MIKE LEW

WALTER KURTZ

1 *What was your most memorable theatrical experience as a child?*

There was a touring production of *Wind in the Willows* that played in our school auditorium during English class, and it ran overtime and there was no way to get out of the auditorium and all I could think was, "They're going to mark me tardy!" What I think I'm trying to say is that for a long time I associated theater with shame.

2 *Is there a production you wish you'd seen?*

The Thugs by Adam Bock. Soho Rep has this incredible pricing structure where they rope you in with 99 cent Sundays, which sell out immediately. Then they slightly discount previews, which sell out immediately. Then you pay retail. Then if the play extends you pay SUPER-retail. I didn't get my act together early enough, and by the time they kept extending and extending, at that point I was like, "Ok, but by now the tickets are probably $500."

3 *Who was the person who made the biggest impact on your career?*

I've been lucky to have some incredible teachers and mentors, but the person who has had the most direct influence on my writing has been my wife and fellow playwright Rehana Mirza. The way we talk about story and navigate our social responsibility as Asian-American playwrights has profoundly affected my writing.

4 *Who are your heroes (writing/composing etc. or otherwise?)*

Marsha Norman, Christopher Durang and Julia Jordan. David Lindsay-Abaire and Steve Belber. Tanya Barfield. Emily Morse, Joy Meads, Kelly Miller, and Celise Kalke. Too too many people to name.

5 *If you could be anyone (past, present or fictional) who would you choose to be and why?*

There's a story from Plato's *Republic* where all the Greek heroes are in the underworld and all the lives they could lead in the next life are laid out before them, and each of them has to choose. Odysseus picks last of everybody, and he searches through all the possibilities and arrives upon the life of an ordinary citizen that others before him had failed to notice, and happily picks that life. I would choose to be Odysseus in that moment, having already lived a life so full and so crazed that a life without drama seems positively idyllic.

6 *If you could have a love affair with anyone (past, present or fictional), who would you choose?*

Bugs Bunny dressed as a girl bunny.

7 *When you sit down to work, what must you have with you in the room?*

Absolute silence. And if I can't have that, I'll slap on some headphones and listen to one song over and over again on loop until I can't hear the song anymore.

8 *When you're in despair with a piece of work, how do you maneuver out of that?*

Don't get me wrong; I care deeply about my plays. But to a certain extent I feel like all of our work is a continuum and each play is but one unit within a much larger body of work. It's like I'm a boot maker. I make boots. People come up to me after a show and go, "You should be really happy. Are you happy?" But I'm neither happy nor unhappy. Is a bootmaker "happy" after making a boot? So on the flipside of that – in terms of despair – I try not to get too worked up over one malformed boot. If I'm frustrated because I can't figure out a scene, I'll obsess and I'll tinker and I'll write my way out of it. Or better yet, bring in some actor friends to work on it with me. Or go make another boot. To me this job doesn't really engender despair; all of it's play, and the craftsmanship in itself is a worthy and engaging pursuit.

9 *If you hadn't become a dramatist, what profession would you have chosen?*

Doctor? Both my parents are doctors. I was a Westinghouse finalist before getting to college. So... whoops.

10 *Which of all your works is your favorite, and why?*

microcrisis was a defining play for me. It was a satire on the financial crisis first produced at Ma-Yi. It's my favorite play for two reasons. First because I'd been developing a comedic style with short plays I'd written in EST/Youngblood, and hadn't yet found a way to sustain the breathless pace of my short plays throughout an entire full-length. This play gave me the vessel to do that. Second, a lot of people tell you something to the effect of "write the play only you can write," and for many writers of color that suggestion comes loaded with the expectation that all they can write about is their race. But in *microcrisis*, beneath all the comedy I tried really hard to accurately convey all the complex machinations and arcane banking practices that had gotten us into the crisis. I had bankers coming up to me after the show saying I'd gotten it dead-on, or audience members with no financial background saying they felt like they left with a much better sense of what happened. So with *microcrisis* I realized that this too was the play only I could write, and that was a hugely empowering feeling finding my way out of the pigeonhole.

MIKE LEW is a member of the Dramatists Guild Council and recipient of the Lanford Wilson, Helen Merrill, Kendeda, and Heideman Awards, and a NYFA Fellowship. His plays include Tiger Style!, Bike America, microcrisis, *and* Stockton. *He is co-director of Ma-Yi Writers' Lab and an EST member. Juilliard (2013), Yale (2003). Website: mikelew.com.*