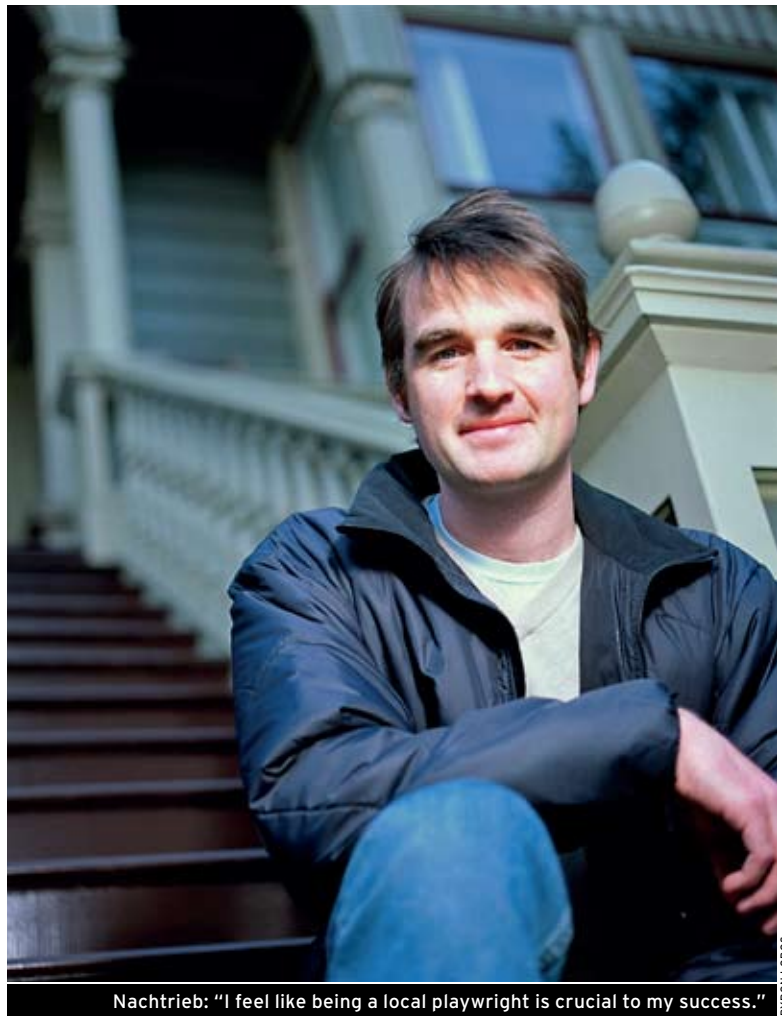


Peter Sinn Nachtrieb Ideas to Spare

This writer with
San Francisco in
his veins hits
all the buttons,
from comic
to melancholy

BY MARGOT MELCON



Nachtrieb: "I feel like being a local playwright is crucial to my success."

DON'T GO ON FACEBOOK, DON'T GO ON FACEBOOK.

That's the desperate mantra of the self-employed everywhere, and at this very moment it's probably running through the mind of some playwright sitting alone, wrestling with an act-three disaster or a line that just isn't landing. But if you're San Francisco-based scribe Peter Sinn Nachtrieb, Facebook is more than a diversion or an invitation to procrastinate—it's your salvation. Rather than losing himself in status updates, Nachtrieb uses his Facebook profile as a clever resource for tackling dramaturgical challenges. Recently his posts have included several questions in the service of writing his latest play:

Peter Nachtrieb *is watching makeover/transformation scenes for research purposes. Any faves?*

Peter Nachtrieb *Who's a better kisser than Susan Lucci?*

Peter Nachtrieb *Which rest-stop character do I keep: the salesman with 1,000 products, the college hippie or the cruising widowed Bear?*

The dozens of responses crowd-sourced from colleagues, friends and "friends" supply this playwright's creative process rather than distracting from it.

