

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT

Prior to the start of rehearsals, the Alley Theatre's Director of New Work, Elizabeth Frankel, interviewed Lawrence Wright, author of *Camp David*.



LIZ: Please wait just one moment. I'm recording this on two devices and want to turn both of them on...

LAWRENCE: You're doing the best practices of journalism, Liz, with the redundancy.

LIZ: Well, thank you, Larry. It is great to hear that from you as I was just about to say that I interview playwrights frequently, but it's a bit intimidating interviewing you knowing that you are a Pulitzer Prize-winning interviewer of other people, so I'm glad I'm doing well so far.

It was great working with you on *Cleo* two seasons ago, and we look forward to having you back here at the Alley for *Camp David*! This will be your second production with us and I love that you can just drive over from Austin. What's it like for you to have a play go up relatively close to home?

LAWRENCE: To actually be able to work in my home state is an honor. It's something I really cherish because most of my career has been spent working outside of Texas. To be able to come back and work on my play with my fellow Texans, especially at the Alley - I feel like I've really formed a relationship; it's the premier theatre in the state and it's an honor to have the opportunity.

LIZ: And it is an honor for us to be working with you! It's also interesting how different this play is from *Cleo*. What was the spark for *Camp David*?

LAWRENCE: I got a call when I was in a cab in New York City from Gerald Rafshoon, who was Jimmy Carter's media advisor when he was in the White House and also when he was Governor of Georgia, and he asked "Would you be interested in writing a play about Camp David?" The truth is, I had never talked to Jerry Rafshoon before and he caught me totally by surprise.

But I began to consider the fact that I had lived in Georgia when Carter was governor. I had lived in Egypt when Anwar Sadat became president after Gamal Abdel Nasser's death, and I had visited Israel as a reporter several times and covered the Middle East.

I thought, "If not me, then who?" It seemed like I was unusually qualified for this particular play because of all the experiences that I've had.

LIZ: What made Gerald Rafshoon think that this should be a play?

LAWRENCE: Jerry had long wanted to make a movie about Camp David but he was never able to do it. Then he was

talking to (Artistic Director) Molly Smith at Arena Stage in Washington and they have a series of plays that they commissioned about presidents. And he saw that this idea might work for Molly. And it came to be that Arena Stage commissioned the play.

LIZ: And then I know they went on to produce it and that it was done at the Old Globe in San Diego shortly after. How has the play evolved since those early productions?

LAWRENCE:
Well, Oskar Eustis, the Artistic Director at the Public Theater in New York, had always been interested. Oskar is famous as a dramaturg and he had some ideas about how the play should be changed. And he had read my book (*Thirteen Days in September*), which I had written after the play was produced and he was inspired by that. And so we talked and the upshot is that I've completely rewritten the play using a lot of Oskar's notes and also materials from the book.

LIZ: What's the biggest change?

LAWRENCE: I suppose that the one that would be the most noticeable to the audience is that there are now six characters rather than four. The additional characters are Mohammed Ibrahim Kamal, who was Sadat's foreign secretary and who was fiercely opposed to the peace settlement; and Moshe Dayan, who was in the

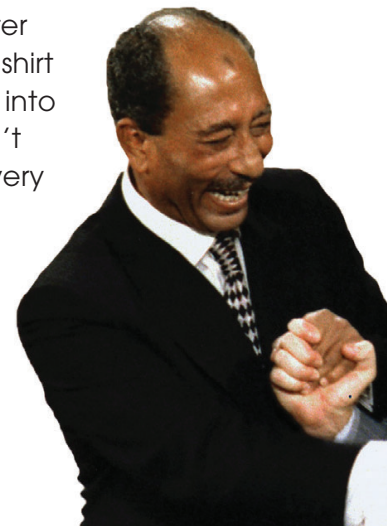
equivalent position for Menachem Begin and who was far more in favor of the peace settlement than Begin himself.

LIZ: What was your research process like?

LAWRENCE: I always think that, even with fiction, the more you know the better job you can do. So I researched it just as I would a *New Yorker* story or a book. I went to Plains (Georgia) and met with the Carters, I travelled to Israel and to Egypt and talked to the surviving members of the Camp David delegations and then I talked to many of the Americans who were still alive who had been involved in that process as well. I interviewed dozens of people and I read all the books I could get my hands on. Imagine that you need to cross a big river—which is the story itself—from one side to the other. If you know the facts, and even the words that were actually used, they become like boulders you can place in the river and lead you across. And then what you make up is what gets you from one boulder to another.

LIZ: What was it like meeting the Carters?

LAWRENCE: Jerry Rafshoon and I drove down and the Carters live in a quite modest home. It's a one story ranch house just outside of this miniscule town of Plains. And they sat in the den on this blue couch. I remember that Carter was wearing a blue shirt and it kind of faded into the couch. He hadn't shaved; he looked very wintry. Behind him was a painting that he had done of the room that we were in. He's



an amateur painter. There were the two rocking chairs and a grandfather clock and the painting in it. It reminded me so much of an illustration from *Goodnight Moon*.

