

# San Francisco Theater Pub

## The Real World- Theater Edition: One More Interview by [sftheaterpub](#)

*Barbara Jwanouskos- one more interview for the road.*

As my last post to *The Real World – Theater Edition*, I'd like to first thank all the readers out there who have gotten some enjoyment from following this column. I am extremely grateful to Theater Pub to have been able to have the space to reflect on art, theater-making, and the creative process. Thank you to all the people I've interviewed for being so heartfelt and expressing your passion for art. Your dedication is such an inspiration and so needed. Please, all artists and people, keep creating and building. If this column has taught me anything, it's that perseverance and commitment to craft and vision can be momentous. The creative power that we have can do so much. I guess I keep distilling the words of wisdom from the past two years of interviews and I come up with —

don't be discouraged  
 what you do is important, powerful, and beautiful  
 stay connected  
 keep going even (especially) when it's hard, even if only a baby step

I was fortunate enough to connect with local playwright-director Andrea Hart and dramaturge Heather Helinsky for this last interview on Andrea's new play, *dark is a different beast*. We talked about collaboration and the creative process, how they work together, and how they fit into a broader theater ecosystem.

Thank you for reading.

**BJ:** Tell me a story of how you got into theater. How did you know this was it for you?

**AH:** I studied theater at college in upstate New York and had an amazing advisor and theater director, Robert Gross. His experimental ethos pervaded the theater program there, including an amazing student-run theater program. One year I performed at midnight in sunken gardens that were part of our art building. The audience was loud and raucous and huge...they were as much a part of the performance as we were. I loved that. And we were in an unusual place at an unusual time and all of that was part of the performance too. All my work tries to capture that essence of creating something that doesn't conform to expectations, but that takes everyone involved on a unique journey.

**HH:** Oh, many reasons, but one of the most compelling things for me is what happens in the room together, when we're all breathing in and responding to the same story. It's important in our divided culture to find ways of talking and really listening to each other. I learned that in 2008 when I was dramaturging a long run of August Wilson's *Radio Golf* in Pittsburgh right up until the eve of Obama's first election. It was like a town hall meeting every night! So much energy and electric conversations. It brought so many neighbors together and everyone had an opinion about what August was saying about the challenges of a black man running for elected office, roughly ten years before Obama

showed up on the national scene. August's play helped us all process the daily news cycle. Well, Andrea's play is a response to this year's national election. We need to keep talking, not shut down. Theatre forces us to stay engaged instead of being cynical about it; artists try their best to show the way.



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Heather Helinsky, dramaturge.

**BJ:** How did you get involved with 6NewPlays and what has the development experience been like?

**AH:** I started talking about creating a West Coast version of 13P in 2010 with an L.A. playwright I met at the Great Plains Theatre Conference. Our goal was to find a way to make West Coast theater vital and relevant and combat the feeling that if we weren't doing it in New York or Chicago we were somehow less committed. Over the next couple years we kept finding other playwrights who resonated with the idea. Originally we tried to do an L.A./S.F. group, but it became too unmanageable, so the SF contingent kept meeting and discovering the shape we would take. It took about 3 years of meeting pretty regularly to get ourselves up and running, but the conversations we had those 3 years were a lifeline for me as I continued to try to figure out what it means to be a playwright in this area. Or at all!

**HH:** Andrea and I are colleagues through Great Plains Theatre Conference, which is a residency that allows playwrights the time and creative space to dream their next project into existence. That's not hyperbole, that's just the relaxed environment we nurture in Omaha: a place for writers all over the country to push conversations forward. I'm not surprised that 6NewPlays started there. In Philly, where I'm based, Orbiter3 has been successfully keeping this playwright-centered process going. We need more of this organic energy where playwrights get to drive the process, but every theatre community has its challenges, here in San Francisco no exception. I'm excited by the warehouse space Andrea has chosen, it gives the storytelling a uniquely Bay Area sense of place, but that's my outsider opinion. I hope this 6NewPlay movement helps the artist community here find their own unique spaces that help add to another part of the conversation to the production.

**BJ:** What is *dark is a different beast* about?

**AH:** *dark is a different beast* is about finding connection in a disconnected world. I think it's ultimately a meditation about what living during this time, and watching the news and being aware of what's going on in the world and living through various catastrophes—either personally or via your experience of watching it unfold on the news or through a friend or loved one—what that does to our ability to love ourselves and each other. Sometimes it feels like authentic connection with others is a

process of cutting through layers and layers of padding and protection before finally revealing and seeing the soft core of someone else, and discovering the strength in that place. The play is basically that image played out on a large scale.

