



MIXED SWIMMING

AN INTERVIEW WITH JACKSON GAY

BY ROLIN JONES

In May 2019, word got out about a 24-hour-long live reading of “The Mueller Report.” After theatregoers recovered from the whiplash reaction of wondering, “Whhhaat?” they were not surprised to learn that **Jackson Gay** would be directing the staging. Over the last 10 years, the adventurous Gay has earned a reputation for developing and directing unusual, inventive, thoughtful, and thought-provoking work, particularly with material—new plays and classics alike—addressing today’s challenging but necessary issues of equity and politics.

Jackson Gay is going to have even more opportunities to do so in the future as she and Co-Artistic Director Steven Padla steer the next phase of activities for New Neighborhood, a multidisciplinary, multi-format company she co-founded with a group of like-minded artists to present a variety of theatrical, musical, and film events and productions. To talk about how she has moved through life from the restraints of a religious childhood to defying the US president and Russian oligarchs alike, *SDC Journal* paired Gay with playwright/screenwriter Rolin Jones, her longtime collaborator and fellow Neighbor.

ROLIN JONES | Here’s my first question, Jackson. How did you go from Sugar Land, Texas, to becoming an in-demand theatre

director in New York and the regions, an Ivy League teacher, and the “go-to” developer of world premiere plays? How did that happen?

JACKSON GAY | Theatre. Like many people, I found theatre at a young age in school and initially used it as an escape from a not-great home life that was unpleasant a lot of times. My little sister and I were adopted from foster care through the state of Texas. My adoptive parents brought us into a home with four boys in Sugar Land, Texas.

ROLIN | This is not a big town.

JACKSON | No. It was tiny back then. We were a very religious family: we went to church Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and, at times, other days of

the week. I was taken out of square dancing when I was in elementary school and made to sit in the library during that period. Dancing wasn’t allowed.

ROLIN | What, like in *Footloose*? Square dancing was dangerous in your family?

JACKSON | Yes. No square dancing for me or, starting in junior high, no swimming in a pool with boys. My mother called it “mixed swimming,” which meant that a proper, morally righteous woman would never put on a bathing suit and get into a swimming pool with a male. I was 19 or 20 years old before I ever went in a swimming pool with somebody of the opposite sex. We occasionally went to the beach in Galveston, Texas, but I guess that was okay because my parents were there.



Rolin Jones + Jackson Gay in rehearsal for *These Paper Bullets!*
PHOTO c/o Yale Rep

ROLIN | If you were not allowed to square dance or mixed swim, how did you sneak in theatre at school and not bring it home?

JACKSON | My big break was in *Mame*. I played Agnes Gooch. There was a theatre class in high school, and my teacher—a man named Jerry Baber—could tell that I really needed a lot. I needed attention. I was very introverted. Very shy. I needed somebody to encourage me, to listen to me and see me. It was as though I was dehydrated and needed water.

So, I glommed onto it. In theatre, I found myself and was able to imagine a different life through learning about other people's experiences and cultures. That helped me understand that I could do something else and *be* somebody else.

I give a shout-out to all the amazing high school drama teachers in the world.

I ended up moving to Houston and going crazy for several years. All through high school, I didn't go to a single party; I didn't go to any dances; I didn't go to prom; nothing, because of family rules. So, when I first got out on my own, I went crazy.

I was the youngest person to be hired at The Comedy Workshop, which was a big standup comedy and sketch comedy place in Houston that was famous for a lot of comics like Sam Kinison getting their start there. So, I went from my household in Sugar Land to The Comedy Workshop, which was too drastic. I just was very clueless.

I had left home very much against my parents' wishes. My father showed up at The Comedy Workshop with a shotgun. I was on

stage in the middle of a rehearsal with one of my best friends. I kid you not.

ROLIN | Loaded?

When you write people off and label them as failures, not capable, or not smart enough, you are very possibly not taking the time to really see them or where they come from and the value they bring to the conversation.

