

Lincoln Center Theater's Platform series presents conversations with artists working at LCT before an audience of interested theatergoers. Admission is free and open to all. Platforms are held in the lobby of the Vivian Beaumont Theater. The following is a transcript, edited for clarity, of the March 28, 2007 Platform with Christopher Shinn Platform:

Christopher Shinn  
Platform Series  
March 28, 2007  
Interviewer: John Guare

JG: I'm John Guare, and this is the wonderful Christopher Shinn. (Applause)

Chris has written a beautiful, impressive play. I don't want to be a spoiler, but how many people here today are going to see *Dying City* tonight? And how many people have seen it already? Ah, lots. Good.

CS: Nice.

JG: I'll try not to spoil it for you. (Laughter) This play has got some of the best reviews of the last few years. John Heilperin said in *The Observer* ... I hate to quote critics but sometimes when they get it right ... *Dying City's* the finest new American play I've seen in a long while. It's a political play, and a psychodrama, about what Arthur Miller called the politics of the soul. It's about public conscience, and private grief, and real and symbolic catastrophes."

Yes, *The New York Times* said, "Anyone who doubts that Mr. Shinn, author of *Four* and *Where Do We Live?* is among the most provocative and probing of American playwrights today, need only experience the creepy, sophisticated welding of form and content that is *Dying City* ... first produced at the Royal Court Theater in London last year. Anyone who has followed the career of Mr. Shinn, who is in his early 30s ... 32! That's the earliest of 30s! (Laughter) ... knows that he uses ..." well, anyway, that's enough out of Mr. Brantley. (Laughter) But anyway, it's all good.

We know that it's a play about twins. Identical twins. Why twins? Did you ever start writing and say "I want to write about two brothers, one gay brother, one straight brother who goes off to war, and the woman that he leaves behind ..."

CS: No, I always wanted it to be twins. I think because it's theatrical, it's exciting, it's cheaper. (Laughter) But also I think I wanted to say something about loss. Because when you experience the loss of someone ... I think the psyche, once we lose someone close to us, every new person that we approach, in a way, I think resembles the person that mattered most to us, that we lost. And using the same actor is a way of sort of making concrete that idea. So we're watching in the play, she's dealing with the loss of her husband, with somebody who looks just like him. That's a particular thing. So I think that was a big motivation for me to make that ...

JG: One of the reviews said it's about the dualistic nature of American society today. I wasn't sure what that meant. But did the twins do it? It was an extraordinary use of Jon Stewart reporting the war on *The Daily Show*. What is the nature today of the difference between the reality of the war and the way we perceive war or even deal with it. Is that the duality?

CS: I didn't think about the twins in terms of dualism, or two cities, or two ... I didn't think of them as symbolic in that way. I really thought about loss. What does it mean to lose someone? And then what would it be like if the person you lost returned in a different way and a different form.

JG: Was that the gestation of the play?

CS: I think that was a big part of it. The play's a lot about loss, there's a lot of death in it. And how do you grieve? And how do you represent grief on stage? That's something that's occupied me for a long time. I lost my dad five years ago, and ...

JG: Were you friends? Were you close?

CS: We were close, yeah. We had a complicated relationship, but we were close. And grief, I think, is one of the hardest things to dramatize. *Long Day's Journey into Night* does a good job of dramatizing it, although

it's an anticipated grief, there's the grief of the dead child that haunts the whole family, but also the future deaths that seem very close. And *Hamlet* is a great play about grief, and wanting to do something when you lose someone. He's lost his father, and he's occupied with this question of "What do I do?" And Shakespeare's very smart to create a sort of revenge story, and a very active plot. And so I was thinking a lot about grief, how do you represent it?

So this idea that this woman's quasi-grieved, and then suddenly the person she's tried to grieve, or hasn't truly grieved, returns, but it's sort of a different version of the person. That I thought was a particularly powerful theatrical idea. So I think that was the reason I made them twins.

