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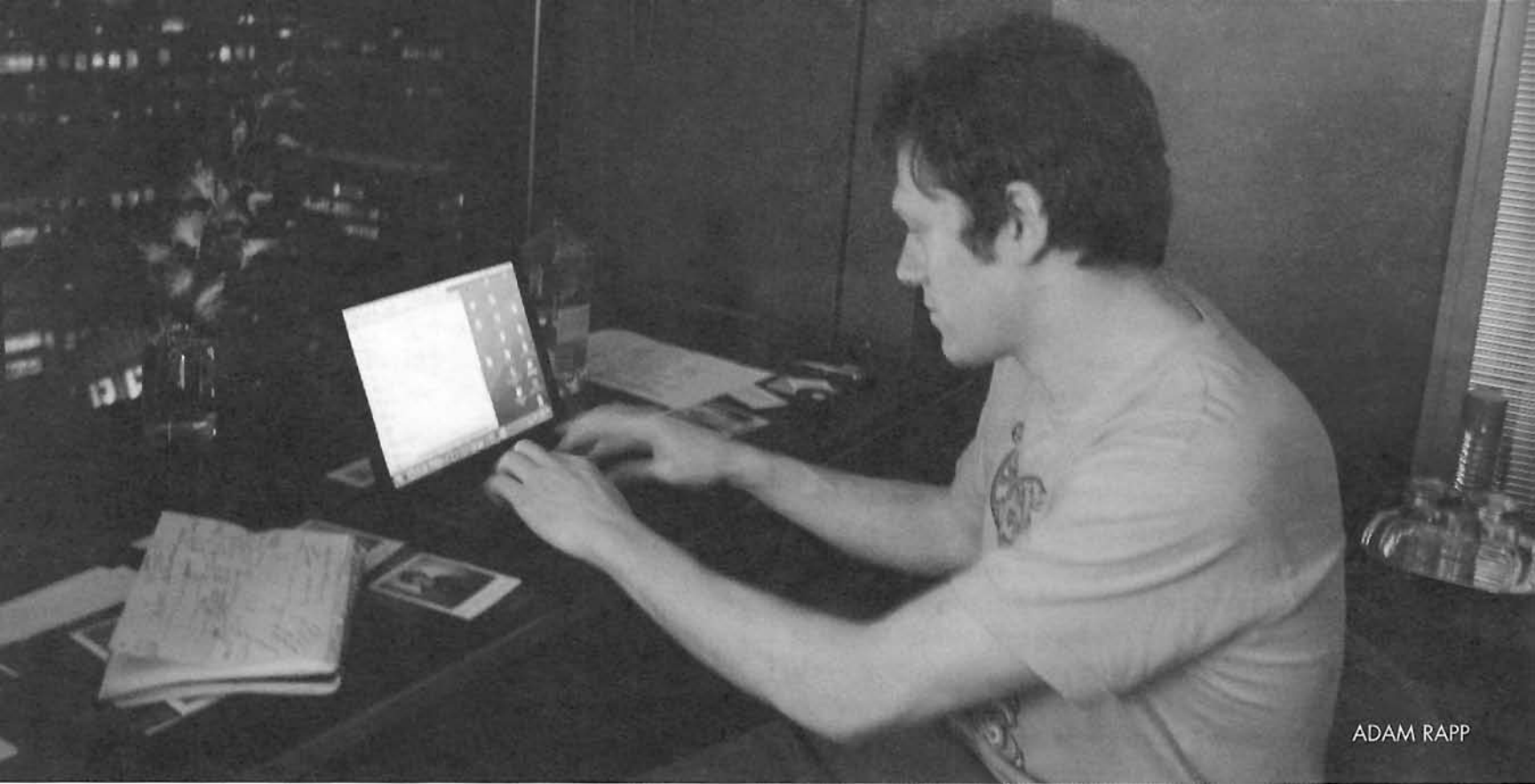