— JACKSON GAY

JACKSON | Yeah, this is *Texas*. He wanted to take me home, and I was resisting. It was scary. He wasn't going to shoot anybody, but he wanted to make a point.

I did end up going home, and then left again. A couple of months after that, my parents sent the church elders to my apartment in Houston. They were six or seven old white men who came into my apartment, sat on the couches and the chairs, and basically tried to save my soul.

ROLIN | How'd that go?

JACKSON | I was polite. Obviously, it went how it went because I'm now where I am.

I did a lot of stuff in Houston for a lot of years, waiting tables, bartending, singing telegrams.

ROLIN | Would you get more money for the raunchier ones?

JACKSON | Yeah. But I had to make money: it was just a gig. It ended because the last one was at an ice house in the middle of nowhere. That experience made me think, "This is really stupid and I'm taking my life into my own hands. I've got to find something else to do."

ROLIN | Was that the moment you realized, "I should go to college?"

JACKSON | I met my husband [Dickson Musslewhite], and he was in grad school at the University of Houston for fiction writing. We were housemates and best friends. All of his grad school friends would come over, sit around, make pancakes, and talk for hours and hours about fiction writers, poets, and poetry. One day, I said to Dickson, "I wish I could be a part of this conversation. I wish I could talk about these things. I wish I could go to school." He said, "Why don't you?"

Honestly, it had never, ever occurred to me that I could go to college. I said, "How?" and he responded, "What do you mean 'how'? You do this, you do this, and you do this." It was just mind-blowing.

I know that's hard for a lot of people to understand, but when I was growing up, it just wasn't something that was talked about as a possibility for me. I was so miserable and had so much going on outside of school that I literally barely graduated from high school. Then, when I *did* end up going to college, I graduated second out of the entire university.

That just goes to show you that when you write people off and label them as failures, not capable, or not smart enough, you are very possibly not taking the time to really see them or where they come from and the value they bring to the conversation. That had a profound effect on me, going from the high school experience to getting to college.

ROLIN | What college was this?

JACKSON | University of the Arts in Philadelphia. I picked it out of a book of schools that had a good theatre department and that you auditioned for as opposed to relying solely on grades. I hocked my bicycle to pay for my plane ticket, flew to Philadelphia, auditioned, and my wonderful teachers, Johnny Hobbs, Jr., and Charles Conwell, accepted me right then and there. I'll be forever grateful.

It was satisfying to leave Texas finally and go on this new adventure. It wasn't easy. It was very expensive. I worked the entire time as a housekeeper and a waiter. All four years, I cleaned houses for some of my teachers at school. I took out student loans, got scholarships. I did everything you could think of.

ROLIN | You went in as an actor and made the switch from actor to director?

JACKSON | I went as an actor. My last year in undergrad, I took a directing class from Paul Berman, who was a major influence on me and which writers have influenced me. He was into existential playwrights such as Beckett, Chekhov, and he loved Witkiewicz. He taught a directing class, and during the first week, after my first exercise in it, I thought, "Okay, this is what I want to do." It was instant.

The first play I directed was Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker*.

ROLIN | I'm sorry...the *first* play you chose, out of all the plays in the world, was *The Skriker*?

JACKSON | Yes.

ROLIN | The thing that got me excited about life was *Pippin*. What the Venn diagram is between you and me, I have no idea. So, you directed *The Skriker*.

JACKSON | I directed *The Skriker*. I rented an art gallery space in Philadelphia. Sadly, I used my student loans. I wanted to direct a play! It turns out that I really did *need to*. It was a crazy choice for a first-time director, but I liked the challenge of it. It had a humongous cast, was language-driven, and was dense and crazy.

ROLIN | I don't understand. You did this in addition to schoolwork and the jobs that you had to do to pay for school. You picked a crazy play; you rent a studio; and you get all these other people to do this in their off-time, too?

JACKSON | Yeah. My classmates at University of the Arts were all in it. It was a gigantic cast because there was no double casting. It was huge—almost too big for this little room we rented.

ROLIN | Clearly, we've gone way past mixed swimming and square dancing.

