AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
Carey Perloff, Artistic Director • Ellen Richard, Executive Director

PRESENTS

WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Dead Metaphor

by George F. Walker
Directed by Irene Lewis

The Geary Theater
February 28–March 24, 2013

WORDS ON PLAYS VOL. XIX, NO. 4

Dan Rubin
Editor

Elizabeth Brodersen
Director of Education

Michael Paller
Resident Dramaturg

Amy Krivohlavek
Marketing Writer

Cait Robinson
Publications Fellow

Made possible by

KORET FOUNDATION

ART WORKS. arts.gov

grants for the Arts San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund

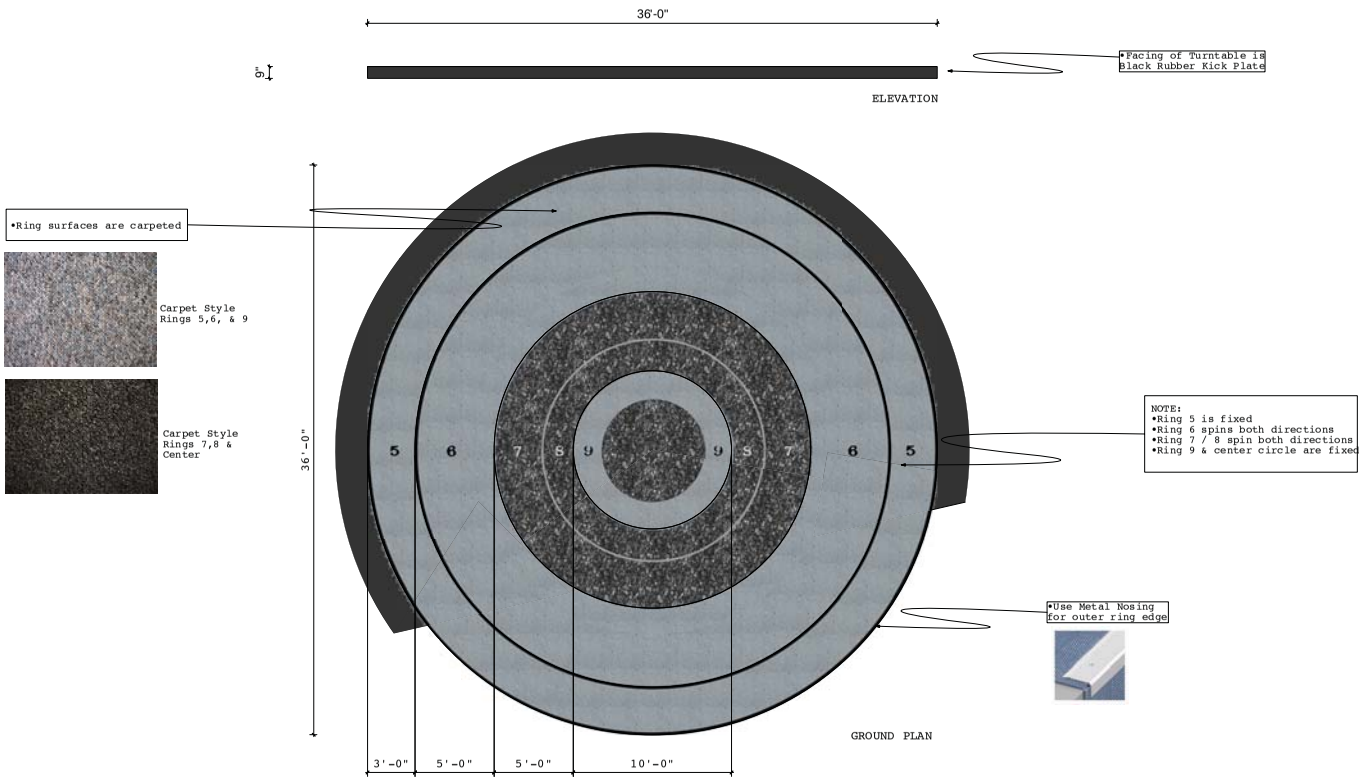
A.C.T.
AMERICAN
CONSERVATORY
THEATER

Table of Contents

COVER *Trigger Finger* (detail), 1963 © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

OPPOSITE *American Sporting Scene: Snipe Shooting* (detail), published by John Walsh & Co., 1870 (Library of Congress). For more on "sniper" as a dead metaphor, see page 35.

Set elevation for *Dead Metaphor*, by scenic designer Christopher Barreca



" D E A D M E T A P H O R "	
A. C. T. G E A R Y T H E A T E R	
T U R N T A B L E	SCALE: 1 / 2 " = 1 ' - 0 "
DRAFTED BY: A . H . & V . R .	DATE: 1 2 / 1 7 / 1 2
DIRECTOR: I R E N E L E W I S	DESIGNER: C H R I S B A R R E C A

5/7

Characters, Cast, and Synopsis of *Dead Metaphor*

A.C.T.'s production of *Dead Metaphor* is the world premiere.

Characters and Cast of *Dead Metaphor*

DEAN TRUSK ..... George Hampe
OLIVER DENNY ..... Anthony Fusco
JENNY TRUSK ..... Rebekah Brockman
HANK TRUSK ..... Tom Bloom
FRANNIE TRUSK ..... Sharon Lockwood
HELEN DENNY ..... René Augesen

Setting of *Dead Metaphor*

Various locations in an unspecified city.

Synopsis of *Dead Metaphor*

The following synopsis reflects the story of Dead Metaphor *as of the first day of rehearsal. As this is a new work, the story may have changed by opening night.*

Five months ago, Dean Trusk returned home from his second tour in the Middle East, where he served as an "efficient" sniper against the Taliban. When he reenlisted, his wife, Jenny, threatened to divorce him as a way of keeping him home; when he deployed anyway, she followed through on her threat. Now that he is back, the two have reconciled, plan to remarry, and have a baby on the way. Dean, however, has had trouble finding work, and the couple lives with Dean's parents, Hank and Frannie, who are struggling to adjust to life with Hank's inoperable brain tumor, which is affecting his memory and impulse control. Having always held strong leftist political views, Hank has been expressing his opinions in increasingly explicit terms since he became ill.

Dean seeks the assistance of Oliver Denny, a government job counselor his parents know from church. Oliver recommends Dean to his wife, Helen, a high-level government official running for reelection. Over the years, Oliver has watched Helen change from a moderate conservative into a right-wing ends-justify-the-means extremist, but he has

Set model for *Dead Metaphor*, by scenic designer Christopher Barreca

stood by her and even offers bits of advice for her campaign. He suggests that hiring a "war hero" like Dean as her personal assistant would be a politically savvy move.

Helen hires Dean, and he excels at the job. The arrangement falls apart after six months, however, when Dean witnesses a clergyman make an illegal donation to Helen's campaign manager, Mitchell. Worried that Dean might go to the press, Helen decides to get rid of him. She fires him and pulls some strings so that he is offered an impressive bonus to reenlist in the military. To the horror of his family, Dean considers the offer because his family is desperate for money. Hank, however, thinks Dean should expose Helen "and all her bastard friends before they get a chance to do any more harm." After Dean refuses, Hank blackmails Helen.

Oliver tries to convince his wife to quit politics and thereby avoid a scandal. She could move with him to Europe, where she could study art and regain her "humanity." She considers her husband's offer, but when Hank lashes out at her in the middle of a church service, she tells Oliver that she wants Hank "silenced." If Oliver is unwilling to take care of it, she'll enlist Mitchell's help.

Realizing how unhinged and dangerous Helen has become, Oliver offers Dean $100,000 to assassinate her. Oliver will get the money from their daughter, Trish, a lesbian environmentalist who won a large settlement after being injured during a deforestation protest. She has not spoken to her morally bankrupt mother in six years and agrees that she needs to be put down. Dean confers with Jenny and, spotting an opportunity to increase their profits, they inform Helen that her family put a hit out on her. They hope that she'll make them a better offer, which she does: Helen will pay them $200,000 if Dean kills Oliver *and* Trish. Dean and Jenny go back to Oliver, who agrees to up his bid to match Helen's. Jenny thinks they should take the money from both parties, but Dean says that would be dishonorable unless they killed all three. Meanwhile, Hank asks Dean to help him die before he succumbs completely to his dementia.

Whom, if anyone, will Dean choose to shoot? And will Jenny help him, or try to stop him from going through with it?

"These Are My People"

Exploring "Walker Realism" with Director Irene Lewis

By Amy Krivohlavek

Director Irene Lewis first encountered George F. Walker's work 20 years ago, when she staged a production of his play *Escape from Happiness* at Yale Repertory Theatre and Baltimore's CENTERSTAGE, where she served as artistic director from 1991 to 2011. A dark comedy about a wonderful, dangerously dysfunctional family, *Escape from Happiness* features a gritty world steeped in alcohol, drugs, pornography, and raunchy language. In a review of the Yale production, the *New York Times* praised Walker for his "perceptive voice, stingingly funny lines, and a fresh point of view." The review continues: "Mr. Walker takes once-radical techniques right to the edge, to the very risky brink, but stops short of despair. If *Escape from Happiness*—telling, terrific title—does not care about how the truth can ruin your day, it's because the play is concerned with more important things, like changing our lives." (See page 24 for Walker's memory of that production.)

After the show closed, Lewis continued to follow Walker's career, reading his plays and developing a deep respect for his challenging themes and unique style. "His humor is truly one of a kind," she says. "He's quirky, and he really creates his own universe, his own world. It's unlike others—it's George Walker."