At the time, I was trying to decide who else was on the stage. I knew Carter, Begin, and Sadat were my three main characters but anybody else, I didn't know. So, Jerry says to the former president, "This is Larry Wright. He recently wrote an article for *The New Yorker* about Scientology." And Carter says, "Oh I read that. I found it most intriguing." Then Rosalynn jumps in and says "Since when did you start reading *The New Yorker*?" "I read it every week!" Anyways, it's as if she leapt onstage. I felt I needed someone who could talk to Jimmy Carter like that - someone who was candid and honest and knew him through and through. Bear in mind, Rosalynn Carter was born in a house next door to Jimmy Carter. He saw her in the crib. They'd known each other for almost a century. It's a striking love story that is part of the larger story of *Camp David*.

LIZ: Did the Carters see either of the first two productions?

LAWRENCE: They came to the opening night at Arena. Some genius situated Carter right behind me. It was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life!

I had no idea how he was going to react. I just felt waves of condemnation or puzzlement; I didn't know what was going on in his mind but I was very worried about his judgement. Anyway, at the end of the play, Jerry and I were asked to come up on the stage and join the actors - as were the Carters and also Jehan Sadat, Anwar Sadat's widow who was there as well. So, I saw the Carters going down and thanking the actors and Jimmy Carter was streaming tears. His eyes were red. Jerry Rafshoon said he had never seen Carter cry before. He was teasing Richard Thomas who played Jimmy Carter but when he got to Hallie Foote, who was Rosalynn, he took her hand with both of his hands and he said to her, "I fell in love with you again tonight." Hallie's knees buckled. It was quite a line for a 90-year-old man. The story that really affected him was the story of his relationship with Rosalynn.

LIZ: So *Camp David* began as a play and you've written many books in your career. At what point did you decide to write your book about the topic, *Thirteen Days in September*?

LAWRENCE: It was frustrating that there wasn't a text to adapt. Carter had written a diary that was mostly incorporated into his White House diary; and in Rosalynn's memoir *First Lady from Plains*, she talked a bit about Camp David but one of the things she said was that she had kept a diary at Camp David - 200 type-written pages, it said. And so I asked her when I was in Plains, I said "I would really love to have a look at your diary." She said, "Oh, it must be around here somewhere." And no offer to find it. I called the Carter Library; they had never heard of this diary. I kept pressuring Jerry Rafshoon and he finally called the President. Then one day in the mail came this manila envelope with these typewritten pages. And it



was helpful to get her side of the story, see it through her eyes. I went through and marked it up and highlighted the passages that I thought I would use. A month later Jerry Rafshoon calls me and says, "Larry, what happened to Rosalynn's diary? She wants it back. It's the only copy." I had to write a letter to her apologizing for marking up this historic document. I'm sure the historians in the future will wonder what happened.

There were also books written by members of the Israeli and Egyptian teams and they were extremely helpful. I actually was able to get some documents about the Camp David meetings that were unavailable in the US; they were still classified but I could check them out from the Menachem Begin Library in Jerusalem. Digging around, I was able to get as much material as I could and try to forge a play out of it. Then after I did that I realized I had the makings of a book: I could write the book that I would have adapted had it been in print before.

LIZ: That's fantastic. So, why do you think this is a story worth telling today?

LAWRENCE: The Middle East is always a source of turmoil that affects the rest of the world - not just because of the oil and not just because of Israel. And now it's a source of so many refugees that are fleeing turmoil and war and the absence of any hope for the future. The problems in the Middle East all go back to the question of war. Right now you see, once again, the Middle East is tearing itself apart because of ongoing conflict. And these conflicts have never been successfully resolved by war. The only thing that resolves conflict is diplomacy. And, yet, again and again diplomacy has failed in the Middle East. And one example of a peace accord that has held up for more than forty

years now is the Camp David Accords that Jimmy Carter brought about in those historic days in 1978. It's a model for how peace can be negotiated. Repeatedly other presidents and other interested parties have tried to forge a durable peace but none of them have succeeded with the exception, I suppose, of Israel's relationship with Jordan.

If you look at the men who made the peace at Camp David: you have Jimmy Carter who had been a one-term Georgia governor who was rapidly losing popularity, who was mired in inflation and gas price hikes and teacher strikes, his presidency was on the edge; you had Anwar Sadat, who was a former assassin who had waged war against Israel in 1973, invaded Sinai; and then you had Menachem Begin, who had been a terrorist leader before becoming president.

You couldn't find three more unlikely candidates to make peace, and yet they did.

And their example is a beacon of hope that if such men can make peace then it should be possible for others. What they had that seems to be lacking in so many people, in so many political leaders today, is moral courage. That's what led them to spend those thirteen days in Camp David and come out of there with a durable peace. It was not a complete peace, the Palestinian part of that peace accord has never been implemented, and so it's an incomplete peace, but in terms of the relationship between Egypt and Israel there has never been a single violation in the four decades since then.

You can read more about Lawrence Wright and his work by visiting alleytheatre.org/wright.