

# Moisés Kaufman

## Stretching the Form

By Kristin Friedrich

In *Bengal Tiger*, reality comes and goes. There are scenes in which everyone is living and can generally agree on the physical circumstances around them. There are also scenes in which some of participants are non-living, and in one case, non-human, and there is great debate over what any circumstances, physical or spiritual, mean.

This kind of non-linear theatrical vocabulary — a convergence of journalistic, historical, fictional and fantastical elements — is one of *Bengal Tiger* director Moisés Kaufman's fortes. He has spoken in interviews about a theatre festival that he attended as a teenager in his hometown of Caracas, Venezuela. There, the work of Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Peter Brook and Pina Bausch proved that plays didn't have to emulate reality.

Kaufman has spent the years since that epiphany continuing the exploration of new theatrical forms. Sometimes that quest comes in the work itself, sometimes in the way the work is written. In the play and subsequent film *The Laramie Project*, Kaufman and his New York theatre company, the Tectonic Theater Project, moved into Laramie, Wyoming, four weeks after Matthew Shepard was murdered. They wanted to live among and observe the citizens, to employ a sort of theatrical journalism, and to create a play.

What was revealed could probably only have been revealed in that first-hand way. Crimes come and go in a big city without much more than a "how awful" headshake from most of us. Because of Laramie's small size, everyone was connected, by a degree or two, to both the victim and his murderers. Everyone, therefore, had to reckon with the tragedy. The interconnected world that makes for the setting of *The Laramie Project* felt like a lot of small towns — and the murder, by virtue of the town's familiarity, could have happened in a lot of places.

For the play *33 Variations*, Kaufman stretched traditional theatrical form again. He could not interact with Beethoven's contemporaries first hand. He could certainly weave in music, dancing, song and video, and move his setting from past to present.

Though he wrote and directed *The Laramie Project*, *33 Variations*, and *Gross Indecency: The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (which was seen at the Taper in 1998), Kaufman doesn't prefer to helm his own work continuously. "Writing and directing your own work is a very lonely experience," he says. "Directing somebody else's at least gives you another brain. I love both, but when I direct my work, then the next project should be somebody else's."

Healthy idea though it is, Kaufman is also notoriously selective about attaching himself to another playwright's work. "But Rajiv's was some of the best writing I've seen. He's wonderful at creating worlds that operate on their own internal logic. He takes a world that is part Quentin Tarantino and part Gabriel García Márquez and he makes it work. His voice is really, really unique in American theatre. You can't pass that up."

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Moisés Kaufman in rehearsal in 2009 at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

Kaufman didn’t. Like his previous work, *Bengal Tiger* explores the ways that theatre speaks as a medium. Kaufman says he felt right at home. “There’s a simpatico between Rajiv’s writing and mine, I think. Perhaps because I’m a Latino and magic realism is a part of me. Perhaps because I’m a Tarantino fan.”

“The important thing for me is to think about theatrical forms,” Moisés said at the American Theatre Wing’s Working in Theatre 2003 seminar. “Why is that we are still stuck in realism and naturalism? Those are 19th century forms. I think there is a great hunger for new forms. What is the thing that can happen in the theatre that doesn’t happen in television and film?”

In film and television you have a great portability – camera angles change, locations change, the film crew travels to far flung locations over months or years, and the footage is cut together. In the theatre an audience comes together in a single place and everything has to unfold in front of them in real time – any traveling through time or space has to take place through the artful use of sets, lighting, sound and pure imagination.

The *Bengal Tiger* set is enormous, but when Kaufman and his design team aren’t using it in its entirety, he carves out pockets with light. In these instances, we’re reminded of a strange pair of film and stage precedents — it’s the kind of light we have seen interrogations staged in; it’s also the kind of light in which visages tend to appear in dreams.

The tiger, no slouch at insightful thinking in life, and a downright philosopher after death, talks of some of the animals that died before him at the Baghdad Zoo. He’s particularly fixated on eight lions, his only competition in terms of mammal machismo, that got out of their cages and took flight down the streets of Baghdad “into the Great Wide Open.”

The lions were promptly killed. There is no Great Wide Open in this production — not in waking life, not in death, and not in the spaces between the two. These characters churn in the juices of their own flaws and hardships, and frankly, the churning doesn’t seem to stop after death. It’s magic realism at its most nihilistic, and still, somehow, it’s entertaining and unpredictably funny.

“What Rajiv has done, what I did with the staging, is mix truth and irony and wit with a great deal of humor,” Kaufman says. “I think the piece allows you to see some of our darker sides, some of the absurdities of our contemporary existence. It makes for an exciting night at the theatre — because you don’t go to theatre for a nice story where nothing happens.”

– Kristin Friedrich is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.