

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Vigil

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MORRIS PANYCH

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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VIGIL MEET AND GREET/DESIGN PRESENTATION

Excerpts from Remarks Made to A.C.T. Cast and Staff, September 15, 2009

During the first week of rehearsal of each production, A.C.T. staff members and the show's cast and creative team gather in a studio to meet, mingle, and get to know each other. After personal introductions are made, the director and designers present to the assembled group their vision for the design of the production, which is typically the culmination of months of research, discussion, and textual analysis. This introduction is a kind of "snapshot" of the creative team's understanding of the world of the play at the moment they step into the room with the actors, an understanding that will evolve and grow and perhaps change in significant ways as the cast brings life and breath and physical action to the playwright's words over the following weeks of rehearsal.

Below are excerpts from remarks made at the first rehearsal of *Vigil* at A.C.T., which offer a glimpse into the initial impulses behind the look and feel of the upcoming production. To work around scheduling conflicts, the first three weeks of *Vigil* rehearsals began in September 2009, six months before the show's opening. The cast and creative team then reunited in March 2010 to complete the rehearsal process.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR CAREY PERLOFF

During *The Overcoat* [A.C.T.'s 2005–06 season opener, which was originally created in Canada by Morris Panych, Ken MacDonald, and Wendy Gorling], Morris sent me a pile of his plays. He's very prolific. It's a wide canon full of wonderful stuff. At that time we originally started talking about *Vigil*, so it has been a very long, interesting conversation. This play seemed like a great reunion for the cutest couple we know in American theater, Marco Barricelli and Olympia Dukakis, who last did a Canadian play here [A.C.T.'s 2002 production of Michel Tremblay's *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*] in which Olympia talked the whole time and Marco talked hardly at all. This time, Marco talks the whole time and Olympia makes snide faces. [*Laughter*]

For those of you wondering why it is so peculiar that we are here in September working on this play that does not get produced until March: it was a creative producing decision, because Marco runs a theater [as the artistic director of Shakespeare Santa Cruz], Olympia lives in New York, Morris and Ken are doing plays in Toronto, and everybody's schedules are really complicated. This was the moment when we had a chunk of time when we could all work together. Then we will come back together in time to really de-ice all this and heat it up again and see what we remember before we put it up onstage.

PLAYWRIGHT/DIRECTOR MORRIS PANYCH

Vigil is a play that I wrote in 1995. It was first produced in Victoria, British Columbia, and it's gone on in a lot of other productions. It's been translated into, I think, 19 languages, including Latvian. How many plays, come on, have been translated into Latvian?

The play was written in response to a couple of things. I had always had the idea of playing with mixed/mistaken identity, but I never really had an idea for a play [that incorporated that concept]. Then we were visiting Ken's mother in the hospital, and she wasn't doing very well, but the woman next to her was doing even worse. Her back was to us, but the hospital had these volunteers going around trying to help people, and the volunteer woman was standing beside her saying to this old lady, "I got a message from your nephew. He says he can't make it. Sorry." There's nothing, and then the volunteer says, "Are you okay? Would you like me to wipe the tears off your eyes, dear?" I just walked out of the



hospital and I thought, "This is what life is becoming for a lot of people: being left alone, cut loose. Society is taking no responsibility for people looking after other people."

So the play was written in response to that. Ostensibly, one person talks and the other listens with very little dialogue, but it really is a conversation, and, in many ways, a love story between this nephew and aunt, or whatever you want to call them. In a sense, it's an incredibly difficult and tricky kind of dialogue to put together, when one person has most of the words. We are just going through it now [in rehearsal] and trying to figure out how that happens. It is very exciting to have two fantastic, thinking actors who can help us try to develop the production in the way I think it should be, which is a true conversation between two people.

The set is a variation on a kind of set that Ken's done before, because he doesn't really have much imagination. [Laughter] No, that's not true!



DESIGNER KEN MACDONALD

I'm very used to it. We're married and we've been together 29 years.

The play takes place in Olympia's—Grace's—upstairs room in her very strange house. In my mind it looks kind of warehousey, but it is just a strange sort of wonderful attic from which she has blocked out the world with newspapers, yellowed newspapers, that have kept the light out, kept the sun out, kept her in her own private world. It's a world that, as a kid, you'd always hoped you might discover—an attic full of things, her history, and then that history sort of stopped. Interesting little things for [Marco Barricelli's character] Kemp to look through, for him to climb on, to explore to find out who his aunt was. And the lighting is quite interesting, because it is all backlit through these newspapered windows.

PANYCH

The play is broken down into 39 scenes, and when we first started to do this show we just did hard blackouts [between those scenes]. Then over time we realized that was too unsubtle, and now it rolls through a little bit more.

I acted in this show a couple of years ago in Vancouver. That was the first time I actually got a chance to do it, and I loved the score from that show so much I asked them if we could have it. It's very haunting and weird and funny. It's like the show itself.

MACDONALD

Costumewise, Olympia and I have already totally changed her outfit [from the initial concept]. We've come up with this new look for her. Marco is a man in a little brown plain suit, and this is all he's brought with him in his empty suitcase, what he has on, so he is forced to occasionally wear Grace's clothes when he washes his own clothes. If he goes out shopping and it's winter, he'll have to wear her outfit.

PANYCH

I was thinking about how important a time it is for a show like this to happen, when you are having this conversation about health care [in the United States] and, believe it or not, in our country people are trying to revisit it because there're so many people out there who are so against this idea of people helping other people. It's just shocking. So I think it's a good time to talk about responsibility and what we owe each other and society, and I think this play does that in a kind of compassionate, funny, interesting, quirky way (if I can boast).

PAGES 4 and 5 Costume sketches for Kemp and Grace created during the first rehearsal of *Vigil*, by designer Ken MacDonald