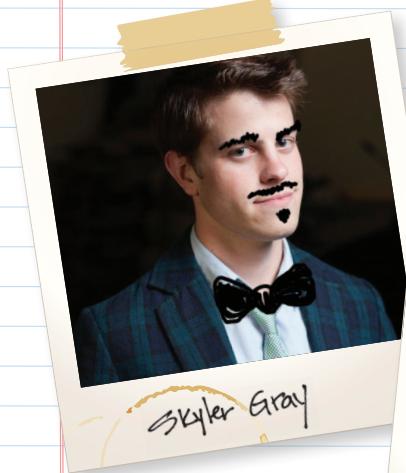


KEEPING IT REAL WITH ROBERT ASKINS

(AND Tyrone!)



Skyler Gray, the Alley Theatre's Literary Manager, sat down to speak with Robert Askins, the author of *Hand to God*.



Skyler Gray: *Hand to God* is set in Cypress, just down the road from the Alley. Can you talk a bit about growing up there and how it has changed?

Rob Askins: Cypress is one of those places that before the last oil boom was still rural. Tomball was still a lot of farms and undeveloped tracts of land that were available to buy these large subdivisions. When my grandfather bought land off of 290 above Huffmeister Road in the early 70s, they were the only subdivision around. There were no curbs and the streetlights... Houston is famous for no zoning, so there weren't a lot of rules. Most of the other families had come south from the big family farms in the dry dusty lands of the Panhandle to try and make their way. The Cypress I grew up in was pretty—I don't want to say small town Texas—but my grandparents and the people that had relocated with them did their best to create that German Arm church settlement feeling. Our life was very much centered around the church. We went to church a couple of times a week and my grandmother worked for the pastor at St. Johns Lutheran—the original building is one of the oldest Lutheran churches in Harris County. As we grew up, Cypress changed pretty dramatically. We had more and more

people coming from out of state to work in oil and gas, so the neighborhoods that surrounded us got bigger and nicer. It was definitely a change. I remember going to public school was a dramatic shift in culture. It was a little bit confusing.

I was always interested in the arts. My aunt had worked for the Dallas Theater Center as a costume designer and then as a costume designer at Baylor. So I would visit and she would introduce me to the fine arts. I went to HSPVA my freshman year of high school and came downtown, and that was a whole other shift entirely. At the time, my parents were "Rush Limbaugh Republicans" who listened to Amy Grant in the car, so coming to downtown Houston and being in Montrose and experiencing different communities was another world-widening shift. Then coming back to our country churches on the weekends, there was tension between those two worlds. I think that is something reflected in the generational difficulties in *Hand to God*. There is no way to keep media out, so the kids in the suburbs in that day and age were being exposed to a very different world than their parents had been. Eventually you had kids in their Nirvana and Marilyn Manson shirts in these little country churches, so it just looked like the devil. It was a response to a change in world. The filth in the conversation and the hyper-sexuality is a lot of times lost children trying to figure out a world that their parents didn't see coming, nor were exposed to.



He woke up like this!..

Cypress was and is great. My grandfather had a farm in Tomball and grew trees after things didn't work out in real estate. He took a job as a maintenance worker for the school district and would fix things, so I would see him around my elementary school. My uncle Roy was a janitor for the local Lutheran high school and Grandpa had a money-making scheme. When they built the new subdivisions they bulldozed everything, so there were no trees in the neighborhood. So Grandpa figured out that if you sat by the side of the side of the road and sold the folks moving in these half-grown trees—like crepe myrtles, live oaks and wild oaks—that people would snatch them up. So on the weekends I would go over to his farm in Tomball and spend the night there. Then, we would get up and put the trees in the back of a converted cattle trailer and take them to a corner in Tomball, and we sat next to the lady who sold fake Dooney and Bourke purses and this guy that had little whirligigs that blew in the wind. We'd sit there all day and sell trees. I'd walk across the highway and get a Burger King at one o'clock, and then at sundown we'd head back to Grandpa's farm. Then we'd get up the next day and do the same thing. So, it was a really beautiful mix of this kind of bucolic and kind of gothic, but coming into Houston to see what the rest of the world was up to. The friction between those times and ideas of America and different notions of culture, I think that clash is present in *Hand to God* and certainly has been a defining clash in my life.