Nachtrieb writes plays with an everything-and-the-kitchen-sink approach; he throws a lot at the wall to see what will stick. Whether he's feeding every animalistic urge that rears its head at a single dinner party in *Hunter Gatherers*,

unpacking every piece of an apartment complex's dirty laundry in *T.I.C. Trenchcoat in Common*, or exploding notions of first dates and last days in *boom*, which has landed on more than a dozen U.S. stages this season, Nachtrieb connects disconnected moments and knits them together into hilarious life. A judicious editor and a receptive collaborator, he is turning out a stream of bright, focused, bitingly witty and deeply human new plays for the American stage.

His latest—the one benefiting from Facebook's insightful assistance—is *BOB*, a commission from California's South Coast Repertory. The setting of this five-act epic, which mixes mythology and episodic storytelling, is the United States of America—all of it, and a small part of Mexico to boot. It spans the entire life of the title character, from birth in a White Castle in Louisville, Ky., through adventures in rest-stop philosophy, large-animal training, love, loss, philanthropy and flea-circus management. The play surprises with the absolute certainty of its direction, even when it appears to be leading the audience down a serious rabbit hole.

Sean Daniels, associate artistic director at Kentucky's Actors Theatre of Louisville, recently directed a reading of *BOB* for the Playwrights Foundation at California's Berkeley Repertory Theatre and worked with Nachtrieb on *BRINK!*, a new-play collaboration among six playwrights exploring rites of passage and ritual for ATL's 2009 Humana Festival.



MATT WROZER

Eric Steele and Jenny Ledel in Kitchen Dog Theater of Dallas's *boom*, running through March 13.

"In simple terms, Peter is one of the great 'yes, and' playwrights I know," says Daniels. "No idea is too silly to explore, no emotion is too honest to be expressed, and he's never satisfied until each joke works perfectly. He's the hardest-working man in show business; I guess that makes him the James Brown of our generation."

It is Nachtrieb's community, rooted in San Francisco, that defines him as a playwright as much as his sharp use of language or his viciously spot-on sense of humor. Counted among his many professional collaborators are individuals and companies from the Bay Area who all proudly claim him as their own. "I feel like I have several artistic homes," says Nachtrieb, listing Z Space, Encore Theatre Company, Killing My Lobster, Marin Theatre Company, Playwrights Foundation and American Conservatory Theater as organizations that have embraced him as a playwright.

Known for writing sharp, dark comedies, the 35-year-old Nachtrieb takes an essentially humorous approach to life. He admitted to recently being busted for making "gun fingers" on the dance floor and demonstrated exactly what that meant when asked. He and his partner of nine years, Mark Marino, once nurtured an avocado seed on the windowsill of their Mission District apartment, posting photos of the seedling online like proud parents. Over a Sunday dinner at his brother George's apartment, when the subject of Jack Palance came up, he immediately dropped into a decent one-arm push-up (like Palance in a famous Oscar moment), growling about "believing it...or not." Nachtrieb even embraced the idea of

meeting for our interview at the food court in the neighborhood mall, folding his towering 6'6" frame into a cafeteria-style table.

A Marin County native, Nachtrieb received his undergraduate degree in theatre and biology from Rhode Island's Brown University. It was in his acting classes at Brown that Nachtrieb first began to write,

working on solo shows (which he calls "the gateway drug from actor to writer"), performing with a sketch comedy group called Out of Bounds, and seeing new plays written by Nilo Cruz, Gina Gionfriddo, Madeleine Olnek and Adam Bock. Brown was where the excitement of new-play development took serious hold of Nachtrieb.

RETURNING TO THE BAY AREA IN '97,

Nachtrieb quickly hooked up with Killing My Lobster, a sketch group formed by Brown alumni, performing and writing with them until his material, as he puts it, "started to veer more toward moody pieces rather than just being very funny." Energized by watching his work come alive on stage, Nachtrieb took playwriting classes and wrote his first full-length play in 2000—though he says it was so bad that only a single trusted friend was allowed to read it.

