THE DRUNKEN CITY

An interview with playwright
ADAM BOCK

conducted by
ADAM GREENFIELD, Literary Manager

Adam Greenfield: So, you were born in Canada.

Adam Bock: Yes. Montreal. When the French got into power in Canada, I was going into high school and they took the money away from the English schools, so I went to prep school in The States. And I stayed ever since.

And when did you move to New York?

Ahhhhhhh, six summers ago? I'd lived in San Francisco for five years. And then I moved out here.

What made you move from San Francisco?

A couple of things. I met a guy. Who I liked very much. And I came here to be with him. But I also wanted to be a playwright that earned my living from playwriting, and in San Francisco that was kind of hard to do. And I realized I probably needed to be in New York to understand the business better, and to—it's hard to be a playwright and make enough money regionally. I mean, you can if you get a good teaching gig. But it's just a little bit tough to get enough, sort of, critical mass behind you. So I thought at some point I either need to move to Chicago, L.A., New York, or London if I wanna be a playwright and make a living. And I also realized there's a certain forgiveness that happens in a smaller community, and there's a softness that can happen. San Francisco is totally sweet. And welcoming. And I had a brilliant time there because I made these plays and people would love them. But I came to New York, and I would do the same play, and I would be like "Oh, I better snip a little. Let's tighten it. Make it sharper." New York—the eye is quicker, the demand is quicker, the understanding is faster.

What do you mean, "quick?"

New Yorkers get things quicker. I mean, it's like the same way, "we want our coffee now!" [*he snaps*] You know? We don't wanna wait. [*snap*] We don't wanna chat. [*snap*] We want our coffee now. [*snap*] Because I have another thing to do. [*snap*] And then I have another thing to do. [*snap*] And then I have another thing to do. [*snap*] The joke I always tell is: In San Francisco, you do yoga, everyone's like "That's really great! You did yoga today?" You know, it's like, that's enough of an achievement for one day. In New York they're like, "so you did yoga, did you finish your *screenplay*?"

Did you have an early love of theater as a kid? What did you stumble upon that made you want to write plays?

I have this story I always tell. In third grade, these girls were doing *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, they put on the play, and they made me an Ooompa Loompa. And I was quite short and annoyed by that, actually. And I went home and I wrote this adaptation of *James and the Giant Peach* and made myself James, and directed it and put everybody in it. So I sort of had a rival theater company to these two girls, Joy and Karen McBride. Who were twins. And I then did *Harriet the Spy*, which was site specific, in the back of my friend Judy's house. She played Harriet, and I played Sport. Under a tree. And so I started doing theater. And the whole time I was in school, when they would say, "You can write a story, you can write a poem," I would write a play. And I don't know why, but while I would write I liked getting up and *doing* it. I always liked the performative thing. And I also think the whole dreaminess of theater sort of pulled me into it. That you get to play someone else. Or that this could be that. This towel could be a cape. Or a lake. That part of me has never really left. That sort of "what else could this be?" "What else could this shape be?" And then when I was in prep school, I did an independent study with a sort-of-young drama teacher. And I said, "I wanna write plays." And she said, "Okay, well, listen to this album." (There were still albums at that time.) And she gave me an old recording of *Marat/Sade* [*The 1963 play by Peter Weiss*] and I hadn't read any plays before, and I was like, "This is great! This is insane!" I loved it, you know? So I had this sort of crazy teacher who shoved me into an odd space. And I got excited.

An argument for arts-in-education.

It truly is when you think about it because I was, I'm a very good student in general, but I didn't really care about a lot of different things. I would do them because I was trying to be a good boy. But, I mean, I keep thinking these poor kids in schools, they have to sit there all day! What about the kids who learn kinesthetically? They must be having a hard time. The ones who would learn through movement instead of through thinking or writing, you know? Or kids who would learn emotionally instead of intellectually. It's odd that we're all taught the same way.