JG: But both the brothers seemed to be grieving over something that results in some kind of self-loathing. What is the basis of their self-loathing?

CS: I think that's the big question that the play doesn't answer. One question I wondered about when I was writing the play was, why are we going to war? Is it for the sort of crass reasons that we all now about? Political reasons? But is there something deeper? Is there a kind of aggression that's just part of human life and we'll never be rid of it? Obviously if you look at human history, you see a lot of war and a lot of death and a lot of destruction. So I think I was curious about that. Is there a way to overcome the aggression that seems to be part of the human race? Or is war something that we actually have to learn to live with? Do we have to learn to think about that as something that will never go away, that's just who we are?

So in the play, the two brothers act in very destructive ways. And there's lots of hints about the etiology of their behavior. They had a dad who went to Vietnam, and was traumatized by that war. Their parents had a rather troubled marriage. You know, they were pushed very hard to move beyond their social class. There are things you could point to and say, well, there are these sort of contingent traumas, that that if they hadn't had a dad who went to Vietnam, or their parents had a better marriage, maybe they wouldn't be so destructive.

But I wanted to keep that dialectic alive, that well, maybe actually, you know, it's something deeper. It's something about human nature itself. There's something so primitive and violent and dark within us, that can never be overcome. That to me seemed to be what a lot of the great ancient Greek plays have to say: it's just who we are.

JG: The first time I ever became aware of you was in your play *Four*. The psychic violence in that play is rather striking. I thought you were a British playwright for the longest time. (Laughter)

CS: Mm-hm.

JG: Where were you educated?

CS: I'm a public school kid from right outside of Hartford, Connecticut. And I went to NYU. Studied dramatic writing.

JG: As an undergraduate.

CS: As an undergraduate. And then...

JG: Was that a good program? Was that a good experience?

CS: I was ignored. My work was ignored by the department. And so I was so convinced I was not going to have a career as a playwright because I couldn't even get a little reading in a class of 30 people. So I went to Columbia to study fiction writing. "Well, I'll write a novel."

JG: After you graduated.

CS: After I graduated. I said "Okay, I'll go to grad school, write a novel, maybe I can become a novelist!" And in the meantime, the Royal Court Theater in London called me, and said "We love your play *Four*, we're going to do it."

JG: A play that you wrote as an undergraduate.

CS: I wrote it when I was 20 as a junior at NYU. And I submitted it to my...remember, this was a tiny

program. The whole grad and undergrad program is 120 kids. And for two years I submitted that play to various readings, festivals. Nothing! Rejection. Both years. I said, "I know this is a good play!"

JG: You knew it! (Laughter)

CS: Oh, God! Come on! This is really good!

JG: But that's a real gift.

CS: Yes.

JG: Because a lot of young people, a lot of young writers ask me "Is my play any good?" And that's why teaching writing is dangerous. It's almost a Fascist state where you control people's futures.

CS: Yes.

JG: It is some extraordinary gift that you have of writing a play that you knew was good, and you couldn't even get a reading of it at NYU, and you still knew that it was good! That you didn't lose faith in it.

CS: Yes.

JG: What does that come from?

JG: That's a really good question. I just knew. "This is really good!" I saw what was out there. I was convinced I had written a really good play.

JG: Did you ever have a reading of it?

CS: We did a little reading in my living room with friends. And I thought, "This is special. This play is really special."

JG: You said it again. You could turn into a madman.

CS: Yeah. You could think you're crazy. But I thought "I'm not crazy." So I sent the play to lots of theaters in London. In fact, what I did was I made tons of copies of all my plays at that time, put them in a bag, got on a plane, went to London, and I mailed them from the post office in London. I found a book with all the addresses of the theaters. And I did it there. So I went to London just to send my plays around.

JG: Had you sent them to American theaters?

CS: I sent them to every theater in America, every major theater, and they all rejected me. That made me very angry. Because again, I knew . I was an avid theater-goer. From the time I got to NYU, I was always at the TKTS booth, from my first week in New York, August 1993. I was seeing everything. I went to see everything.