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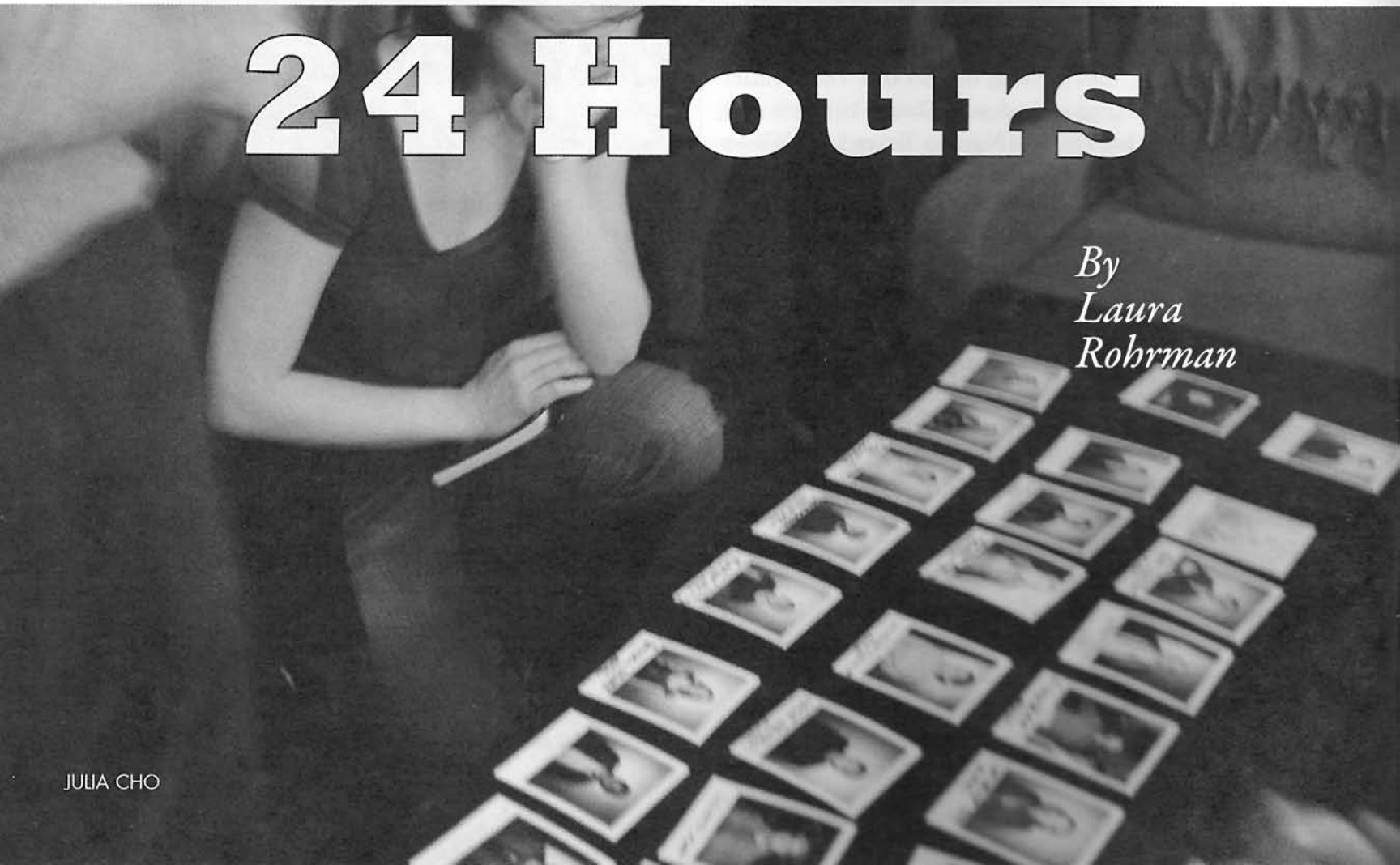