That makes sense to me that you would be skeptical of that kind of logic and the structure. Because your plays operate on a different logic than "A + B + C = information."

Well, when I was in school teachers would tell us something, and they would explain it to us, and you'd see the thought pattern, you'd see the thought path that you were supposed to follow. And then

they just wanted us to *repeat* it in our work. It was great when I went to Brown [University] because Paula [Vogel] taught us about associative logic, about different ways of thinking. And that is always interesting to me. Like how you can get from A to Z, but through color, instead of through letters. Or you could go through time. And that sort of is the way my brain works, a little bit oddly. It's like, "Oh, we already know this one way to go, but there are so many different ways." So, often my plays might make sense emotionally, rather than logically. Or they'll make sense if you know they were based on the map of the United States. Or if you take into account color theory. Or something like that.

Yeah, what strikes me when I experience your plays, both on paper and as an audience member, is that I have this strong emotional response, and I feel like there's a great journey that's been taken, but I can never quite put my finger on what exactly it was that created that.

Is that good or bad?

No! I mean that in a great way! You have this wonderful trust of the experience that the audience is going to have when confronted with the characters, without explaining their behavior, without pointing us.

I think what distances us often in theater is the idea that we need to know what's going on. I think it's a control issue, that we feel like we should be ahead of the play. "I should get to sit back and watch and decide about how I feel." Instead of feeling, and then deciding. That's what I'm always trying to get at-- that people will be in it, and then pull away, and then be in it. I try to take that choice away from the audience a bit. And I know that it can unnerve people, or annoy people, or exhilarate people. It depends on what their capacity is, whether they'd like to be pulled in one way or another. I learned it during *Swimming in the Shallows*. Someone who'd just seen it told me that I kept changing the ground they stood on. Which made sense to me, because if the audience can still be safe, and feel like the story is making sense, then you can have them stumble, and fall, and not know where they are. As long as they have this clear line of story that they can hold on to. Then you can use a song. Or you can have a dream sequence. But the thing I always want is for them to not know what will happen next. Because that's the way life feels to me.

And do you think about that while writing? How do you craft that experience? Because I feel like what you just described is the experience I have watching your plays, this experience that's raw and direct. Like listening to a piece of music. I have an immediate response, not a response in my head.

Right. I don't know. I think it's just what I like. So when it happens to me as I'm writing, that's what I'm attracted to. I'm like, "Ooaaah! Hmm. That's interesting." Also, when I write, I don't—I think about character quite a lot. I love people. And I love that people—we're not logical. Humans aren't logical. We don't do things only out of logic. I love astrology, and I'm always talking to people about what their sign is. But the reason I love it is that it— There are four elements that people are, that you're water, air, fire, or earth. And each of those represents a different kind of energy. So water is emotional. Air is intellectual. Earth is sort of a practical, "I understand the world from what exists." Whereas an "air" person might be, "Oh! I thought of it, so it exists." And an emotional person might say something like, "I don't like his shoes, so I don't like him." And then there's fire, which is intuition. And I actually think that the world is a mesh of these four energies. Or maybe more that we don't even know. Sometimes I think plays are like, "What's it about, what's the theme?" I'm like, "No, what's it emotionally about?" Or, "What is it intuitively about? What's the action?" And so, when I'm writing I'm like, "Have I just spent too much time thinking? It's gonna be boring." Because all those people who don't understand the world through thought are gonna be like, "Well, what's going on?"

When you sit down to write, do you already know how you want to make people feel?

No.

You discover that?

What I do is I start with *moments* that I think are emotionally potent. And then I trust the fact that because there are good actors on stage, most of the audience will identify with them and go with them. And so they'll have an emotionally potent moment too. That's what I do.

