sure enough, each time he did, she was there. Standing in the same spot. One or two friends around her, more if it was a Friday or Saturday. Smoking and talking about things he could only ever catch in passing. It didn't matter how cold it was, she would be there. One night, he saw her standing out in the middle of a snowstorm, seemingly unaware of the blizzard forming around her. He was too nervous to stop and say "Hello."

"It was my sister who ratted me out. She knew I had a crush on this girl, and one night, we're walking back to my car, and my sister goes, 'My brother likes you.' Like that. Like how sisters do. I wanted to go jump into traffic, that's how embarrassed I was. But she waves me over, and my sister is pushing me, so I go. She asks me my name and I tell her, and we get to talking, and her friends are there. They're going, 'He's cute. He's blushing. Look how cute he is blushing.' That only made me blush more. But she gave me her number."

The first time he called, there was no answer. The second time, somebody picked up and told him he had the wrong number. He went by Thayer Street again to see if maybe he had written it down wrong, but when he got to her usual spot, she wasn't there.

"Her friend — one of her friends — was there, and he told me she took off, because the guy she had been dating was making threats against her, being a ****, and her friend didn't know where she was. He told me the number she gave me was right, but it was a landline to the place she had with her ex, because they were still living together even though they were broken up. It was probably the ex who picked up when I called. That number was all I had to go on. Man, I was- When I tell you I was sad, like I was *sad*."

As sad as he was, he was also determined that if she ever came back, he'd know about it. That's why even after his sister quit her job at the consignment store to go work at the newly opened Providence Place Mall, he kept driving by Thayer to see if she'd returned. Time and again, the spot was empty. Her disappearance seemed to herald the disappearance of other businesses up and down Thayer, but he kept driving by hoping to see her in her light coat and mixed colors.

"I gave up probably after a year or two, but I didn't forget her. I just felt like a **** driving down Thayer all the time when I didn't need to."

Then, one night, he's back on Thayer. This time grabbing food from East Side Pockets. The line is long, and he's at the end of it, irritated because he's starving.

"From behind me I hear, 'Hey!' I turn and look. There she is."

She'd moved back a month earlier after living in all kinds of arrangements all over New England. On futons. In guest rooms. In garages. Bunk beds. With relatives. Friends. Acquaintances. Jerks and saints. They'd only ever spoken once, but this time it was her seeing him as she was walking by only quickly glancing in the window to see the face of a guy who couldn't even look at her without blushing.

"When I tell you I gave her the biggest hug. I think we hugged for a whole minute, and that's when I thought, 'Man, she's hot.' Like, for real, hot. That's when I realized how come she could wear that little

jacket even when it was subzero out.”

While he was waiting to get food, she was on her way to meet friends at a bar, but those plans quickly changed once they started talking.

“It was like seeing an old friend you never got to have that friendship with, you know? We got interrupted, but it didn’t matter, because it was meant to be what it was meant to be. We hung out the whole night, then the night after that. I told her all the time, ‘I lost you once, I’m not going to lose you again.’”

In fact, that’s what he told her the day he proposed to her. They were having dinner at a restaurant on Thayer Street when he showed her the ring.

“Where else was I going to ask her? I couldn’t do it outside. It was 30 degrees out. She wouldn’t have cared, but my teeth would have been chattering.”

If you live in Providence, you’re used to making a connection only to find out that the state has whisked someone away the same way it welcomes so many in. It’s the same for businesses and sentimental landmarks and streets where you grew up standing on corners with your friends from morning ‘til night.

“The place where I first saw her is all different now, but I’ll tell you, she’s still the same. Every time I see her, I still see her like I did that first time, and she still makes fun of me for blushing, and I tease her about how she’s too hot to hug, but then I hug her anyway, because I can’t help it. We got a great love story. How many people do you know got a love story like that?”

And while it’s a sign of old age and longstanding Rhode Island citizenry to refer to what used to be, sometimes you can’t help falling in love with whatever took its place.

In Providence: The Pod Problem

If you’re in the Fox Point neighborhood these days, you should know there’s somebody on the lookout for a new pod.

“Dating was hard enough before you had to find someone worthy of inviting into your bunker.”

He wasn’t looking for a boyfriend. Just someone he could let off some steam with while he waited for the pandemic to expire.

“We had gone on- I want to say four or five dates when it started, but nothing had turned physical yet. Some kissing; that was it. I like to go slow at first. I wasn’t looking for a relationship either. I’m one of those guys who thinks he’s married to his job, but he’s the same way, which is why we started connecting in the first place. We both liked going out and doing things, but neither one of us wanted anything serious. Dates and fun. That was it.”