JG: What did you like? What touched you? What excited you?

CS: Back then? I haven't thought of those years... *Angels in America* was a big play for me. And *The Kentucky Cycle* was a big play. I know a lot of people don't like that.

JG: By Robert Schenkkan.

CS: Yes, I thought it was a very moving play. What else did I like? It was more what I didn't like which motivated me.

JG: What didn't you like? I think it's very true, that you write to destroy what it is we're seeing on stage.

CS: That's a big reason I was writing, certainly.

JG: Can you say what you didn't like?...

CS: I remember more later...well, you know why I sent my play to the Royal Court? Because a couple of

plays that they had brought over around that time, *Shopping and Fucking* by Mark Ravenhill, and *Beauty Queen of Leenane* by Martin McDonagh -- I thought my plays were better. And I thought, they're in this world... I saw I could belong in this world, but I'm different, and I think I'm better. And in fact, this is really cheeky, but when I wrote the cover letter to the Royal Court, I believe I even said what I just said to you. That I thought my play fit into what I had seen of their work in New York ...

JG: And was better?

CS: And was better.

JG: You said that?

CS: I did say that. I was (Laughter) ... I wouldn't say that again. I wouldn't do that again. I don't know why I said that. I think I was so frustrated, so angry. I felt so silenced and rejected by the theaters in New York, by the NYU Program that I was becoming quite aggressive, and a bit grandiose.

JG: That string of unsolved murders? Do you have any connection to ...

CS: Might be me. (Laughter) You know, the grandiosity...part of being a writer is you're grandiose enough to think "I have something to say and I'm going to say it" ... so when no one reflects your grandiosity, whenever they reject you, you kind of become more grandiose (Laughs) because you're compensating for the world's silence. So I think at that time I was becoming more and more full of myself, because I needed to. I needed to believe in myself, believe that what I felt...

JG: Did you have a day job? How did you survive?

CS: After grad school I temped. I worked in a little coffee shop in the meat packing district. Got up 4:30 in the morning, get there, open up the store, for the drag queens and the prostitutes. And I temped for Pfizer for a long time. So I did little things like that.

JG: There was one whom I admire - the appropriately named Francine Prose who said you were terrific.

CS: She's a fiction writer. I took her fiction class. That was a big deal to me. That's one reason I went to Columbia. So all the playwriting teachers were ignoring me. Nobody was doing my plays.

JG: Who were they? CS: I can't come out and say. Nobody's even heard of them actually. I could say their names and you wouldn't know. But Francine Prose ... a wonderful novelist ... she came into our playwriting program, and taught a little fiction class. She called me into her office, and she said, "So you're going to do this?" I said, "What?" She said, "Well, you're a writer. Are you going to be ... Are you going to do it? Because you are one!" And that meant the world to me. Really. To have a real writer say "You are a writer." To validate me in that way. I had been longing for that, waiting for that, hoping for that. And here was somebody saying it. The only problem was she was a novelist. So what do I do? So she encouraged me, she said go you know ... go to Columbia, go to Iowa, be a fiction writer. So that's what I did. This is the one person who was giving me good feedback.

JG: Francine's a neighbor of mine and I asked her if she had seen Christopher Shinn's play because he had said how her words had given him enough juice to go on! And she said, "I remember that day vividly that I read his stuff for the first time, and I called him into my office. That doesn't happen every semester. It doesn't happen every couple of weeks. It happens only a few times in your career." And she said, "Chris is one of those rare ones."

CS: That's nice.

JG: Yes. It's amazing how writers need so little, one drop, to build a world on. Now here comes the part where you became an English playwright in my mind. (Laughter)

CS: I had my first play produced in 1998. In London. My first play in 1998 in London, and that's when my career began. And my second play was there also. And I got good reviews, and they accepted me right away into the theater community there.

JG: Did you live there? Did you settle there?