After Lewis directed the acclaimed A.C.T. production of David Mamet's hot-button drama *Race* last season, A.C.T. Artistic Director Carey Perloff thought of her as the perfect match for *Dead Metaphor* and Walker's signature style. "Walker has an incredible knack for mining dark humor out of impossible circumstances, deploying a kind of vivid satire to make us listen to our own clichés and become aware of our own hypocrisy," says Perloff. "There is no one better than Irene Lewis to bring to life this world premiere."

Like Walker, Lewis has dedicated her career to bringing challenging theater to audiences without fear or apology. "I was always after the widest swings you could get in a six-play season, in theatrical experience," she told the *Washington Post* in 2011. Her directing résumé covers immense ground, from classic plays by Shakespeare and Molière to an eclectic range of musicals (e.g., *The Pajama Game* and *Sweeney Todd*) and a wide range of new works by emerging young playwrights—including many playwrights of color.

Although Lewis maintains that a director need not perfectly identify with the material or background of a playwright in order to stage a compelling production, she

admits that she identifies very personally with *Dead Metaphor*. She heard horrific stories from a cousin who served in the Vietnam War (and tragically, unlike *Dead Metaphor*'s Dean Trusk, did not make it back), and she was raised in a working-class family not unlike the Trusks. "Class is very, very important in this play," she says. "I'm from that working class, and I struggled and pulled myself out. These people onstage are working class, and I find them very moving."

Walker is notorious for endless rewrites of his scripts, and *Dead Metaphor* is no exception. In fact, there was a period during which he sent revisions on a daily basis, and Lewis anticipates that changes will continue to be made throughout the rehearsal process as questions arise in the rehearsal room. "I look forward to exploring this play with this wonderful cast," she says. "I think this is one of Walker's strongest plays since *Escape from Happiness*. The characters are familiar, and what he's dealing with here is, as the kids would say, 'way contemporary.' It's so *now*, I'm sorry to say."

A few weeks before rehearsals began in the A.C.T. studios, Lewis shared her insights on Walker, *Dead Metaphor*, and our contemporary theatrical moment.

From war and politics to unemployment, *Dead Metaphor* touches on so many controversial and charged topics. What do you think the play contributes to the conversation?

I think the lost quality of Dean is so dead on. He's back from war, and he doesn't know what to do. He has no skills—except killing! And he was very good at killing, but he doesn't have any other abilities. He's floundering, and it's impossible for him to find work. This is not unusual for these guys coming out of the service.

LEFT Costume rendering for Dean Trusk. All renderings by costume designer Lydia Tanji.

Does it scare you at all to mount a play involving guns right now?

It's interesting, because when this play was written, none of these recent events had happened. The Columbine school shootings had happened, of course, but the Newtown massacre last December took violence to another level. But the sniper/military experience we see in *Dead Metaphor* is different. It's very specialized—a completely different world. Our costume designer made a connection with a guy who served as a sniper in the Middle East. He gave us the glasses he wore when he used the gun, and he showed us how he used all of his equipment. He's very, very involved, which will help us get it right onstage.

It strikes me that you describe Dean as having a "lost" quality. That seems like a word you could apply to a lot of young adults graduating from college right now.

They really float. They can't seem to get their bearings. I wasn't like that—I knew what I was going to do from the age of 15—but not everybody is lucky enough to have a calling. Some of these kids are just really flailing around. They get these jobs that have nothing to do with what they were involved with in school—just "job" jobs.

But Dean seems to soldier on. One of the themes from Walker's early work is "insistence in the face of defeat," which seems to fit Dean—and the working-class community he's from.

Part of it is his wife, Jenny, who is trying to give him some focus. As soon as you become pregnant, it's a very different dynamic. You become very, I would imagine, practical:

RIGHT Costume rendering for Jenny Trusk

"Things have to happen *now*, you have to do something *now*, because you have something to protect." Dean's father, with his illness, helps to focus him, too. And of course George chooses an illness for the father that he can get some comedy out of.

***Dead Metaphor* is so many things—a comedy, a political thriller, a love story, a family saga. What does the play mean to you?**

It means all of those to me. You have the central story, Dean's journey, and that emerges as the pivot for everything else. That's very clear. You don't lose sight of him, ever. George gets a lot of humor out of *extremes*—people going to an extreme. That first scene with Dean's job interview really sets the whole thing up. I have a close relative who would sound exactly the same way Dean does in that scene. It was scary [how accurate it seemed] when I read it. I said to Carey, "These are my people. George hit the nail on the head with this one."

What do you hope our audiences will take away from their experience of the show?

I never project onto the audience. I do my work, and I try to deliver what the playwright had in mind—whether they know it or not. I think *Dead Metaphor* is universal enough, and contemporary enough, and funny/serious enough, that I don't think anybody will have trouble understanding this story.

In the play, the right-wing Helen and left-wing Hank have it out. After last fall's election, do you think it will be cathartic for audiences to hear them bark at one another?

I don't know about it being cathartic. And I don't want to make anybody a two-dimensional character, no matter what position they have.

LEFT Costume rendering for Hank Trusk

Helen's hard in that sense, but [A.C.T. core acting company member] René Augesen has a quality that is perfect for Helen. She has an enormous sense of comedy, and she's gorgeous, and she has a facility with language. These look like easy lines, but *Dead Metaphor* is not really naturalism at all—it's a different style of speaking, and René understands it.

If it's not naturalism, what would you call it?

It's "Walker realism." It's very much his own brand. You can really see it when you watch people audition for his plays. You either hit it or you don't, because there's a sensibility you have to have. There has to be *a lift* so it isn't naturalism—but it still has to be *real*. And it has to be funny, although it's played very straight.

What do you make of the title?

I find it a very unusual title and it doesn't give anything away. It doesn't suggest to me Dean, or war, or family. . . . Again, it's Walker. When I did *Race*: yes, race is what we had up there. And when I did *The Misanthrope*, *that's* what we had up there, a misanthrope. George comes at things in a way you're unlikely to expect, and that's true of any given scene. I'm always interested in what he has to say.

As you direct around the country and the world, do you consider a theater's audience demographic while staging a play?

I don't. Well, I don't *think* I do. When I did *Race*, it would have been received very differently in Baltimore. That's not to say I would have done it differently, but the reactions would have been different because we did a lot of black plays and had a large African American audience. But I'm sure there are things that reverberate

RIGHT Costume rendering for Frannie Trusk

with this community that would not in other places. Carey has pushed a real theater literacy here at A.C.T., and this audience really likes challenging work. She hasn't done "soft" material, which is why I enjoy being around her—and working at A.C.T.

What is your general process as a director—do you have a certain routine?

I just let it hang there. Then I go back and read it and then I leave it alone, then I go back and read it and then leave it alone. When I was first starting out, I preblocked every scene. I had every move written down. Now I really like the collaborative process. I *love* it. I don't always agree with what the actors will say or do, but I just want a rehearsal room to be a place where you can try anything. The rehearsal room has always been my home, the place I'm most comfortable—it's always been the place I've felt most alive. I've done a lot of classical work, and when you get to work with those great minds, those playwrights, you never get it all. You just chip away at it, and maybe you get a certain portion of it. It's such a challenge to be in the room with somebody much smarter than you, like a Molière, Shaw, Shakespeare, Chekhov, Wilson. They are just towering, extraordinary. And I especially love that, for a contemporary play like *Dead Metaphor*, we don't have the two-character living-room play, which I'm really not interested in doing.

Do you think theater has power as a political device?

I think theater has the power to ask the very big questions. And it's live, so it has a very different kind of impact than a film. It's in front of you. This is why there were always so many protests about certain plays and people trying to shut them down. During Shakespeare's time, they shut them all down! When it's right in front of you, it has an immediacy—it's not removed. I think theater has the ability to do a lot of things. I'm interested in how it asks the big questions of life.

Dead Metaphor does that. And Walker is making a point—and he's very clear about it.

What do you think his point is?

It's in what we [as a society] create—we created Dean. We gave him a skill, and that's what he can do, and he has no other way to earn a living. His father's request seems very natural to me—it really does. To take advantage of what the kid can do and not drag out a protracted illness. And the competitions for the highest bidder to decide whom to kill, it does get crazy, but then it comes to fruition. That's what you see—a different side of Dean—at the end.

There is a sense of collective responsibility that we created this person—and now what are we going to do with him?

That's it. That's it for so many of these returning soldiers. How do you deal with what you've seen and done? How do you get on with your life after that?

Seeing the World through the Eyes of a Sniper

An Interview with Scenic Designer Christopher Barreca

By Dan Rubin

George F. Walker has set his plays in such exotic locations as the jungles of Mozambique and nineteenth-century Italy and ordinary places like the cluttered office of a cynical journalist-turned-private-eye and the kitchen of a dysfunctional family in Toronto's working-class East End. Six of his one-act plays take place in the same cheap motel room. According to the script, the action of *Dead Metaphor* occurs in "various locations, all just suggested." These include an office, a park, a backyard, a church, a garden, a second office, a rooftop—interiors and exteriors, some contained and some expansive.

An experienced director himself, Walker knew it would be necessary to abstract these spaces when staging a production, allowing for the quickest possible transitions between scenes. Moreover, he did not write *Dead Metaphor* with a specific place in mind. Any North American city would suffice. Veterans like the play's protagonist, Dean Trusk, are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to their homes in every corner of Canada and the United States. "Those characters are everywhere," he says.

Taking up the challenge of creating the vaguely defined and yet immediately familiar world of *Dead Metaphor* is scenic designer Christopher Barreca, who has designed more than 200 productions for theater, opera, and dance nationally and internationally. Currently the head of scenic design at California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles, Barreca has collaborated with director Irene Lewis many times before, including on A.C.T.'s 2011 West Coast premiere of David Mamet's *Race*.