In The Drunken City, *do you remember the moments that you started with? What were the moments that you built the play around?*

Well I knew about Marnie's discovery of her dishonesty. And her being afraid and, "What am I going to do?" I knew that was going to be a big moment. And I knew for the boys it would be, "Will I take a chance again, and how does that feel? Will I fall again? Will I let myself fall?" The others showed up as I set up the circumstance. *The Drunken City* is set over the course of two days, so it's maybe 48 hours or so. Of that, I take maybe seventy minutes and I try to pick the best bits. The ones that have *stuff*. And then throw a little pause in, here and there. But mostly it's like, "What moments do we want to focus on that are interesting so that we can then see a bigger world?" You know, because it's got six people, and each of their worlds is in there, each of their pasts, what we *hope* for each of them. So there's a *lot*. And then I take a little bit little bit little bit little bit little bit little bit little bit. And we have a whole world.

Which probably accounts for why the play feels so active. And why we have such strong emotional responses. You're building it on these moments—

And I keep whacking you with them.

Right!

One after another. And it's then, hopefully, if you're with it, you forget yourself. And then you can actually have a real feeling. Because you forget to think. And that's when you can cry. Or get angry. Or be shocked that you care about someone that you wouldn't normally care about. I'm trying to keep the audience off-kilter a little bit so that they forget to sit back. And I do as many different things as I can to push and pull at the audience. It's an interesting—It's a hard—It's an interesting and hard job to try and do.

Well especially since what you have is a word processor. You have words on paper to do it. You don't know how it's going to work until that first preview audience.

Mm-hmm. I have to be an actor when I'm writing. I'm always acting at home. I'm like, "this will sound like this: drah drah drah drah drah drah drah drah drah drah drah."

Do you find that, when an audience comes in for the first time, that

you were accurate? Or are there huge surprises?

Both. I mean, there's always a big surprise, because by the time the audience comes you're exhausted and you haven't thought anything was funny for a *week*. And so you're like, "I don't know. This play? I don't know." Because a whole level of it has been missing: the *jokes*. By then I've heard them a hundred times, which I forget, but then the audience comes in and the jokes are there again. I have this friend who's a hypnotist and she says what you're trying to do is get past the "Critical Faculty," is I think what she called it. You're trying to hold your hand up here so everyone's looking at it with the Critical Faculty, and then you touch 'em over here. And that's what you do with jokes -- You're like, [*Holds one hand up*] "ha ha ha," [*Pokes Adam with the other hand*] "erp!" You know? I often try to put a big laugh right before an important moment. Because the audience is like "haa-haah," and then they're open because they just laughed. And then you can tell the truth. And the audience doesn't think about it, they just hear it.

That's what I was getting at before when I said I don't know how it's happening to me— Like, when I'm watching The Receptionist, *I'm terrified and I don't know how you made me terrified. It's also scary because it seems like we always know just about as much as the characters know—never any more. The same's true in* The Drunken City, *which is a totally different kind of play. I feel like those characters are* born *in front of us. It doesn't seem like we know them any more or less than they know themselves. Like, they're not a step ahead of us or a step behind us at any point.*

That's what I always hope for. I feel successful if that happens because I want the audience to identify with the characters. I want you to be them. So, if you're ahead of them you're not them. Or if you're behind them you're not them. You have to be with them.

That seems like the hardest thing to do.

Well, I learn as I watch. Every time the audience laughs I know they're experiencing the same thing at the same time as someone. And sometimes it will be laughs, like, scattered, but sometimes the whole audience will laugh and I'm like, "Okay, we're all together in this moment. We're all surprised by that." And then there's sometimes when I'm like, "Ah, the audience got ahead of us there." So then I have to do something, either throw a red herring, or distract them, or take out a piece of information that they would need to be ahead of me. Or they're behind me and they're confused, and I need to add something.

Were there moments in The Drunken City *that you've changed because you felt that dynamic wasn't working for you?*

Yeah. We're about to cut a big element. [*At the time of this interview, the play had had six previews*] And we also cut this moment in Frank and Eddie's first scene where Eddie does a dance. 'Cause I realized, "Oh! The audience doesn't know who these people are yet, so they're just watching without any connection. They're watching from a distance." So I was like, "No, I've gotta connect them to the audience first, and *then* I can do stuff, like have Eddie do a dance."