You've decided this is what you want to do and you go from undergrad to grad school, right?

JACKSON | Immediately. I didn't even start undergrad until I was 26 years old, so I was in a bit of a different situation. A lot of times, graduate theatre programs want you to have two years of work before you go to school. At Yale, they counted my entire life experience and considered it part of who I was as an artist.

The interview was terrifying. There are three parts. The first step is that they select you out of what you send. The second part is

a one-on-one meeting with one of the directing faculty. The third part is that all three directing faculty sit at a table and give you three choices of plays you can pick from, and you have to direct a scene from one of these plays. The plays during my year were *The Cryptogram* by **David Mamet**, *The Way of the World* or something like that, and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

ROLIN | You picked *Much Ado*. You had to.

JACKSON | I picked *Much Ado*.

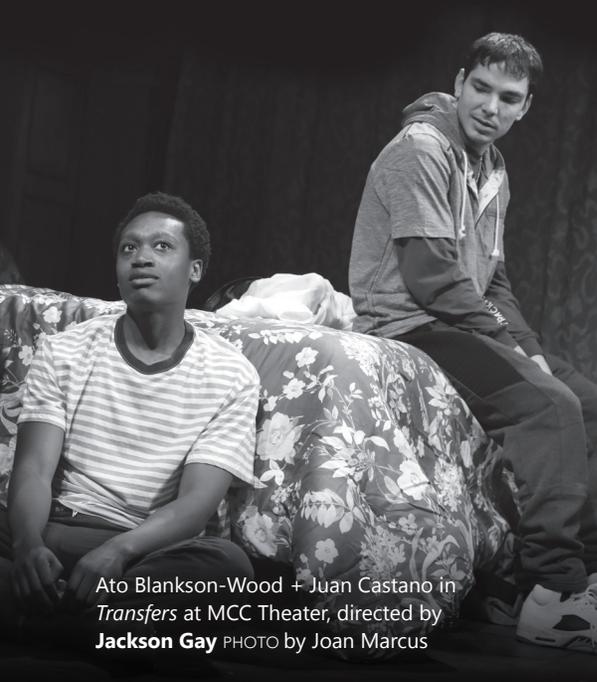
You go in and the second-year actors learn these scenes, then you direct the scene with

them. They give you 45 minutes. You stand in front of the faculty and direct the actors however you want. Table work, up on your feet, or a combination of it.

It was one of the scariest things that I had ever done. I think back on it a lot. I remember freezing up. I stopped talking. Not a peep came out of my mouth for at least a minute, way past the point where you can cover for it and pretend you were thinking. I had to give myself a pep talk. In my head, I said, "Jackson, this is it. If you don't do this, this is it. You have to do this." I talked myself out of complete fear and panic, and then started talking again as if nothing had happened.



Seema Sueko + Remy Auberjonois in *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* at Yale Repertory Theatre, directed by **Jackson Gay** PHOTO T. Charles Erickson



Ato Blankson-Wood + Juan Castano in *Transfers* at MCC Theater, directed by Jackson Gay PHOTO by Joan Marcus



Kerrie Seymour, Rob Kahn + Andy Croston in *Power of Sail* at Warehouse Theater, directed by Jackson Gay PHOTO Wallace Krebs

ROLIN | What is that feeling of danger or fear for you? Fear of failure or exposure? What is that about?

JACKSON | I think it's a fear of not being good enough. It's not even "good enough," it's "worthy enough."

It's things that you carry with you your whole life: that you don't have enough money, you're not wealthy enough; you don't come from the right family; you are a female. Things that are said to you throughout your life, such as, "You shouldn't speak"; basically, "You're stupid." Even though you know that that's not true, if people say it to you long enough, it affects you. It's real.

ROLIN | When does that leave? It seems like you're building up a number of successes along the way.

JACKSON | It gets easier, but it never goes away. I think many, many people can relate to this in some way. It's crazy. It's like you get thrown back someplace over and over and over, and you have to climb back up the hill each and every time.

