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A Conversation with Nina Raine, April 5, 2014

By Marcia Eppich-Harris

Marcia: How long has it been since you thought about *Rabbit*? You wrote that a while ago [2006].

Nina: Well, actually, they did it in San Paolo [Brazil] about a year or two ago, maybe like a year and a half ago or so.[1] I revisited it then because I went and saw it, and it was in Portuguese, but I got sucked right back into it. And that was really interesting because they went to town on my father scenes. They had some very well-known actor playing the dad, and they went with the surreal. It was just like the boldest production I've ever seen of that play because I wrote it thinking, "Oh I want to write something I can direct so I'm going to keep it really simple and it's going to be over one night basically," and I always just envisioned that the father scenes would just play out around the periphery of whatever you had making the bar or the restaurant set—that the father scenes would be quite stark and you'd just do it with lighting and they didn't need a set. And in this production they really had thought so much about the play and what it meant and they had a quite conceptual set. The bar was—they'd gone with the idea of childhood and how the play's partly about lost childhood—like that bit where Bella says, you know, "I was special, and I'm not special anymore" (*Rabbit* 56), so their bar set was like…. You know that sort of playpens where children play in little inflated plastic balls? They sort of swim, almost like a dry swimming pool with lots of balls?

Marcia: Wow.

Nina: Yeah, and so they'd imagined that it was a very trendy bar—that the theme in the bar was [a] playground and so [the actors] had to wade through these balls and then the table was like a little merry-go-round thing that you could spin

round. Then [in] the father scenes, the actor did things; like, he chopped an onion. He was active all the time that the scenes were going on in the restaurant, in fact to a degree that I was a little bit worried that he might pull focus from them because you just didn't want to do a bit and then go off. He wanted to be active in the rest of it. He did things like he wore a sort of scuba diving mask. I don't know what their rational was. It was –the father is an eccentric, and these are all memories she has of him that kind of play on while the restaurant scenes go on.

Marcia: That's really interesting. As the first director of *Rabbit*, how did it feel to see that kind of interpretation?

Nina: Well, what I loved about it was, normally I might be a bit suspicious or a bit resistant, but they actually tapped in to something that is there in the play. So it wasn't the ego of the director or the ego of the designer taking over.[2] Actually, it works because there are these bars where they have very fancy themes and so on, so that I believed in it. It wasn't too disruptive. Yeah, they made a kind of rustling noise when they waded through balls, but they used that and it was elegant. And I suppose that he had understood the play, the director, and he was so passionate about it. It was a female theater company that found the play somehow, and they were looking for plays that acted well for women, and they built up this whole production on their own. It wasn't like a theater did it. It was this company, and then they found a venue and they were just clever and intuitive, and so I relished all of the boldness with which they'd attacked it. I know there's certain—maybe it helped that it was in Portuguese, but you can still tell when the scenes would have not quite gelled yet. You can hear it even in another language. You intuit it in an almost musical way, a nonverbal way. You go, "They're not reaching the right heat here or they should be going faster than it is." You can see things very nakedly when you do it in another language—you know, the problems.

Marcia: Yeah, I was going to ask if you spoke Portuguese or not, but I guess not?

Nina: Not a word, no.

Marcia: I got interested in your work because I saw *Tribes* at a small venue, The Phoenix Theater [in Indianapolis, Indiana], and it was really interesting because it was such an intimate space. You really felt like you were in the family, arguing everything. Especially that opening scene that's so combative, it was thrilling and intimidating all at one time.

Nina: Oh wow. I'm so interested to hear that. That's amazing because there've been a few productions and I'm losing track now, of where the big ones are and where the small ones are, and I'm interested when it gets done in a small space because I really see it for the Royal Court downstairs, which is really like 400 seats or something. And yet, when it was done in New York, that was the Barrow Street, which is like a 90-seat theater. And like you said, what you described just then, is what lots of people said about the New York production—that you felt like you were in the room and you felt like you—someone might suddenly grab you and bring you into the yard.

Marcia: Yeah, I think, too, that different—well, the British speak differently than the Americans as far as their curse words. Most Americans won't pop out with the word "cunt"—and yet, it's in the third line in *Tribes*, so it's like, "Oh my God, okay, here we go."

Nina: (Laughs)

Marcia: But a lot of British things that I read bandy about the word "cunt," so I knew it wasn't so unusual. But the reason why I saw the play is because I've been taking students to the theater this semester. I've got a small Modern Drama class, and I decided when I was designing the class that I'd try to get a grant to go to the Phoenix which does almost exclusively newer plays, things that have been written within the last 10 or so years. So I thought this would be great for a modern drama class. *Tribes* was the first play that we saw this semester, and it

really set the standard. Nothing else has been quite as good. But it was really funny to me—we go into the theater, and we really knew nothing about the play, but that was kind of the point. Pedagogically, I wanted to see how we would react to a play that we knew nothing about, and how we could analyze it. So you know that opening scene is just so much like a war within the family, and the students are sitting there like—I mean, they're college students, so it's not like they don't curse or drink or do whatever, but they were almost zero to sixty in no seconds. It was amazing. The greatest reaction was from one student in particular. I have a student who is autistic, and she really related to the play because she said that she related so much to the deaf community and their portrayal in the play. She felt like that portrayal was almost exactly what it's like to be autistic.

Nina: Wow.

Marcia: I didn't think about it that way, but by the end of it. Actually, at the interval and at the end of it, she was absolutely sobbing. She just loved it.

Nina: Oh my God, that's amazing.

Marcia: Yeah, it just changed her life.