In addition to following Walker's directive to simply hint at the play's various locales, Barreca is responsible for ensuring that this dark comedy can move along at an appropriate pace despite its 17 scene changes. He and Lewis came up with an interesting solution to this problem that promises to not only keep A.C.T. audiences laughing but to also help them understand how Dean sees the world.

Barreca spoke with us from New York City the week before rehearsals began in A.C.T.'s studios.

Set model for *Dead Metaphor*, by scenic designer Christopher Barreca, cued to various scenes: (left to right) set for Act I, sc. 2; set for Act I, sc. 3; set for Act I, sc. 4; set for Act II, sc. 1.

How would you describe the set?

The simplest way to describe it is that the play itself, the way that the scenes function, happens somewhat like a collage. You bounce around between multiple locations. In plays like this, the biggest challenge is always to find a way to do that seamlessly and in a way that is organic to the text. The idea of using turntables came to me when I was doing research related to the show, looking up assault rifles and army paraphernalia, and I was looking at targets, which look like turntables. They reminded me of this kind of turntable that has rings [some of which move clockwise, some of which move counterclockwise]. It was used by people like [mid-twentieth-century director/choreographer] Busby Berkeley as a way to create a kind of movement that is kaleidoscopic, because things are moving in opposing directions. People move in opposing directions metaphorically a lot in this play.

The turntables also allow us to have actors already in position [before their scene starts], waiting. Then they just "turn" into the space. In the second act, particularly, there is a lot that seems to happen simultaneously, right on top of each other in multiple locations, and this simultaneous action led me to think that the turntable was a really good idea. Irene and I have worked together on several plays that have a lot of scenes, and one of the things that we have both tried to avoid is the trap of representing every scene scenically.

And you've surrounded the turntables with a wall?

That's architectural. It is not trying to represent one specific space. It is giving us the feeling of spaces that are in transition.

Did you purposefully base the wall design on the inside of a kaleidoscope?

Yes, exactly. And there are other ideas relating to the kaleidoscope: footlights will cast shadows of the furniture and people on the wall as they are moving. Things onstage will get mixed up and then settle.

We also wanted to make sure that whatever was onstage felt comfortable with the other things onstage, so we decided that we would paint and treat all of the furniture the same. Not exactly the same, but it will all be in shades of green: I call it "pine tree


forest furniture," because all the tops are green and all the bottoms are wood. Some pieces will have patterns, some won't, but it will create this northwestern feeling because it is all green tones.

This also means that if we are in the office and upstage right of the office furniture is a bench from the park, it feels like they belong with each other. They're related. If there is an upholstered green hotel chair nearby, it still makes perfect sense for the scene in the office: the chair is in the outer room of the office. When we are in the restaurant, that same chair fits in as a piece of furniture in another part of the restaurant. In other words, even though the chair is very specific to its own scene, it also makes sense in the other scenes.

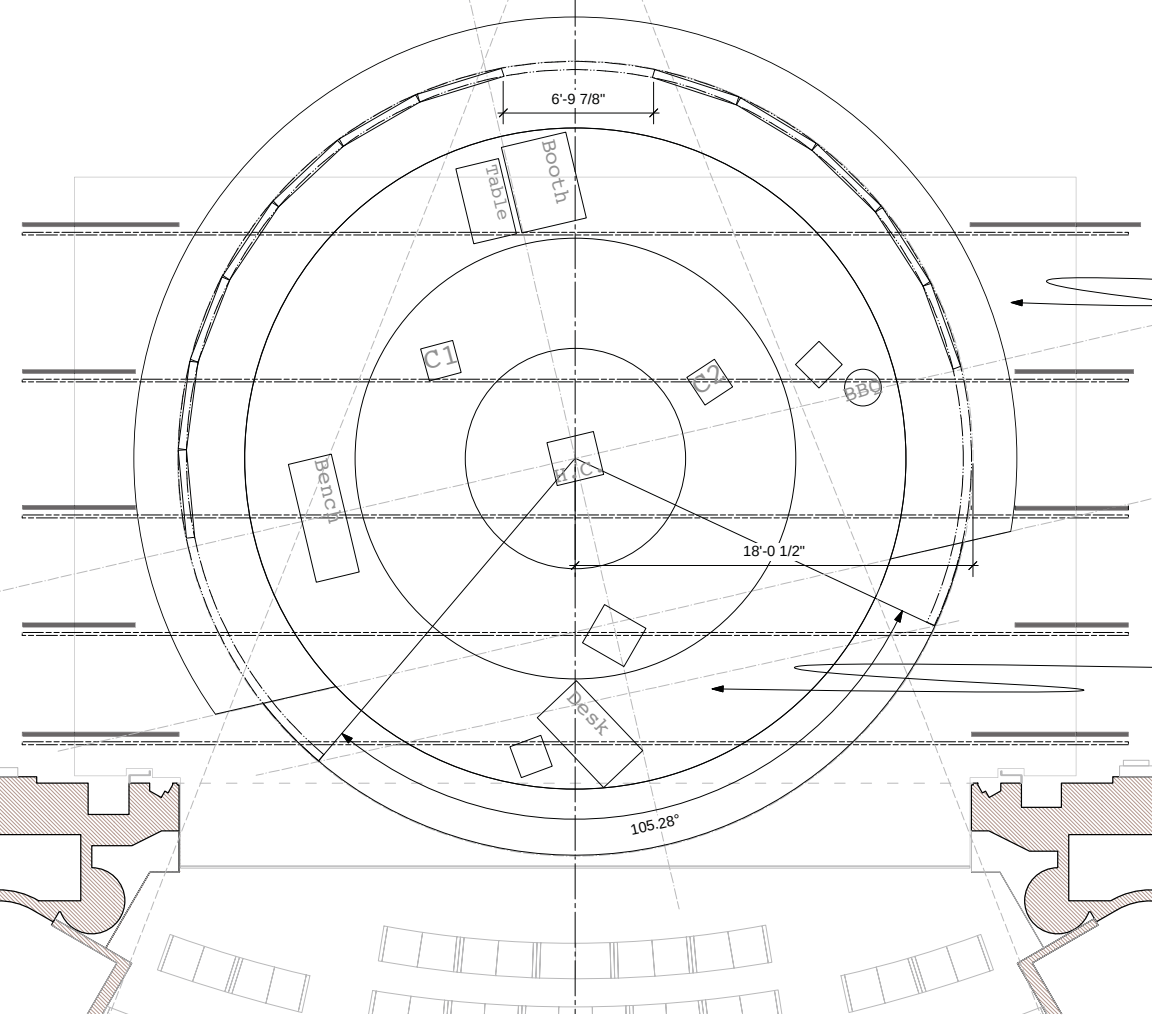
Irene mentioned the idea that George Walker's plays are not naturalistic but employ a kind of "Walker realism." How have you applied that concept to your design?

You know how in your memory, in your subconscious, you remember details of things but you don't remember everything? I think what is nice about the way Walker writes is that he doesn't try to expose everything with exposition, and I think that's true even of how he describes a space. He's not trying to make us understand his world in the traditional sense of realism, but in the sense of how we remember things.

It was important for us to keep the set very light and bright and cheerful. Often one of the dangers of designing a play is *explaining* the play. This play has a very dark underbelly, but it doesn't appear until very deep into the play. We knew that the set could not float in a black void; it needs to be surrounded by a light, airy space. Because that's the truth: the worst things happen to us on the most beautiful days.

The play has a dark underbelly, but like all of Walker's work, it is also very funny. How is the set going to facilitate the comedy of this play?

There is inherent humor in these turntables. There is something about that kind of movement that is very, very funny—and it is particularly funny if you have someone already sitting there [before their scene begins], and they start talking before the turntable stops moving. And you've probably seen enough plays with lots of scenes to know that every time furniture tracks on and off stage it creates a hole, because you are waiting for the next scene to arrive.



Set elevation for *Dead Metaphor*, by scenic designer Christopher Barreca

How did your research influence the design?

When you first have an idea how to design a show, it is instinctual. You don't dramaturgically analyze it. But as you go deeper and you're deciding whether that [first impulse] is the right way, you do. For example, there is this way in which snipers take in what's around them. They have a way of looking at things. And that was another reason I thought the movement of the turntables was really good. We follow the actor playing Dean through this world, and his way of taking in his surroundings is different from other people's.

Dean explains, "I'm good at knowing where someone will be without being told"—a skill he picked up as a sniper. It is as if the turntables allow Dean to see the trajectory of the other characters and predict where they will be before they get there.

That's right. That's the exact line that made me interested in his way of seeing the world.

Laugh Lest You Go Insane

A Conversation with Playwright George F. Walker

by Dan Rubin

> "One of the ways of making the world less chaotic, I guess, is to show that it is chaotic."—George F. Walker, 1982
>
> "That Walker is funny, that his vision of the world is essentially a comic vision, is extremely important to understanding, appreciating, and producing his work."—Scholar Chris Johnson, 1999

Confounded by many years of failing to understand George F. Walker's work, a critic (Walker didn't say which) realized the problem he was having was that he assumed that Walker was a playwright just because he had written plays. In fact, the critic concluded, he's not a playwright, but rather a "talented primitive."

Walker, proud of and in many ways indebted to his working-class upbringing in Toronto's East End and his lack of formal training (in any field, let alone theater), doesn't disagree. "I thought, 'Okay, yeah!' And I don't even know how talented, but I am definitely a primitive," he laughs. "This critic struggled through his whole review, and then he finally said, 'Oh, I got it. Everybody is making a big mistake thinking of this guy as a dramatist. He's not. He's like a country painter.'"

