



A Conversation with Playwright Robert O’Hara and Director Damon Kiely

Dramaturg, Taylor Barfield, sits down with playwright, Robert O’Hara and director, Damon Kiely to discuss *Barbecue*, celebrity, the perils of technology, and America’s obsession with watching fucked up people.

Damon Kiely (DK): Great, so Taylor’s going to ask some questions, you and I are going to talk, you’re going to swear, we’re going to bleep that out, and this will all be great.

Taylor Barfield (TB): So, I like to start with the broadest, most general question in the world and then get more and more specific as we go along—

Robert O’Hara (RO): I hate the most general questions in the world so...go ahead.

TB: Great, great. That’s exactly where I want to start, pissing you off! But, for both of you. This is a wildly raucous play in certain ways and in other ways it is some of the most heartbreaking and real depictions of drug addiction, that I’ve seen this side of the “Intervention” TV Show. Damon, what drew you to this play? And Robert, what drew you to write it?

RO: Well, what drew me to write the play is that Steppenwolf commissioned me to write two plays and this was one of the plays that I wrote.

I kid around, but one of the interesting things that made me go down the alleyway of this play is a phenomenon that I like to call, watching white people do shit. There are all these reality shows: watch the white guy build a house, watch the white guy fix the car, watch the white guy go around the world and eat. And I’m like, black people fix cars. They build houses. They eat too. But the thing is, we’re so used to watching white folks doing it. Or the show where you watch the white girl who is sixteen and pregnant. I know sixteen-year-old black people who are pregnant. I don’t know why they don’t have a television show.

So, I was seeing this show “Intervention,” and was like, why are all these white people being intervened? Black people are on drugs. I don’t understand why we are watching white people being given interventions. So, I started thinking about the stories, the narratives that we are comfortable seeing white folks in, but not seeing people of color in. And that drew me down the alley of writing *Barbecue*, telling the story from two different perspectives, but with the same story.

DK: And for me, it started with the reading of the play at Steppenwolf. And I don’t know if I have ever laughed so much in my life. I felt like I was gasping for breath and in pain by the end of it. And without giving anything away, I was also continually surprised. Those are two things I love in a play. I will also say that I have known Robert for a long, long time and we’ve never worked together and so there was a great joy at the idea to finally, if not work directly with him, at least work on his work and talk to him about it and in those ways get great ideas from him and collaborate in that way. That to me was a great joy. And one of the great things about Robert, I’ve always felt, is I have never met anyone who is such a truth-teller. The truth might be funny, but it’s true. I found myself, when I was laughing at things, laughing and going, oh I cannot believe he just did that. I shouldn’t be laughing at that. That’s not right. I feel guilty now. This is terrible. But then, I’d laugh again, probably harder.

TB: Robert, you just talked about the “white people doing things” trope in television, citing specifically “16 and Pregnant.” In the introduction to *Barbecue* and *Bootycandy*, you talk about how the truth of the matter is that these characters are fucked up. What is it about watching fucked up people do things that we as Americans find so fucking entertaining?

RO: Well, why do you want to see people who are not fucked up? You want to watch people who are healthy and in control of their emotions and they don’t have any problems? Why would I want to watch that? That’s not interesting. I want to watch people who are more fucked up than I am or just as fucked up. Someone once said to me about my work at a talkback, someone said to the dramaturg, “Is all that really necessary?” And the dramaturg looked at her and said, “none of this is necessary. This is theatre.” Why are you asking if something is necessary? That’s the most stupid question I’ve ever heard. Is it necessary? We’re making the shit up. Why would we want to make something with people who are not in conflict or not fucked up? I think the more fucked up, the better.

DK: I was recently reunited with someone, who had had a more troubled past than I did and it was interesting. He himself at times knew he was entertaining us with tales of his troubles in the past and then knew that now that he was fine, he was less entertaining in some ways as a person. I was on the edge of, is some crazy shit going to happen again or

not? I was happy that it didn't, but also a little like, oh well, I don't have any good stories to tell about tonight because it was just a regular night out. Even in life we like entertaining shit like that, not just in theatre. As long as it doesn't touch me personally up in my grill.