CS: No, I didn't. People always said, "Well, why didn't you move there? Did you think about it?" I loved America. I think I'm an American. And I love my country. I wanted my work to be done in my country, I wanted to be a writer in America. So it was weird to me to be over there. I mean I liked it, it was great. But I was waiting to...

JG: Did you have an agent at this time?

CS: I got an agent after I had my first play in London.

JG: In London.

CS: Mm-hm.

JG: And did that Royal Court experience make it easier to have *Four* done in America?

CS: Not really. No. We ended up doing it Off-Off-Broadway at a now defunct theater called the Worth Street Theater. And that was the only place that would do it. Even after, Michael Billington said it was the best new play of the year. David Bennett from *The Independence* said it was the debut of the year. We could not get it on in New York. So a guy named Jeff Cohen and Carol Feinman, the former Public Theater press rep, they said "We'll do it in our little theater." And I think I got \$750 to do it there. The good thing about doing it there was Carol Feinman being the press rep at the Public, knew the critics. So she got Brantley in to see it there, he gave it a good review. And then we got to move it to Manhattan Theater Club. But even with those good reviews from London, no major non-profit theater in New York would touch my play. Which is another good lesson. You know, that even if you have the London validation and good reviews, even that sometimes is not enough to spark things in New York. So it was still a struggle after that for awhile.

JG: And you were then 22?

CS: 23 when we did it in London. And then when we did it here, 25 and 26, when we did it Off-Off-Broadway, right before 9/11.

JG: Did any of those ... present company excluded ... did any of those companies tell you why they turned the play down?

CS: No, they were all form letters, all the rejections. I have them somewhere. I kept them all. There was one ... Playwrights Horizons wrote a personalized rejection, which was actually very nice. It was very thoughtful. Even that meant a lot to me at the time, to have someone who had actually read it, and they wrote something coherent about it. Gave me incredible hope to continue.

JG: You have really got the soul of a playwright. You've got the things you can't teach. People say "How do you teach playwriting?" Well, these are the things you can't teach. It's that in the face of every reason not to, you still keep on going.

CS: Keep going.

JG: In *Dying City* you invoke William Faulkner. Talk about Faulkner, and what he means to you, and why Faulkner?

CS: I really like Faulkner. We read The Sound and the Fury my senior year of high school. I remember thinking oh, my God, this is the real thing. This is really amazing. And particularly the Quentin chapter, leading to the suicide, which at that time had a profound effect on me. And I think I identified with Quentin. And I don't want to give too much away, but in my play there's a reason, of all the Faulkner novels, to choose The Sound and the Fury. There's a character who goes to Harvard who may or may not have committed suicide in Iraq. And so I think there's a resonance with the Quentin chapter of The Sound and the Fury. But Faulkner, I think, was one of the great American novelists, if not the greatest. And was somebody just that I admired and respected.

JG: What playwrights were you admiring when you started. I mean you wanted to write not novels but plays.

CS: I did want to write plays. From the time that I...

JG: Why? Had your parents taken you to see plays?

CS: My mother had taken me to Hartford Stage, from the time I was very little. I had seen like *Moon for the Misbegotten* when I'm ten years old, and falling asleep. But even then, I still thought it was really cool to see it. And she kept taking me. She had grown up very poor in Brooklyn, and her step mother wouldn't let her be in school plays. And she was determined to give me the childhood she hadn't had, to give me access to the arts, so she took me to Broadway musicals, but serious plays too. So I was going to Hartford Stage and seeing Shakespeare and O'Neill and stuff, from the time I was really little. I didn't understand it, but I loved the theatricality. I thought it was so cool. And then as I got older, I actually began to understand the content of what was in the plays, and I found it tremendously exciting.

And I found all the usual ... like Eugene O'Neill I thought was really amazing. I remember reading *Long Day's Journey into Night* for the first time. And I couldn't believe it. I couldn't breathe at the end of it. And I thought this is really unbelievable. This is special. The ways that plays are condensed. Not like a novel that goes on and on and on. But that so much life can be in a play, in just two or three or four hours or 90 minutes.