The founding artistic director of Toronto's famous Factory Theatre Lab, Ken Gass, however, is a bit more constructive. He understands Walker as a "wonderful contradiction": working class, but extremely well-read. He surmised that it is because Walker has no theater education that he is able to give free rein to his imagination.

It is due to Gass that Walker is in theater at all. In 1971, Walker was a 23-year-old high school dropout driving a taxicab. While carting fares around Toronto, he saw one of Gass's ubiquitous posters calling for play submissions by Canadian playwrights—part of Gass's visionary "Canadian Only" policy, one of the sparks that ignited Toronto's theater movement in the 1970s.

Walker had been scribbling poems and short stories since high school. Friends from the neighborhood had always said he would become a writer. Local writing groups were closed to a working-class kid, however. They were reserved for University of Toronto

graduates. And Walker had no idea how to approach publishers. Theater in Toronto, on the other hand, "was just getting started," he remembers, "and they'd take anyone."

So Walker wrote his first play, *The Prince of Naples*. When he delivered it to the Factory, he handed it directly to Gass, who started reading it immediately while the novice playwright stood awkwardly by. When Walker tried to leave, Gass, still reading, grabbed his sleeve and made him wait.

A week later, Walker learned that *The Prince of Naples* would be produced. On the first day of rehearsal, Walker saw director Paul Bettis's copy of the script. On it, dramaturg John Palmer had written a note: "This guy is a genuine subversive. We've got to produce him."

Whether or not Walker was a subversive is hard to say as he was unaware that Canadian theater had any traditions to subvert. ("Starting to write plays in Canada . . . was starting from nowhere, really," he told Robert Wallace in a 1982 interview.) But he was certainly something new. At the time, English Canada's national identity was still in its teething stage. The country's small theatrical canon consisted almost entirely of nationalistic and naturalistic rural dramas. Rural plays were simply not in Walker, the urban son of a municipal laborer. "I had been surrounded by things like movies, television—you know *The World at Six*, that sort of thing—theater and literature of all kinds all my life," Walker told interviewer Myron Galloway in 1979. "What did I know about the farmer and his wife?"

In fact, before writing *The Prince of Naples*, Walker had seen just one play, "a Shakespeare," and he hadn't cared for it. To him, theater was "elitist and distant." But the unpretentious grittiness of Gass's Factory quickly seduced him. He, apparently, seduced Gass, as well: Walker was quickly hired as the company's resident playwright. The title and the protection that came with it were invaluable to his growth as a dramatist. Gass encouraged him to create a body of work without worrying about critics—which was good, because critics didn't like him.

From 1971 to 1977, Walker experimented with theatricality, moving from what scholar Chris Johnson, author of *Essays on George F. Walker: Playing with Anxiety*, calls his "apprentice work, literary rather than theatrical" into a period of "cerebral farce," in which Walker satirically wove together high and low comedy and elements of pop culture, like B-movies and cartoons (genres with which he was more comfortable than drama), creating hilarious and off-putting collages. He produced six works during this time, all of which received their premieres at the Factory.

Walker relied on Gass and a small loyal following for not only financial support, but also emotional support. A lot of what he put onstage, he acknowledges, made him look foolish and naïve. After the 1974 premiere of his jungle-movie spoof *Beyond Mozambique*, an unhappy Arts Council froze the Factory's grants. As the failures piled on, Walker became "removed and introspective," according to Gass, and disheartened to the point of giving up. "It wasn't just the fact that critics didn't like his work . . . but rather it was the realization that he still didn't have a context in which to explore his most important

OPPOSITE George F. Walker

unconventional themes and style," Gass remembered in 1978. Perhaps he should try a novel, Walker thought, something that didn't expose him so nakedly to public ridicule.

What Toronto's bad-boy playwright did instead is perhaps more surprising. He decided to create work that would be more appealing and accessible to the masses—to become, as he puts it, "more generous" with his writing. In 1977, he wrote the detective play *Gossip*, the first to feature the slovenly, nihilistic, and ironically named journalist-turned-private-eye Tyrone Power. This wild investigation into the comic foibles of upper-crust society was his first popular success. It received numerous productions, not only in Canada, but also at important theaters in the United States.

Zastrozzi, The Master of Discipline, an entertaining and existential gothic revenge story set in Italy and featuring the titular master criminal, followed later that year and was also well received, as was a revival of *Beyond Mozambique*, this time directed by Walker himself. Walker wrote two more Power plays, *Filthy Rich* (1979) and *The Art of War* (1983); the latter was his first critical success.

By 1980, scholar Denis W. Johnston writes, "Walker had earned the ironic grand prize of Canadian arts and letters: fame abroad and obscurity at home." Dramaturg Martin Kinch joked that Walker seemed "well on his way to becoming a celebrated and successful American playwright." But even in Canada, critics were starting to wake up. Johnson wrote in an 1980 essay, "The man who appears to be among Canada's most abstruse and esoteric playwrights has, in fact, a thorough grasp of populist techniques, and can use the forms of popular theater as both popular vehicle and as a means of sharing with a broader audience a more demanding dramatic view."

In 1982, as his work was receiving productions as far away as Australia, Walker turned his attention homeward, aiming his lens at the East End struggles of his adolescence. Over the next decade, Walker's identity would be linked to the six plays of his East End cycle. While retaining the same comedic extremism and resistance to naturalism that defines his early work, the East End plays present a more direct social commentary from a writer who has always fought the institutionalized inequity and abuse of out-of-control capitalism. In 1982, Walker told Wallace, "I am alert and concerned and angry—and the work is getting angrier—never defeatist, I feel, but angry. Yeah, I want to change everything."

In writing the East End cycle, Johnson explains, Walker used "autobiographical material and the observation of the neighbors to his childhood, working-class home." He thereby created "a linked grouping of plays that constitute a fictional portrait of a community," Johnson continues. His heroes are the marginalized, disenfranchised, and desperate, struggling to overcome adversity. They make up an invisible class of humanity that Walker feared was being ignored.

The plays of the cycle—and, in fact, all his plays since 1982—are explorations of power imbalances. His protagonists are almost always social pragmatists, wanting little more than to survive; his antagonists are, as Johnson describes them, "totalitarian tyrants who attempt to seize and control the future by confining it within their predictable definitions." This dichotomy is also true of his earlier work, but starting with the

Scott Freeman and Fredi Olster in *Nothing Sacred* at A.C.T. (photo by Harry Wade). In 1988, George F. Walker loosely adapted Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*. He reread the book for the first time since high school, and he referred to the text only twice during the writing process. Scholar Chris Johnson writes, "The play is not a novel adapted for the stage, but a classical and canonical work of art filtered through Walker's irreverent sensibility." Walker titled the result *Nothing Sacred*; A.C.T. produced the show under the direction of Robert Woodruff in 1989.

East End plays, the characters and confrontations are closer to home. Why travel to Mozambique or Italy when the same conflicts can be found in your own backyard?

As Walker shifted his focus, he also shifted his tone. As "angry" as they may be, the East End plays are not as unforgiving as his earlier plays, in which dark humor pushes narratives deeper and deeper into blackness, until everything is eclipsed. Walker himself refers to the East End cycle as the beginning of his "looking for the light" period. "I'm tired of being wretched and self-consumed," he told Wallace in 1988. "I wanted to let the characters find each other. You know, writing really is funny like that; at a certain point, you begin to ask yourself, 'Have you been preventing people from finding each other all the time? Have I been what's in the way?'" In the end, these plays provide, if not hope, at least possibility.

His first "possibility" character was the maternal figure of Nora in *Better Living* (1983), the first East End play he wrote, although it was the second to receive a production, after *Criminals in Love* (1984). Walker remembers:

> I put her under a lot of pressure, to test the possibilities to see how far she would go. What was important was that she held up. The worse things got,

> the better she got in some way; she took all that stuff and translated it into "betterism," as I call it . . . her process of turning things into something better.

Despite this positive turn, following the completion of his final East End play, *Tough!* (1993), Walker gave up on theater, escaping into radio and the writers' rooms of the television shows *Due South* and *The Newsroom*. He returned to theater in 1997 with his *Suburban Motel* suite, a series of six one-acts all set in the same seedy motel room, and then again in 2000 with perhaps his grimmest play, ironically titled *Heaven*. Then he gave up on theater again.

He explained to reporter Richard Ouzounian, "I had been through nine openings with the *Suburban Motel* plays and their remounts and I learned what theater can do to you. It's so intensely personal, so emotionally hard. It gets to you." Walker, the creator of arguably the most recognized and produced body of theater texts originating in English Canada, again retreated to television—this time for an entire decade.

Then, ten years later, while he was supposed to be working on a television script, he began writing dialogue for the play that would become *And So It Goes*. "I just felt it was something I had to get out," he told Ouzounian. The Factory Theatre produced the world premiere in 2010 as part of its 40th-anniversary season. Since then, Walker has written six new plays.

Earlier this year, Walker spoke to us about one of his most recent plays *Dead Metaphor* and his return to theater.

You recently returned to theater after a ten-year hiatus. Why did you leave?

I didn't so much feel burnt out by theater, I just sometimes found that the theater closes in on you. It became claustrophobic all of a sudden. I just needed a change. To get away from it. See what a different kind of writing was like.

I was asked to develop *This Is Wonderland* with the Canadian Broadcasting Company and I did that for a few years. It took a couple years to research because it was a show about the lower court system, so I attended court for a year or two. It had three seasons [starting in 2004], and then I did another couple of cable shows up here.

I did that for a while, and then TV started to close in on me, as well. It all started to seem too much like a business, which it really is. So I stuck my toe back in [the theater scene] a little bit, and then I kind of had an outpouring of plays. I've written six or seven plays in the last two years. A friend of mine asked why that was, and it's partly because TV writing clogs a writer's psyche. You can't really go to where you need to go to as a writer, which is [to write about] what's swirling around in your mind. As a TV writer, you have to do what's needed, not what you want to do.

