

Q&A with Playwright Bill Cain

by Michael Cotey, Director of *EQUIVOCATION*

During the summer after my first year of grad school at Northwestern, I read a large stack of plays looking for the show I would direct during my second year. *EQUIVOCATION* was the first in the stack and while I did the due diligence of reading the other thirty or so plays, none of them could compete. Reading Bill Cain's complex, funny, highly theatrical and deeply human play was like riding a heart pounding roller coaster. His play is a gift – to directors, actors, designers, and audiences. Bill not only succeeds in juggling many balls – politics, history, religion, family, art – he does it while delivering a play that speaks from the heart. One doesn't need to know a thing about Shakespeare or the Gunpowder Plot to love this play because it also speaks to the anxieties of the world we find ourselves in.

I've never had the chance to revisit a play like I will with *EQUIVOCATION* at Next Act (which I couldn't feel more honored to be doing). This time around I worked up the nerve to talk to Bill Cain and ask him some questions about the creation of his brilliant play.

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MICHAEL COTEY: Where did the idea to write *EQUIVOCATION* come from?

BILL CAIN: *EQUIVOCATION* began while I was standing in the Tower of London – shouting distance from the Globe Theatre across the river – and looking at the words prisoners of conscience had engraved in the walls of the Tower at the same time that Shakespeare was making a fortune writing for the King. And I wondered – which would I have rather been – a prisoner of conscience – or a writer writing for a corrupt regime?

MC: Did you have any other plays or movies in your head while you were putting *EQUIVOCATION* down to paper?

BC: Always. *DEVIL'S DISCIPLE* by Shaw was helpful. *GALILEO* by Brecht. Big canvas modern pieces. *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA*. *BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI*. As well as *MACBETH*, *LEAR*, *CYMBELINE*, *RICHARD III*, etc.

MC: What do you hope people walk away with from having seen this play?

BC: Someone after the original production wrote, "I came out of the show wishing to be bigger, truer, bolder." That.



Bill Cain

Photo: Jenny Graham

MC: How does being a Jesuit priest affect being a playwright, and vice versa?

BC: The job of a Jesuit priest is to find God in hidden places. This leads me to overlooked stories. Overlooked characters: Shakespeare's daughter Judith, Tom Wintour, etc.

MC: This play has an artist [one of the greatest of all time] grappling with both internal and external forces. Were you grappling with anything in particular as you wrote this play?

BC: Shag [Shakespeare] says in the play something to the effect that truth defies dramatic structure. Although the structure of *EQUIVOCATION* is rock solid, it is a very complex scaffold built to tell the story. It has five plays-within-the-play, two elaborate executions, domestic and public plots, politics and family – all done with complex doubling. This was not an easy structure to find. But once in place, it seemed inevitable.

Our vision of life is frequently reduced to melodrama. Good vs. bad. Usually with good triumphing. My goal was to reflect



Photo: Timothy Mader

Michael Cotey & David Cecsarini in *MICROCISIS*

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accurately – as accurately as I could – my understanding of our complex time through studying and understanding the situation of our hero writer in his time.

MC: Your sense of humor has been described as impish. How would you describe it? And how do you find balance using humor in a play like *EQUIVOCATION* where the stakes are so high and where the endings are tragic for some?

BC: I don't think my humor is impish. I have a mind that embraces paradox and contradictions. It embraces chaos and finds implicit meaning in it. I would call my humor – oh, call it what you want. I find many things that are very serious, very funny. Drama is opposites meeting. Half of the time, that's very funny. The other half, it's heartbreaking.

MC: One of Shagspeare's first lines to his actors is in response to one of them calling Lear insane and he says, "Not near as insane as what's outside those doors," and it feels as though Shag could be talking about today's America. Your play also deals with truth and how to say the truth in difficult times, yet 2017 has been a year where what is "true" feels up for grabs day-to-day. How does *EQUIVOCATION* speak to the world we find ourselves in that maybe it didn't when it premiered in 2009?

BC: I am told of an incident that happened when the play was done at UC Santa Barbara. The day of opening night was the day of the campus shoot-

ing at UCSB. Seven were killed. Twice that number injured. They decided to perform the play. When the actor playing Shag said, "Not as insane as what happens outside those doors," I am told there was a shudder of recognition. They decided to do the play to give people a safe, creative place to be. A way to deal with madness outside. I hope the play retains that function.

MC: What's your favorite Shakespeare play and why?

BC: *LEAR*, I suppose, because of the scenes on the heath. Man is stripped of everything down to his naked being – and still that being is glorious. Lear finds room in his heart only when everything else is taken away.

Plays like *EQUIVOCATION* are the reason I direct. It's challenging and complex, full of big ideas, great passion and tremendous energy. And what an embarrassment of riches we have with the group of actors we've assembled to tackle this beast! Above and below Next Act's logo are two words; Intimate and Powerful. No truer words will describe your experience when you come see *EQUIVOCATION*.

– Michael Cotey