SG: How has your Texas upbringing shaped your work?

RA: I think the preoccupation with the church is just central in my life. I'm continually tinkering with what the church means. People, even now, as I rumble

around Brooklyn you hear people say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." There's a hunger for an understanding of our place in the universe. There's a hunger for a larger context and that's one of the things that we seek to find in the theatre. And that's one of the reasons that the theatre was so compelling to me. You get a chance to participate in the ritual that you're used to participating in every Sunday, but you get to write your own. And so a lot of the plays come from this angry or agitated emotional place, and it's the work of workshopping and production that make them make more sense. But they begin with this gesture, this feeling, this need, you know? And that feeling and need a lot of the time is unlocked by Texas, by the things I think about where I come from. I think it makes you more sympathetic as a writer to write about your family and write about your home. When people are writing about other geographies they can be too harsh and they can be too willing to place blame and too willing to "other" somebody and say, "This is, oh this is, I know." Whereas the many layers of revelation that comes from growing up in a place and watching it change before your eyes, and then meditating on the people that you know more than anybody else, your family, the people you grew up with, what it's like. Like, you can't bullshit looking at one square of ground at different times in your life, being simultaneously in love with and then hating and then ambivalent and then reconciled to a building, the walls of a building, a room, your room as a child. Or your parents going from gods to villains to humans, you know what I mean? You can't f*****g fake that.

One of the things that's super frustrating to me is that the church has been hijacked by hate. These really great stories about mercy and love have just been appropriated by fairly predatory people who are preaching to get money. Not to be a dickhead but that's the history of everything: it gets too big and instead of attracting true believers it attracts hyper-aggressives. When you're in those rooms and the, for lack of a better word, the Spirit is really there and people feel forgiven and they feel the relief of the burden of life, you know? Which is what I think you should feel at a good play. That catharsis comes when you're like, "This thing made entirely of words and movements—just this not false thing, but this ethereal thing, this ephemeral thing that we all made, that the audience and the performers made together just changed the way I think, or changed my inside, or allowed me for a f*****g second to get out of my head and into somebody else's head." Like, that's beautiful and it's something that is lost for a large section of the population. And now that Middle America is dying from OxyContin and heroin and Trump and a lack of jobs, we need community and we need some kind of a faith in something more than anything else, you know?



SG: I got you. So, did you start out as an actor at HSPVA and then transition to a writer?

RA: No! Hell no, man. I was a painter!

SG: Really?

RA: Yeah, I was fine arts!

SG: Oh my gosh, do you have some old Rob Askins artwork lying around?

RA: Oh, there's some under my bed in Cypress. I can get my mother to send you one or two.

SG: That is amazing!

RA: One of the earliest things I did, talking about all this weirdness, is I took a passage from the Christmas story in the Bible and I illustrated it. Then I did calligraphy for the passage itself, – I did it all on parchment – and then we photocopied it and tried to sell it at a church arts and crafts fair. It was intense. Yeah, I started as a painter, and one of the reasons was, like, sitting on the side of the road [selling trees] with Grandpa all day. I could bring along a sketchbook, and I could bring along a pencil. Grandpa was not gonna have acting, you know what I mean?



Commander
Mark

She's sad,
but she's
laughing!!

SG: Painting was as far as you could go.

RA: Yeah—and my aunt, like I said, was a costume designer. We could go to museums. And we spent a lot of time at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston and the Fine Arts Museum. There's this guy who used to teach art on the Public Access channel in Houston, Commander Mark.

SG: Wait, his name was Commander Mark?