**HH:** Great answer, playwright Andrea! I encourage playwrights on principle not to over-explain your play, let the audience come up with their own interpretation. It's that and many other things, including the elemental forces in this country, the conflicts between fire and wind, water and earth. We're living in a time where all of those elements are fueling a big bonfire of issues, and the play mines those metaphors. We'll see what resonates the most when the audience shows up!

**BJ:** How are you both working together in this production? What are your roles? Do they have boundaries? What's your working style?

**AH:** I asked Heather to work with me on this script after the script had been around for almost 5 years. I wish I had asked her 3 years ago! She has been amazing at helping me find the structure and make the actual "plot line" clearer, without sacrificing the imagery or fantastical elements of the piece.

She came out to see a few rehearsals in October. I had never had a dramaturg working with me during the production, and wasn't quite sure what to expect. She was able to describe the play to the cast in ways I hadn't yet. She gave them direct feedback about how the story was coming across and where it wasn't. She and I stayed up until midnight discussing the ending and she talked me through how to present script changes to the cast. She is basically like a script doula...she holds my hand and encourages me to make the tough choices. She helps me put the script first even when all the production concerns are making me want to do the opposite. She was even counseling me through some actor notes last night via text when it was after midnight her time.



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Andrea Hart, playwright-director.

**HH:** Thanks, all kind of you to say, Andrea. One of the hardest things for a playwright to do is be a playwright-slash-director. Andrea came to me while we were in rehearsals at GPTC for a very poetic play by Chicago playwright/director/producer Bonnie Metzgar. We talked there of the challenges of self-producing and decided to set deadlines over the summer so the actors and designers didn't feel unnecessary stress if Andrea did any major rewrites. Her focus right now should be directing and nurturing the actors. But the reality of writing is sometimes you discover things in the rehearsal room along the way, so we had a very calculated strategy for me to come in midway and take a hard look at

the ending. I'll miss being there for opening night and I would have loved to see the designers tech this show. I'm sure we could learn more if I wasn't based on the east coast, but there's always limitations in theatre-making. Sometimes a limitation can be freeing and have its own advantages. Andrea and I can work well long-distance because there's a strong bond that has been built over the years working together at GPTC. We've been through fire there too, I know Andrea's aesthetic preferences, we know how to make a quick but tough decision and keep moving forward. Onwards!

**BJ:** Has working with the story in film changed or opened up how you see dark is a different beast as a play?

**AH:** The film came out of the need to have better footage of my work to use in grant applications. The cinematographer was a friend and he suggested making it into something that could stand on its own as a film. The process, I think, taught me more about film than it did about theater. It did make me realize that this is definitely a theatrical piece. It helped me know when the language was working or not working—after editing the same line multiple times! The film also only included a few short scenes from the full play, so ultimately the play is an entirely different beast (har har!). And I think how the piece ultimately needs to be seen.

**HH:** Film is not my medium. As a dramaturg, I work purely in theatre. I read about 300 new plays a season for different national new play organizations and my job is often to sniff out a submission that is really a film script trying to pass as a play. But when a writer like Andrea comes to me and has the experience of making her script as a film first, I love hearing what she learned and what's she's already willing to throw away for the sake of a making it a play. There's always a lesson from crossing over, but you have to be willing to rip it apart and potentially throw away the things that worked best on screen. My training came from the American Repertory Theatre, under AD Robert Woodruff, where we were always encouraged to search for new forms. Woodruff loved Fellini, so we did several exercises ripping apart Fellini's films and finding the values that were purely theatrical and repurposed them. Like ripping apart a historic house and turning it into a hipster contemporary apartment.

**BJ:** What challenges and opportunities have come up in the process?

**AH:** Challenges: How do you have enough time with actors in the room to work the script, discover the design, etc? Really, that's the biggest challenge. How do you have the space/time/resources to develop the play in the way that it needs before being seen by an audience? I think that's especially important working with a piece that is this visual and design oriented.

Opportunities: The actors have all brought a lot of interesting knowledge to this piece, from the 3rd Face of Power, to Native American ritual, to comic-book imagery...everyone in the room is constantly introducing me to something I wouldn't have known about before that is completely relevant to the piece. That makes the piece so much richer and fuller.

**HH:** Yes. All of the above. Just telling your truth in the form of a play is a challenge, and communicating with a room full of collaborators, and making sure we're all on the same page with the playwright, and not spinning too far in other directions.