JG: Have you written your family play yet?

CS: I haven't. No, I haven't. I think you've got to be older. You've got to wait. You've got to wait until some people die as well. (Laughter)

JG: Really?

CS: I think so. My mother wouldn't want me to write the family play right now.

JG: Is she very happy? She must be very, very moved and pleased.

CS: I think she is. She's pleased. She's a little...she can be very critical still, but she's also proud of me, yes.

JG: Halfway through seeing your play *On the Mountain* at Playwright's Horizons I realized, even though it was about rock and roll, that this is Henry James! This is inspired by The Aspern Papers. Was that the first time that you had invoked the spirit of a novelist, of another writer in your work?

CS: I think that is the first time. There are a lot of playwrights I really love and admire. But there's a kind of consciousness in a novel that is really special. And so something about the feeling I think I had reading Faulkner, and reading Henry James...it produces a certain kind of feeling that I think I wanted to carry over, particularly in *On the Mountain* ... bringing The Aspern Papers into a theatrical space, and trying to carry on the power of what I'd felt when I read it, into the theater.

JG: It was just a beautiful play. I wanted to ask you about directing your own work. Because you directed *Where Do We Live?* so well

CS: Thank you.

JG: - why didn't you direct *Dying City*? I'm very glad that James Macdonald did it. He did a brilliant job. But why didn't you?

CS: I would have loved to have directed it. James did a great job in London.

JG: How did you work in London? You sent him the play?

CS: Yes, I had known him...he had seen all my plays there...so I knew him. And he would always call me when he came to town.

JG: For you in the audience, James MacDonald is the director who did Caryl Churchill's *A Number* at New York Theater Workshop last season with Sam Shepherd, and who did Sara Kane's *448 Psychosis*.

CS: Yes. He's a great director. The Royal Court hooked us up together and said, "Why doesn't James do this one?" And I was very pleased about that, because I really liked him as a person, and I liked his work. So we did it in London, and it went very well.

JG: What kind of work did you do on the play in London?

CS: We did very little work. I mean, when the Royal Court said they were doing it, I got a couple of notes from Ian Rickson, the artistic director, and a couple of notes from James. Very simple.

JG: Like what?

CS: Well, James said to me he'd like to see in the next draft a little more distinction between the twins. To explore how they were different. He thought they were a bit too similar. That was just a very simple thought that I could go through my head then as I re-wrote it. The kind of note that they tend to give, they're very suggestive, rather than giving suggestions, they are suggestive.

JG: That's very key ...

CS: Just things that are in the back of your head. And then Ian Rickson had a question about how I integrated the *Law and Order* references and John Stewart stuff. He felt it could be just a bit better integrated into the action of the play. So that was something I thought about then when I re-wrote it.

JG: What's your next play?

CS: I don't have one. There are so many different things I want to do. Write a new play. I'd love to direct.

JG: On your Website ... on MySpace you can bring up Christopher Shinn ...

CS: Yes.

JG: Is that you singing?

CS: It's not me singing. It's my friend David Turner. We're writing a musical together. So we're in process, on a full length original, non-adaptation musical. Which I'm very proud and excited about continuing to work on. So that's something that's very far along, I think.

JG: You do have another show. That is your new show.

CS: Yes. Exactly. It's not a play. It's a musical. But I had a play ... I thought about writing a play about the election. 2008. I don't know, it's weird to write about topical things, and it becomes a bit of a guessing game. Will the play seem too far away from what actually ends up happening and all that? So I don't know if I'm going to write that. And now you know, I get to have a lot of movie meetings. You get good reviews, and the movie people come knocking. And I would like to ... I've wanted to work in film, I wanted to direct movies for a long time also.

JG: Did you see *Lives of Others*?

CS: I did see it.

JG: Did you love it?

CS: I thought it was too positive in the end. I loved it till...

JG: (Laughs) CS: I didn't believe an agent would have that kind of change of heart that easily, personally. I didn't find that totally convincing. Did you like it?

