The Dramatist
The Journal of The Dramatists Guild of America
July/August 2007

Broken Music: Adam Bock
In conversation with Caridad Svich

[Adam Bock's plays include Five Flights, Swimming in the Shallows, The Shaker Chair, and The Typographer's Dream. He is the recipient of a 2007 Obie Award for his play The Thugs. This season his play The Receptionist premieres at Manhattan Theatre Club starring Jayne Houdyshell under Joe Mantello's direction, and The Drunken City premieres at Playwrights Horizons. This telephone interview was conducted 28 May 2007 while Bock was in New York City and Svich was in Los Angeles.]

Caridad Svich: When I think about your work, the first thing that comes to mind is your use of the language of the everyday - the quotidian and the banal -and your ability to deploy it in your plays in a manner that is absolutely heightened and eerie for comic and more serious effect. Words are presence in your plays, and indeed your characters are alive only through the words they have at their disposal. And when your characters go silent, as they often do, the space becomes fraught and charged in a way that is frightening or hilarious - and sometimes both.
What is your relationship to quotidian language in your work, and how has it evolved for you over the years?

Adam Bock: After I got out of college, I did a semester at the National Theater Institute at the O'Neill Theater Center. Anna Deavere Smith came and did a three-day workshop with us, showing us how she had developed her playwriting through the transcription and editing of oral histories. Using a video of Joan Rivers hosting The Tonight Show, she spoke about the attention she paid to the figurative transcription of the spoken word and how she'd recognized that the flow of language is constantly broken in a conversation, that in a transcription we can see where the direction of thought has changed or curliqued in unexpected ways. From then on, I couldn't help but hear how people spoke on a daily basis, how, in fact, people don't speak in complete sentences but rather in fits and starts. I started listening and writing down the oddities of the language I heard swooshing around me. Not as an act of mere replication but to accurately transcribe the speech of the people around me and to search out the emotion behind what they were saying. As a writer I use repetition, pauses, and broken-ness to mirror the world I hear around me. It's the poetry of the everyday that I love. I love hearing how emotion escapes through the cracks in language, how it is revealed when language breaks. And on a purely technical level, I might also use repetition, let's say, to plant information in my plays. So that you hear a piece of information that's necessary more than once. Just so it sticks! The writing of a play becomes both hearing and making, both the borrowing of language and my using it to sculpt.

CS: Very few playwrights actually put the workplace and/or the language of the workplace on stage, as you do in The Thugs for instance. Of course it is an imagined, heightened version of the workplace, but nevertheless, a statement nonetheless about your interest in exploring behavior, class, status and power dynamics current in the part of the day, the part most often spent away from domesticity and recreation, most of us spend our lives, be it in an office environment or not.

AB: I'm surprised more plays don't use workplaces as their center, since we spend some much of our lives at work! When I start a play I always think "Which formal element am I going to interrogate/play with?" In The Thugs and The Receptionist, I fooled around with language certainly, but I was more concerned with space/world initially. What world was I going to put on stage, and how were we going to see it as an audience? So, in The Thugs, we enter a temporary workspace – a world where the characters have little or no power, a space that was formerly used for something else and now has been borrowed to house this group of temps at a law firm. There's something disposable and dismissive about the people and the space they're in. In The Receptionist, I was interested in placing the receptionist outside the working office space, but of course, she's affected on a profound psychological level by what her job is, what her function in society is, and it determines to a great extent how she acts with others and what she says. My job as a writer, then, is to find a different angle for how we habitually see a space or think we see it!
I used to work as a receptionist at a temp agency and I remember the many different ways I had to communicate during the course of the day, and the many different people I had to deal with (from executives to couriers). When we first see Beverly Wilkins on the phone in The Receptionist, for example, we don't know exactly to whom she's speaking. She has to use so many different kinds of language and the different roles she has to play depend on who is on the phone with her: is it someone she knows? Is it a stranger? And with each person, how she speaks, demonstrates her status. I'm hyper aware of that: of how language denotes status. How talk to people says so much about who you are and how you behave in the world.

CS: How did The Thugs come to be? And by extension The Receptionist? And how do you think class (as in the hierarchy of social classes) is revealed in the workplace, and moreover, how do you think the stage can be a vehicle for such exploration outside of the polemical or didactic?