I have to remind myself of who I am and what I've accomplished, and also just be honest with myself about where I am and things that I need to take responsibility for myself. It's constant.

ROLIN | I'm fascinated by the person who talked you out of that dead silence, the powerful Jackson or whoever that person is. I'm wondering what that person looks like, looking down or being outside of that body, and what that person looks like now. That other voice that pulls you out of this moment.

JACKSON | I think that person, now, is somebody who is not buying in to shame and

that narrative anymore. What I think I do now is, instead of hiding it, I want to expose it and talk about things that a lot of people prefer you didn't bring up. Things that are not polite to bring up.

There are discussions about inequality in the entertainment field, in terms of debt, money, and who gets to do things and who doesn't. Those kinds of conversations are very difficult for people to *want* to talk about.

That's one reason I have always been drawn to [playwright] Lucy Thurber, because she just puts it all out there.

ROLIN | Okay, Lucy Thurber. She's one of the playwrights you work with over and over. Can you talk about meeting her and what attracted you to her writing?

JACKSON | I met her years ago through David Van Asselt at Rattlestick. She was the strangest creature I had ever seen in theatre. What attracted me about Lucy is her honesty.

Lucy does not write realistic plays, naturalistic plays. People think that she does, but they're not. They're heightened, and there's something more going on there besides some people in western Massachusetts in a house. I get a head start in terms of knowing these characters.

ROLIN | Both of you did not grow up with money.

JACKSON | She tells me stories about her childhood that are just so heart-wrenching but also full of joy and laughter. I think what makes her work successful is that she's so compassionate about where she came from and the people that surrounded her—and surround her still. I love that.

And I love that she talks about class. She actually talks about *class in America*—which is underrepresented on stage—and she gets slammed for it.

I still remember a [Charles] Isherwood review of her play *Scarcity*, which we did together at the Atlantic [Theater Company]. There was a character who was blown away that there was a healthy salad bar at the college that he had been given a scholarship to. That was one of the details in her script that I loved so much: it was something I could relate to. In his review, Isherwood wrote on and on about the salad bar; he singled it out as being unbelievable and ridiculous to talk about it. To me, it highlighted the willful entitlement of a reviewer happy to mock another human being with a different life experience than his own. That was maddening and very upsetting. With Lucy, there are those little details. She gives a voice to the people that you rarely hear or see. I think this really makes her special.

ROLIN | Yeah. You're in an art form where the characters that you and Lucy put on stage... there aren't a lot of those people seated in the theatres. Especially in New York, where it costs \$60 to \$70 a pop for a seat.

You two have done six or seven plays together now. Is something like the Isherwood review a bonding experience? Is that where you two can link arms and say, "We are pushing this unpopular American story to people who are not familiar with it?" What's the tension about delivering this kind of story for a paying audience that did not grow up like you?

JACKSON | It's a complete bonding experience. If there's tension, the tension is always needing and wanting to be hyper-careful with how you portray the characters.

They are flawed, like anyone, but they're human beings deserving compassion and an attempt to understand why they do what they do, why they believe what they believe. That means a lot to both Lucy and me. We take seriously how their stories are being told.

ROLIN | Is that a democratic exercise, an exchange of values and how you can get a New York audience, or a regional theatre audience, into either Sugar Land, Texas, or Western Massachusetts, where Lucy is from?

JACKSON | I think so. It's about wanting to share these stories and human beings with other human beings. Nothing will ever change if you don't get people to think about and feel for their fellow human beings. It doesn't really change unless you can get somebody to, literally, put themselves in somebody else's shoes, just for an hour.

And laughter. Humor is important. Lucy's plays are funny.

ROLIN | One of the things that you're known for in the American theatre is world premieres and new work. Lucy is the person that you've probably collaborated with most in terms of new plays.

JACKSON | My main collaborators—the writers I work over and over again with—have been Lucy, some guy named Rolin, and Kenneth Lin.