JG: Yeah, I thought it was about the best movie I've seen in about 10 years.

CS: Wow.

JG: But anyway, let's have questions from the audience. (Laughter)

M: Was *Other People* at Playwrights Horizons your first major New York show?

CS: That was my first New York production. And we did that first at the Royal Court in London. And then we did it upstairs at Playwrights Horizons. That was my first play. But I don't even think that of that as a real ... *The New York Times* never even came to review it. So I never even think of that as a real play in a way.

Because nobody...you saw it, but nobody else saw it. (Laughter)

M: Yes, but I mean Playwrights Horizons - That's a pretty prominent theater.

CS: It's a prominent theater. But if the major paper that covers theater doesn't come it doesn't feel like much of a ... it never got a review.

M: Wow!

CS: That's why if we do it again in New York it can be the American premiere.

JG: This woman asks – you've talked about the lack of professional response to your early work. what about the personal response to your work, and how did you deal with that?

CS: Do you mean like my fellow students? Colleagues? I had a couple of special friends who believed in my work. And they were the people that really kept me going. They said, "No, this is important, you have a good project here, you've got to continue on." When I would despair. Because I would. I don't want to make it seem like I was all confidence, and grandiosity. I had moments where I thought well, this is not going to happen, so just better give it up. And they would be the ones who'd say, "No, no, no!"

JG: What did you do for your spirit when you were in those dark places?

CS: Smoke cigarettes. (Laughter) I quit July 2002. So when you get more successful as a playwright, you can...all those things you do to cover up your feelings of despair. You can start giving them up one by one. (Laughter)

JG: This woman would like to know how long did it take you to write *Dying City*?

CS: It really took me about two years from really, really seriously thinking about it, to the final production draft in London.

JG: Yes, sir?

M: Is the play different play in production here than it was in London?

CS: Sure, it's very different. I think there's a transgressive thrill for English audiences to see an American writing a play that is critical about America.

JG: I just wanted to ask you ...Do American TV shows like *Law and Order* and Jon Stewart have any resonance at all in London?

CS: They've just begun to get Jon Stewart. They all know about *Law and Order*. And they just now know who Jon Stewart is. I think there's a certain transgressive thrill the audience feels. Here's an American writing a play that's critical of America, and we're watching it on a foreign shore. That's exciting in a way that is not a transgressive thing here. Here there's more of a sadness, I sense, in the audience. More of a sense of mourning, of lost opportunities that we feel as Americans ... whereas there it was "Oh, here's an American, he's actually sane! That's good to know they still have them." That was a big difference.

Also in London we had a big proscenium. In a proscenium, it's like you guys watching us. You all sort of see the same picture. Whereas in the round, here at the Newhouse, everyone has a different picture. So whereas it was a much more sort of voyeuristic experience, the audience kind of looking in on this world and this marriage, here it's much more public. The actors are really sort of in the center, but where you can see the audience all around. You know you're in a theater, you know you're amongst your fellow citizens in your community. It's a much more public feeling that completely changes the play.

JG: When did the idea of having the stage make the slow revolve?

M: Well, I think what we felt was, here ... the Newhouse is a thrust ... we built it in the round ... but it lives as a thrust. Now if we were going to put the couch in a place where everybody could see what's happening on the couch, it would have to be really far upstage. And that means towards the back of the stage. So that would mean that if you were in those center sections, the couch would be so far away. Well, you're not going to be able to see what's really going on. So, how do we bring the couch closest to everybody? Well, we put it

in the center of the stage. But if we put it in the center, then some people are facing the back of the couch. What do we do now? So, we'll put seats all the way around, and then we'll have the stage do a 360 degree turn over the course of the 90 minutes, so that brings the couch closest to every single audience member. So that was why we put it on a revolve. We wanted everyone to have a chance to see what was happening. What we didn't know, in London, most of the play took place on the couch. And we knew we'd have to sort of re-imagine the staging, and poeticize it and lift it up out of its naturalism a little bit. But we knew that a lot of it, when push came to shove, was going to happen on and around that couch. So we wanted to bring the couch to as many people as possible.