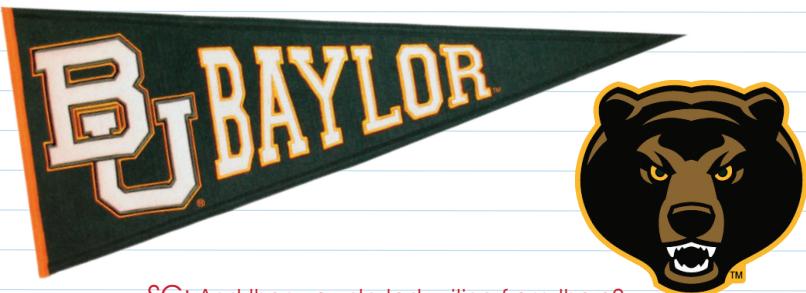
RA: His name is Commander Mark, and he actually would do these art workshops in the summer at the churches. He has a book, and if you really want to see Rob Askins' art, one of my drawings is published in his book.

SG: Commander Mark's book, note to self.

RA: Mark Kistler was his real name. Then when I got to HSPVA, I was like, "Oh man, fine arts are really sort of isolating." Like you spend all of your time in your studio, like, thinking. Even in class we would have our headphones on, and I remember it was the year the Alanis Morissette album came out, "Jagged Little Pill." We would all be listening to our own separate music and only come together for the critiques. I left HSPVA—my father had passed—and I went back to Cy-Fair High School, and I was like, "Okay,



I know I want to do something creative." I did set design for the first couple of years I was at Baylor—I was trying to pursue a combined major of performance and design. I did a writing workshop at Harvard, and it was the first time I'd been above the Mason-Dixon Line. Then I did a puppet workshop in Prague and I think it scrambled my brain. Do you know what I mean? It was another one of those, like, wildly different frames of reference. And it was beautiful and strange and just kind of mind-blowing. And when I came back to Baylor I was like, "Alright, well, if they won't cast me at Baylor, f******, you know what I mean? Like, I'm gonna take the stage in another way."

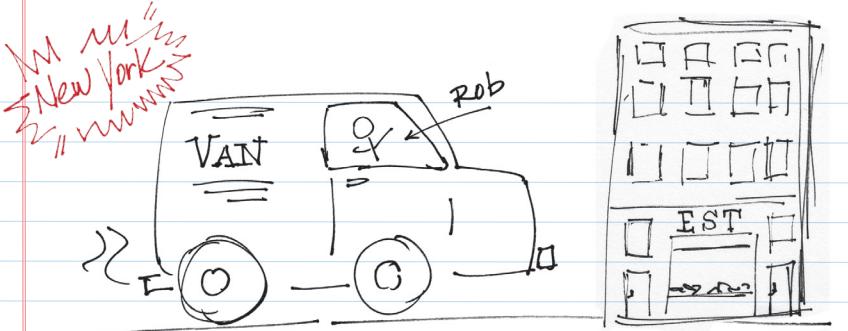


SG: And then you started writing from there?

RA: Yeah, I started writing for the campus comedy paper first, and then Baylor had a 10-minute play contest. I wrote a 10-minute play, and it caused a lot of trouble because it was on these religious themes, but it was really aggressively sexual and violent. And it was very polarizing, you know? Like, one half of the faculty was like, "Aahhh!!!!!" and one half of the faculty was like, "What's going on? We can't give this first prize." It was really interesting. And then, Romulus Linney came down because we were doing the Horton Foote Festival at the time and we read the one-act for him. He gave me some notes and then I turned it into a full-length play. That was the thing that sort of got me to EST [Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York]. Then I did a couple classes and summer workshops at EST and ended up just staying. I was bartending back in Waco after I graduated, and I just kept calling the guys and being like, "I need another week, I need another week!" Eventually EST put me on staff and I made beds and cooked breakfast and drove the van. Then at the end of the summer [Artistic Director] Curt Dempster at EST was like, "Hey, why don't you move to New York? You should be a part of this theater." And I was like, "I would love to." I went back to Waco and sold everything I had and moved to New York and worked with EST for a decade until *Hand to God* happened.

Ahhh!!!

"New York"



SG: What inspired you to write *Hand to God*?

RA: This sort of emotional core of anger or defiance or frustration or grief, it'd always been present, right? And so, it took a long time for us to be like, "Okay, I can write about Texas." For a while I was writing strange historical dramas. I wrote three plays about how the sun gets into the center of the universe about three astronomers...

SG: There's a series?