ROLIN | Those are wildly different playwrights. If you were to house Ken Lin, Rolin, and Lucy Thurber into whatever director house you've made, what's the commonality? Or do you say, "Hey, I've got to do something completely different?"

JACKSON | My main joy—and the only reason that I love what I do as much as I do—is because I get to do different kinds of things.

Feeling trapped for so long... When I moved away from Texas, I had spent so many years in my imagination going to all of these different places, and I wanted to do that for real. I never wanted to be trapped some place again. I still feel that way sometimes, to my detriment. I'm restless and I worry a lot about being confined.

So I like the fact that I'm known for being very eclectic, and that I get offered crazy, different things. If I only got to do one kind of genre, style, or subject matter, I would not be doing this anymore.

ROLIN | What's the difference between breaking down a Lucy Thurber play, a Ken Lin play, and a Rolin play? Part two: do you have a head start with a Lucy Thurber play because of your life experience?

JACKSON | The answer to the first question is that I always start with the writer. I try to understand and get into the head and heart

of the writer, listen and watch them, and listen to what they say. A lot of times, I listen to them read their own material so I can hear how they read it to understand the tone.

ROLIN | They read it poorly, I would assume. I know all three of those people are terrible actors. All of them, *terrible*.

JACKSON | Well, yeah!

It becomes clear really quickly what it is they care about and what they're trying to express or do. That leads everything else. It gives you a direction on everything else that you do.

ROLIN | Since danger is a theme in this *SDC Journal* issue, I want to ask about two "dangerous" plays you directed in the last three years: Paul Grellong's *Power of Sail* and *Kleptocracy* by Kenneth Lin. Is that fair to say these were "dangerous plays," considering the landscape of what gets produced in American theatre?

JACKSON | I think so. It's not even just what gets done in American theatre, but it's the state of our world right now where it is scary, sometimes, to put certain plays up.

We did *Power of Sail* at a wonderful theatre in South Carolina called The Warehouse. *Power of Sail* is about the rise of white nationalism in America. Paul, the writer, doesn't pull any punches. As the plot, you have a white Harvard professor and a black former student



Greg Stuhr, Anthony Manna, Brian McManamon, Andrew Musselman + Jabari Brisport in *These Paper Bullets!* at Yale Repertory Theatre, directed by Jackson Gay PHOTO Joan Marcus



Kleptocracy at Arena Stage, directed by Jackson Gay PHOTO C. Stanley Photography

who has risen to prominence by writing a book, eclipsed his mentor, and is now a talking head on CNN and MSNBC. He still looks up to his professor and there's an exchange between them that is very upsetting and shocking for both of them. It's told in the form of a thriller *and* it's told forward and backwards.

ROLIN | What happened to your actors when you were exploring the play?

JACKSON | In rehearsal, it's very difficult to deal with all of these issues. The process was upsetting at times because of the things we had to discuss and talk through honestly and the things that actors have to have said to them on stage. Even though they're acting—it's obviously a character saying it to another character—it takes a lot out of an actor to put themselves out there like that. There is the potential to bring a lot up from their own lives and personal experiences.

ROLIN | What are we talking? The N-word, anti-Semitism?

JACKSON | Yes: everyday racism, overtly and casual racist statements and attitudes, slurs, anti-Semitism in the United States.

A lot of the pain in the play—the most upsetting thing about it—comes from the moment you see something ugly and hateful inside a person you thought you knew. Somebody who you trusted as a mentor or a friend. An ugliness that person hadn't even acknowledged about themselves. So the shock and pain are palpable and instant for both. And their lives are forever changed.

We had questions about how this particular audience would react to this play.

ROLIN | Because, geographically, they're 15 or 20 miles away from where people who would espouse this openly live? Is that why?

JACKSON | Well, down the street is a Confederacy museum, open to the public, in someone's house. This is definitely not to say this is who these people are in this area, but it is who *some* of them are. And you can find these kinds of people, groups, and museums all over the United States, including where I live in New York.