Nina: I just love to hear that. That's brilliant. It's interesting because I wrote it about the deaf thinking that this could be a metaphor for—there's so many other things. I just didn't expect. I remember when I was writing it, I thought somewhere in it, "Shall I make Billy also gay?" Like will he come out? But I thought, no, no, this is going to confuse it. But so many gay men love that play because to them it's about coming out and saying to your family, "You know you've never really accepted who I am and now you have to." I mean, the dad makes a joke about [it], "Are you sure you're not going to tell us you're gay as well?" And so gay men like the play. I don't know about lesbians; I just don't know as many. But you know, I've had lots of gay men say this, and David [Cromer] who directed it in New York is gay, and he found it so emotional as well. He was just crying at the first read-through and things. And I have a friend

who's a black actor, and he said, "Oh, I thought it was about being black." And then I had a friend who has been pregnant and just recently given birth, and she said, "Oh well, when I heard Sylvia do that speech about losing her hearing and her life shutting down in a small circle and everything dark outside, well, that's how I'd felt after giving birth." It's amazing how many different things people bring to it. It makes me really happy.

Marcia: Yeah, it's great, and I felt anyone who has ever felt alienated in his or her life could definitely relate to Billy. It's really universal. What's kind of funny to me is Dan—he's got voices in his head that no one else can hear, and Billy is surrounded by the voices of his family that he can't hear. So that was an interesting dynamic because they're sort of the opposite sides of the same coin.

Nina: Yeah, absolutely. I remember I was talking to someone who does hear voices, and I suddenly thought [that] it's so fluky sometimes, and this is really going to be a brilliant counterpart, a sort of spin on it. I was really excited about the scene near the end where Daniel, his speech is really sort of deteriorating and the voices are really bad, and Sylvia says, "If you tell me what the voices are saying, I'll speak to it." I thought—I kind of wondered whether I should push that scene further, because I thought this would be such an interesting scene with someone engaging through what the voice is saying in someone's head. The person I know who has voices won't ever go that way. 'Cause I asked them, would you? And they said, "No, because it just encourages the voice if you engage with it, even if you're someone else engaging with it." But I thought this is interesting territory. I kind of wish I could have pushed it maybe further even, but this play just ejects. It gets to a certain point quite late on in the play. It's kind of a marble rolling down a spiral, and it goes faster and faster, and you can't hold it up with the things you'd love to get in as a sort of greedy playwright.

Marcia: What was the timeline for when these plays were written? They seem to have so many connections that I wondered if they were meant to form a sort of loosely connected trilogy. Did you have that in mind or not?

Nina: Well, it usually takes me about…it seems to be about two to three years to write a play, unfortunately. So it's slow, and then, along the way, I get hijacked by directing things. And there was slightly a connection between all three plays because in *Rabbit* they talk about this deaf doctor, and that's because I was already interested in deafness then and also in medicine. There's a medic [Emily] in *Rabbit*. And then, after having written *Rabbit*, I thought I've written my intimate, sexy, funny play, and now I want to write—I want to get one character, Emily, and put her in the wider universe, in the landscape of this hospital [in *Tiger Country*]. And I want to write a huge tapestry of a play with interweaving narratives. And I want to really stretch myself and not be accused of writing the same play again. I've got a horror of that, you know. So there's a connection there, which is the medicine, and taking one of the individuals in that airy sort of play about individuals obsessed with themselves and taking it into a sort of broader context. And then I wrote *Tribes*, and *Tribes* was again a sort of reaction against the hospital play [*Tiger Country*] because the hospital play—it's exhilarating to watch, you know. People crave intimate scenes, I realized, watching it. So the audience loved the scenes where the boyfriend and girlfriend, Emily and her boyfriend, have troubles and then they break up. I think the play is full of human interest, and you know it's about coming to terms with death. But I kind of felt like I need to just use some of my own personal juice for the next play. Because for *Tiger Country* I went and I hung out in hospitals, and I used other people's dramas. I felt so lucky, actually, just to be there and witnessing all this stuff, before it has had to happen to me as a parent or you know. These dramas that are going on, but I felt like, "Now I need to write a play where I squeeze my own lemon" or whatever, so that was *Tribes*, and there's that deaf element. You know, already in *Rabbit* I was thinking the girl, the deaf doctor Goulding] is a sort of emblem for the people in *Rabbit*. They are deaf to other people. They're ambitious. Even the doctor character that gets described—she's leaf, she's sexual—she kind of grabs this guy and pushes him up against the

wall. This is what the characters in this play are like. They can't recognize it though. They want. They grab what they want carnally, and they are sort of horribly pushy and ambitious. And then of course you find that they're not all those things solely by the end. They're human and they're hurting and so on. That idea I suppose was there in a seed, and then, in *Tribes*, I thought—family, this whole thing about the deaf. It would be great if the irony is that they disapprove of this deaf community when in fact they are a perfect image of the same thing in miniature themselves. They don't listen and they are piquey. That's a very long round the answer, but yeah, I think you're right. They are. I mean, I didn't write them thinking I'm going to write these three plays, but they all are a reaction to the one I wrote before, developing something that was there, internal, in a previous play.

Marcia: Yeah, I really love the connections that you've made, and I'm also impressed with the doubling in *Tiger Country*, especially Vashti being the 24-year-old girl who dies in Emily's care. I haven't seen the play, unfortunately, but I noticed that detail in looking through the notes and the cast list. I thought that that is like a microcosm of what you were just describing with trying to make those connections. But, for instance, Vashti being a patient who dies, perhaps gives that character more sympathy, especially if you make it kind of obvious. Did you direct *Tiger Country*? Did you try to make those connections obvious?