TB: I've been fascinated doing research for this show by this need for the façade of reality, but one that, just as you just alluded to Damon, doesn't touch or affect me in any real, substantive way. Like, no one is actually throwing hands at me like in Jerry Springer, but I am more entertained by that because I believe that that paternity test is real. Could you both take a moment to talk about the interplay between the idea from the play, "We all make everything up" and the need to make that faking seem "real" in reality television for example.

DK: Well I can speak a little to this today because I was doing some more work on Act 1. Without giving too much away, in Act 1, I'm working on making something feel real. But it's definitely real in the theatrical sense. I'm using some of the conventions in the set and in the costumes and the staging, that we as a group have decided is what reality looks like both on a TV show and onstage. So, when we get to some later stuff, we've got a way to make it seem even more real than real. We change things up so we're like, oh that thing that I thought was real wasn't real and this is the actual real. That's something that I was working on today and I thought, I can be, not slick in the first act, but polished and make some stage pictures that tell the story in a very clear way, where in the second act, I can be a little sloppier in some ways because it's a little more real.

RO: I think that there's all this technology that we put into reality. For instance, throwing twenty-five people into a house [in "Big Brother"] with nothing but cameras on them 24/7 and calling that a reality show. Or walking down the street with a camera crew and a mic pack stuck to your back and a boom and you're supposed to be real. Or that our president is Trump. The "reality" of it is the most unreal thing on earth. Then, people want to make these characters into people that they don't know, but in fact we all know them. Every name in the show I took from someone I know in my family. Now whether they are taking on the full characteristics of that person, is my artistic license, but I know these people. So, one person's stereotype is another person's aunt. That's what this play plays with. Even when people are telling their memoirs, who's telling the truth about their lives? What is real and what is not real? They make it more. They have to make it more. You know...you have to have no feet and no arms before I give you a dime on the subway now. If you can talk, then you're not downtrodden enough. I need to have real horror in front of me before I can acknowledge that it's there. I don't know why that is, but I think it's because technology has become so much a part of our lives that we're not interested in just anybody being homeless. We want you to actually have no feet and not be able to talk. We want more. That to me deals with the ease of technology that we have.

DK: Well the thing that would seem cool, Robert, going off the introduction to the published version of your plays, is that we want to be entertained by this. So, we might miss the fact that these are real people with real problems and that everyone is fucked up. That's been interesting for me because I feel like on the journey of making the play a little bit of the desire to push the characters away from me and say, well, those aren't my family members. That's not me. Those aren't people I know. But the more I work on it, the more I keep pulling them closer and the actors are also clearly pulling them closer and saying, well actually, these are people I know.

RO: Right. It's very, very true that sometimes reality is stranger than fiction.

TB: Something that just occurred to me was this need for excess. It's not enough to just be homeless, you have to have no feet and not be able to talk. It's just like the level of excess that attracts people to celebrity. We don't want people to just be able to afford a car, we want someone who can afford a car made out of Rolexes.

RO: Right! We have this instant celebrity. In thirteen weeks, you can become an American Idol. How is that possible? You can become the voice of the country in sixteen weeks. And then every year, we're going to give you another idol. An idol?! We're creating idols on a time schedule? That is crazy to me.

TB: Could you both talk a little about the role of celebrity, fame, and money in the play?

DK: One of my favorite stage directions is when Barbara is trying to negotiate with her family to seal the deal—and that's something I think everyone is trying to do in this play—is that Zippity Boom has a new addiction [in chasing fame and fortune.] We can't be ok with the everyday boringness of our lives and the boringness of human relations. There's something that must make that more interesting. Either that's our obsession with a different celebrity, we can live vicariously through them, or it's drugs, or it's alcohol, or it's our own need for fame, our own need for recognition in whatever field that we're in. We need a way to feed that hunger, otherwise life's kind of depressing.

RO: Like I said earlier, most of the characters have names from my family. So, my aunts and my mother came up to see the play. My mother's name is Lillie Anne and my aunts are Adlean and Marie. And there's a lot of conflict and anger and vulgarity between the characters in the play. And so I was concerned that my aunts and my mom would be like, why are you writing this play with our names in it and that has us cussing and fussing. And they came up and saw it and afterwards thought they were celebrities. They were going up to the actors and saying, oh yeah you played me so well. And I was like, all this stuff that I

thought they would be concerned about, the conflict, went out the window the moment they saw that the character had their name. I could have had them killing each other and they'd say, oh my god that was such a good portrayal. That was insta-celebrity.