That was it.

“You can’t do that anymore though, because now, even if you’re using protection, one night stands are a public health crisis.”

Unless you’re willing to go all in.

“I still wasn’t willing to say ‘boyfriends,’ but I knew there was no way I was going to make it two years without physical contact. I had friends saying they could do it, and I thought, ‘They’ll last for three months and then summer will get here, and they’ll be over the whole thing and they’ll be twice as reckless.’ I wanted to come up with a better solution.”

So he pitched the idea of a pod to the guy he was casually dating.

“He thought it was a great idea. I thought it was a great idea. Cool. We’re good to go.”

Everything was going well.

“For the first month.”

For the first month.

“It’s just that thing where you get sick of someone. I’m guilty of it. We’re all guilty of it. I got bored with him, and normally, I would move on. Because that’s what you do. But we had done the whole isolating, he works from home, I work from home, not seeing other people, doing all of that. We waited so many days before we took things to the next level. It was this whole process, and now I have to do that all over again with someone else? I didn’t have the energy for that.”

It soon became clear that he wasn’t the only one feeling this way.

“He made it clear to me that he was also no longer interested in me, but we both were stuck in this way that- It’s interesting, because it’s usually the way you get stuck in a relationship, but we weren’t in a relationship, we were supposed to be just having fun and helping each other out, and now that wasn’t happening anymore.”

But, because the needs that led them to this arrangement weren’t going anywhere, they pressed on.

“The sex was great. Even when we got sick of each other, we still had great sex. So that was one more reason not to throw the whole thing out the window. We just kept hanging out, following the rules of the pod we created, but it became this thing where we were openly hostile to each other the entire time we were hanging out.”

You might wonder if that made the sex less enjoyable or-

“Way more enjoyable. Way more. Have you ever had sex with someone you really dislike but still find attractive? It’s so hot.”

Hate sex is known to (sometimes) be the hottest kind of sex, that’s true.

“It’s true.”

But then he started to suspect that his pod partner was opening up other options.

“I heard from a mutual friend that he was talking with someone else about starting a pod, and I confronted him about it. This is weird for me, because—What can I accuse him of? Cheating? We’re not exclusive in the sense that we care about each other and made a commitment to each other. It’s strictly about health and safety.”

His podmate confessed that he was only planning on seeing the other guy once they agreed to form their own pod, and then he was going to leave the pod he was in, pointing out that things had become too toxic.

“Right, but where does that leave me?”

Strangely enough, they didn’t stop seeing each other after that. Instead, he began looking for a new pod, and when his pod buddy’s back-up plan fell through, it became a race to see who could get into a new pod the fastest. But don’t worry, they weren’t dumb enough to keep having sex as all of this was going on.

“We were definitely having sex the entire time.”

Of course they were still having sex. This column isn’t called *Good Decisions*, is it?

“He ended up moving to Atlanta at the beginning of the year. He wanted a change. That tells you everything you need to know about him. The dumbass moved to one of the worst COVID spots in the entire country because he wanted to shake things up. Why are the stupid ones always the best in bed?”

As for him, he hasn’t found a new pod-lover yet, but that might be for the best.

“I went from thinking I couldn’t live without sex this whole time to resenting sex for making me act like such a #\$\$%-ing idiot, so who knows? I might be able to hold out until all of this is over.”

He will not be able to hold out.

“I’m not going to be able to hold out. Even as I was saying it, I knew it wasn’t true.”

We’re all telling ourselves lies these days, aren’t we?

“Things are bleak out there.”

Lies about what we can handle and how long we can handle it and what we’re comfortable with and how safe we’re willing to be.

“I’m right in Fox Point, gays all around me, and I can’t find a decent one to watch horror movies and hook up with once a week. I’d even let him keep the mask on.”

While part of me thinks that what we’ve learned about the people around us has been startling, lately it seems like what we’ve learned about ourselves can be even more frustrating.

“Before this, I would have thought I had way more self-control than I do. They better start working on a pill that gives you pandemic amnesia, because I want to forget *all* of this.”

So if you're near Fox Point and you'd down to potentially make some mistakes you can forget post-pandemic, have I got a pod for you...

They Say Write What You Know: How (not) to write a play about a pandemic

This was my first week teaching classes as an adjunct professor in playwriting. One of my students asked a question I've heard from a lot of other writers lately.

"Should we write about the moment we're in?"