Nina: Yeah, I actually did direct *Tiger Country*, and it was funny because it's such a roundabout story with the ones that I do end up directing. With *Rabbit*, I wrote it to direct it, then I sent it to theaters, and there was a such a sort of like positive response to the play, that people were very like, "Oh, are you sure you want to direct it? You wrote it." It became sort of a "We're interested in doing it, but we're not interested if you insist on directing it." So I relinquished the idea that I'd direct it. And then of course, theaters go, "Well, we do really like it, but what we really want to do is commission you to write another play for us. We don't actually want to put this play on." And I realized that the only way to get it

actually on was to direct it myself. So I came full circle. And a similar thing happened with *Tiger Country*. I thought, "Well, I really don't want to direct this myself because I'm scared of all the challenges it raises." It's like a National Theater play or a Lincoln Center play, I suppose. It needs a huge cast, needs maybe even a revolv[ing stage]. I've done small, intimate, realistic plays as a director, and so I always thought, "I'll give it some grand old director, probably an older man to direct, and I can take it easy." And then, again, the same things happened. It was impossible to get anyone to put it on because it had a big cast. People were worried it was too televisual. Was it really a play? If you ever watched a hospital drama, it's not like *Tiger Country* on telly, but people worried that, because it had the same subject feel, that it might be accused of being television. And so again I realized, "Oh God, the only way to get this on is to just do it myself"—you know, help search around for people who might help put money into it because it needs extra money to be on at the theater. Once you started putting all this effort into it, you don't want someone else to cock it up, you know? You don't want some director to come in not really invested and not do a very good job. So being a control freak, I thought, "Well, I'm gonna have to do it myself."

It's interesting, the thing about Vashti being the twenty-four year old because I remember thinking, "Yes, this could really work," and then of course, pragmatically, you have so few people actually playing all these parts that Vashti, as I remember, had to be the ambulance person bringing in this twenty-four-year-old girl, so, yes, she was doubling, but basically, the girl in the end was played by my assistant director, who I had to persuade to go on stage because we literally had so few people for so many parts, but I think we're going to revive it this winter. So I'll revisit that because it was an idea I was interested in for all the reasons that you said. I remember also, the end of the play—I don't know what draft you've read—but originally, I wanted to replay the beginning of the play. There's this arrest, and then they all give up and the person is dead. The person

leading the arrest at the beginning of the play is Rebecca, that kind of feisty girl, and the person leading the arrest at the end of the play also used to be Rebecca because I wanted to show just completely the same thing happens again and again. And this novelist who's a friend of mine, William Boyd, came to see the play on the very first preview, and he said, "You should make Emily lead that final arrest because you've got to show that she now has finally got that extra layer of skin. She couldn't call off the arrest in the middle of the play, but by the end, she is the person [saying], 'Okay, should we stop now?'" And it was a really good idea, and it just put a button on the end of the play. It meant something. So yeah, there are things like that that happen in performance and then you can sort of do things like relinquish the "Vashti as the twenty-four-year-old girl." I once summed it up to someone: people really need to be explained to—I've done so many meetings with theaters, trying to get them to put that play on, and they say, "What is it about?" And I say, "It's about Vashti and Emily. Emily psychically becomes the patient because she becomes ill through doctoring. She's like the shaman who is permeable and the sickness invades her. Vashti is closely related to another patient, so she suddenly is one step closer to that. John literally does become the patient. So it's about all these doctors—they cross over to the other side."

Marcia: I also think there's so much wonderful development for Emily. If she leads the arrest at the end, then that really closes up her development. Whereas the draft that I have does have Rebecca leading the arrest at the end. So it's somewhat more ambiguous about whether or not Emily is going to survive in the hospital. But I like both endings. I think that in performance, you could go either way. Rebecca leading it means that the world goes on whether you're in it or not. And then if Emily leads it, then it shows that she's finally developed enough stamina to deal with this kind of career. So I guess it just depends on what your focus is. If you want to have the focus on Emily or the ensemble.

Nina: I think it did work quite well with it being Emily in the end just because it alternates. You think, "Well, is that the right thing or the wrong thing that she's now able to do this? Is that a pity or is that a mercy?" It doesn't quite close it down because you examine what you feel about it. Half of you feels as if you're cheated. That she's grown that hard skin or whatever. But then you think, "Has she really grown it?" I don't know, you know? I think it leaves enough open that it's still interesting.

Marcia: To get back to *Rabbit*—I was thinking there are really combative relationships in all of your plays, but I'm really interested in *Rabbit* because they are relationships that are not necessary. Obviously Bella has to have a relationship with her father, but she doesn't have to stay friends with Richard, and of course, she invites Tom over to sit with them. And then, she doesn't have to stay friends with Sandy, so this is a group of people that she mainly chooses to be with. My question is—why does Bella perpetuate these relationships when she could choose to have different relationships that are not maybe so crisis driven or combative and argumentative?