ROLIN | That becomes the question of the art: where is the theatre bubble? When you're sitting at the back of the house, you *feel your audience*. When you put this hot-button work on stage, it feels different from what was

happening in the audience with something like our *Much Ado* musical adaptation, *These Paper Bullets!* You know what I mean?

JACKSON | Right. It feels dangerous. I've never watched an audience so intently before. It's really putting stuff out there for people to think about and have lively discussions about. It's not a situation where you can sit back and enjoy the show: it's not that type of play. That was very exciting.

ROLIN | What *were* the audience reactions to it?

JACKSON | The audiences were, for the most part, really blown away. They were very receptive. Lots of discussion, lots of staying after and starting conversations in the theatre. It was very successful in that way.

ROLIN | Mm-hmm.

You're sitting in the back of the audience at Arena Stage for Kenneth Lin's play *Kleptocracy*. Let's get into that piece of dangerous, exciting theatre. What's the play really about?

JACKSON | It's a fictional dramatization of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Vladimir Putin, centered on Khodorkovsky—a Jewish-Russian

man—who rose from passing out pamphlets on a street corner with a barely running car to becoming the richest man in Russia, to being the owner and founder of Yukos Oil, to Vladimir Putin throwing him in prison for 10 years after a power struggle for the heart and mind of Russia.

ROLIN | You were directing that at Arena Stage, in Washington, DC, the city that is the most politically involved in the entire world. You were in a town that has a significant Russian population, including diplomats. One of the major businesses of Washington is international relations with other countries, and Russia is one of our big adversaries in the world. So, what was that like?

JACKSON | The audiences were smart and engaged with the material. Ken's play allowed us to use our imaginations to theatricalize a story and a time that resonates today in our own time and country. If being a kleptocracy means that you steal from the money and resources of your own country, then one could say there's a lot of similarity between the two.

ROLIN | I'm interested in what happens to you, as an artist, who puts on a play and, because of the content, something different happens other than the usual process of reviews, and maybe it'll move to New York or London. When something unique happens, such as threats or danger, what's your state of mind?

JACKSON | It feels a little scary at times, in a thrilling way. I want to do more things that make me feel that way. There is something about *Kleptocracy* and *Power of Sail* that is so "happening-right-this-second" in a crazy, important way that is very exciting. You don't know what's going to happen; you don't know how it's going to end.

There are so many people out there who are trying to get and keep control of the narrative, and make sure that *their* story is the one that is out there. It was scary-thrilling to have people be emotional, angry, or *whatever* about what stories we were trying to tell.

ROLIN | Imagine Jackson Grace Gay sits down to flip around channels. You're flipping on CNN, NBC, Fox...and they're all talking about the same story but in very different ways. You have a theatre piece here that, potentially, you're telling one truth of this—*your* truth—and there are other people out there who say, "No, that's not the story. The story is *this*." Did you ever feel weird about not knowing if you were right?

JACKSON | In essence, we flipped around to *all* the channels. We read so many different things and I never felt, "This is *this*." What you

do as a director—what I did—is focus more on the characters' objectives and what makes a human being strive for what they want. I find something to tell the story of a human being overcoming obstacles to get what they want.

ROLIN | Let's talk about one of your recent theatrical ventures: "The Mueller Report." What was *that* all about?

JACKSON | After *Kleptocracy*, it felt so good to get a conversation going about the world we live in. Right after that, I was watching a lot of news channels on TV, and they were talking about "The Mueller Report" and, jokingly, the idea to put it on stage came up because it didn't seem like anybody was reading it.

When you think about what theatre is—or could be or should be, or what it used to be—it's that a community comes together and experiences something that has to do with a present-day issue. And then they talk about it and go home, hopefully changed or expanded in some way.

— JACKSON GAY

ROLIN | It's 500 pages long.

JACKSON | Yes. I had read little bits of it at that point, so I went on Facebook and wrote, "Who wants to get together and read 'The Mueller Report' out loud?" as a joke. People started responding and it grew and grew.