You have to work within the restrictions of that show.

And even when you are doing what you want to, you're not digging down as deep as you would if [the writing] just came to you—rushed out of you like it *had* to come out. You're not allowed that kind of indulgence in TV. You're not allowed to say to everyone

involved (including the network), "Oh, it just *had* to come out of me! *That's* why it's not completely linear and has a messy ending—like life has. That's why it's not tidied up."

How would the networks respond?

They'll just look at you. They don't know how to respond, because they aren't used to writers saying that to them, so I learned not to say that to them. They just look at you like you're nuts—and you're already kind of nuts to them because you come from theater. And they had heard of me and already had a notion of what I was like.

I tried to hold onto in TV what I try to hold onto in theater: character. Character drives the narrative, not the other way around. In a lot of writers' rooms in TV, you'll hear "Let's have the character do this, let's have the character do that": the narrative comes first and then you fit the characters into the narrative. That's the opposite of how I think it should happen. When I was working with younger writers, I would say, "Don't ask what you want to do, ask what the character wants to do. They'll get you to a better place."

Was *And So It Goes* driven out of you by your characters?

Absolutely. A lot of the research we did for *This Is Wonderland* was in mental health court. The pain of a schizophrenic's parents was on my mind for a long time because of that. I saw a lot of really tortured people. There was also the economy. *And So It Goes* puts those two things together. When things go bad for a family, sometimes a whole bunch of things go bad. I tried to make that struggle accessible and healthy by making it not so dark. A lot of organizations that deal with mental illness came to see that play,

Work by Walker

Plays

The Prince of Naples (1971)
Ambush at Tether's End (1971)
Sacktown Rag (1972)
Bagdad Saloon (1973)
Beyond Mozambique (1974)
Demerit (1974)
Ramona & the White Slaves (1976)
Gossip (1977)
Zastrozzi, The Master of Discipline (1977)
Filthy Rich (1979)
Rumors of Our Death (1980)
Theatre of the Film Noir (1981)
The Art of War (1982)
Science and Madness (1982)
Better Living (1983)
Criminals in Love (1984)
Beautiful City (1987)
Nothing Sacred (1988)
Love and Anger (1989)
Escape from Happiness (1991)
Tough! (1993)
Suburban Motel (1997): *Problem Child, Criminal Genius, Risk Everything, Adult Entertainment, Featuring Loretta, The End of Civilization*
Heaven (2000)
And So It Goes (2010)
King of Thieves (2010)
Dead Metaphor (2012)
The Burden of Self Awareness (2012)
Kindred (2012)

Television

The Newsroom (1997)
Due South (1997)
This Is Wonderland (2004–2006)
The Line (2008–2009)
Living in Your Car (2010–2012)

and of all the audiences, they had the most positive feelings about it. It's as simple as: "Someone is telling our story."

Some of your recent plays deal with mental illness—schizophrenia in *And So It Goes* and dementia in *Dead Metaphor*—but your work has always been interested in characters at psychological extremes.

Totally. Absolutely: *desperate*. Someone once told me that if I wasn't exploring desperation, then everyone [in my plays] would be okay. If everything was all okay, I wouldn't be writing. I'd be relaxing. My characters have always been desperate. I'm drawn to the up-against-it. We're more and more up against it all the time.

With the current global economy, it feels like more and more of us are up against it. Your work has always explored class and the lives of marginalized and disenfranchised working-class characters, but your more recent plays have started to also deal with characters from a disenfranchised middle class.

I think that's true. It is an interesting point you make because I didn't go looking for them: they came to me. They've been drawn into *my* world, rather than me being drawn into theirs. They are now on my radar because they're messed up, too—because they are struggling and they don't know if all the things they believe in about security and aging and family are true anymore.

[A.C.T. Dramaturg] Michael [Paller] asked me where the title for *Dead Metaphor* came from. One of the reasons for it was the thought that there used to be a time when we didn't send soldiers off to fight wars and then forget entirely about them, like they weren't even part of our society. Less than one percent of both our [countries'] populations have anything to do with them. So something that used to mean something—soldiers fighting *for their country*—is now irrelevant. It is a dead thing. We don't even know where they are. Off they go and then they come back into our world, many of them in trouble, messed up and with nowhere to go. They come back and they only get noticed when they're in trouble. And we're in trouble too.

And yet, of the characters in *Dead Metaphor*, Dean is perhaps the least "troubled," mentally at least.

That's right. I didn't want Dean to be messed up. He came to me as strong, compared to the world that he is coming back to. The only thing that is messed up about him is that the skills he learned over there are not applicable here—and because of that, he can't get a job. So, *he* isn't messed up: *the world* is messed up. He comes back with his head on his shoulders. He has dreams he doesn't want to talk about, but he's not that clichéd tormented soldier. And yet, where has he been? He doesn't fit in here. He's not psychologically messed up; he's sociologically messed up.

I think that Dean and Jenny are their own class within their class. It is interesting to me how people on the edge of the middle class can have children who so quickly

fall downward. Frannie and Hank are lower-middle class, but their children, Dean and Jenny, are now working class. They've dropped down into a world where I know them. The soldier and the wife of a solider: unemployed, pregnant. Those are *my people*! I understand them.

Middle-class kids, whose parents have a couple of degrees, are going to tech schools to become plumbers. They consider that their futures are not going to be easy, and they say to themselves, "I'm not going to be able to get a job with a degree in English. If I get a degree in English, people are going to laugh at me and say, 'You *might* be qualified to serve at Starbucks—maybe.'"

And that's assuming that Starbucks is hiring.

Right! "Maybe, *if* there is a job available." That's a big adjustment. Not only is there no upward mobility, there's downward mobility within families.

Your earlier work doesn't look at downward mobility because you are dealing with characters that are already at the bottom.

Right, and my big fear was that that class of people was being forgotten. People come to Toronto and say, "It's such a pretty city. Where's the poverty?" And I say, "Oh, I'll show you. Let's take a drive. It's not in the middle. They don't want it there."

As you said, Dean is pretty well-adjusted, but Dean's world—our world—is a mess. And for you, it seems, that mess stems from people like Helen Denny. I think a lot of our audience members who aren't familiar with your other work will think Helen is a new idea for you, inspired by the Sarah Palins and

RIGHT Costume rendering for Helen Denny

Michele Bachmanns of our world, but you've been interested in political extremists for a long time.

That's true. Palin is just the one we recognize now and will be the audience's reference point, but I've been seeing these characters in every aspect of life. They're there. It's hard to even think about attempting to write Sarah Palin, because anything you write is not going to be far out enough. Same with Michele Bachmann. I'm puzzled by her: that she says these things she says and they don't try to have her locked up somewhere. She opens her mouth and I wonder how could you possibly put that onstage. What possible context would you have for her other than a clown show? A person comes on with a big funny nose, squeaks it, and says the stuff that she says, and runs off. Seltzer in the face or something. I was thinking I was making Helen more like [South Carolina Governor] Nikki Haley—a person who at least appears to be reasonable until she says what she really believes in.

Extreme political views of all kinds have always been there. I've always been aware of them and terrified by them and fascinated by them. And for someone like Dean . . . he is returning from this simple world of hiding behind a rock, shooting at people who are trying to kill him. At least that is something he can understand. That is a simple and declared conflict: "You want to kill me; I want to kill you." But what is going on here at home?

That is exactly what Jamie says in *The Art of War*: "I am in the politics of staying alive."

And Dean is trying to stay alive in a world that is just as scary and somewhat scarier than the one he has just come back from. I love Jenny's point of view. She walks the earth very solidly, trying to hold her ground. In particular, the way she explains things to Dean. This young woman says to her husband, "This situation is fucked up." And, I think, Dean never thought it was fucked up until she says that. He thought *he* was failing. When he came back, people made him feel like a failure because he couldn't get a job. But Jenny says, "No, it's weird out in the world, and we have to do something drastic to protect ourselves."

I am so interested in your social view, because your liberal-minded characters admit that the world is chaotic and everything might be descending into darkness. But anyone who is trying to prepare for this impending doom inevitably goes too far and becomes tyrannical. Throughout your work, you have these right-leaning characters who sound rational when they start talking, but then they *keep* talking, and it becomes clear they are calling for totalitarianism.

It is hard to hold on to goodwill and the spirit of possibility. Think what your country, with all of its innovation and its power, could do if it only had to listen to a progressive voice? Nothing to hold you back. A voice that says that everything is possible, including fairness and open-mindedness . . .

Extreme conservatives can say things about the world that can be true, but when push comes to shove, where do they go? Have you heard about that lunatic [Alex Jones] on *Piers Morgan*. His CNN rant [on January 7, 2013]? He is a radio talk show host who went on TV and just lost it. I thought he was going to kill Piers Morgan right on the air, screaming, "This is 1776 again, and if you try to take away our guns we'll just annihilate you!" There are normal people and then there are the crazy people who go into schools and kill children. This guy is in the middle, but he is closer to the crazy people. He might have had a reasonable thought at one point, but now he's out of control.

So, how do you fight fire? I worry that the progressive voice, especially in your country but here, too, is muted because it begins with compromise.

Your plays can get pretty violent. I am trying to think of one that doesn't have a gun in it.

Well, a couple of the new ones don't have guns in them, although my daughter calls *Dead Metaphor* and *The Burden of Self Awareness* [2012] the assassination plays, because there are a bunch of hired assassins or characters who want to hire hit men. It's a popular fantasy. A friend of mine said, "If this theater and TV stuff doesn't work out, why don't we all quit and become assassins and kill bad people."