Nina: Well, I suppose there are lots of different answers to that question—not ones that I consciously was thinking when I was trying to write. Because when you're writing it, you're just following your nose and it's more interesting writing scenes with people who are not going to agree with one another. So that leads you as a writer to conflicted relationships. But I suppose if I was talking to the actors about it and they asked me that question, I'd said Bella's relationship with her father is combative and argumentative and often you seek out similar persons in your relationships, don't you? That you know and feel familiar with what you've grown up with. I think she might not feel properly challenged unless she was [in these relationships]. The other thing is that the conflict slightly arises because they are honest with her, and that's always interesting to watch on stage as well. So it's not always going to be a person into her. One could say, "Well, Richard's motivation is a bit tainted because he wants her for himself, so how

much of it's actually just him trying to sort of undermine her confidence?" And, actually, you can find lots of ways of attributing his behavior that are not so morally spotless. But someone like Sandy, I think, genuinely—you know, there's that scene where she berates Bella about letting Richard trample on her? That comes from a loving place, actually. Tom is not such a combative person, but the relationship didn't work. So you could then say, "Well, why did she invite him over to the table?" People don't always do what's best for themselves, and sometimes that leads to really interesting snarky scenes, you know? But I suppose you could look at her and think, "God, you're so screwed up, why're you surrounding yourself with these shrieking people?" But you know, Emily is a counterpoint to that, isn't she? She's a trustworthy, quieter friend who takes Bella on a certain amount, but she's much less aggressive, and I think Tom is a less aggressive person as well. I think the interesting thing about Bella and her friendships that I kind of was drawing on from life is that she's one of those people—I'm not by the way—who puts her friends in different filing cabinets and never lets them meet. I know people like that. They separate their friends, and you never get to meet their friends. You're in one group. I know quite a few people who do that, and it's because they're control freaks. They're scared of what will happen if they introduce group A to group B and what it might reveal about them as people. I know a boy who went to a posh boarding school, and then he went to Oxford; and you know his friends from Oxford, he gets tense at the idea that they might mix with the posh boarding school lot . . . who'd reveal something about him as a younger man. And he can be slightly different selves with each set of friends, but if you mingle the sets, then you get caught out as the *Talented Mr. Ripley* sort of awful moment where you think, "Oh shit, I can't be both person A and person B." I think Bella's one of those people usually, and then on this one night, she becomes self-destructive and just thinks, "Fuck it, I'm just gonna invite all my friends" and "Oh look, there by chance is someone who I had an affair with. I'm gonna bring [him] over because I feel nihilistic tonight

because my dad is dying, and I should be with him. Any fuel I can throw on the bonfire, bring it on."

Marcia: I really think of Bella as being a control freak but also a big risk taker. She does bring this motley group together and knows that there's going to be some kind of conflict. With her past with Richard, it's clear that he still has feelings for her and everything and wants her for himself, but it's also clear that he uses underhanded complimenting, like [paraphrasing]: "You're too good for this job in PR. You should have gone to law school and become a lawyer because you're smart enough for it, and it's your fault that you gave up and why did you give up?" It's like he's goading her into saying, "Well, I'm just not good enough." It's that sort of underhanded compliment that we see with her father, too. I think that Richard and the dad are absolutely parallel. And I do think that you sort of seek out what you had in your past, whether it's a father figure or somebody who's going to treat you the same way that your family treated you. It's a real surprise when somebody ends up with somebody that's not like that. It might be healthier for them, I don't know, but yeah, I think that I see the play in terms of risk taking. Each time I've read it, I see another risk that Bella's taking. Like, "If I do this, then what's going to happen?" I see Richard as being very risk averse—he likes what's safe, even though he's a writer, which is a fairly risky thing to do. But it's a different kind of risk when you're throwing yourself into being a writer full time, and when you're doing it on the side, which Richard does. So I feel like he is more of a person who is interested in guarantees, and that Bella's more interested in risk taking and throwing herself out there and seeing what happens. I especially think that this could be supported by the scratch cards that Sandy brings in, so there's always this lottery and this chance of winning always going on throughout, once she finally enters the play. Could you respond to that? Do you think of Bella [as] being a risk taker?

Nina: Yeah, I do! I do like that, and I like the scratch card element to it. I think you're right that Richard is not really taking a risk as a writer because he's

hedging his bets with his barrister career and all that. And Bella, why does she take these risks? She's gambling this very night because she knows the dad could go at any moment, and it could be this night. And she's putting everything on red, like you say, she's sort of going, "Well, I'm going out this night that he really could leave the world. And I'm going to put two boyfriends [together] who didn't know that they existed in parallel. I'm going to put them at the same table, and let's see what happens." I think she does it because she's self-destructive, though. I mean I don't know what makes people gamblers. Are they self-destructive or what is it? I don't know. I haven't really got to know any gamblers really, really deeply. I think they are a bit, maybe, some of them thinking about it. I mean, there's Patrick Marber who wrote that play *Dealer's Choice*. I remember then he wrote this play called *Howard Katz*. *Closer* was his big hit, but *Howard Katz* was the fourth play he wrote, I think, and in that there's a character a bit like Mamet's Edmund who throws everything away. I always felt like there is something in the Patrick Marber [play] who as a gambler knows the desire to go, "I'm going to lose everything. I'm just going to do it and see what happens. I'm going to leave my wife. I'm going to leave my son. I'm going to buy a gun. I'm going to do all these things that are the wrong choice and see what happens." Part of the thrill of gambling is that it hurts when you lose, right? If there wasn't that, then there wouldn't be the thrill.

Marcia: Right. Well, Bella says a lot about how she doesn't want to get married and have kids because she says, "What's in it for me" right? And so that feels like she's thinking, "That's not a risk I want to take because it's not going to benefit me at all, when my model for marriage is my mom and dad, and my dad treated my mom like shit, so why would I want to take the risk of getting into that kind of relationship when it's not going to benefit me at all?" So I see Bella is willing to take risks and gamble when there's a possibility, even if it's a small one, of having a benefit to her, but she's not willing to commit to any kind of relationship because she doesn't see the benefit to her.