ADAM RAPP

making a play ready  
for **BROADWAY** in

# 24 Hours

*By  
Laura  
Rohrman*



**I** started off very content in my hotel room with my desk, my coffee, my warm lap blanket. It was one of the nicest hotel rooms I'd ever been in. I thought: "Ten pages? No problem." Ah, hubris. As the hours passed at an alarmingly fast rate and my attempts to find a play fizzled, I started to panic. I had woken up that day before dawn to catch the plane to New York and had arrived around three or four in the afternoon. I then went to the 24-Hour Play meeting at nine and started to write around midnight. I was exhausted and fighting hard not to fall asleep. I just became so tired that I couldn't focus. I called the producer, Tina, for help. She was great. She calmed me down, patted my hand soothingly and asked if I had seen the Red Bull in the hotel minibar. It was like she had offered me a ray of hope. After she left, I opened the door to the fridge, and I remember seeing the Red Bull on the top shelf. It was bathed in divine light and I swear, I heard angels singing. I drank it down—the first one I'd ever had—and my mind cleared and I wrote the play."

- Julia Cho

**F**or the past ten years, superstars of the acting, writing, and directing world have come together for a great cause and participated in the 24 Hour Plays on Broadway, which benefits Working Playground, a not for profit organization providing vital arts programs that help young people in underserved schools. To date, the group has raised upwards of two million dollars for their cause. This amazing celeb-fest has been run by genius producers Tina Fallon and Kevin Chinok since 1996 when it began at a black-box theater in Greenwich Village. It's come a long way since its humble beginnings when the producers were scribes, and the actors mostly unknowns. Nowadays it's a badge of honor for a writer to be asked to participate – and the stage is a little bigger, it's Broadway.

The ticket price, address, and accommodations may have changed, but the creative process of the 24 Hour Plays is still just what it sounds like – plays that are created and performed in 24 hours. Celebrity or no celebrity, Pulitzer winner or not – putting on a Broadway show in less than 24 hours is both thrilling and terrifying at the same time.

The whole gang of writers, actors, directors, press agents, producers, and assistants meet up at nine the night before to do a meet and greet. Many of the actors bring props (a wet suit, a hooded jacket, a tape recorder, a stuffed bunny and many more.) Then, the writers and producers meet in a suite at the W Hotel

in Times Square (the sponsors for the last several years) where the intense casting session takes place with posturing and Polaroids, and off the writers go with six hours and counting to create something fantastic for those actors to say and do.

The writers, luminaries of their field – such as David Lindsay-Abaire, David Ives, Tina Howe, Terrence McNally, and Theresa Rebeck – acted like "writers," hunkered down, and got to work at around eleven. At six the next morning, the sleep-deprived scribes turned in their scripts. At nine, the producers met with the directors who then blindly (names removed) chose the pieces they were to work on. Shortly thereafter, the actors, directors, and assistant directors began working on the scripts. Exactly 23.5 hours after it all began, a Broadway show was performed to a packed house!

Some of the writers like Warren Leight, David Lindsay-Abaire, and Julia Jordan, had done the 24 Hour Plays before; Tina Howe had never moved her computer out of her house; while newcomer Mike Lew was just thrilled to be there. Then there was Eisa Davis who had to choose her actors and write remotely. Playwrights Adam Bock, Adam Rapp, Tina Howe, Theresa Rebeck, David Lindsay-Abaire, Mike Lew, Julia Jordan, Elisa Davis, and Julia Cho have shed some light on what this grueling but exhilarating process was like for them. Once the hotel door shut, here's what really happened.

**LAURA ROHRMAN:** For us New Yorkers it's a rare treat to be up on the 46<sup>th</sup> floor looking over our city of lights. What was it like staying up all night in an unfamiliar place with such a daunting task ahead?

**JULIA JORDAN:** Normally, at home, I work on the kitchen table alternating between a glass of wine or other alcoholic beverage and a cup of coffee at night. During the day, solid tea.

**ADAM RAPP:** I thought writing in the W Hotel was weird. In general I don't like writing in hotels, it feels like a science fiction experiment. Normally I write at my kitchen table, in bed, or in my home office which is where I am supposed to write. The kitchen table helps because it's lodged in a corner and it gives me no alternative but to do it. And I like being in a corner, because I have to write out of it, I guess.

**DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE:** It was a lovely room, and the snack collection was superb, but I'm very much a creature of habit, and used to working in my space at home. So it's difficult for me to get comfortable and write anywhere that isn't the corner of my office with my special chair and collection of wind-up toys.

**EISA DAVIS:** I wish I spent the night in the W! I was in Berkeley, seeing my play *Bulrushes* before it closed, so I did everything remotely. I was actually working in my childhood room at my mom's, in the very place where I wrote plays and short stories growing up. I always start writing longhand. I like to sit on the floor too—it literally grounds me. Then when I

type it into the computer I'm already rewriting and gaining perspective. I wrote on my Mac in bed (shameless product placement), and sent in the script by email. They had said they were giving all the writers a free night at the W as swag, but I never got a certificate, nothing! So I missed out twice.

