Baitz, Jon Robin (b. 1961)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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One of the foremost American playwrights working today, Jon Robin Baitz is the author of such highly praised plays as *The Substance of Fire*, *Three Hotels*, and *A Fair Country*. His works are generally regarded as both morally serious and politically conscious, with a focus on such themes as power, corruption, personal responsibility, and the enduring skirmishes between fathers and sons in Oedipal opposition.

Ben Brantley, chief theater critic for the *New York Times*, noted that Baitz "is without peer among his contemporaries in creating dialogue that spontaneously conveys a character's social context and moral limitations, not to mention a self-consciousness about both."

Characters both gay and straight, as well as those whose sexual identities blur all labels, populate his work. While his earlier plays often relegate homosexual characters to secondary roles, some of his more recent work, such as the play *The Paris Letter*, and the television drama *Brothers & Sisters*, which Baitz created and serves as executive producer, prominently feature gay male characters.

From 1990 to 2002, Baitz was in a widely-chronicled romantic partnership with the theater director Joe Mantello. In 1994, the *New York Times* dubbed the two men "the New York theater's couple of the moment." In a profile on the playwright, *The Advocate* observed that the couple's "star quality lent the aura of a gay Lunt and Fontanne."

Early Life

Jon Robin Baitz was born on November 4, 1961 in Los Angeles, California. His father, an executive in the foreign division of the Carnation Company, uprooted the family when Baitz was eight years old, moving first to Brazil for two years and then to Durban, South Africa for six years.

"All of the living overseas was a good preparation for being a playwright," Baitz explained in a 2007 interview for *Playbill*, "because it's all about being foreign, and about language, and not understanding the language. You sort of develop an outsider's ear. If you have a tendency to be a bit of an eavesdropper, that's a perfect cauldron for being a playwright."

His family eventually returned to Los Angeles, and Baitz spent his senior year at Beverly Hills High School, which he once characterized as a "particularly odious, class-conscious place."

Upon graduating, Baitz decided against entering college. "Being a student seemed unreal," he told the *New York Times*, "and going to college seemed evasive--a kind of sidestepping maneuver. I had lived a very passive life up till that point."

Instead, Baitz traveled throughout Europe and to Israel, and took odd jobs to support himself, such as short-order cook and tractor-trailer driver. In his early twenties he returned to Los Angeles, where he worked as an assistant to two film producers before finally settling down to write.

He chose writing plays, he explained, because he thought dialogue was "simply the easiest way for a young writer to manage a world, manage an event."

Early Work

His first play, the one-act *Mizlansky/Zilinsky*, was produced in Los Angeles in 1985. The play is a stern but affectionate morality tale about two film producers on the fringes of the movie industry. The production was well received, winning an *L.A. Weekly* Theater Award, which honors excellence in Los Angeles theaters.

He revisited the work in the late-1990s, expanding it into a full-length two-act play, which he renamed *Mizlansky/Zilinsky, or "Schmucks."* It was produced in New York in 1998, under the direction of Baitz's then-partner Joe Mantello, and starred Nathan Lane and Lewis J. Stadlen. In the revised version, Baitz created several new characters, including a young, gay assistant named Paul Trecker.

In 1987, Baitz's first full-length play, *The Film Society*, was produced in Los Angeles. Baitz drew upon his experiences as a teenager in Durban for the play, which looks at apartheid through the eyes of the white staff of a conservative South African prep school.

Baitz has described his own response to apartheid as a moral failure. "When one is confronted with such day-to-day evil, it should be very clear how to respond," he explained in an interview. "And yet I found myself lacking--found myself, my peers, my parents, my parents' friends, the world lacking."

The play's protagonist, Jonathon Balton, a weak-willed teacher and head of the school's film society, uses the extracurricular group as an escape from the brutal political realities around him.

The play received enthusiastic reviews and Baitz was frequently compared by critics to such politically responsive playwrights as Simon Gray and Athol Fugard.

The success of the play in Los Angeles led to a New York Off-Broadway production in 1988 starring Nathan Lane. It received a nomination later that year for a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play.

His next play, *Dutch Landscape*, a semi-autobiographical portrait of an American family living abroad, premiered in Los Angeles in 1989, but was regarded by most critics as a failure.

Baitz rebounded, however, with his next production, *The Substance of Fire*, which opened Off-Broadway in 1991 to generally ecstatic reviews. The play examines the deterioration of an imperious and once-influential publisher as he battles with his three children, one of whom is gay, for control of the family's failing publishing firm.