I don't know where the violence comes from. I actually try to forestall it, but I don't have a lot of control over these characters once they get going. I control it just enough to keep it from going off the rails. But I do believe that the violence is what needs to happen for some of these characters. It's part of what their world is, so it is part of what the play is. But the nature of that violence is Beckett-like: it's beyond cartoon

RIGHT Costume rendering for Oliver Denny

A Little Too Real

George Walker on attending Irene Lewis's 1993 production of *Escape from Happiness* at Yale Repertory Theatre:

GW New Haven back then was scary. They told you, "You're going to need protection on and off campus." Some of the actors brought their own guns. I was in the green room, and we heard this gunshot from the dressing room of the guy who played the cop in the show. He'd been cleaning it, and it had gone off.

This really unnerved everyone because he was playing a character who brandishes his gun onstage. Everyone was afraid he was going to make a mistake some night and bring the wrong gun onstage, so he had to submit to a nightly body search before he was allowed to go on. They seized his piece and put it in a safe and made sure the gun he had was a prop gun. A little bit of the street in the play.

and it's surreal and wonderful. It's metaphysical. It's not real. It's like dream violence.

As violent as your plays are, they are always hilarious.

Because the violence is pushed that far. As far as it can go. And that's dark comedy. Someone said to me, "Take the comedy out of your plays, and they are the darkest things you can imagine. If you take the comedy away, they are pretty bleak views of the world." And I told him that you can't take the comedy away, because it's the motor. It's what allows these stories to live. The comedy is not *part* of the play, it *is* the play.

According to scholar Chris Johnson, that pretty much sums up your world view: it's bleak, but comically so.

There's the simple cliché: you either laugh or you cry. Well, I think you laugh or you go insane. I mean really insane. I never feel better than when I see a really brave comic go for it, like Sarah Silverman just letting it out. So little of the world makes emotional sense: how we govern ourselves, how we keep going to war for no reason. It doesn't stop. You have to introduce humor into the procedure.

I remember John Cleese talking about how Monty Python did these really brutal parodies of the Church of England. They thought that would be the end of the Church of England. How could it possibly survive that kind of satire, being exposed for the idiocy that it is? But people have been mocking the church and the government for a long time, and they go on and on. As a writer, you yell, "But didn't you read what I wrote about you!? How can you keep doing that!?"

Do you feel your plays are social commentaries that you hope will change society?

I just like to air things, just to talk about these preposterous things that are said. I watch a lot of political news, and I'm always thinking, "Put a comedian into this—fast!" Put a comic in the middle of these political conversations and let them say honestly what everyone else is talking around. I treasure people like Bill Maher and Jon Stewart. When I am watching their shows, for a brief moment I can pretend that what they are saying

is the world view everyone has. Everyone sees the world for what it is. But then you flip stations and you realize, "Oh, no. No one sees it. Just those few people see it."

So that's what my plays are doing, talking about what I see. That's why they are comedies. They're dark because I think that's the world, and they're comedies because I don't want to go insane—or anyone else to go insane. Comedy gives you distance from reality. Even my characters want distance from it.

Do you know where your plays are going when you are writing them?

Never at the beginning. I follow the characters. With *Dead Metaphor*, I had Dean, this guy coming back, and I put him where he would go: to job counseling. You always have to ask yourself, "Would *he* do this?" Not "Do *I want him* to do this," but "Would *he* do this?" Dean would visit a counselor and they would talk, and I'm learning more about Dean just by having him in this scene with Oliver. After four or five exchanges I had the play. I didn't know where it was going, but I knew what it was about. It was about Dean. And when Jenny was introduced, I knew her, too.

You attach yourself to the characters and they start to tell you about things. The first few moments of a play are the most exhilarating because they speak, they come to life, they are saying the things they want to say, and you start to figure out what it is all about. *I'm* learning more. I love that: they're teaching me. You put them into scenes and that's all you do. The more you get going, the less work you do. You're just hearing them.

It may sound a little flaky, but it's like stenography. My wife calls it channeling. She thinks I'm just gone when it happens. But you're really just hearing them talk and writing it down as fast as you can.

It is interesting that *Problem Child* (one of your *Suburban Motel* plays), like *Dead Metaphor*, has a character named Helen, and the two share some similarities in terms of the high-horse delivery of their social views.

And with *Problem Child*, there are many, many people who could easily attach to Helen's point of view, but she crosses the line from doing the right thing to judging in the nastiest way. It is the same in *Dead Metaphor*. There is a moment when Oliver says to Helen, "You used to be a reasonable person."

But when we meet the Helen in *Dead Metaphor*, she's already crossed the line.

But she has other lines still to cross. How far will she go? Where is the cutthroat in these people?

It is less surprising to me that Helen becomes cutthroat than Oliver. In *The Art of War*, your liberal character, Tyrone Power, loses because he doesn't have it in him to do what needs to be done—to shoot General Hackman, the conservative militant. But in

SPOILER ALERT!

The following excerpt reveals information about the final scene of *Dead Metaphor* otherwise avoided in this issue of *Words on Plays*.

DR In the last scene of the play, Dean shoots someone, but the audience doesn't see who.

GW That's the chaos: a definitive action and then the chaos of not knowing what's happened. Who is shot? I don't know. I really don't. I have an opinion, but I have an opinion about it like you have an opinion about it.

DR What's your opinion?

GW A friend of mine said this to me: "It's very important to me that Dean kills his father in the end, because I care so much about Dean and I think he is the kind of man who would make that kind of sacrifice."

And I agreed with him. I am hoping that's the case . . . but I don't feel like I have the kind of control over the character to *know* that that's true. I hope it's true because I hope Dean's able to do what his father wants even though it's painful.

There is a moment when his father says, "Wouldn't you feel better, after killing all those people for reasons you don't understand, to do it for a reason you do understand?" But it is a leap for me to go from *hoping* that's the end to *knowing* that's the end.

***Dead Metaphor*, Oliver does have it in him to, at least, hire someone to take out the threat.**

The liberal has evolved. He at least recognizes the enemy. Tyrone Power was the feckless liberal who couldn't get it together. He could talk a good game, but he could never compete with someone like Hackman. Whereas Oliver knows that Helen is getting worse and worse, that she has tendencies in the direction of Stalin and Hitler. There's an awareness. There's a change, you're right. Maybe that is me searching for a character that can stand up a bit more.

Is that a hopeful thought for you, or is it just one more element in the screwed-up game of social politics?

I don't know that it's hopeful or not. Maybe it is desperate. We have to find some way [to neutralize Helen], because she has all this power.

Do you still write with Toronto in mind?

No, I've traveled enough to know that [these characters] exist everywhere. Any big city. Especially in our two countries, and especially characters like Dean. Because we've had similar experiences. Our countries lost proportionately the same number of people: us in Afghanistan, you in Iraq. And it is the same in both countries that the public is barely aware of it—or of the soldiers coming back. My nephew was over there, and I knew about it from talking to my sister. These characters are everywhere, defined by class and circumstance.

SOURCES FOR INTRODUCTION Chris Johnson, *Essays on George F. Walker: Playing with Anxiety* (Winnipeg, Canada: Blizzard Publishing, 1999); Harry Lane, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English: Vol. 5 George F. Walker* (Toronto, Canada: Playwrights Canada Press, 2006); Richard Ouzounian, "Playwright George F. Walker Turns the Page on Pain," *Toronto Star*, January 30, 2010

A Weapon First, A Person Second

A Sniper's Life

by Cait Robinson

Of the diverse jobs in the U.S. military, sniping holds a special place in the mind of the American public. We imagine a lone gunman in the shadows, stalking his unsuspecting human prey with aim so precise he can hit targets up to a mile and a half away. Violent video games, action films, and libraries of sniper biographies and autobiographies only enhance the mystique. One such autobiographer, Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, holds the distinction of being the deadliest sniper in U.S. military history: his book, *American Sniper*, dominated best-seller lists for months after its January 2012 publication. Sensationalist media both lionizes professional snipers—as in the coverage of the Navy SEAL snipers responsible for the 2009 rescue of the captain of the MV *Maersk Alabama* from Somali pirates—and undermines them, linking crimes like the assassination of President Kennedy and the 2002 D.C. Sniper's killing spree to the profession itself. Fear-mongering portrayals of sniping play upon its necessary concealment, suggesting a virtually undetectable killer with godlike power to pick off anyone within his scope. In these depictions, the sniper is all-powerful, but also a coward. In reality, professional snipers are neither: they are soldiers.

That said, the job of a sniper is undeniably different from all other military occupations. Snipers are carefully screened for psychological stability, intelligence, and, of course, marksmanship. Few servicemen are invited to train as snipers, and only half of those who are ever graduate from the grueling sniper schools—eleven weeks for the Marines, five weeks for the Army. A series of tests in long-range shooting, camouflage, stalking (approaching a target unseen), and physics are administered pass/fail with no leniency. The result is a small selection of elites: only a few hundred snipers are deployed at any given time; the total currently qualified for deployment is around 1,000. They comprise just .06 percent of the military's 1.5 million active frontline personnel. They are trained and work in all branches of the U.S. military, but mostly in the Marines, the Army, the Navy SEALS, and the Army Rangers. Despite their small numbers, snipers are valuable investments: according to military expert Hans Halberstadt, "You'll find that many [snipers] individually make more kills than entire battalions or brigades operating at the same time in the same area."