AB: Right before I left my job at the temp agency, I had them send me out on assignments. I had opportunity to see some of the places where we'd sent people to temp, and it was appalling to see how a subculture has been created in our society to dismiss the "temporary." A company would ask for someone to come in and do a job and basically at the job, the temp person would be treated as someone from a separate class. They were set aside. They were observed but also ignored most of the day. And yet they are doing a job deemed necessary to fill or fulfill for the company that called

them in as temp hire. It was unnerving to witness how you were being set to work and were essentially treated as disposable; in fact, it was preferred if you as temp worker did not connect to anyone else. So you are this disposable figure who does not have health insurance, whose name is barely registered by the others who are permanent workers. And I thought it was interesting to see how we've created this system to dismiss people. A couple of my plays have come from that experience, from working in those offices. Some people choose to be treated that way because they want the freedom of deciding when to work – perhaps they're artists and it's convenient, say, to have a job that allows for such flexibility – and the freedom to not connect. But I also remember when the dot.com industry went bust and suddenly everyone was disposable; everyone was temporary. Permanence had actually been a charade. Might still be, eh? Maybe we're all working in temp jobs. It echoes a truth about the social fabric in the States where you realize that net that's supposed to catch you when you fall might not exist. Everything gets a bit bald. And you see how people work with and against each other.
As I was writing The Thugs I came across an article in Harper's Magazine about torture and how people decide it's okay to use it: if there was an impending disaster like a planted bomb, for instance, would it be okay to torture people to find out where it is? So, I decided to put the two concerns – language and status in the temporary workplace, and torture and its rationale – up against each other. That's how I write plays. I put things together: a formal concern and then a story reveals itself and I work from a different angle to illuminate it.

CS: Related to the above, I also wanted to talk about minutiae and an obsession with it, it seems to me, in our culture, be it in novels or in our theatre and television. In the last seven years or so, especially in fiction, there has been an almost compulsive focus on the footnote and on the "smallest" of articles in our presence (paperclips, etc.) on which to build a story. It's as if what's most manageable to write about is the discursive cataloguing of experience. This is neither a fault or a virtue but just an observation, and one I which relates to how we tell stories and why at any given time in our culture. Your writing in particular and its sometimes very microscopic, forensic quality puts me in mind of this literary phenomenon.
Of course, in our theatre in the US esp. there is the constant nagging and wearying debate between "small theatre" and "big theatre." A debate that seems to me mis-labels or brands works of art and grants value judgments on their usefulness and importance to culture at large, when art is ultimately useless (in the Wildean sense) anyway, in the end, and that is its chief strength. In play-making we're often asked to tell the Big story, therefore. I think such a demand can create conflict within the dramatist: which story to tell? Who is it for? And yet, in the end, we have to tell the story that compels us without ascribed judgment attached. What do you love about the so-called "small" moments in our lives and placing them on stage?

AB: I read an early draft of Swimming in the Shallows a while back, and at the top of the page I'd written "simple and funny." And I probably could've added "small" because when I think about drama, I think about accrual of events. Little bits add on to other

moments and the pressure doesn't mount necessarily where one would expect. I'm always looking for the little moment that turns the play rather than the big moment that announces itself. We have big dramatic events in our lives but they don't come that often. Most of the time we're wandering around, dodging little disasters or heading unknowingly towards something great. I'm interested in little moments. I had a teacher once that said that acting moments are like pearls on a string and each one is small but in the end you have this big gorgeous webbed necklace, and that's how I think about making plays. But the other thing that occurs to me is well, I'm Canadian. And I read somewhere that Canadian artists tend to do foreground and background but not middle ground. In Canada, you see the person and then you see snow behind them and you see the horizon in the distance. There isn't a lot in the middle ground. I focus close-up and then the big picture but not so much in between. How do you think about "small?"

CS: To me "smallness" has to do with actually placing what are neglected moments, essentially un-dramatic, in a conventional sense, moments on stage and by hint of that you have a dramatic moment, because it's framed theatrically. For me, too, it has to do with moments that are delicate and subtle and what happens to them when you move them outside, say, a 99-seat theatre and into a much larger venue. How does the work and the conception of the "small" shift?