Writing in the *New York Times*, critic Frank Rich found the work "deeply compassionate," written "with both scrupulous investigative zeal and bottomless sympathy." Rich further asserted that "line by line, insight by insight, scene by scene, [Baitz's] writing is already so articulate, witty and true that it's only a matter of time before his theatrical know-how, some of which must come with experience, catches up with his talent."

The award-winning production was directed by Daniel Sullivan, with Ron Rifkin, in a "career-transforming performance," as the embattled father and Sarah Jessica Parker as his sensitive daughter.

Rifkin and Parker reprised their stage roles, joining Tony Goldwyn and Timothy Hutton among others, for the 1996 film adaptation of *The Substance of Fire*, also directed by Sullivan, with a screenplay by Baitz.

Baitz and Rifkin have gone on to forge a strong theatrical alliance. Rifkin starred in the 1993 New York production of Baitz's *Three Hotels*; he appeared in the 2002 Boston production of *Ten Unknowns*; and starred in *The Paris Letter*, first in Los Angeles in 2004 and then a year later in New York. In 2006, Rifkin took a recurring role on the Baitz-created television series *Brothers & Sisters* as a middle-aged man struggling with his homosexuality.

Three Hotels is told in the form of alternating monologues by two characters--Kenneth Hoyle, a ruthless businessman facing a moral crisis, and his embittered wife Barbara. The play was originally produced in 1991 for the PBS-Television series *American Playhouse*, with Baitz himself directing. He won a Humanitas Award, which honors excellence in television and film writing, for the production.

Baitz later revised and expanded the play for its 1993 New York premiere, directed by Joe Mantello. Reviewing the production for *Time*, William A. Henry III, announced that "with these speeches, Jon Robin Baitz vaults into the top rank of U.S. dramatists."

Recent Work

Ten Unknowns (2001) concentrates on Malcolm Raphelson (portrayed by Donald Sutherland in the original New York production), a hard-drinking, underappreciated artist who is on the verge of being rediscovered. He is visited by, and enjoys sparring with, Trevor, an art dealer eager to revive the aging artist's career for his own gains, and Trevor's lover Judd, a talented, although cynical and self-doubting painter, who inspires Raphelson toward a new burst of creativity.

The Paris Letter (2004) is concerned with, as Baitz has described the play, "the survivors, the benefactors, and the victims of a sexual revolution." The work focuses on the tortured affection between two middle-age gay men: Anton, who has been open and honest about his sexuality, and Sandy, an old friend and briefly a lover, who has lived in self-denial, choosing a more normative, heterosexual life, a decision that ultimately engenders his self-destruction.

Charles Isherwood, writing for the *New York Times*, found the play "intriguingly expansive in its dramatic scope and ambition," and noted that Baitz "is always most interesting, and most effortlessly articulate, when he is tracing the interlocking grooves of psychology and morality."

Baitz's most recent play, *Chinese Friends* (2004), is set in the year 2030 and imagines disastrous consequences for an environmentally devastated and politically impotent United States.

Other Works

Other works by Baitz include *The End of the Day* (1992), a bleak but comically wry account of an opportunistic doctor running a public clinic whose patients are dying, mostly of AIDS.

A Fair Country (1996), a reworking of material that initially appeared in *Dutch Landscape*, focuses on an affluent American family trying to make emotional and moral sense of their lives in South Africa. Baitz was one of three finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for his play.

Baitz collaborated with the writer Terrence McNally on the play *House*, which was first presented in 1998. He also wrote a new adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, which premiered in 1999 in Los Angeles, starring Annette Bening. Additionally, he has written several one-act plays, often to raise money for charitable events, including *Coq au Vin* (1994), *Show People* (2002), and *My Beautiful Goddamn City* (2004).

Baitz has also written episodes for such popular television series as *Alias* and *The West Wing*. He co-scripted, with Howard A. Rodman, the teleplay *The Frightening Frammis*, which was broadcast in 1993 as part of the anthology television series *Fallen Angels*, and directed by the actor Tom Cruise.

Baitz wrote the screenplay for the 2002 film *People I Know*, a satire on fame directed by Daniel Algrant and starring Al Pacino as a once-high-powered publicist.

Baitz is also the creator and executive producer of the television drama *Brothers & Sisters*, which debuted in 2006. The hour-long show, which has received enthusiastic reviews and a strong following, centers on a politically diverse California family and prominently features an out gay lawyer and his life partner.

As an actor, Baitz has appeared in Henry Jaglom's *Last Summer in the Hamptons* (1995) as a successful, young gay playwright; as Michelle Pfeiffer's assistant in the romantic comedy *One Fine Day* (1996), also starring George Clooney; and again in Jaglom's 2006 film, *Hollywood Dreams*.

He is the recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation Award, as well as fellowships from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Baitz currently resides in New York City.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.