**MIKE LEW:** Writing at the W was certainly a surreal treat. But the pressure of staying up all night forced me to ignore the incongruousness of being a pauper in a posh hotel. I don't know that the setting affected my process one way or another, but here was my process: I spent a lot of time pondering what to do with that specific set and that specific cast. I would leave the hotel and sort of pace around Midtown fretting until three in the morning. I tend to work out the play in my head before ever setting pen to paper, and that process can take up hours of precious writing time. But the upshot is that the writing itself can be accomplished quickly. After returning from my wanderings I was able to throw myself into writing until the very deadline - actually, maybe a bit past the deadline.

**LR:** Was this experience different from writing other ten minute plays?

**THERESA REBECK:** Well, normally when someone asks you to write a ten minute play you don't have to do it in the middle of the night. Honestly I find writing a play at four in the morning to be excruciating. I sometimes kick out a ten-minute play for one of those Naked Angels Issues Projects; HB Studios used to have a ten minute play festival and I would write for them as well. I've only done this 24 Hour thing twice: the first time I did one that was held at the Atlantic and I had to write a play in the middle of the night in a dressing room, where there were all those little round light bulbs glaring in my face all night.

**TINA HOWE:** My particular experience with the 2006 24 Hour Play Festival was so extraordinary, I can't begin to tell you, but I was dragged into it, kicking and screaming — KICKING AND SCREAMING! I'm Queen of Rewrites. Plays don't emerge from my desk perfectly formed. I spend months on the one scene, tear it up, proceed to the next and tear that up... and so on. It's a grueling, self-lacerating process, but because one of the other 24 hour playwrights dropped out at the last minute, the powers that be begged me to come on board, and I mean, begged! They called me four times before I finally gave in.

**DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE:** This was my fourth time doing the event, and I guess it was a little less harrowing than previous years. I mean, it's ALWAYS terrifying, but the first couple times the terror was as much about the unknown - the rules, the protocol, the celebrities, the enormous theater - as it was about the writing. Now that I've done it a few times and generally know what to expect, the terror is purely about writing a play in six hours.

**LR:** Is it different writing for celebrity actors?

**MIKE LEW:** Whenever I write a new play, I like to write with specific actors in mind. I get inspired by certain actors and want to tell stories around them, to highlight what I appreciate in their acting and to stretch them a bit from what I've seen them do before. This entails a long study of an actor's body of work. I felt enormously privileged to be working with my cast, but even if I'd seen a lot of their screen work I had no idea what interested them as actors - how they liked to work, the kinds of roles that moved them, the way my lines would sound on them. Really this was no different than if I'd been asked to work with actors I'd never met before - it wasn't a function of celebrity so much as a function of knowing an actor through and through. So I just went with something that I thought they'd have fun working on, tried to write as specifically for them as I could, and tried to go with their impulses (and my director Peter Ellenstein's) when it came to elaborations or cuts. David Cross requested some trims to my jokes that I immediately recognized as better than the lines as written - little tucks that improved the flow and created stronger buttons for jokes.

**ADAM BOCK:** I loved working with Jennifer Aniston. She was great. That's one of the incredible things about working with the 24 Hour Plays (and Musicals) - the actors are wildly talented and bold. That night I was writing for Lynn Whitfield, David Cross, Rosie Perez and Jennifer - it was intimidating at three in the morning - but I could imagine them doing anything I came up with.

**THERESA REBECK:** I don't know that it is different, writing for celebrity actors.

We're all kind of in this crazy environment together—where I have to write the play fast, and they have to learn it fast—so it's more or less an equalizing force. And I'm used to writing for specific actors, I do it all the time because I work with a lot of the same actors in the theatre so I know how to fit a character onto a specific performer. I will say that when Chris Rock showed up I said no way am I writing for him; he's too great an individual genius, in my book, for me to attempt to put words around that. I did choose Gaby Hoffman and Kristin Johnston because we've known each other for a long time and always wanted to work together, and I know their voices, so in that way I made my job easier for myself. Also I picked a couple of other actors because I've seen a lot of their work and I knew what the instrument was, to some degree.

**ADAM RAPP:** Writing for celebrities was fun. I knew Sam Rockwell a bit and had wanted to work with him. And the others were just fun to try something out on.

**LR:** When writing in such a short amount of time are there any familiar roads or techniques that have helped you in the past?

**THERESA REBECK:** Well I will say this, I tend to be the playwright who is going, "come on come on let's get going," by around eleven pm. Everyone else is sort of moseying around and probably



JULIA CHO

letting ideas gestate or something but I know that if I don't start writing fast I will be in big trouble. I kind of hit the wall around four in the morning, and then my brain starts to completely shut down. I know I better have a full little draft by then, so I have to get started putting words on the page FAST. So if I have a "trick" that would be it. Start writing earlier rather than later.

**DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE:** The only remotely similar event I've done was New Dramatists' Nocturnal Commissions. It's a benefit they hold every year where playwrights and songwriters are auctioned off. The writer is ushered into a room with their highest bidder who tells them what kind of play he or she wants. The writer then has 40 minutes or so to whip something up, and it's performed later that night by actors on book. The 24 Hour Plays was a walk in the park by comparison. One Nocturnal Commissions, Andrew Lippa and I had to write a song for the bidders' upcoming wedding. I don't imagine it made it into the actual ceremony, but it got a lot of laughs that night.

**LR: Do you find it difficult to tell a story in ten minutes?**

**ADAM BOCK:** A ten minute play overnight is like a sprint - you can't really think, you have to move, you gotta jump, and just go for it. The difficulty is remembering to show the story instead of telling it; how do you find ten minutes of action, ten minutes of life - some peak moment that represents a bigger story.

**THERESA REBECK:** I actually don't find it difficult to tell a story in ten minutes; there are plenty of stories that are meant

to be told in a flash. For me it's all about finding the nugget of the idea, and then letting it tell itself in ten minutes. When you're writing a play overnight, the nugget has to come quickly or you're screwed. The other thing that is really hard is when you're writing a ten minute play for more than two or three actors. It's extremely difficult for me to get the shape of the play sort of rounded and sturdy when you have that many psychologies bouncing around the stage.

**ADAM RAPP:** I don't like the ten minute format, it's like sacking groceries or something.

**JULIA CHO:** I love writing short plays. They're like sprints instead of marathons. I find I'm able to focus on one theme or one idea and take it from beginning to end. It's enormously satisfying.

**LR: I watched many of you getting settled into the act of writing; what is this process for you? Is there any advice you can give to writers to help get them started?**

**MIKE LEW:** Writing for the 24 is kind of like my longer work in microcosm, because I will often spend a year or more actively mulling over a full-length before I begin to write. For the 24, I will similarly spend hours just thinking, trying to hear the actors' voices and trying to explain why these people would be in this particular setting. But once you have a good instinct, you have to just go with it because otherwise you'll run out of time. You should also use the response (and the acting talents) of the producers and PAs who faithfully stay up all night checking up on



TINA  
HOWE

you. If Tina Fallon likes it, so will the world. If the PAs laugh as they read it aloud, it will be fun for the actors to work on it.

**JULIA JORDAN:** I really concentrate on a beginning, middle, and end in a short play. I think it's the difference between a play and a sketch. The play begins with the first hat and the reveal of the second brought it to a close, full circle. It didn't happen instantly. I had the human dynamic already but I wanted something to signal that Hope and Hugh belonged together. With less than ten minutes, symbolic was the way to go and the two funny hats were there. I remem-

bered them because it was odd two separate actors had brought in such similar props. It connected those two in my mind so I just transposed the idea to Hope and Hugh.

**EISA DAVIS:** It always takes time to drop in. Maybe that's all younger writers need to know—to be patient and let themselves alone for long enough so the play can show up.

**JULIA CHO:** I like to have a large, empty desk and quiet. And a deadline also helps; fear is a great motivator. But starting is not always easy; I spend a lot of time staring at the wall. I heard a story once about how Hemingway would psych himself into going to his writing room by saying, "I'm only going to sharpen a few pencils..." I think that's a pretty good trick. Whatever can help you get out of your head—your bill-paying, worrying, what-am-I-going-to-do-for-dinner head—is great.

**LR:** For many, the set was a determining factor in what they wrote. The 2006 event took place on the set of *Heartbreak House*. It featured an imposing staircase, a vintage organ, and felt like an old Dracula movie. In 2007 the set of another Shaw, *Pygmalion*, hosted the event. It seemed that many of the plays were written based on certain givens: the stage, the actors' limitations or strengths, the props, etc. Was there anything that made your play for you?

**JULIA JORDAN:** The things that determined or affected my play were: Lili Taylor was very pregnant, Hugh Dancy had a throat op and couldn't speak a line. A few years ago I had Sam Rockwell and he couldn't speak either, so I think the three-character, one non speaking role is becoming my specialty. But the

speaking actors tend to shoot daggers from scared and angry eyes in my direction when they start counting lines. But so far they have always gotten through it like absolute aces. Hope Davis and Lili Taylor this time. Fisher Stevens (with crib notes on his hands) and Maria Bello last time.