I've heard people describe language in your plays in a bunch of different ways: lifelike, realistic, naturalistic... How would you describe the language that you use?

I don't believe that people are polite when they talk to each other. I think every now and then they are. In certain situations. Like, for example, if I'm a teacher the students are compelled to listen to me. If I'm giving a speech on TV and there's no audience then I can speak straight forward, like the President of the United States. But my experience with language is that people struggle to be heard. And fight to be heard. And use language to conquer each other, or to woo each other, or to make each other move in different directions. And language is this sort of multi-thing, it's hitting at so many different levels at once. Poor old Elliot sitting here [*Elliot B. Quick, Playwrights Horizons Literary Resident, who operated the tape recorder and transcribed this interview*], he doesn't get to talk because you're interviewing me. So he knows his job is to be quiet. And yet every now and then he'll go "huphhhh," or "mmmmm," or let out a little laugh. Right? Or you, you know I'm supposed to be the one answering, but you encourage me by going "umhum," or "ahhh," or "mmm," or then you interrupt. Right? And even my own language, as a thought interrupts me I change directions. Or I might be like, "oops, their eyes are glazing over, I better start talking about something else." Or I might have a deeper thought, so I change tone and go down *into* language. So language is rocky and hilly and like a stream and does all of these different things. But on stage what we get is: you talk, then I talk, then you talk, I talk, you talk, I talk, you talk, I talk. In full sentences! That make sense when you read them! Which, if you've ever transcribed any language, just isn't the way it goes. Like if we actually transcribed this I would sound either unintelligible or idiotic. But because I have my hands, and I have my body, and I'm looking you in the eye, and I know when you're following me, I can use fragments. Or I can use pieces. Or I can use the wrong words and it still makes sense. So that's what interests me. I love a couple things. I love listening to one person talk and watch them go on this crazy path to try and get from their first impulse to where they feel comfortable stopping when they've gotten the point across. And I love hearing the other people try to take over. Or encourage. And then I like what happens in those moments of trouble where either there's two people fighting and so there's a lot of overlapping and we don't know who's gonna win and then get to *actually* talk. Or moments when an emotional thing happens to someone and they come up *against* language. Language deserts them. Or pushes out of them so fast that they can't even control it. That's the stuff I find beautiful and fascinating. And so I listen for that, and I listen—and I try and make it and put it onstage... I remember when I saw a woman in Providence, Rhode Island. She had bright red hair, a bright red fox fur coat on, green shoes, and she was holding a *leek*. Right?!? And I thought to myself, "You would never see that on stage as realistic. You would see that as experimental." And yet this woman was standing right there in the middle of the street, going somewhere, she had a *leek*. It's the same way with language-- people always think it's experimental in my plays. And yet, if you really look at the world, it's not clean. And when you think of actors standing around onstage, they all stand in that Actor Way, but usually if you look at a group of regular people standing around, one person's got a foot somewhere very strange. Or they're touching a part of their body in a way that, you know, that their knuckles are on the back of their head for some reason. Like, how you're sitting right now, that's not how you would ever sit on stage. You wouldn't sit like that. I remember, when I had to give, I gave a speech and I stood in, like, a yoga pose. It was just because I was nervous. But we think nervous-standing is with your hands sort of like this [*puts his hands out in front of him*]. And that's the way I think language is being used in plays. Like we're supposed to write big speeches that finish properly at the right moment.

We articulate things without actually articulating them.

Yeah.

Your stage directions do a lot for you, too. Like, at the end of a sentence, somebody might not complete their sentence, but it'll say, "They open their eyes wide," or "They open their mouth wide," or "They blink three times."