AB: When I'm doing a show I like to be there a lot with the director. One time though I remember we'd made a play for a 100-seat theatre and we lost the venue at the last minute and we got lent a 600 seat venue and the show didn't work because it wasn't made for that space. Each space necessarily impacts each production. When I write a play, it's a blueprint for what will be made in whatever space it finds itself, and you'd think each venue should do the piece differently. You can't repeat the play if the venue changes. Because the environment affects the play completely. I've seen Swimming… done in about 20 different places now, from a 40-seat theatre to a 250-seat theatre. In a 40-seat theatre the play it scratchier because the play is RIGHT THERE in front of you and the actors are huge in relationship to the space so they don't have to do enormous gestures. In a 250 seat theatre the body is more important, the set has to speak up more. You pan back and the world is as responsible for telling the story as the characters. In a small theatre the characters are everything. So, it's been interesting for me as a writer because as I work in bigger spaces, I do have to take into account the world the play lives in more and more. In The Thugs, for example, we smushed a lot physically into a small space (at Soho Rep) and it created a sense of claustrophobia, which was essential for the play. Conversely I went out to Oregon and saw the play done on a thrust stage and suddenly the audience could see each other almost all the way around the play and that feeling of claustrophobia was impossible to create. I love working with space and seeing how it impacts the play. I talk to my directors about how space functions in my texts. When director Anne Kauffman and I worked on The Typographer's Dream in San Francisco, I really wanted the space to work not as a theatre but rather as a presenting place - the idea being that these characters came into a strange space and just started talking to the audience. I wanted to get away from the

idea that the piece was directed or even designed, in effect, to avoid the idea that it had been pre-made. So, when we did the set, it needed to be an empty raw space, and it was difficult to work against the artistic impulse to make the space look symmetrical or beautiful. Same thing with the sound design. How to create a soundscape so that it doesn't sound made? We had three tables in the set and they all looked pretty much the same, which created a sense of harmony. And it was clear that that couldn't be. We needed one of the tables to be different, to disrupt the harmony. I didn't want the piece to look well designed or well-directed. As a writer I didn't want the text to feel as if it was well-made. The language was broken and it did odd things. We tried to make an un-well-made play! (Laughs.)
I've also been thinking about spaces and audiences. For example, at Manhattan Theatre Club, a large portion of their audiences are older women, yet I noticed how rarely they get to see themselves at the centre of a play. It's usually a guy or a thirty-year-old. So, I wrote The Receptionist with a 55-year-old woman as the lead. It was my reaction to that space and who comes to see shows there. Who gets to direct a show, who gets to be in it, where it plays, these are all political choices. A play doesn't exist outside of the where, how and who and what produces them, and yet often plays are treated as if they are separate from the space where they're produced and in the way they are produced. They're not! In fact the politics aren't in the stories being told on stage but how the piece is offered to the audience. Every decision about how a play gets put on determines its political affect. A story can't sit outside of its context. As a gay guy, I know that context radically affects content. How you get to be in the world and how the world is impact each other. If there's room for me, it's easier for me to be there. If there isn't, then I have to fight to be heard/seen. Marriage as a heterosexual construct is an image that surrounds me, so as a gay man, if I want to get married, I really have to change the space that surround me.

CS: I'm pretty much against categorical branding of writing based on expected notions of race, ethnicity, etc. My feeling is we should talk about good, strong, rigorous writing and that ultimately that is the bottom line. Though, as an activist, I am well aware of the need to be a champion and advocate for work that due to its "tokened" marginalization may otherwise not be seen, represented, and/or heard. When we were at the Composer-Librettist Studio at New Dramatists recently, you spoke a bit about writing from a gay perspective and reality, and that this was crucial to your mission as a dramatist. I wonder if you would expand please upon your mission and vision, and if you see yourself at all as part of a line of thought in dramatic writing and/or forging new ground? And if you feel any particular and sometimes conflicting responsibilities to tell stories given your mission?

AB: I'm a gay playwright. That's what I am. I have no problem being called that. It's part of who I am. I write from a gay perspective. It's not the only perspective I have but it is one of the strong ones. I write because I want to see people I care about on stage. So, I write from my world, my communities. I also see the job as a playwright to bring up questions I have for my group to think about. Right now I'm thinking a lot about aging

and what are gay men going to do as they age? How am I going to behave as I get older? Will I still be attractive? Especially in my age group it's difficult because a lot of guys ahead of me died, so we have no models to teach us what it's like to be a gay man in his 40s and 50s. To talk and show who we are and challenge stories that have been told about gay men seems absolutely worthwhile to me.
In terms of lineage, certainly, in the gay community, we've gone through the coming out plays and the state-of-AIDS plays and it's much easier now to come out and come out younger and younger, so to write about that problem is different now than say twenty years ago. Now I think the questions that concern me are: are how do we interact with power, and what is our responsibility to the larger community? Are we part of that larger community? The subjects change because the gay community is growing and changing, and its place in the larger community is doing the same.

CS: Humor is one of the toughest aspects of writing to describe and employ. When I first was attracted to writing and performance, even before I really knew I wanted to be a writer, comedy was a form I was fascinated by and even studied in an informal way (reading books about humor, listening to Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Bill Hicks CDs for timing, rhythm, and ways of telling story or anti-story, etc.) And I'm still very much drawn to the comedic as impulse, and possibly its cruelty, to animate my work, even when the plays aren't on the surface overtly comic at all. How did you come to embrace the comedic in your writing?