And now everyone has their own talk show on Facebook. Everyone uses Facebook like it's their own talk show and we have to tune in whether we like it or not. They have to tell us every minute of their lives as if someone wants to cover them every minute of their life. That's what's very funny to me about celebrity. Now you can literally be a celebrity by making a video and uploading it onto YouTube.

DK: Yeah, that's right. For a while, my daughter and her friend had a YouTube channel where they were doing stupid stuff that twelve-year olds do and these different challenges because both of them are friends with someone whose sister had a million followers on YouTube. And I couldn't figure out why. [My daughter] said, you know, she just talks about her life...it was crazy.

RO: Who wants a million people knowing what you're doing?! I don't even want my partner to know what I'm doing. So why would I want a million people? There was this whole phenomenon of these directors, these young directors putting on social media, oh I've got this gig. There was a time when we actually didn't have to tell everyone every moment of our lives. But now it's like a daily process. Wake up and tell everyone that I'm about to have a bowel movement. I'm walking down the street. I'm singing a song. It's really crazy to me.

TB: Do you all think that the advent of the technological age has made the quest for fame and celebrity more dangerous, more drug-like, more difficult to wrangle?

DK: Well, I certainly will say that I'm much more addicted to it than Robert is. I definitely, and I'm not sure why, am more prone to posting about my life than Robert is and I definitely feel the addictive draw of it. It's like shouting out the front door and seeing who is going to yell back at you. I know it's not healthy and I probably should just stop it and shut it down. Part of it has to do with staying in tune with what my colleagues are doing, sometimes staying in tune with what my old friends are doing. And the thing that's also weird about it is my friend group is a stupid mixture of people who I've known for twenty-five years and the people I met last week, former students, my family. It's not a healthy mix. It's weird.

RO: I know people who have broken off engagements, had knockdown, drag out fights, over Facebook. And I'm like, really? You're arguing with everyone on earth? Yelling.

Because I also create fiction, these sort of mad stories, the idea of putting my real life for everyone to see...

Because, every time I write something, there are a bunch of people who go on media, they're called critics, and they will criticize it. So, me wanting to put my personal opinion so it can be criticized is just not a part of my DNA. Although I love reading your posts Damon. I love reading everyone's. That's for sure. But I know that if I started doing that, I would lose a lot of friends and cuss a lot of people out. Because I usually hang out with my friends one or two at a time, and we're in my house or whatever, and we're talking about stuff and no one has to know that we hate someone or that we hate something. But, once you put it out there, everyone has an opinion. Well, I didn't ask you for your opinion. But then I just told you mine on this huge server. So, I understand the addiction. I just know that it would be a horrible thing for me and I would lose a lot of friends.

DK: I don't know about the New York theatre community, but the Chicago theatre community just loves controversy and loves to stir it up on Facebook, loves to accuse each other, even to the point of, if you're not posting about this current controversy, I see your silence and I accuse you of silence. And I do not fall for that hook ever. Because my posts are always about, this is me doing something dumb or give me a recommendation for this or honestly I'll just post a lot about this show that comes up so I can get people there. There's people here who love to stir up shit.

RO: One of the good things about not posting is that they can't say that about me because I've never posted an opinion. Just recently I did a show in Dallas and we did another version of the show in New York and a woman who played a character in Dallas posts, "So Robert I see so-and-so's character is wearing clothes now. Why is that?" And I'm supposed to answer this on the internet? I'm supposed to answer why I put clothes on a character as opposed to in a bodysuit. But they begin to believe that they are actually having real conversations with people and that's what's scary to me—that I don't really walk down the street and, at the top of my lungs, yell, I hate so-and-so. I don't just walk into a crowd of people and tell everyone what I believe. I'm a very shy person, whether you know it or not. Damon probably does know. I'm very shy. And I don't like to be around crowds. I don't like people to make me the center of anything. I like to drop a little bomb in the middle of the room and tiptoe out.