Nina: I suppose that that touches on this thing in the play that I want to—it's quite an important thing actually in this play—which is her attitude to women, because she is a woman who isn't sure if she likes women. Deep down doesn't know. Basically, when I was writing the play I thought what would be really interesting is to write [about] someone who seems to be the ultimate kind of power-to-women feminist—I'm not going to be [the patriarchal] ideal of a woman. I'm not going to follow in my mother's footsteps, who I feel was sort of hard done by and dominated and all that. I'm going to act like a man, and I'm going to blah, blah, blah. And then I thought the interesting reversal in the second half would be if she says, "My darkest fear is that women…." Having trumpeted about how women can be as good and better than men that her deepest fear would be that they can't. She's like a self-hating woman. That's why she comes out with this stuff in the second act, near the end of the play, which triggers then her admission about what is actually going on with her father. I thought this was such a big deal when I wrote it.

Marcia: Oh, I agree.

Nina: This is so taboo, so taboo. I've got a woman who's like set up as this absolute strong role model for women, I think, and then she pisses on it by the end of the play. She crumbles. I just thought it was so outrageous for a woman to stand up and say, [paraphrasing] "Where are all the famous women conductors, where are the famous female—where are the female Piccasos? You know. There just aren't as many as men, and why is that? Because they're just not as good." It's like such a big deal and what was weird was the reviews really didn't pick up on that. They picked up on, "Isn't it interesting we haven't seen this cast before on stage?" Little cast and this age. "Gosh, that's interesting, dialogue." "This is a new voice," blah, blah, lots of really nice things, but no one said, "This is a really thorny sort of thing to get aired."

Marcia: I have to admit that the first time I read [that part], I was horrified. I've kind of struggled with "is this a feminist play or isn't it?" I'm a Shakespearean,

but I taught a twentieth-century women playwrights class two years ago, and it changed everything for me as far as the way I look at drama. There are so many women playwrights that are fantastic and brilliant, and they are so completely overlooked. So I thought this class was a real opportunity to showcase women writers because they do get neglected so much. So when Bella says, "Why are all my favorite writers men? I don't have any women writers I like," I felt like, "You just haven't read the right women." I felt like I had been in that position before, too, and felt like drama was the area of, especially for me as a Shakespearean, an area for dead white men. And yet, when I started reading these women, they are just so astoundingly good.

But then, as I said, reading *Rabbit*, and Bella says, "Why aren't women writers my favorites?" And then Richard suggests George Eliot, which is so ironic because it's a woman writing as a man.

Nina: I know, I know.

Marcia: And I laughed and laughed, but it was really disturbing to me that Bella is so anti-women. But I also wondered if it was a comment about the complicity of women in their own oppression, and I feel like Sandy's response is evidence that that's true. She says, [paraphrasing] "Don't say that because there are just too many people waiting to agree with you." So do you think that women are complicit in their oppression? Do you see this as a feminist play?

Nina: I do see this as a feminist play, actually. Although I would sort of be scared about saying that and then being forced to argue what its thesis was because I don't know what side it comes down on. I just know that it airs it. I think that sometimes dialogue is the best way of contradicting yourself, so that's why Sandy has the counterargument, which is what spins round in your mind when you have these thoughts. It does worry me that I can't name a female composer, for instance. Let me think, yes, women have been sort of….I mean I do find it really extraordinary to think that women only got the vote recently.

That's just bizarre to me, and yet then, I see couples right now, and I see that they sort of....

I read this extraordinary book called *Living Dolls* by Natasha Walter, which was about how we agree from an early age to take gender roles, basically. You know what I mean? Like girls are quiet and neat and do the tidying, and boys are sort of bold and outrageous and whatever. I'm really generalizing, not going into the specific thing she's arguing, that she put forward, but that was the gist. It's something that worries me. So I thought in the play, what I should do is show the darkest fears, which is, "What if women are not as good as men?" and that's why this has happened. Not because we've been oppressed and we've had to do all the child rearing. What if, like, we don't have....What are the things that it takes to be a Mozart? And do we have it? Do we? We are different; we have different genitals. But what other ways are we maybe different that we can't quite quantify? And then that is such a scary thought. As a woman you don't want to be at a disadvantage at all. So you know, does that make it a feminist play or not? I don't know. I just think it's interesting to look at taboos. When I wrote it, that was 2006. Feminism is a lot more fashionable now actually than it was when I wrote it. It's funny how these things come in waves because now it's all the rage. And I have some friends who are—I'm thirty-eight—and I have some friends who are twenty-five—girls—and they are all so into like, "Well, I'm a feminist." No one said that when I was twenty-five.

Marcia: Yeah, I'm thirty-eight, too. I remember when I was in college, and I was at an all-female college. My friends and I felt a little squeamish about admitting being a feminist. It was like, "Is it a dirty word?" And does that make you a bitch or a lesbian? Does it mean you're never going to be able to find a husband?

Nina: Or does it mean that you have no sense of humor? Which is an association with it, I think.

Marcia: Yeah, like everything is so serious, and you're not allowed to do even the slightest bit of joking or flirtation because that would mean that you were betraying the cause somehow.

Nina: Yeah, well, it all seems to have loosened up so much and become rather fashionable. It's amazing how these things change. And who knows why exactly? I don't know. I'm not an anthropologist, but it's definitely changed. I directed this play called *Jumpy*. It's written by—do you know April de Angelis?

Marcia: No, I don't.

Nina: Okay, well maybe you should—I'd say look at her play *Jumpy*. It's about a 50-year-old mother and her teenage daughter not being able to get along. The mother is a Greenham Common feminist, and she's horrified by the fact that all her daughter is interested in is make up and having sex. She sort of thinks, "Did we do all that protesting for nothing? Does the younger generation just not care?" When I directed that, I remember thinking, "So... feminism is suddenly fashionable." I directed it at the Royal Court. The guy who was running it, Dominic Cooke, he has a real nose for what is "of the moment," and I remember thinking, "Feminism is having a real moment here," and I see it in this play. Yeah.