**TINA HOWE:** It was the set that did it for me! One look at the fake pipe organ in the corner of that turn of the century *Heartbreak House* drawing room and I had my play! Having been offered a strolling accordion player as well as two sound cues made it a no brainer!

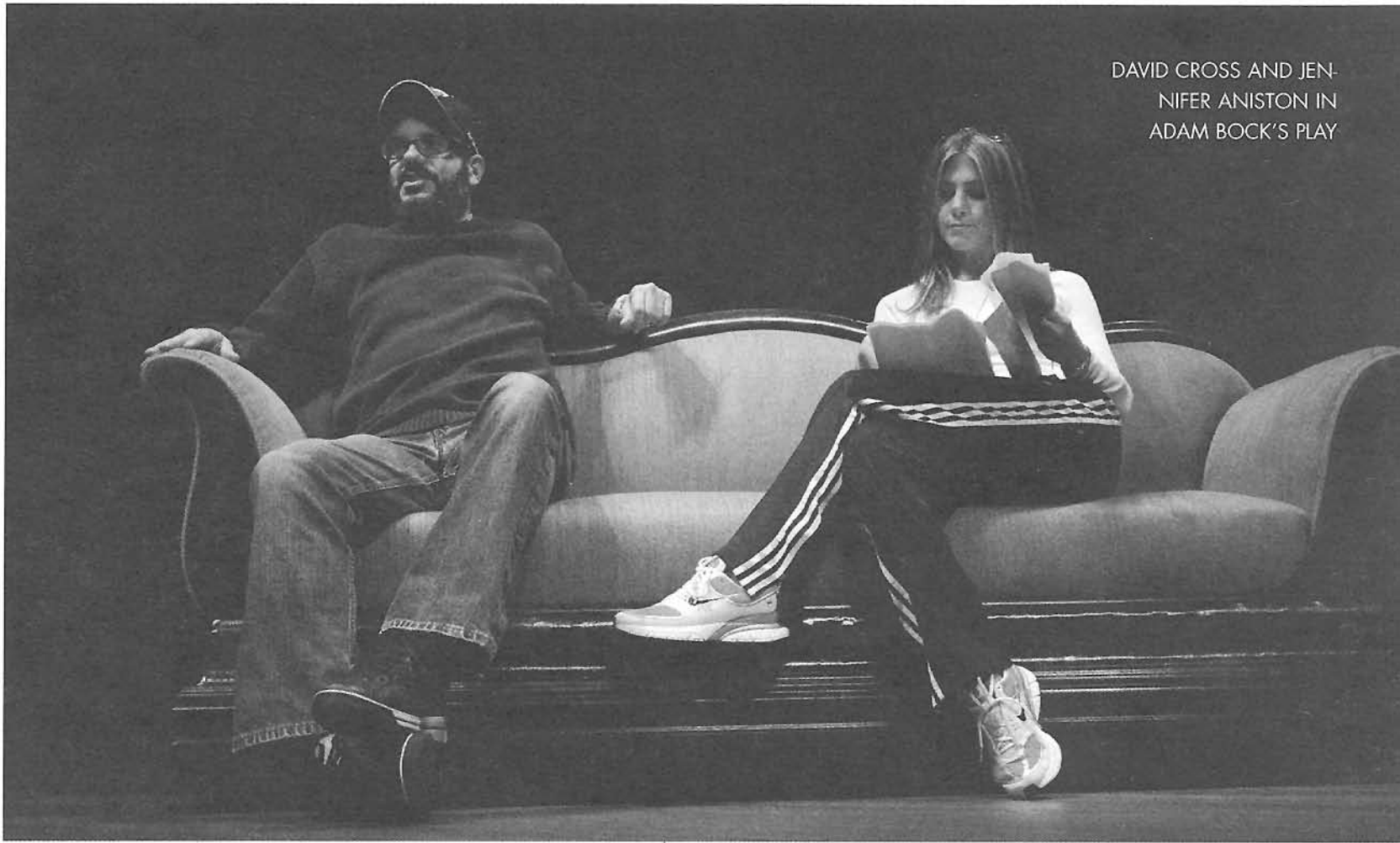
A great organist was in the grip of such paralyzing stage fright, he hadn't performed in 20 years. All I had to do was plot his recovery so the play could end with him pounding out Bach's thunderous Toccata and Fugue in D minor. I just prayed no one else had gotten the same idea.

