

just gimme that perfect score

New Georges presents **NONE OF THE ABOVE** by **Jenny Lyn Bader**, directed by **Julie Kramer**
with **Kel O'Neill** and **Alison Pill** – March 15 to April 5 at the Ohio Theatre

Jenny Lyn Bader talks with Susan Bernfield about comedy, collaboration—and what's really going on with the SAT.

Susan: Well, you and Julie have both been affiliated artists of New Georges almost from the start – we've done lots of your short pieces; Julie of course directed our sketch comedy group, Kinda Personal, for its 3 ½ year life; and the two of you collaborated in our Dawn Powell festival last year. Which makes this project really fun for me, as well as a great example of our mission and how it works. You and Julie have worked on, like, 13 projects together., but I can't actually remember: did you meet through New Georges?

Jenny Lyn: The first thing we worked on together, in 1996, was not a New Georges thing, but my play didn't have a director and the producer called you and said can you recommend somebody, and at that time Julie was directing the sketch group, but had mentioned to you that she was itching to do a play, so we met. And we got along instantly. She immediately understood the style, and the rhythm, and the quirkiness of my work. That my plays are like reality, but just two degrees off; y'know, they're just a little off. It's gotten to the point now where I would say Julie knows me better than I know myself. We sometimes find ourselves writing the same notes; in auditions for this play last week, I wrote under one actor "a little broad," and turned to see what Julie had written, and she'd written "a little broad." Or sometimes Julie just writes down what she knows will be my notes, after working with me so many times. So I feel like even if I don't go to rehearsal, I'm going to be represented in the room.

Susan: I love producing comedies, and encouraging women to write comedies...but this is a real live, unabashed romantic comedy, and we've never done anything like that before. I guess we've always thought we were too cool, or maybe there just aren't very many good ones around. Did you know from the start that that's what this play was going to be?

Jenny Lyn: I think the characters wanted it. I listened to them. I mean, **I love the whole history of happy endings**, I really love the classical comedies by Moliere, and the Shakespearean comedies where three sets of people get married. I think there's a strong tradition of plays where, if they're funny, the audience wants something really good in the end. I especially love the Shakespearean romances where if all is lost, magic and enchantment can help save you. But in terms of the flirtation between the characters, that was something I didn't anticipate, that was something that happened very organically between them in the writing of it. So I was planning for the play to be happy in terms of the main plot, but I didn't quite know just how happy it would be.

Susan: The play is about a girl who attends a private school in New York City, and her SAT tutor. You went to Dalton. Have you always wanted to send up your high school experience?

Jenny Lyn: When I started writing the play – well, I thought it was going to be a one-act, I imagined it as a shorter piece, but as I started writing it I began channeling my whole private school experience, and tapping into this world that I know. And then I realized – I think now, with distance and perspective – just how funny it is. 'Cause when you're in school, you think, that is the world. You don't think, what a funny world I'm inhabiting. For the record, I didn't personally have an SAT tutor, but through these 2 characters I invented I started finding expression for the kinds of zany activities I witnessed in my childhood.

Susan: And what's with the SAT? Most people just want to forget it, not write a play about it.

Jenny Lyn: First of all, I think the SAT is really kind of hilarious. I didn't realize quite how funny it was to other people 'till I started bringing scenes from this play to my writers' workshop, and I'd bring in a scene that'd say *isosceles triangle* and everyone would crack up.

The SAT has a whole domain of vocabulary, a whole world of language that brings people back to that time in their lives. I think not in a traumatic way, I hope not, in fact I think it brings them back in a way that makes them realize how irrelevant and ridiculous the test actually was.

So initially I just thought the SAT was funny. And then as I started writing I realized that the SAT is this entire system unto itself. And then I started becoming interested in the social corruption that is reflected by this test. Because originally the test was supposed to help democracy, it was supposed to show that some kid from a terrible school with a lousy curriculum could still excel on a basic test about reasoning and analysis. But instead of becoming an equalizer and measuring how much aptitude a kid has, it's become a measure of how much money the kid's parents spend on tutoring or prep courses. And there's so much focus on the test scores themselves, rather than on the subjects of the test. People don't necessarily remember any question that was on the SAT, but they remember their score. So there's this emphasis on the test score, and this emphasis on spending enough money to get this test score, and in both of those senses, the SAT reflects the materialism in our culture. It's just another example of how our values have been turned upside down. Obviously, we see materialism in the private school system, we see kids paying 5 figures to college consultants, we see kids taking kindergarten prep courses and applying early to kindergarten; we see accumulation in that world of a lot of *stuff*. But I think materialism is a lot more deep and sinister than the accumulation of objects or stuff. I think it's about the focus on status at the expense of nurturing the spirit, the soul.

The other reason the SAT intrigued me is that it's a great subject for a comedy. Because I think that comedy is based in truth, but it's also based in shared human experience. That's why, for example, political satire only works if citizens are following what's happening in politics. And the SAT is really a shared experience. Most people took the SAT, or at least most people who are coming to this play will have either taken it or be taking it, and be familiar with the world of standardized testing – which is not a realm of truth and knowledge and the spirit and all of the things that education was originally supposed to be about.

I also think the SAT affects the way we think. They recently talked about getting rid of analogies on the test. So there's this whole generation that has learned this analogical thinking, and what if it stops being on the test? How would we communicate with the new generation?