I'm trying to encourage the actor to recognize that they speak physically. And that you could do a lot physically to make your point. All of the actors in *The Drunken City* are brilliant at that. When people read my plays they hear a rhythm in them. And because they hear rhythm, sometimes, or a metronome, at times, they think, "Oh, this might be expressionistic. Or presentational." And I actually don't think that's what I'm trying to do. What I think I'm trying to do is, I'm trying to find very real moments and then place them next to each other in a way that can be oddly expressionistic. But I don't ever want the actors to be fake. You know, I don't ever want them to be distanced from the thing itself. Each moment, I'm hoping, is a truthful one. It's just the odd proximity to another truthful moment that makes you go, "How'd you get there?"

The four parts of The Drunken City *aren't called "Act One, Act Two, Act Three, Act Four." They're just numbered, "One, Two, Three, Four." What's the difference?*

I think what I was hoping for by using these numbered parts instead of acts is that each one is something new. Because of what I'm calling it, you might see it differently, and therefore make a different choice. If it's Act One, Act Two, Act Three, maybe you'll think they all have to be part of the same thing. But four different parts could be—one could be blue, and one could be wet, and one could be from the Financial District. So it's like, they could come from different places.

Part Three in The Drunken City *is a song. How'd you arrive at this?*

It started out as a very short, short monologue originally. I knew that it wasn't taking place on the night that we'd been watching, the drunken night. And I knew it wasn't part of the next day. I knew that it had to be this moment alone for Linda. And I knew very specifically that it was an emotional moment, where she discovers something. And feels something. And then I thought, "Okay, so how is it different, formally?" And I just went, "Oh! It should be a song."

It's such a different head space. It seems so private.

Yeah. But then also, songs are so *public*, too. The deepest connection you can get is through a song. It's like the audience says, "Oh, you're singing to me! Please, say whatever you want." Because it's not hitting you in your head. It's hitting you in your gut. Or wherever music goes in. I'm appalling when I listen to songs because I never hear the words. I only hear the sounds. I often don't know what a song is about because I just listen to the sounds.

What sort of music do you listen to?

Me? It's Motown. Yeah. That's what I started with. I started as a young boy listening to Diana Ross and The Supremes singing "Love Child" in the basement. We had an old hi-fi and I think we only had three albums. One was Roger Miller. He's got a crystalline voice. Beautiful. And very simple storytelling. And then Diana Ross and The Supremes were TOTALLY emotional, and I was like, "I'm one of them!" And I would, I would actually take my tube socks and put them on my arms like gloves and then do the choreography. Which is, like, my *one bit* of drag when I was a child. But we only had a few records, so I just listened to "Love Child" over and over thinking, "Love child, love child, that's me! *I* started school in a worn torn dress somebody threw out!" Which is completely crazy because I was in Canada, in a snow suit.

Okay, this is my James Lipton question: Which writers turned you on when you were beginning to write plays? Anyone whose work you slept with under your pillow?

It changed with each time, each period in my life. I loved Lanford Wilson. Then when I went to grad school I loved Kroetz. And Chekhov. But then I loved *Ubu* and that crazy stuff, too. Pirandello. And I love Strindberg. You know, the thing is I kind of love the emotionalists rather than the thinkers. Like if it's between Sophocles and Euripides, I like Euripides. If it's between Shakespeare and Spencer, I like Shakespeare. And that's the pattern all the way down the line. If it's between Ibsen and Strindberg, I like Strindberg. Miller and Williams, it's Williams. It was never Shaw, it was Oscar Wilde. You know, it was always the one who was like, "Lets have fun! I read recently how Thornton Wilder said that one of the reasons he loves Shakespeare is that you could never tell if he had an axe to grind. He never told you how you were supposed to feel, or who you're supposed to like. And there's something lovely about that, the idea that we don't actually have to make something right by writing. I mean, I feel very moral, I have strong moral opinions. But I'm not sure it's my job to make *you* have that. Maybe that's because I was at Brown during the whole post-modern, deconstruction craziness where suddenly there were 500 truths instead of one truth.