Marcia: I kind of wondered about the candle holder that does the twirling, and you can't tell if it's going clockwise or counterclockwise. I took that as a metaphor for—whether it's going forward or backward is almost too complicated to understand. Of course you know that it's going one way or another, but your eye is so tricked that suddenly you're just not sure what you believe anymore. You perception is almost untrustworthy. So do you feel like that could be a metaphor for the feminist cause in *Rabbit*?

Nina: It could. I think the way you describe it, yes, it absolutely could. I think when I wrote the candleholder, it was to do with seeding right at the heart of the play in this little stage image, this little decorative present that [Richard] bought [Bella], that time in the play goes backwards and forwards, and you can't quite

tell. I had in my head when I wrote it—do you know that story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*? It's a Tolstoy story. I really wanted to quote a passage at the beginning of the play—you know how you can have a quote at the beginning of the play? As a frontispiece. And my dad said, "Oh no, don't do that. That's just so pretentious," so I didn't. But in [*Ivan Ilyich*], when he's dying, Tolstoy describes it really brilliantly as like when a train pulls out of a station. You don't know at first whether you're moving backwards or the world's moving forwards. Your perceptions are upside down. It could be backwards or it could be forwards, and then [Ivan] realizes that it—it's sort of an image for what it's like to die and pass out of this world into the next. So I kind of had that in my head as well, so it was to do with the slippage of time and stuff, and it's kind of about how they can't analyze themselves any longer, these people in the play. They don't know if it's backwards or forwards. Is it right or wrong what they're doing? Should they be together? Should they be apart?

Marcia: And I really, really love the ending. It goes way back in time, where Bella's a child and seems to be frightened by this curtain, seeing something in a curtain. And the dad's explaining, [paraphrasing] "No, it's just a curtain, and there's nothing to be afraid of." It's the one really tender moment that we see in the play between Bella and her father, and that moment when he asks, "Do you want the door open or shut?" And something like, "Do you want me to leave the light on?" And then says good night to her. That's so touching to me. It seems like he's dying, and this is the way it's playing out in his mind. I thought that was a brilliant way to end it. Because the play has been so combative, you ask yourself why is there ambivalence about this relationship because he just seems like such an asshole? So I guess the question is—are we supposed to think of this as a really touching moment like reconciliation between the two of them?

Nina: Your perspective is meant to keep changing, and this changes it and shifts it right at the end once again, which, like you say, is because it's tender. So you see that you've had a very selective, edited version of Bella's life with her dad,

which is what she tells her friends and what we see played out. Then at the end you get something that's a different note to the rest. And also I think you know it's to do with the time winding right back to the very first of the memories before things got so difficult between them, when the dynamic was simpler, when he could just be her father and she could be his daughter. But the thing about the image at the end, that I think makes it work, is that you see it with the back catalogue of all the other things you've seen up to that point, and they shadow it; so you know, if you just played that scene, it could be quite saccharine. But because it comes with all the baggage of what's gone before, you know where they're going to go with their relationship and that makes it more poignant, I think. And also you know that he is going to die. I think that the memory is from when she's like five years old or something, so he's nowhere near getting his brain tumor then, but the face in the curtain is like the fear that we all have of death and of the shadowy things that even when you're five you know are in the world. And that has more plangency because of what we've seen before.

Marcia: Which is your favorite of these three plays?

Nina: Oh God, I mean, I love *Rabbit* because it was the first play I wrote, and my brother described it really well. It's like the first jumper you knit and the arms might be really long and weird, and there's a strange sort of neckline to it, that—it's really interesting what causes those things. And then your second play is better knitted but may be less arresting. But I think *Tribes* is the one with the most interesting elements in it. But like Patrick Marber said about *Howard Katz*, I kind of love *Tiger Country* because it's my sort of misshapen child that is harder to love or whatever. It didn't win prizes and things, but people really loved it who actually came and saw it.

So I think probably *Tribes* because you hope that you, as you write, that you get better and that's my latest play.

Marcia: Are you writing anything now?

Nina: Yeah, I am. I'm writing something now. Yeah, about halfway through, and it's just going very slowly—sort of chipping away. You look back and you think, "How the hell did I do it with the other ones?" And then you hopefully will end it again.

Marcia: Do you want your legacy to be as a writer or as a director?

Nina: As a writer. It's more immortal because of the words on the page, whereas the director, you know, where will it live? In the memories of people, I suppose, but it dies at the end of the run, doesn't it?

Marcia: Yeah, I wondered what you thought about your work as reading material because I think it reads just brilliantly. And in fact, rereading *Tribes* after having seen it, I feel like I missed so much in the theater, because it just goes by so fast.

Nina: Yeah, yeah.

Marcia: Of course, I read a lot of plays. It's what I do. But some plays read better than others, obviously. So do you think about it as reading material as you're writing it, or are you mainly focused on the stage?