AB: I write from the inside. Always. With my characters. Truth is funny. Truly acknowledging our motives is funny. Wanting to be pious and truly not being, for instance. Whoops. Makes me laugh to recognize myself and how human I am. And how hard we all try. I always am surprised a bit by how people laugh at my work because I just try to tell the truth. I had a teacher at the O'Neill who used to say" bore, snore, goodbye" by which he meant "you bore them, they fall asleep and then they leave their chairs." Humor attracts an audience because it's an expression of warmth. Humor invites an audience in. And it is by nature surprising. And since I think my job as a writer is to keep the audience guessing, surprised and entertained, humor comes in very handy. Right?

CS: A writer's voice is often distinguished as much by content as form. Specifically I wanted to address your marks on the page itself. When you format text, lay it out on the page, assign character, etc. how do you see this as creating for readers (directors, actors, designers etc.) the score for performance? How conscious are you of white space? No space? Has marking changed for you over the years?

AB: I started almost writing plays as poetry. Little fragments of language one after another. Then I started blocking text together and only used odd markings to let actors know when to change direction in the text. Then I stopped using commas because people would often pause at a comma when I didn't want them to, so I had to mark the page differently to get them to do what I wanted. I'm constantly trying to find new ways

to cue an actor. I've started to use gestures as lines recently. A character might say a line and then a character in response would blink so I'll write "blinks" so that gesture becomes dialogue. I flirted with the whole Tristam Shandy blank page thing but I stopped that because it feels like a literary rather than dramatic device. It's about reading the page and not about preparing for performance. For me the play text is always about the play and its making and not about the page. I wrote a role for actor Mary Schultz and I wrote the line "she mutters" and I knew she would do something wonderful and she asked me what I meant and I asked her to make it a "symphony of muttering." And suddenly she made it into an event on stage, but really it began with just a line, a direction in the text that I hoped would trigger something gorgeous on stage. I've also been using capitals within sentences to indicate the next new thought path but to try an avoid a full stop prior. What's difficult of course is writing simultaneous dialogue. I'll have, say, four characters talking at once and on the page it looks as if it's a five minute scene when it really lasts 30 seconds. Having a play published can be tough because when it's published it becomes readers' theatre as opposed to actors' theatre. One person reading a play is very different from five people sitting around reading it out loud. So when my work is published I find it odd to look at because it's been made into an object that can't be erased or scratched out. The pages we give to actors feel way more real than what's in print. Even the idea of someone reading a play on their own is weird! A play is a communal activity.
Plays to me were always the activity at hand rather than the creation of an object separate from the activity. As a result, often when people read my plays they say to me "Nothing's going on," and I say to them "There's lots." When my plays are in rehearsal, in time and space, we discover what the actions are, what the movements are. It may not be so apparent I guess at first glance. People are starting to understand how to read my plays more now though. They'll say to themselves "Oh something must be happening here because the language is all broken." The biggest moment in a play can be one sentence and with the right actor in the light on stage saying that line it can change the world but reading it, it can slip by you as a reader. Luckily actors and directors and designers read scripts really carefully. (Laughs.)

CS: Distance and irony are operative in your plays, but simultaneously often there are flights of fancy, of the magical and the impossible alive in the worlds you create.

AB: To me the magical is about leaving space for actors to fly. The fantastic disavows the illusion of control. It's like the work of the whirling dervishes. People are spinning at the beginning and then we finally end up in some trance place with them, and that's what playwrights have to do: spin the world fast enough so that the audience can enter the trance together. As writers we can do things to make the trance occur like, when I put a shark in a play or a strange elevator, it allows a place that's not immediately unrecognizable to exist in the work, and that knocks us off-center and the spin begins. Weird thing is: I remember one day I was standing on the street in Providence, Rhode Island and I saw this woman in a red fur coat and red pumps with bright red hair and she was carrying a leek in her hand. If you saw that on stage it would look unreal but I

saw it. On the street in broad daylight! Made my head spin! Made me notice the world around me. (Laughs) Or you're standing around and suddenly you see six blue cars in a row go down the street. It seems magical but things like this happen all the time. For me in the theatre, it's about acknowledging the magical that exists in our lives.

[Caridad Svich is alumna playwright of New Dramatists. Her new collections are Lorca Major Plays Volume I and II (NoPassport Press at www.lulu.com]