RA: Yeah, it was about Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo. It was just really bizarre. And then, I guess it was my first two years in New York, I was working on weird, weird plays. They were crazy and violent and whatever, and then finally I wrote a one-act about Texas. I'm gonna say it was probably the first good play I wrote. I'd done all this kicking and screaming and all this sort of troublemaking, and then I wrote this one-act about Texas. I think that one act got me into Youngblood [a group for writers under 30 at EST]. And my love for the writers' group was sort of born in that room. And so then I wrote a full-length called *Princes of Waco* which *The Village Voice* called "Fool for Love meets Cheers." I think it was meant as sort of a slight to the piece, but it taught me that I should lean into the comedy. Then one night I was at a party and Steve Boyer and Geneva Carr were standing next to each other, and everything sort of just clicked into place. It was like, "Oh, I know they're a mother and a son." You know? And I'd wanted to write about the puppet ministry for a minute, and it's just always this thought in my head like—I understood what the conflict was between the two of them. I went home and wrote Tyrone's first monologue that night. It was one of those beautiful things where I developed that with them and it was a really beautiful moment because I had spent a long time at that point at EST. I'd sort of been through a lot of stuff with that community and really got to know those actors in that space. And then I wrote this play, and like a lot of plays, especially plays that are that weird, just float around for a long time. I was in this place where I knew everybody and everybody knew me, and they'd put so much work into it. We read it and people kind of went crazy. It spent a year in the wilderness being developed by a lot of people, and then it came back to EST and we did

a reading of it at the Southampton Writer's Conference. That reading really came alive and they pulled the trigger on it. We had all EST members, and it was something really special for the theatre. There was just so much stuff that came together in this one really gorgeous moment. Then it just never stopped. We went to MCC and met new, wonderful friends. Then we went to the Broadway and then all the Tony Award stuff...

SG: And were you developing it from EST all the way up to Broadway?

Spoilers

RA: It changed every step of the way. And it changed a lot of the times in previews—almost every night. There was a long time where we didn't have the epilogue—the first draft was like, "What is the epilogue?" ~~Then the big battleground for the play was always the second sex scene with Timothy and then the epilogue—Oh God, we can't use this, right, 'cause it's a spoiler—like the end of the play was always a big thing and we went through it over and over and over again. I remember before our first preview at EST, we just slashed and burned a huge chunk of the second act—I mean it just disappeared—but it was right. And then we tried to take the epilogue out for MCC, and that didn't work, so we put that back and then added some stuff to the end of the play. And then on Broadway I was going home and re-writing again. It was every step of the way. Especially with comedy, especially with comedy that's so aggressively cynical. Especially with comedy that is a hare's breath from not just tragedy but from grand f*****g Guignol, do you know what I mean? That comedy that skates on the razor's end of absolute blackness. It was about calibration at every moment.~~





I love Lucy

SG: You've said you "start with something that's too sincere because a lot of comedy comes from the harder things in life to deal with." Can you talk a bit about writing comedy?

RA: First of all, writing comedy is impossible without funny actors. That's brass tacks. But then after that it's strange because it's slotting into funny voices. Like Southern Mom is a hilarious voice. You know? Like, darkly hyper-aggressive teen is f*****g hilarious. Like shy-ass nerd? Actual dialogue, the actual words are the least difficult part of the writing. If you can write a joke you can write a f*****g joke. Like, lights up and you wanna watch them keep a lid on something difficult—you wanna watch them camp down chaos. Marjorie