U.S. Army sniper team from Jalalabad Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) scanning the horizon after reports of suspicious activity along the hilltops near Dur Baba, Afghanistan, October 19, 2006, after a medical civic action project was conducted by the PRT and the Cooperative Medical Assistance team. U.S. Army photo by Corporal Bertha Flores © United States Government Works

The myth of the lone sniper working deep behind enemy lines arose during the Vietnam War, but today's snipers almost always work in teams of two. Missions may require them to travel on foot, sometimes crouching or crawling for days at a time. To fight off fatigue on long missions, they typically alternate roles: sniper and spotter. On short missions, a spotter may be an apprentice sniper. It is the sniper who fires the rifle, while the spotter uses a powerful scope to help set up and calculate the shot. There are many variables to consider: wind speed and direction, range, target size and movement, mirage (light distortion), spin drift (the rotation of the bullet in flight), light source, temperature, and barometric pressure are only some of the factors the spotter tries to measure and help the shooter adjust for. The spotter also has the task of shouldering an automatic assault rifle to protect both team members from an ambush. Sniper rifles are nearly useless in the event of a close-range surprise attack.

Sniper teams rarely get more than one shot at a target; hence their famous motto: "One shot, one kill." If they miss, their target may find cover before a second shot can be calculated. With every shot, they also risk revealing their location. However, in some cases the spotter may be able to recalculate in time for an additional shot based on the path of the first bullet. In the right conditions, a trained eye can spot the "trace" or "swirl" of the first shot: a visible swirl of air that is displaced by the bullet. A spotter also looks for the bullet's "strike" or "splash": the small puff of dust or earth kicked up by the

bullet's impact when it misses its mark. It may even be possible to catch a glint of light reflecting off the bullet as it travels.

When a sniper is pursuing a dangerous or high-value target, the pressure to shoot perfectly is immense. But more often than not, the sniper's most important job is reconnaissance. "The radio, not the firearm, is the sniper's most powerful tool," says sniper and Afghanistan veteran Olivier Lavigne Ortiz. Skilled in stealth and observation, snipers can provide valuable information about the size, location, and strength of the enemy. They may also target supplies or equipment, including vehicles, generators, munitions, radios, and transmitters.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, snipers are typically positioned near conventional forces. "When patrols marched, we gave them information about what surrounded them," continues Ortiz. "We were therefore able, for example, to let them know if armed men were approaching from blind spots. Before the patrol entered the next village, we were in a position to see the population's reaction." In regions where insurgents are especially entrenched—like Musa Qala, Afghanistan, and Ramadi, Iraq—conventional forces may become trapped in their camps and must rely on snipers to drive back insurgents. If the rest of their platoon is engaging an enemy, snipers play support roles, attacking any forces threatening the troops on the ground from a concealed over-watch position.

Though difficult to quantify, the psychological impact of snipers is perhaps their greatest contribution. Halberstadt sums it up thusly: "Snipers inflict a kind of terrible psychological warfare on the entire enemy force by hunting and slaying people when they are not expecting to be slain. When snipers are on the battlefield, there is no safety anywhere." Sniper teams look for ways to destabilize enemy morale. Careful students of human behavior and body language, they can identify and target leaders. They may also terrorize lower-ranking enemy forces through negative reinforcement—for example, shooting the first soldier in each marching formation. Both approaches are extraordinarily frustrating and disorienting to the enemy, who can rarely locate the sniper to return fire or prevent future attacks. According to Marine Colonel Tim Armstrong, commander of the Weapons Training Battalion at Quantico, Virginia, when an insurgent is killed by an unmanned drone, "the enemy just sort of absorbs that," dismissing it as superior American technology. But "when a sniper shoots them," Armstrong continues, "it translates to, 'I just went to a fight man-on-man and I was bested by another man.' . . . It takes the fight out of them." The flip side of such power can have unfortunate consequences for snipers: if captured, they are especially vulnerable to retributive abuse and summary execution.

Despite the hatred and fear they inspire in the enemy, the precision with which snipers kill has an added importance in counterinsurgency warfare: it keeps civilians relatively safe and the death toll and property damages low. Snipers are able to take out an enemy without endangering or alienating the populace. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, this is essential. "It's a lot easier to win hearts and minds when you're doing surgical operations [instead of] taking out entire villages," says LeRoy Brink, a civilian instructor at the Army Sniper School in Fort Benning, Georgia.

Sergeant Christopher Zigler, 1st Battalion, 121st Infantry, fires an M-107 .50 caliber sniper rifle during a marksmanship exercise at Fort Chaffee, AR, while attending the U.S. Army Sniper School, January 24, 2009. Photo by Staff Sergeant Jon Soucy.

Still, sniper teams bear a heavy burden. Their efficacy is measured in confirmed kills, which means both team members must confirm a hit and watch the individual die. Their powerful scopes expose them to the harsh realities of war in gruesome detail. "This is one of the things that separates [a sniper] from the grunts on the ground," explains retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant Jack Coughlin. "A[n ordinary] soldier may see the fighter go down but not what the bullet has done to the human body. . . . [The sniper] sees the look in the eye of his foe."

Hard-to-shake memories are part of the job, Coughlin admits. "The sniper above all is a weapon first and a person second. If he lets a target go by, he puts his fellow Marines at risk." U.S. Staff Sergeant Jim Gilliland, who holds the record for the longest-distance confirmed kill in Iraq with a 7.62 mm rifle (1,250 meters), has invented a personal motto to encompass this sacrifice: "Move fast, shoot straight, and leave the rest to the counselors in ten years."

SOURCES Hans Halberstadt, *Trigger Men: Shadow Team, Spider-Man, the Magnificent Bastards, and the American Combat Sniper* (New York: St. Martin's, 2008); Toby Harnden, "Sniper Shot That Took Out Insurgent from Three Quarters of a Mile," *Telegraph*, January 1, 2006; Jim Michaels, "U.S. Military Snipers Are Changing Warfare," *USA Today*, May 9, 2012; O. L. Oritz, *The Other Side of the Lens—Vol. 1: The Photographic Journey of a Canadian Sniper in Afghanistan* (Exeter, UK: Revaluation Books, 2012); Eric Schmitt, "In Iraq's Murky Battle, Snipers Offer U.S. a Precision Weapon," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2004; Mark Spicer, *The Illustrated Manual of Sniper Skills* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith, 2006); Robert Valdes, "How Military Snipers Work," HowStuffWorks.com, June 11, 2004; Bobby Williams and Al Edgington, "Surviving the Cut—S02E02 U.S. Army Sniper School," *Discovery Channel*, watchdocumentary.org, January 21, 2012

A Few Good Jobs

Returning Veterans Struggle to Find Work

By Cait Robinson

Twenty-five-year-old Army soldier Josh Jones was first deployed to Iraq in 2006 when the U.S. economy was still booming. He came from a military family and figured that his service would secure him a good career in law enforcement or corrections. The idea of military service as an entry into the middle class is attractive to young people who have not been successful academically or lack the money for college, and military recruiters are happy to foster it. But the post-discharge reality too often falls short of the promise. While Jones was serving overseas, the economy at home was plummeting and the job market was drying up. When he returned in 2010, he says he received two weeks of standardized group job training that felt tokenistic and yielded no results. "I didn't know what the hell I was going to do," he remembers. "I didn't want to take a step back and . . . be some cashier at a grocery store or a gas station."

Even work as a gas station cashier is more appealing than the chronic joblessness that plagues many of Jones's comrades. While the unemployment rates for veterans of all U.S. wars are actually slightly better than the national average (7.0 and 7.8 percent, respectively, as of December 2012), unemployment rates for those returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been much higher over the last five years. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that unemployment among veterans between the ages of 18 and 24 averaged a crushing 30 percent—double the unemployment rate among non-veterans in the same age range and towering over the 12.1 percent for all post–9/11 veterans. In 2012, there was some improvement: the unemployment rate for veterans under the age of 24 dropped to 20 percent, and the rate for all veterans who served after 9/11 fell to 9.9 percent. This decline has sparked cautious optimism among both veterans and their advocates. "We've got more miles to go," admits former Green Beret Tommy Sowers, assistant secretary of public and intergovernmental affairs for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). "But it's clear we're marching in the right direction."

Still, there is an employment gap, one that cannot be explained by lack of academic degrees. Veterans fare worse than their civilian peers with the same level of educational attainment. In part, the disparity may be due to veterans' relative inexperience in the job market. "I'm right where I left off, really—essentially in high school," says Iraq War Army veteran Javorn Drummond in the 2009 documentary *How to Fold a Flag*.

"My transition from teenage to adulthood was in war, in the Army. I joined the Army at 17 years old. I turned 18 in basic training. I turned 21 in Iraq." Many young veterans return from abroad never having had a job interview or written a résumé or cover letter. Like Dean in *Dead Metaphor*, they may struggle with presenting themselves as civilian professionals and articulating how their military skills qualify them for nonmilitary work.

Others, like Jones, say that military service left them with few real qualifications to articulate. Rachel Feldstein, associate director of New Directions, which offers San Diego veterans drug rehabilitation, job training, and other services, says that in today's tight economy, her clients have difficulty competing. "I'm not necessarily convinced that they have great marketable skills," she confessed to the *New York Times* in 2011. "If you train someone to be a sniper, those are not necessarily skills that are transferable."

Today's employers are less likely than ever to have personal experience with military service, and they may find the qualities the VA encourages veterans to highlight on job applications—leadership and collaboration skills, work ethic, the ability to work efficiently under stress, punctuality, etc.—too abstract, especially when compared to the concrete credentials of a candidate with actual experience in the field. In areas for which new veterans are considered most qualified, like police and corrections work, competition is especially stiff, as government budget cuts mean fewer openings. Even veterans with obviously transferrable skills, like emergency medical technicians or truck drivers, find their military experience nullified by bureaucratic roadblocks that force them to reenter training programs and reapply for licenses.