When I got first pick of the wildly talented actors, I was cool as a cucumber because I knew exactly who could pull it off—Wally Shawn, fellow playwright and friend. What with John Linnell, the strolling accordion player, gorgeous Elizabeth Berkley-Lauren and Catherine Tate on board, the play was virtually written by the time the elevator whisked me up to the 26th floor.

**THERESA REBECK:** With the 24 Hour Plays I focus really intensely on the set that they're giving us to work on. The specificity of the set seems to release that part of my brain that has stories to tell. They always have people bring in those props and I think I can't work with a prop, props do nothing for me. But sets do a lot. I must have some big visualization thing going on—that when I can see what kind of action might fill that space, then a story emerges from that. And then, as I said, I grab up actors I feel an instinct for.

**MIKE LEW:** There is a certain magic to developing a totally ephemeral piece of theater that is built from the ground up as a 24 Hour Play. The audience appreciates seeing something written without any preconceived ideas, and that is specific to the evening. I think the key to these plays is that they must be written for the particular talents of the cast and the peculiarities of the site. You have to study the set in detail so that the audience knows that the play wasn't hatched beforehand. I've written for two different 24 Hour Plays, and I can't imagine their being restaged. For this play, we were on the set of *Pygmalion* and I kept obsessing over how the wood-paneled walls reminded me of my professors' offices in college. The evening was also sponsored by Montblanc, so I used a Montblanc pen as a prop. I did another 24 Hour Play at the Atlantic on the set of Keith Bunin's *Ten Million Miles*, and there was this huge, windowless pickup truck that just insisted on itself. There was also a windup penguin toy that an actress had brought in as a prop. You would never remount either of these plays. Who is going to spend the money on wood-paneled walls and a \$700 pen? Who's gonna

DAVID CROSS AND JENNIFER ANISTON IN  
ADAM BOCK'S PLAY



hunt down a wobbly penguin on eBay and blow the windows out of a pickup truck?

**ADAM RAPP:** I had no tactics. I just thought of trying to do something that would be strange and outrageous. Something that I might not even understand. It was Broadway after all, and only one night. I figured one of us had to be a little weird.

**DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE:** I honestly have no memory of how it all came together. I just latched onto an amusing hook and tried to write to the strengths of my actors. And it wasn't until someone mentioned at the post-show party, "Hey, your play was about a bunch of frantic sleep-deprived narcoleptics!" did it occur to me that the play might've just been me channeling my own four a.m. delirium.

**LR:** What did you most enjoy/hate about the experience? Would you do it again?

**ADAM BOCK:** I am amazed at the actors' bravery and skill. I also like the feeling of artistic exhaustion and the sensation of having completed an athletic event. I like feeling like an art jock. Would I do it again? Absolutely.

**THERESA REBECK:** The first time I did this, with the 24 Hour Plays, over there at the Atlantic, I liked the play I ended up with but the whole experience honestly made me kind of grumpy. I haven't done it since but let me tell you doing it this

time was a blast. The fact that it's such a big party, and on that stage, and with so many really talented actors going to the wall out there—I don't know, it just was a great ride.

**MIKE LEW:** This was a monumental, whirlwind opportunity. I loved all of it and I was so sleepy I remember little of it. But getting my first opportunity to write on Broadway and to work with such incredible collaborators is unforgettable. I would do this again in a heartbeat, even though writing this way feels like a total assault on my body.

**TINA HOWE:** When I finished at 6:30 in the morning, I hauled out my camera and took pictures of me and my iBook against the backdrop. Neither of us had ever been so jazzed! As the smart English director, Josie Rourke, rehearsed the actors, the technical people ran out to buy a CD of Bach's thundering Toccata and Fugue, which they then loaded into their sound system. When the curtain rose 24 hours later, everything was in place. It was that dopey fake organ that gave me everything — Wally, the beautiful blondes, the crazy English accents and John accompanying it all with his wheezing accordion. Would I do it again? I don't think so. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place.

*Laura Robrman is an award-winning New York City playwright and DG Associate Member, who worked as a writer's assistant for the 24 Hour Plays on Broadway in 2006 and 2007.*