JG: I teach at Yale, and one of my students had seen it in London, and then saw it here at the Newhouse. And she said it was much sadder here. It was a much larger experience here than in London, and she had loved it in both places. Another question? Yes, sir?

M: Was it the same design team in London? CS: There was a different designer. They were both English. But Anthony Ward designed the sets here. And it was Peter Mumford, a famous lighting designer, who has now become a set designer, who did it in London.

JG: Yes, Ma'am?

W: What does the title of the play refer to?

CS: The title of the play, *Dying City* ... why I called it that? I wanted to give the play a name that no one could mistake what they were going to see. The first word is "dying" ... so you don't think it's going to be a lighthearted entertainment. You don't think "Oh, this will be an easy one." I wanted the audience to be ready for a really serious drama. And I thought well, what better way to do that than to give them a title that they know what they're walking into. They can prepare themselves to enter the space of the play.

JG: And which city is the dying city?

CS: I always thought of it as New York. I mean it makes reference in the play to Baghdad. But we're watching somebody moving out of New York City in this play. She's leaving. I remember right after 9/11, somebody said, "Are you going to stay in New York?" And I said, "Of course I am." But I thought well, what if enough bad things happen that people did start leaving?

JG: Where is she going to go to?

CS: She's going to Ann Arbor, Michigan.

JG: But I mean is she going to go there ? I mean you believe she'll go there but ...

CS: I think she will go there. She'll go there and hide away for awhile.

JG: Yes, sir? This gentleman would like to know what part the playwright plays in the selection of the actors?

CS: You have final say over who the actors are. And you know, hopefully if it's a positive collaboration, there'll be overlap, and there'll be agreement. So the director and I, we both sort of have final say. And we have to agree. And in this case, we both agreed.

JG: That's one of the strengths of the Dramatist's Guild. The organization that protects the interests of more than 6,000 playwrights, lyricists and composers in America and Great Britain. Because nothing can be put on that stage without the playwright's permission. So the playwright can forfeit that. But it's so thrilling when the playwright and director are in synchronicity ...

CS: Yes.

JG: ... about the cast. Yes? Any other questions? Yes, sir?

M: Why does Peter bring the hard copies of the e-mails with him when he comes to the apartment? It seemed like an old fashioned, Ibsen-esque theatrical device.

CS: Yeah. The rationalization Peter offers in the play is that when he's preparing to go on for *Long Day's Journey into Night* ... to get into the mood of that play, he reads them in his dressing room. So he wouldn't

have his computer there. So he printed them out, so he could read them. That's what he says. But I think he also wants to unconsciously perhaps ... he wants to bring them to her, and this is the only way he could do that, if he has hard copies of them.

JG: Why did that trouble you? You didn't think he brought them with him to wound her in some way?

CS: It is a little bit of a device. But a lot of Ibsen ... Ibsen's probably my all time favorite playwright. And it is a sort of homage ... I mean there are little post-modern touches in this play. And I've always loved how Ibsen just does his thing. Somebody comes on with the papers ... whatever it is ... you were right to feel it was a bit antiquated. I wanted it to be. And Peter's an actor.

M: How many plays are you working on at a time?

CS: Just one. I couldn't do more than one at a time. I don't know how people do it. I can only keep one. It haunts me. It's the thing in my psyche. It's the only thing. So I don't know, I could never do two at once.

JG: There's so much novelistic detail in the play. I love the density of your details, the specificity of it. Does that come from your work at Columbia writing fiction? Experimenting with being a novelist? You've taken a little ... you haven't lost that identity fully?

CS: I love how condensed plays are. I think it's one of the most exciting things about a play -- it takes place in 90 minutes, or 120 minutes, whatever it is. I wanted to see with this play how much can I pack into a play? How much detail? How much back story? And still keep it moving forward, still keep it dramatic and active and going the way plays need to go. So that it could be a play that you could go to a second time, a third time, a fourth time, the way you can go to a work of great literature and read it again and again, because there's always more that you missed. There's always more detail, there's more connections that you start to draw.

