



LOOKING BACK WITH **JAMES BLACK**

INTERIM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The Alley's Interim Artistic Director James Black has been working at the Alley for over thirty years as a member of the Resident Acting Company and a frequent director. During the season he curated as Interim Artistic Director, we are delighted to present a series of essays from him about his career and his memories of the Alley.

New work is the life-blood of the theatre. It keeps the space contemporary and vital. It provides excitement and discovery for the audience as they are exposed to fresh, topical voices and ideas. New work is also exciting for the actors involved. Playing Hamlet is one thing, having a hand in the Dane's initial creation and subsequent premiere is quite another. The stage actor is a practitioner of an ephemeral art form and working on a world premiere can give one a rare sense of permanence.

There is a small ritual that I perform to this day when I start work as an actor on a popular twentieth century play. I open my Samuel French Acting Edition text to the front and locate the original cast list. Most published modern plays include a page dedicated to that first professional performance, listing the director, producer, venue, and actors. I then try to imagine the atmosphere of that first rehearsal room and its bygone occupants. I find my role and see if anyone famous played it and wonder how I'll match up. Some names are familiar. Some not so. But they all have one thing in common - all those involved in that first production will live in the front of printed editions of the play for

generations to come. In a fleeting art form, they have achieved an unexpected touch of immortality.

I've always thought of theatre as the truest art form because it is the one that most accurately reflects life. It is to be experienced in the moment. A writer can hand you her latest book to read, a composer can play his concerto, a painter can exhibit their canvas, but the stage actor sculpts in ice and writes in sand. For a stage actor, this is the poignant reality of our work - that which makes it so true, also makes it transitory, like a firework, its very birth is its consumption. The play can be performed again the following night, but that's an entirely different event. That is why it's relatively easy to do a show eight times a week, thirty-two times a month. No two shows are the same. No two audiences are the same. The run of a show becomes a living, breathing, ever evolving creature and the only permanent, tactile evidence a stage actor has of this work is the collected memory of those who saw it. It's there and then it is gone.

Unless.... you are doing the premiere of a new play and you find yourself on the original cast page. I've had the good fortune of appearing in several world premieres here at the Alley over the years, including new work by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau (*American Vaudeville*), and Ken Ludwig (*Be My Baby*, *Treasure Island*). But my most cherished credit as an actor is the world premiere of Tennessee Williams' *Not About Nightingales*. A joint production of the Alley, The Royal National Theater, and the Moving Theater, it premiered in London, then Houston, and finally moved on to an acclaimed run on Broadway at The Circle in the Square in 1999. To know that my name is forever associated with arguably one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century is the stuff stage actors dream of.

Shortly, you will see tonight's unique performance of the world premiere of *The Carpenter* written by Robert Askins and developed right here at the Alley. I was honored to direct a workshop production of Rob's play in the 2017 Alley All New Festival. This performance will only exist for a short time, only on this day,



Hal Holbrook, Dixie Carter, and James Black in the world premiere of *Be My Baby*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.



Top: James Black in the world premiere of *Not About Nightingales*. Photo by Nobby Clark.

Bottom: Elizabeth Bunch and James Black in the world premiere of *Treasure Island*. Photo by Michal Daniel.

only to be shared with you and your fellow audience. It will be performed by a group of lucky stage actors who have been given a little touch of permanence. I imagine a little permanence of my own in the form of a new credit on the world premiere page of a future publication of *The Carpenter*: Interim Artistic Director of the Alley Theatre, the first venue to produce this exciting new play.

Enjoy!