Many employers pass over veterans because of their apparent inexperience and lack of transferrable skills; many others balk at the mere mention of military service itself. Job discrimination based on prior or current military service is illegal under the 1994 Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), but infractions are exceptionally difficult to prosecute. Recent statistics indicate that they go largely unchecked.

Widespread misinformation about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a major contributing factor to discrimination against veterans. In a study released in June 2011 by the Center for a New American Security, employers indicated that their number-one reason for not hiring veterans was fear that they were "damaged" or might go on "rampages." Justin Jankuv, a 25-year-old former Army soldier, was fortunate to return home healthy, but he believes that it is assumed he is emotionally unstable anyway. He gives his impression of potential employers: "'Oh, this guy is from Iraq,' or 'This guy is a veteran. So he's got post-traumatic stress disorder or he's a loony.'"

In actuality, veterans who suffer from PTSD experience symptoms that have much in common with familiar anxiety disorders and depression. PTSD is most often characterized by sleeplessness, racing heartbeat, sweats, nightmares, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, nervousness, and feelings of guilt, sadness, and detachment—not the violent outbursts employers fear. Furthermore, PTSD can be effectively managed with medication and therapy. Robert Schwartz is a program director at Helmets to Hardhats, which helps veterans transition to careers in construction.

Job seekers speaking with potential employers at the Veteran's Job Fair in Boise, Idaho, in November, 2012 © Emilie Ritter Saunders / StateImpact Idaho

He explains the realities of PTSD to employers every day, and says few realize how nondisruptive most cases actually are. "[Most employers] probably already have someone in their office who sees a therapist every Wednesday night, and nobody says anything about it," he explains. Schwartz believes that negative stereotypes about the disorder are especially damaging because they can become self-fulfilling. Impoverished from unemployment, many afflicted veterans serve additional tours because it is the only work they can get; once redeployed, their condition inevitably worsens.

Citizen-soldiers in the National Guard and Reserves also meet discrimination from employers. These so-called "weekend warriors," who typically live at home and hold civilian jobs while doing military work part time, may be deployed overseas on short notice. USERRA requires companies to rehire Guard members and Reservists in the same positions promptly after their deployment ends, and it forbids pressuring them to leave the military. These protections are essential for soldiers and their families, but they can also be tough on employers. "They can't run their business with someone being taken away for 12 months," says Ted Daywalt, who runs VetJobs.com in Georgia. He estimates that "nearly 65 to 70 percent of employers will not now hire National Guard and Reserve" because they are wary of suddenly losing employees and being unable to hire permanent replacements.

The federal government is currently the nation's largest employer of both citizen-soldiers and veterans: about 123,000 of the country's 855,000 Guard members and Reservists, or about 14 percent, have civilian jobs with the federal government, and more than one fourth of federal employees are veterans. Despite this, the government is one of the worst offenders when it comes to job discrimination. The *Washington Post*

reports that "in fiscal 2011, more than 18 percent of the 1,548 complaints of violations of [USERRA] involved federal agencies, according to figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act"—more than any other employer.

Unfortunately, loopholes offer little incentive for improvement: federal agencies convicted of willful discrimination are not subject to the same penalties as private companies. Without an effective advocate, "the whole burden is put on the serving soldier to defend your case," says retired Army Brigadier General Michael Silva, who lost his job with U.S. Customs and Border Protection after a yearlong deployment with the Army Reserve. USERRA lawyer Matthew Estes agrees: "There seems to be a feeling that the federal government can get away with what they're doing."

Barack Obama's first presidential campaign promised massive improvements to the VA, including removing benefit eligibility caps put in place by the second Bush administration, expanding education benefits, timely access to mental health care, and stricter enforcement of USERRA. Making good on these promises, however, has been slow work. Obama's 2013 budget request for the VA was more than $40 billion—an increase of 41 percent over the VA allotment he inherited when he took office four years ago—which he says will cover the construction of hospitals and clinics, staff increases, and expanded disability benefits. But the price tags of such initiatives have drawn objections from Republicans, who shelved a bill that proposed veteran-staffed federal public lands projects and would have established a network of job-training centers in September 2012.

Modest progress is being made in the fight against veteran unemployment. The White House has introduced Joining Forces, an initiative to assist military families in finding work headed by Michelle Obama and Jill Biden, and significant upgrades to the decades-old Transition Assistance Program, notorious for its outdated one-size-fits-all approach to job training. Perhaps the most effective policy of all is President Obama's high-profile tax incentives for businesses who hire veterans. Secretary of Veterans Affairs and former U.S. Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki believes that the administration's improvements will stand the test of time. "What [Obama] asked me to do was make those fundamental, comprehensive changes today that would serve the VA for a long time," he says. "Not two-year changes or five-year changes, but put in place the processes, the systems, the disciplines, the behaviors that would change this in transformational ways for a very long time."

SOURCES Lauren Bailey, "Veteran Unemployment Still Below National Average; Post-9/11 Annual Rate Falls to 9.9," *VAntage Point Blog*, January 7, 2013; Shaila Dewan, "As Wars End, Young Vets Return to Scant Jobs," *The New York Times*, December 17, 2011; Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker, dirs., *How to Fold a Flag*, streaming video, Heroes Film, 2009; Aaron Glantz, *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle against America's Veterans* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009); Brian Mann, "A Soldier's Struggle Up the Economic Ladder," *Chicago Public Media*, October 30, 2012; ibid., "Young Vets Face Job Discrimination, High Unemployment," *North Country Public Radio*, November 13, 2012; Rick Maze, "Obama Announces Overhaul for Job Help Program," *Army Times*, July 24, 2012; Phil Stewart, "Special Report: Obama's Struggle to Mend Veterans' Safety Net," Reuters, July 26, 2012; Steve Vogel, "Returning Military Members Allege Job Discrimination by Federal Government," *The Washington Post*, February 19, 2012; Greg Zoroya, "Veterans Jobless Rate Falls but Remains High," *USA Today*, January 16, 2013

How Metaphors Die

A dead metaphor is a word or phrase that was once metaphorical but has lost its force as a rhetorical trope in common use. In other words, it is a metaphor that has been used so frequently that it has come to mean itself. Michael P. Marks writes in his 2004 *The Prison as Metaphor*:

> An example of a dead metaphor would be the "body of an essay." In this example, "body" was initially an expression that drew on the metaphorical image of human anatomy applied to the subject matter in question. As a dead metaphor, "body of an essay" literally means the main part of an essay, and no longer suggests anything *new* that might be suggested by an anatomical referent. In that sense, "body of an essay" is no longer a metaphor, but merely a literal statement of fact, or a "dead metaphor."

When "free lancer" was a living metaphor, in order to understand its metaphorical use one had to understand that the original referent was a mercenary knight who offered his services to the highest bidder. "Free lancer" was coined by Sir Walter Scott in his novel *Ivanhoe* (1820), in which the Norman villain Maurice De Bracy says:

> I offered Richard the service of my Free Lances, and he refused them—I will lead them to Hull, seize on shipping, and embark for Flanders; thanks to the bustling times, a man of action will always find employment. And thou, Waldmar, wilt thou take lance and shield, and lay down thy policies, and wend along with me, and share the fate which God sends us?

Through repetition, "freelancing" has secured its own independent meaning separate from medieval trials. One does not need to know about knights in order to understand the word to mean an unattached contractor available for hire.

In *Dead Metaphor*, Dean Trusk's new profession—a freelance sniper—is actually a dual dead metaphor. To "snipe" was coined by British soldiers in India in 1773 meaning to "shoot from a hidden place" in reference to hunting a specific waterfowl, called snipe, as game. "Snipe shooting is a good trial of the gunner's skill," reads an article in an 1818 issue of London's *Sportsman's Calendar*. In 1824, "sniper" came to mean a sharpshooter with enough marksmanship to hit the bird, which is notorious for its erratic flight pattern. Now, of course, the term has very little connection to shooting birds.

Questions to Consider

1. How does Dean feel about his military service?

2. In addition to "knowing where someone's going to be without being told," what other skills do professional snipers have that could easily be applied to civilian employment?

3. What does Helen want? What arguments are made for conservative policy in *Dead Metaphor*? Progressive policy? What social commentary is *Dead Metaphor* making?

4. In what ways does Jenny act as Dean's spotter throughout the play?

5. In what ways is this production of *Dead Metaphor* like a kaleidoscope? How did the use of turntables impact your experience of the show?

6. What is the funniest moment in *Dead Metaphor*? When were you caught most off guard by the play's serious implications?

7. Answer the question Oliver asks Dean: "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

For Further Information . . .

Afong, Milo S. *HOGs in the Shadows: Combat Stories from Marine Snipers in Iraq*. New York: Berkley Caliber, 2007.

Glantz, Aaron. *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Halberstadt, Hans. *Trigger Men: Shadow Team, Spider-Man, the Magnificent Bastards, and the American Combat Sniper*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

Johnson, Chris. *Essays on George F. Walker: Playing with Anxiety*. Winnipeg, Canada: Blizzard Publishing, 1999.

Kyle, Chris. *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.

Lane, Harry, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English: Vol. 5 George F. Walker*. Toronto, Canada: Playwrights Canada Press, 2006.

Walker, George F. *And So It Goes*. Burnaby, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 2010.

———. *Escape from Happiness*. Toronto, Canada: Coach House Press, 1992.

———. *Somewhere Else: Four Plays*. Burnaby, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 1999.

———. *Suburban Motel*. Burnaby, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 1997.

———. *The East End Plays*. Toronto, Canada: Playwrights Canada, 1988.

———. *The Power Plays*. Burnaby, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 1999.