Brown has a very distinct identity as a grad school for playwriting. What would you say you took most from Brown?

I guess I'd say the recognition that when we write a play we do two things: We tell a story, and we choose a form to tell it in. Most people think, "Oh, when you're writing a play you're telling a story," and they ignore the fact that just by telling a story you're making so many formal choices. What Paula did was acknowledge that through the years the forms have changed. It changes constantly. And so the idea that there's one way to write a play is ridiculous. Because we could choose any form we wanted. And we've even seen it in the last five years: the difference between the Pulitzers, for example, the difference between *Rabbit Hole* and *I Am My Own Wife*. Entirely different plays. And yet to think of them like, "That's a play. That's what a play looks like." It's silliness. So, that's something I learned from her. It was like, "Oh! Well I can choose the different rules of my world and the world will change. I can choose different characters—you know, a toaster could be a character."

Or a shark.

A shark. Exactly. Before that I had thought, "Oh, there has to be a sofa." You know, because I came of age at a time when a lot of sofas were onstage.

"The Sofa Period."

"The Sofa Period." "The Big Beige Sofa Period." I remember I was seeing plays and I was like, "Why are they all beige? What's going on with all these earth tones? There are acid greens in the world! There's metal in the world!"

You're also are very purposefully not prescriptive about what race or ethnicity your characters are. When it comes to casting, you make sure there's a diverse ensemble.

Well, that's something I've noticed in the theater. I think the theater's both sort of revolutionary and reactionary at the same time. If we ever looked at the stages in New York and thought about how white everybody is on stage, that huge casts are filled with white people, and white men mostly, we'd be— if we ever actually noticed that, we'd be shocked. Because when I go on the subway that's not, it's not all white guys next to me. That's not my world. I mean, I think the first four plays I did in New York had one person of color out of maybe 20, 30 characters. And none of them were specifically written to be white. I never write a white character. But I think it's assumed families are white. I think it's assumed leads are white. I think it's assumed before it starts. It doesn't feel truthful to me.

When you sat down to write The Drunken City, *were the characters fully formed in your head? Or did you discover the characters as you worked? Did you know their signs, for example?*

I probably knew their signs. I can't remember that now. I usually, what I do is I collect for a while. I start bucketing. And I make certain decisions. I'm like, "Okay, this was a commission for a small theater, six is probably the most people I can have in it." And then, "Ah, lets try to make it half men, half women. And there are lots of great actresses, you know? So I'm gonna put the girls in front." And then, "Okay, I've got three girls. One's beginning something. One's in the middle of something. One's at the end of something." Which speaks to their engagements. One's trying to begin in a way— Melissa. One is in the middle—Linda. And one's at the end— Marnie. And so that's where, suddenly their personalities start taking shape. And then I discover things. I had no idea what they did for work until I needed it. So then I go back. I write forward, and then I go back. And then I write forward, and then I go back. Every morning. I write, and then in the morning I go back and reread, and tinker tinker tinker. And then I write a little bit more. I'm a very *small* writer though. If I write for half an hour a day I'm, like, thrilled! Because I find it exhausting, I write quite hard for half an hour. When I used to smoke, which is way back when, I would write five lines, go have a cigarette, come back, write another five lines, go have a cigarette. So that was the pace, that was the rhythm. Because I actually think my beats are quite short. And that's why things twist so fast. I don't go on very long in one feeling. I don't think feelings stay very long. I think some rage-aholics can stay angry for a long time, but I think most people burst into anger, and then retreat. Or people burst into sorrow, and then recover, and then fall into melancholy, and then fall into depression, and then get distracted, and then return. But I don't think you stay in one feeling for a long time. So. I write these little bits of it. And then I put them next to each other.

Speaking of which, I know you need to get back—

Yeah I should head upstairs to rehearsal.

Thanks for chatting.

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