John Belitsky and Sari Caine from a space called DMDR at the Arc in Queens said they wanted to co-produce it and would love me to use their space. Dan Butler came on board to help produce it, and you—specifically, New Neighborhood with Steven Padla—got behind it. It was an *outrageous* amount of work.

ROLIN | It's not character driven; it's not a play; it doesn't have the shape of a play, but you're trying to make a theatrical event out of it. What the hell *is that*?

JACKSON | It's maybe one of my favorite theatrical productions that I've ever done.

We thought about it just as you would with a play: what does this *really* want to be about? Then, after a lot of talking, it ended up being just a person's voice, amplified, with nothing else.



ABOVE Jackson Gay's Facebook post inviting people to read "The Mueller Report" out loud

When you think about what theatre is—or could be or should be, or what it used to be—it's that a community comes together and experiences something that has to do with a present-day issue. And then they talk about it and go home, hopefully changed or expanded in some way.

After a massive amount of work and trying to get the word out, it started at eight o'clock on a Saturday night and ended at eight o'clock the next day. We wanted to do it as straightforward as possible, with no commenting. Our readers were a combination of actors, directors, dramaturgs, artistic directors, designers, and people not involved in theatre at all. The first reader stepped up on this little platform with a microphone and started reading. I got emotional about it. It was so quiet and you could only hear just this person's voice. Then, when they finished their section, the other person was standing there, ready to go on. As that first reader put the mic down and turned to step off stage and let the other person step on, they started to pat each other. One of the people grabbed the other person and hugged them. And that was it. The other person went up and started reading.

For 24 hours, that was my favorite part of the event: watching the pass-off. People sat there for hours, just *listening* to people, one after another. We slept for 45 minutes in 24 hours. When we finished, I thought, "This is what I should be doing." In addition to other things that I also love.

I didn't think that I really had the skills or the knowledge to be engaged in this way, but I really do. Why am I *not doing this*? It's these little things that could bring people together.

It was a big moment for me not just as an artist, but as a human being, and as a mother. My daughter came, and I got to show her this thing. That was important for me.

ROLIN | What did she think of it?

JACKSON | She loved it. She was our unofficial photographer.

ROLIN | Your mom pulled you out of square dancing, and you brought your daughter to this staging of “The Mueller Report.”

JACKSON | Exactly. I’ve come a long way, Rolin.

ROLIN | I think this is clearly where you are at right now as an artist. But what are the dangers of doing theatre as a mom, cobbling together the career that allows you to put her through school and create a better life to give her an advantage from where you started? What’s the danger about this lifestyle as a theatre artist?

JACKSON | The danger is that she won’t be able to pay her rent or feed herself.

ROLIN | But *you* are.

JACKSON | I am, but it really is a constant worry. It’s very difficult to be a female director raising a daughter. Dickson and I use the money that I make in my directing life and teaching to *actually live*. It’s not “fun money.”

Working in theatre requires you to be away from your child. Sometimes you have to take a job because it’s a wonderful project or because of the people involved, or, sometimes, honestly, you just need to pay bills.

ROLIN | Yeah, but it’s worth it.

JACKSON | It’s worth it.

I don’t think it’s a secret to say that a lot of people involved in theatre come from some sort of financial advantage. It’s just how it is, because you do not make enough money in theatre. And it’s not just about making money: it’s about knowing people who can help get you other things.

That’s not just for theatre, that’s a problem in all of America. You’re born into a certain class, and you go to school, to birthday parties, church, or whatever you do, with people who also have the same societal and financial advantages. So of course you’re going to be around people who will help you immensely to get what you want. And that cycle of financial advantage continues to the next generation. That’s not a secret.

It’s also not a secret that people *without* that really struggle or give up.

ROLIN | Your particular story is that you’re in this art form and doing some provocative work that’s holding up a mirror to the country at this moment. And this is an art form that is a struggle if you don’t come

from those advantages. If you come from your background and your situation, it’s hard to do.

JACKSON | Yes, it *is* really hard. Many productions that I’ve done make it worth it to me because I so love what I do. I understand that there are a million people who come from way worse situations, so I’m really grateful for many people that have helped me along the way and for the advantages I myself have gotten.