JG: How long did it take you to find the structure of the play? The alternating of the scenes?

CS: That happened intuitively from the beginning.

JG: The play seems to function on a musical level.

CS: Yes, I hear it. I hear the rhythm so clearly. I hear the whole thing and want...and that's one thing about writing plays. You can imagine the whole thing in your head. You can hold it all in your head at once, like it's a single gesture. A book is so big. You know? I could go through, if I was going to start writing that day, I could hear the whole rhythm of what I'd written up to that point, and then begin. So I love having ... I can contain it all in me, and sort of have a sense of how the rhythms are going to work all the way through, like a symphony or something.

JG: Do you play any instruments?

CS: No. I mean I sang a lot. I studied music as a kid, but I don't play anything.

JG: This woman wants to know did Christopher see the two brothers as being very, very close, and the woman separated the two? That she came between them?

CS: Sure. I think the later relationship is the less secure one. Because it comes later than the kind of primal connection of brothers, and twins in particular. So powerful. And on the eve of going to war, that older, more primitive relationship, becomes more important to Craig. And his wife Kelly can see this, and it becomes incredibly frightening that she's seeing a man that she's never really known before.

JG: Have you seen *Journey's End*?

CS: I did see *Journey's End*.

JG: I just loved it. Did you like it?

CS: It's really good. I think the first act is amazing. I think the second act the writing isn't as good. Because the love triangle I think is the most interesting, powerful part of that play, because it's all about this guy who's worried about going back to his girl, and what the war's going to do to him. And maybe I liked it the most,

better than the second act, because it's so much like my play, where it's so much about what is this war going to do? How am I going to return to this marriage after I go through this experience? And in my play, he knows even before he goes to war, that he's not going to be able to return to it. And I was amazed that 80 years ago, this amazing writer wrote a play about the same exact thing. About how do we return? Once we experience violence? How do we go back to civilization?

JG: It's a real gift today. It's one of the brilliance of this great theater season that we're having. The way that the two plays ... the way that *Journey's End* ends with sort of a love affair with war. In love with war. And the way we deal with war. But they're both equally bleak, about the horror of what we're going through. So when I saw *Journey's End* ... I just saw it the other night ... and I just said, "Oh!" It just amplified ... it was amplified by my having seen *Dying City*.

CS: I felt the same way. Yes.

JG: One more question. This woman wearing a salmon colored sweater wants to know if Christopher saw *The Coast of Utopia*?

CS: I saw Part 2 of *The Coast of Utopia*.

W: What did you think?

CS: I thought Tom Stoppard's a conservative, reactionary writer, who doesn't believe in political progress. To me the play seemed to be a very effective and entertaining, incredibly well acted, and well produced, rationalization for his very reactionary political beliefs.

M: Why haven't you seen the other two parts?

CS: I was so busy with my play, I didn't get to go. But I'd like to go see that. He didn't come to see my play, so I don't have to go see his. (Laughter)

JG: That's right. Okay. Is there another question from ... okay, you started it off, you can ask the last question.

M: Who do you write for? When you write, do you write for yourself? Do you actually have an audience in mind? It can't be a Broadway audience.

CS: I've written every play I've ever written with the hope that it would be on Broadway, and the conviction it should be. And another way of saying that, I think of every play that I write as being for America. I love this country, and I want to be a part of the dialogue about the country. And that's why I think of Broadway – it's the top in this country. It's where the height of the theater is, on Broadway. So that's where I want to be. I want to be a part of the national dialogue about who we are as a people, and where we're headed.

JG: Thank you very, very much for coming this afternoon. (Applause)

CS: Thank you.

JG: Don't forget, benefit Broadway Cares, Equity Fights AIDS ... copies are for sale, autographed copies of this wonderful play. And thank you all for coming. And thank you, Chris.