Nina: No, you do think about it. I mean, I don't think, "Will people enjoy reading this?" But you are reading it as you're writing it. I read somewhere that Zadie Smith, when she wrote *White Teeth*, she had to reread from the beginning up to wherever she'd got up to before she could write any more each day, so it took her forever to write because she had read from the beginning each day to get herself into it. And I do that. I'm continually reading it, so if there's a line that I have a slight sense of depression when I get to it, or sort of dip in my happiness, then I kind of think, "No, this line is making me uncomfortable. There's something not right." That's what the reader is. It's not like watching an actor do it. So the toughest test is really, "Does it work on the page?" If it works on the page, you will finally get the actors to make it work unless they're not very good actors, but you can write a crap scene and actors can actually sort of camouflage it by their charisma and things. The toughest test is, "Does it work on the page," I

think. Although, having said that, there's one thing that I noticed with *Tribes*. When I first wrote it and thought, "Oh, I've written the perfect play, it's so brilliant," I was really pleased with it. And then we did a reading of it at the Royal Court before they agreed to put it on. And I realized that it was too much. It was too stuffed and it needed to be sleeker. What can read on the page as perfect can feel overwritten when actors read it aloud. It really is. Like if I read you something aloud, an email even, and if you read the email silently in your own head, it will read more quickly in your head than it will when you hear me reading it aloud. It's the physics of it, meaning that you can't get away with quite such density once someone's speaking it. So I have to sort of thin it out a bit.

Marcia: Yeah, I sort of feel the same thing with Shakespeare. There are some plays that actually feel a little heavy on stage that when you read them, they are phenomenal. Some of the best productions have really trimmed down important speeches that I would teach, but they make so much more sense on stage if they're streamlined. Do you know much Shakespeare?

Nina: Yeah, I did a degree in English, so I read nearly all of the plays. Some of them a little while ago now, but yeah, I love Shakespeare. It's funny because I was just thinking about *Othello* the other day. And I was thinking we don't often now have an Iago figure. We don't really believe in the devil any more. Well, we believe in evil, I suppose. We've got horror films and stuff, but in a play, I haven't seen an Iago character for so long—well, not one that worked in the same sort of way, and I thought, God, you know... there are things that you can steal from Shakespeare because it's not as obvious as stealing from a contemporary, you know?

Marcia: (Laughs) Right.

Nina: Yeah, he's so good. When, you see [the plays] on stage you realize how clever he's being. For instance in *Lear* when Gloucester is taken up [to Dover] by Edgar and he's blind. Edgar says, [paraphrasing] "Go on and jump off the cliff," and he describes the scene. And he says, "There's someone collecting samphire,"

and he paints it for us. Gloucester tries to jump, and of course, they're not at the edge of the cliff. But the thing is that when it was done, wherever it would have been done, at the Globe or wherever—that kind of place with no décor—the audience would be in the same position as Gloucester. They wouldn't know whether it actually was [a cliff]. In truth, is Shakespeare painting the scene with his words, and now he really is going to jump off the cliff? So we are sort of in the same position as the vulnerable person on stage. We don't know—are we about to jump off the cliff or not? We're blind. That's just so…. It's so modern in that. It's so clever. I love Shakespeare. I think he does stuff that one can take from him definitely.

Marcia: Yeah, I remember the first time I read *Lear* and that scene came up, and he tries to jump and doesn't die—I just burst into tears.

Nina: (Laughs)

Marcia: I just didn't know—I didn't know the play at all, so I didn't know it was going to happen. It shocked me. It was so amazing. I love that play. It's so bleak, but it's got some really funny parts, too. I just love it. But I was thinking about *Tiger Country* as being sort of large and epic, like Shakespeare's history plays almost, and the thing that I think is different about it—I know you said there was some anxiety about it, about being like something on a hospital TV show—but I think the thing that's really different about it is it's got female characters at the center, instead of male characters at the center. And there's that gender tension and feminism going on in it. Are there British TV shows that have females at the center like *Tiger Country*, or is that pretty different?

Nina: It's quite different. I think that they keep trying to sort of tap into that market, basically. I don't watch enough medical dramas on TV, but dramas, in general, they are endlessly trying to get interesting female protagonists. But the trouble is British TV is in such a mess. There's so many cooks boiling the broth, that it's really hard to hold on to the integrity of someone that might be an interesting character because people like to change things and make their own

imprint on it and something gets lost along the way. I remember trying to develop something [for television], and I had an idea that was quite like *Girls*, quite like the Leena Dunham thing. It was when I was that kind of age. It would just be these girls living in a house together, and it would be about how lost they are, trying to make their way in London with their careers and how their boss was. In the pilot, it was exactly like *Girls*, and they said, "Yeah, but we don't really know what the hook is." One of the girl's characters was a policewoman because a friend of mine is training to become a policewoman. She was hilarious—a really good character, and they said, "She's a policewomen, why don't you make them all policewomen?" I went, okay, all right. So I did, and then they said, "In fact, why don't you just write a thing about people who are training to join the police? And could we have a black guy as well? And could we have an Asian? And could we have a young mum? And could we have a guy who's been made redundant?" And suddenly, where are these interesting girls that I had? They aren't there. They become a part of an ensemble thing where it's like, can we get a black guy in because we need to be sort of Benetton advert about it, you know?

Marcia: Do you feel like you've got more freedom in the theatre?

Nina: Yeah, it's more immediate. You're more respected as a writer, so it gets around your stuff less. And so the characters are more or less as you drew them, if you're lucky.

Marcia: What would you think of your plays being adapted into movies?

Nina: I think that's fine because I could write the script. And I think some of them would make good films, like *Tribes*, you know. So I don't have a problem with that at all. I do think I've got to keep on writing new stuff though. I think that you get a bit like, "Oh now it's a film so that's going to keep me busy for another year or so." You can sort of lose fight.

Marcia: Did you do any acting?

Nina: No, I can't act. No, I'd get stage fright. I'm just far too nervous and self-conscious.

Marcia: How did your parents influence your writing? I know that your dad's a poet, and your mom's an academic, is that right?