**BJ:** Have you had any moments of being stuck? How did you get out of it? Or are you still there?

**AH:** The ending was a big sticking point. I always sort of hated it and kept telling the actors...“We’ll figure that out soon.” Heather was a huge help in talking me through why it wasn’t working and what might work better. It took both of us only getting 3 hours of sleep and me trusting actors to deal with a major change. I’m still not sure it’s the right one, but I know it’s much closer to being right than what we had.

**HH:** Yep. Out of the 300 new scripts I read a year, a majority of them haven’t figured out the ending yet. Part of my job is to get the writer there. You have to see the potential and keep pressing after hard questions. But then, think about Shakespeare. How many contemporary directors cut the heck out of Shakespeare’s Act 4 & 5? We revere him, but we also get frustrated and cut his last acts to say what we want to say now. For a world premiere, you also have to respect and trust the writer, not force changes to the text until you absolutely have to. My philosophy is to treat a new play like a classic and a classic like a new play. Respect the writer’s first impulse, maybe even go back to an early draft to find the answer. Something hidden in there is closer to the truth.

**BJ:** What is your take on Bay Area theater vs. other places? What does it look like or how does it differ? Do you see any opportunities to grow the scene?

**AH:** One thing we’ve talked a lot about with 6NP is that in the Bay Area you really have audiences that are ready and willing to watch anything. What I would love to see is an expansion of support for local theater makers to have the time and space to develop more risky ideas BEFORE inviting the audience in. I think there are some amazing organizations offering this (CounterPulse comes to mind), but with the size of the artist pool, we need more. Ideally, artists shouldn’t have to use the production process to flesh out their work. I think when a workshop showing of a piece has to charge \$30 for tickets, something in the ecosystem is not healthy.

**HH:** I work all over the country in many different theatre ecosystems and this is the first time I’ve been invited to the Bay Area. I’m happy to be here with Andrea, but our collaboration started outside of this city. It takes a lot of respect and trust to invite a dramaturg into the room. Our origin story is taking a critic and throwing an outsider’s critical opinion into the process. Do you want a Kenneth Tynan in the middle of your rehearsal process? Many people don’t.

**BJ:** What words of wisdom do you have for people that want to do what you do?

**AH:** I’m at the stage of the process where it’s really hard to feel wise. But I would say...as much as the audience showing up on opening night terrifies you, still make the risky choices. Do what you need to do to drown out the chorus of advisors and critics who get louder as you get closer to opening. Everyone is scared about their part in the final piece. Do what you need to do to get past the fear and find the essence of the story you’re trying to tell. Stick with that.

**HH:** Pay attention to the playwrights that are part of this 6NewPlays collaboration. In Philly, Christopher Chen’s production of *Caught* at Interact blew us all away and many Philly playwrights wrote their own new plays in response. I also love Eugenie’s work. Take care of the playwrights making work in your own backyard. The city has many stories to tell, there’s a unique ecosystem here and on a national level, we need to hear your voice just as much as playwrights in NYC, Austin, or Chicago. Give them grants so every once in awhile they can mix it up with writers in other cities, like Philly or Omaha, then bring them home. Don’t lose them.

**BJ:** Where can we find more info on dark is a different beast and do you have any other projects or friends’ projects coming up we should check out?

**AH:** Check out 6NewPlays' website: [6newplays.com](http://6newplays.com). You can find out about *dark* and also about the next show coming up by Erin Bregman. I also have to put a plug in for Ochlos Theatre Lab, where I create devised work with my collaborator, Carol Ellis. We are slowly working on a new project that we're hoping will emerge toward the end of next summer: <http://ochlostheatrelab.org/> (<http://ochlostheatrelab.org/>). I also pretty much always love what CounterPulse is doing and the education department at ACT—specifically director Tyrone Davis. (*Every 28 Hours!*)

**HH:** Playwrights of San Francisco, send your work out bravely to these places, because I work there: Great Plains Theatre Conference, Sundance Theatre Lab (November 15th deadline!), PlayPenn, Jewish Plays Project in NYC, the O'Neill. Or if you're still in college, the Kennedy Center's American College Theatre Festival's playwriting division. I hope our creative paths cross again. Thanks for my first experience in the Bay Area! Looking forward to getting to know your community more. Andrea did a fantastic job in hosting me and introducing me to how things work here. A sincere thank you.

*dark is a different beast is playing at Light Rail Studios in San Francisco on Nov. 11, 12, 18, and 19. For more information, please visit <http://m.bpt.me/event/269658> (<http://m.bpt.me/event/269658>).*

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