It can seem like one of those lose-lose situations when we talk so much about needing to remember history to be living history and cry out that we cannot handle any documentation of it even though most people agree that the moment you're living through something is *exactly* when you should be documenting it.

I guess we could all write time capsule plays, seal them in a steel tub, and then bury them for 100 years so that the fish-people of 2121 can one day do nothing but perform plays about binge-watching *Devs* and learning to salsa while FaceTiming an instructor thousands of miles away.

(Those poor, future humans-with-gills.)

There's also the obvious problem of not being able to avoid two years of human history that have this big a cloud hanging over them.

If you write a play that takes place in "modern times," and everybody isn't walking around wearing a mask, have you then written a play that takes place in an alternate reality?

The temptation to write something that is as seductive as not having to deal with characters who actually have to work for a living. Recently, a film critic complained that she was watching a movie where the protagonist spent a lot of time in their office seemingly doing nothing. I can go into that problem at a later date, but suffice to say, if hundreds of plays can be written about characters who appear to never worry about money or talk about work, then it should be possible to simply edit out a worldwide pandemic so you can have two straight characters arguing about their relationship in a gorgeous apartment you doubt either of them could afford.

But we want to come back better, right?

So maybe skip writing something like that.

Admittedly, I am one of those folks who does not want to read a play where the pandemic is used as a plot device.

I am, actually, very offended by movies like *Locked Down*, not just because they're poorly written, but because it seems like the definition of "too soon" to use a crisis that's taken the lives of scores of people across the globe as a centerpiece of your heist flick. Rarely do I argue that something is in poor taste, but in this case, I'll make an exception.

That being said, it is difficult to tell writers to set aside something that is currently permeating their lives and write about ... something else.

My first bit of advice was to look at that permeation as encouragement.

It really doesn't matter whether you want to write about the pandemic or not. Whatever you're writing is going to include the pandemic, because the pandemic is in our pores. It's in the atmosphere.

If you're going through a divorce, and you write a play about talking magpies, I guarantee you those talking magpies you're creating are working out your divorce for you. It's unavoidable.

That means if you do feel inclined to make something that deals with the COVID era head-on, I would argue that an audience living with something every day does not need it reflected back on themselves six months from now in some 50-seat blackbox. Whatever lessons we need to take from this moment will probably need to come with a good deal of retrospection.

In other words, you shouldn't be trying to figure out how the fire started while you're still inside the house.

What I did suggest to my students was that they could break down the themes that exist in their lives now and write about those instead. Things like isolation, disconnect, absence.

They could think about how this past year has further allowed technology to invade our lives. They could examine FOMO culture and what happens when it's challenged.

They could write about community and what our responsibilities are to our community.

I advised them to go really, really easy on the metaphors, because while we'd all like to believe we're Arthur Miller writing *The Crucible*, most of the time we're some hack writing a one-act about an evil troll king that looks and sounds just like George W.

Careful with your metaphors.

Finally, I reminded my students that audiences watch plays the same way they vote — with an eye on personal interest.

There was a trend in the mid-aughts of every play having that David Hare flair for big, global arguments about 9/11 and the Iraq War and politics and ideas so complex you were handed an essay before the curtain rose so that you could understand just what the hell everybody onstage was screaming about in flawed accents.

I love David Hare and I love big ideas and I love a large worldview, but you can write a play that still showcases universal feelings like anxiety and loneliness and hope. Idea-driven plays are one of the things I think we can leave in the before times, since even Aristotle agreed that plot and character should come first.

I had a hard time — and still do — finding plays that deal with characters who are struggling to pay their student loans. People who are working two jobs, people who are smart and funny and clever even if they're not formally educated. People who are used to living and working and getting things done even as the world around them falls apart.

One day, 100 years from now, when most of my body is bionic, I hope to see a play that looks as though it has nothing to do with the pandemic until a character walks onstage wearing a mask. During that play, maybe the characters will be dealing with other problems that are pandemic-related like the matriarch of the family being laid off or the son needing to adjust to learning at home after being the star of his school.

Those characters won't necessarily be saying the word "COVID" all the time, and maybe they won't even say "pandemic," but they'll be reminding me of a time that was, yes, unique, but also, one section of human history that still featured many of the conflicts and drama we've seen throughout time.

That's why successful war movies don't make war the star of the film.

That's why effective horror movies are not concerned with the element of fear.

That's why despite what SJP says, New York City cannot, in fact, be the fourth character on *Sex and the City*.

Ultimately, it has to be about people and the connective, emotional throughlines that run through us all.

A play about masks isn't just unnecessary; it's unoriginal.

Just ask the Greeks.