Nina: Yeah, they're both academics, actually. My dad was a poet as well, is a poet as well as being an academic, but now they're both retired. They both taught at Oxford. My mom, interesting[ly], was a Shakespearean, and my dad, you know. I grew up with it all. I suppose what's lovely about them is that they considered writing as a career. I didn't have that stuff of like, "Oh get a sensible job." The other side to that is you don't want to disappoint. There's a horror of being bad at it when you've been allowed to have a go, you know? They also were good readers of stuff. My mum used to be really encouraging, and my dad's harsher possibly, although that's maybe changed around lately. I don't know why. I think my mum's become harsher, and my dad's more of an enthusiast. But they're both very good at being honest. And you know my brother [Moses] writes as well, so he's also great to talk to. It's good to have a family of writers.

Marcia: To get back to the feminism a bit—most the women in the plays are a bit anti-family and a bit anti-love. I'm thinking of mostly of Bella, Sandy, and Vashti, but also in *Tribes*, Sylvia doesn't stick with Billy through the end, too. I wondered, Is there room in the universe of these plays for long-term relationships?

Nina: I suppose so. It's just that it's more interesting when things are frying, isn't it? I think it's partly to do with what's interesting to watch on stage. And I suppose it's also about investigating your own fears and things. It's where the interest lies, so there probably is room for it; but I don't know how I'd make it interesting to watch.

Marcia: And then there's another detail question I wanted to ask. It seems that both *Tiger Country* and *Rabbit* are taking place close to Christmas. I think *Rabbit*—Bella says that she's a Sagittarius, so I think it's close to Christmas. And

then *Tiger Country*, they say something about not putting on carols, so I'm guessing it's close to Christmas. But in the time of the plays, are they supposed to be around the same time, or is this like maybe a year on for Emily?

Nina: Oh yeah, no, I think it's later on in Emily's life, definitely. I think it's like four years later or something. But it's interesting that there's this Christmas marker. Writing is a bit seasonal and when it's like the blazing heat of August, it's actually quite hard to sort of get any good writing done. It's usually when it gets crisp and cold—there's less desire to go outside and lie in the sun. That's when the writing starts to go better. That's when you're surrounded by Christmas carols and people. And it kind of seeps into the writing. I don't know what it is. Who knows?

Marcia: Do you have a time in mind for *Tribes*, too? I was trying to think if I noticed a time frame.

Nina: You know what? There's carols in that as well, so…yes, there is. But you see, I think with that play, it stretches out well over a month because mom and dad want to know if [Sylvia] can come to France with [them]. So I think that it goes over a summer, maybe, as well as a winter, but the winter is sort of when everything is about to go on with Billy and Sylvia and how things are seeming outside.

Marcia: At the end of the play in *Rabbit*, by that time, they've drunk an awful lot of liquor. Do you think that them being drunk heightens their honesty, or do you think that we have unreliable characters that we're listening to? How do you see the role of alcohol in that?

Nina: Oh God, that's interesting! I think that it becomes uncensored, and so the stuff that's usually packaged away and buttoned down comes out. But then the thing is, are you really that upset? Booze can make you more self-pitying, and I think that's where the unreliability comes in. It seems like they can't live with their lives as they are at the end of the play, and yet, they'll all get up tomorrow and they'll carry on. So I suppose that part of it is distorting, isn't it? But I think

what you're getting is the truth that is packed down. That's the emotional truth of what's going on underneath, by the end of the play.

Marcia: Did you write fiction or poetry in addition, or are you mainly just drawn to the stage?

Nina: I wrote some short stories, but it was really as a way to find my way into writing the plays.

Marcia: How did you get into writing plays?

Nina: Writing down little scraps of dialogue or conversations I overheard and stuff. Honestly, that's how it started.

Marcia: And once you finally had a full play, then you sent it out to a bunch of places, hoping for it to be picked up, or how did you go about it?

Nina: Well, the first thing I did was I got taken on by an agent as a director first. Then I gave him a little short thing that I wrote, and he took me on as a writer. Then I wrote a play, unsolicited—that was *Rabbit*. So it kind of happened like that. But I suppose I got helped by the fact that I had an agent behind me at the start.

Marcia: Well, Nina, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. It was really quite a delight.

Nina: Thank you! It was a real treat.

NOTES

[1] A teaser trailer, which shows the set of the San Paolo production, is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inVJo-zJAKw.

[2] Eric Lenate designed the set and directed the San Paolo production.

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Collaborative Examinations as a Feminist Pedagogical Strategy

JAY R. HOWARD

Introduction

As scholars strive to value work by and for women as authors, producers, and consumers of texts and artifacts, most often we focus on changing the subject matter of our research or the curricula in our courses to include a focus on women. We design and create courses about women that incorporate the work of female scholars. In addition we attempt to systematically integrate diverse perspectives and diverse authors into courses that are not focused exclusively on women in order to broaden the conversation and increase appreciation for women and their work. This focus on the content of our scholarship and our courses is a worthy endeavor. However, should efforts be limited to changing course content?

Amanda Coffey and Sara Delamont argue a feminist critique offers not only the potential for different content in courses but also alternative classroom practices (27). Therefore, they suggest that we should not only consider what counts as knowledge and continue to critique the current curricular practices; we also need to develop and practice feminist pedagogies. Given feminist values and commitments, how then should we teach feminist (or any) content? What are the appropriate pedagogical approaches in the classroom if we wish to value women's and other marginalized voices? What strategies for assessment of student learning are most appropriate in this context? How might we align our values with our classroom assessments? This study offers one example of an attempt to align feminist values with learning assessment strategies through a collaborative examination process.