ROLIN | The Jerry Babers, the Paul Bermans, the **Liz Diamonds**...all those people that got you there along the way. I get that.

JACKSON | After “The Mueller Report,” New Neighborhood’s Steven Padla and I talked about how New Neighborhood should do more theatrical events that have to do with various topics relevant today in American life. We talked about what is missing in our souls, in our own lives, and came up with ideas of what we could do.

Part of us wanting to make more work like the Mueller reading event is wanting to not just be focused on a career—how to keep jobs coming and all of that—but that you could take time out to create socially interactive events to get a conversation going in a community and do it in a theatrical and fun way.

There was a lot of the idea of joy and audience engagement in the origins of New Neighborhood from the beginning: to do something that is different, fun, and involves the audience. Steven Padla and I will now be taking the reins of New Neighborhood and will focus the work on amplifying the experiences of our fellow American citizens through the creation of “Live Actions,” which we think of as socially interactive theatrical events that change and grow as audience members contribute their own voices and diverse perspectives to the conversation.

Our current project—*Endless Loop* of Gratitude*—is an interactive “live action” piece that gives participants the opportunity to express gratitude for events, people, or places that positively impacted their personal lives. There will be a sign encouraging people to step up to the mic and share their stories in their own voice. Each speaker is recorded and those recordings will enter a stream that is played for everyone to hear. The voices will fade into one another in a stream that bathes the audience in gratitude, thankfulness, and kindness. For those shy or uninclined, we will have “thank you notes” sent from all over the country to be read, allowing a stranger’s gratitude to enter the room and the world.

We want this experience to have an emotional impact on people, providing momentary respite from a world overwhelmed with partisanship, identity-driven grievance, and maybe even raw anger.

ROLIN | It seems, at the heart, what you’re looking for, or what’s slightly different here, is some version of mixed swimming: getting people together. What’s coming in the door all seems very provocative. It’s not that what’s on stage isn’t important, but it’s conceived by creating a little gumbo with the American experience. Right?

JACKSON | I guess it really is. I love how you’re putting this together.

If you keep a teenage girl away from boys in a swimming pool, they’ll have no idea who boys are, won’t know how they think, won’t know what their flaws are, and won’t know what their good parts are. They won’t know anything about them. They’ll be terrified of them.

There’s something about getting in and getting to know each other...yes, it could be dangerous, but you learn about each other. You learn what one person wants, what the other person doesn’t want. You learn everything you need to know about life together. You learn to not have any shame about who you are, your body, anything. I think it is a good metaphor: you have to put on a swimsuit, say, “Here I am,” and jump in together.

So, there you go. **SDC**

PHOTO CREDITS: *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* by Rolin Jones. Directed by **Jackson Gay**. Scenic design: Lee Savage; costumes: Chloe Chapin; lighting: Miriam Nilofa Crowe; sound: Hillary Charnas. | *Transfers* by Lucy Thurber. Directed by **Jackson Gay**. Scenic design: Donyale Werle; costumes: Jessica Ford; lighting: Russell H. Champa; sound: Broken Chord. | *Power of Sail* by Paul Grellong. Directed by **Jackson Gay**. Scenic design: Shannon Robert; costumes: Kendra Johnson; lighting: Tony Penna; sound: Marc Gwinn. | *These Paper Bullets!* Adaptation by Rolin Jones; songs by Billie Joe Armstrong. Directed by **Jackson Gay**; choreography: **Monica Bill Barnes**; fight direction: Michael Rossmly. Scenic design: Michael Yeargan; costumes: Jessica Ford; lighting: Paul Whitaker; sound: Broken Chord; projections: Nicholas Hussong. | *Kleptocracy* by Kenneth Lin. Directed by **Jackson Gay**; fight direction: Lewis Shaw. Scenic design: Misha Kachman; costumes: Jessica Ford; lighting: Masha Tsimring; sound: Broken Chord; projections: Nicholas Hussong.