is so funny because she's gonna lose it at any minute. And she's picking some of the worst methods to keep a lid on her crazy. She has picked something truly ridiculous to pin all her hopes and dreams on, and it kinda goes back to Lucy on the conveyor belt with the chocolate that won't stop coming. But replace chocolate that won't stop coming with self-destructive grief. You know what I mean? And stuffing things into your mouth with a puppet ministry. But we all understand, and you're like, "Ah God, I am so f****d up so often. And I'm trying to keep it together, all the time." And then somebody's heart goes out to that struggle, and at the end of the day we all kind of know that our attempts to keep it together are a little ridiculous. And so it's a relief to watch somebody struggle and be defeated, with the hopes that at some point they will be successful. So if you can create somebody that people's hearts go out to, where they can still laugh at that failure. And then, like, the play is just unexpected. And I'm watching this person destroy everything, you know? So it comes from this bizarrely delightful place—we're delighted and participating in these characters' self-destruction. How often in a day do you just want to say "F*** it!" and like do whatever the f*** you want? And that's what Tyrone is, in some ways. So how to write comedy? I don't know, man. Just do it. Get in the room with funny people and try to make each other laugh. I think that's one of the reasons that the puppet sex scene is...I'm very proud of that. It was just, like, a game of comic escalation where you just build that world. You put funny people in it and you keep trying to make each other laugh. And I think that's the only way to keep a story that's as painful as this story watchable, is acknowledging the humanness inside of that.

SG: Are there other writers whose work inspires you?

RA: Yeah man! I really love Sam Hunter. Sam just loves all those humans, and it's f***ing thrilling to watch him love those humans. Even as it's all very real, and the stakes are very high you're like, "Oh God!" He really feels for them. I'm really a big fan of Clare Barron. Clare's work is just f***ing crackalack, and raw and sexy and dangerous in a way that I love. Who else is f***ing super amazing right now?... I mean obviously Annie Baker—I love that, the ladies be killin' it. I love Josh Conkel—*Milk Milk Lemonade* was, like, a revelation. Stephen Karam—can't keep that guy down, you know? And I'll be basic, I don't give a f***, *Hamilton*, dude. Like give it up! That shit's thrilling. There's a lot of real up-and-comers that I think are gonna bust open. I think Nick Gagliello has a lot of beautiful stuff, and Chris Nuñez is, like, *insane*, but I think he's gonna be a lot of fun. Jennifer Haley, *The Nether*—Jennifer is deeply weird and amazing. So yeah, I mean, I think I just listed people I like to party with, but f*** it, they also make really good plays.

SG: So, what are you working on next?

RA: I've got a musical with Alex Timbers and Michael Friedman called *King of Kong* and the HBO show about going to school in Texas, *The Brotherhood*. I'm super excited about my plays *The Carpenter* and *Prosthetic*. I'm super excited about that play, *Security*. I'm super excited about this one-man thing I'm gonna do at Ojai... I do too much but I am excited. The thing is, I love plays, and when I get a break from film and TV stuff that's kind of what I do to relax, you know? I spent so much time bartending and writing plays on the side, that I'm used to, like, having the majority of my day spent pouring margaritas. So now to have the day free, I'm like, "What? Gotta do all the things..."

SG: What does it mean to have your play produced in your hometown?

RA: Um, it means everything. You know? I think Houston has never been cooler. Last time I came down I was just like, man—I'm just gonna buy a house down here and just live. I think you always have a conflicted relationship with the place that you grow up in. First you feel sort of controlled or restrained or confined and then as you grow, the place seems to grow with you, especially as you revisit it. So it's really important to me that my mother and my family, who's been so incredibly supportive through this process, even as I sort of, like, tell some of our family secrets on stage. My mother has



seen every version, and she's been so supportive. And she's still an obstetric nurse at Ben Taub, and when she got to go to the Tony's it was so much fun for her, and all the doctors in the hospital were thrilled. So it's good to have her be able to take those people with her and see what we made. I just hope that, in all of the funniness and sort of outrageousness, the love for Houston and the love for Texas and the love for the

churches that I grew up in comes through. I feel like a lot of folks from Texas would come up to me after the shows and say, "Oh my gosh, that's totally like where I came from." So if people can see our home in the play, and see it in a way that maybe they haven't before, or in a way that they feel is truthful, or in a way which they feel they can be like, "Oh, I felt that but I didn't say it..." "Or if there's one weird kid like myself who is like, "Oh, gosh, I feel so alone in my struggle," and if they can see the play and go, "Oh there're other people out there who feel like me, and there's a place for my voice in this world," I think that's kinda everything. You know? If they can get the feeling that I got from painting and the Museum of Fine Arts and going to see plays at the Alley, if they can feel that freedom from this play, then I feel like the job has been well done.