When Nachtrieb dove in again, he gave himself a personal dramaturgical assignment to help reign in his untamed script tendencies. The result was a play called *Meaningless*, a light comedy that premiered at Bailiwick Repertory in Chicago. Next came *Colorado*, a dark

A promotional poster for the Portland Actors Conservatory. The top half features a black and white photograph of a woman holding a man's head. The text "Put Theory into Practice" is written in a large, yellow, serif font at the top. Below it is the Portland Actors Conservatory logo, which includes a star and the text "25 YEARS OF ACTING". The bottom half of the poster is dark blue with white and yellow text. It lists the conservatory's acceptance of interviewees for two-year conservatory candidates in Chicago, Boston, and Portland. It also provides the website and phone number for interviews, and mentions that the conservatory is accredited by the National Association of Schools of Theatre.

comedy about the disappearance of a teen beauty queen. He finished *Colorado*, which was performed in NYC's 2004 Summer Play Festival, while earning his MFA in creative writing at San Francisco State University.

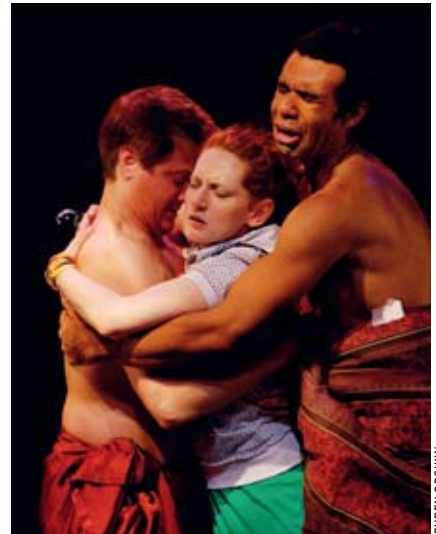
"Going back to grad school was a way to re-brand myself as a writer," says Nachtrieb. "I was trying to do everything, but I knew I couldn't focus on acting, writing and directing. I asked myself, 'What is the thing that challenges me most, compels me most?' And it was the writing." Though he still acts occasionally, that discipline has become supplemental. "I do on-camera stuff," he concedes, "and interactive murder mysteries and sexual harassment training seminars. It's not my focus, so it feels weird. I have misgivings about hyphens."

Staying in San Francisco, he says, was the best decision he could have made for his playwriting career—the relationships he built with the local theatre community while at SF State paved the way for his first major success as a playwright. While in grad school, he received a Tournesol Emerging Playwrights Residency at Z Space. He was just finishing a script for his thesis when

Killing My Lobster approached him, wanting to produce it. Over the course of a year, *Hunter Gatherers* was developed in part at the Bay Area Playwrights Festival and was mounted in summer 2006. It earned rave reviews and the run was extended into the fall.

A ferocious skewering of civilized behavior that carves pretension into tasty, bite-sized pieces, *Hunter Gatherers* gave Nachtrieb a national profile, winning the ATCA/Steinberg New Play Award in 2007 and landing him New York representation. The award allowed him to devote the next year exclusively to the writing of *boom*, a romantic comedy about an unlikely couple repopulating the human species after a massive comet hits the Earth.

Nachtrieb is pragmatic about how *boom* came to have 16 productions across the country in one season. (This month alone, it is running at Dallas's Kitchen Dog Theater, Jobsite Theater of Tampa, Fla., New Repertory Theatre in Watertown, Mass., and Perseverance Theatre in Alaska). "It's a well-written comedy that has three characters and one set," he matter-of-factly admits. "It's a very producible play. I knew that when I was writing it. But it's a pretty weird play,



Michael Shipley, Rebecca White and Lance Gardner in Encore Theatre Company's *T.I.C. Trenchcoat in Common*, San Francisco, 2009.

too. It's crazy that so many people wanted to do it." Nachtrieb credits collaborators who were willing to sign on early in the process of developing this end-of-the-world comedy, including Lowry Marshall at Brown, who launched an early workshop production of

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COURTESY OF KILLING MY LOBSTER



Jon Wolanske and Alexis Lezin in Killing My Lobster's 2006 *Hunter Gatherers* in San Francisco.

boom in the summer of 2007; the Playwrights Foundation, which included it in its In the Rough development series; and Ars Nova of New York City, where *boom* got its official premiere in March '08.

Indeed, the web of support for Nachtrieb's work reaches far and wide, though it is most densely concentrated in the Bay Area. "I feel like being a local playwright is crucial to my success. Being here gives me stability. The geography of where you live and the people around you are going to influence what you write—a sense of place is going to have as much of an influence on what you write as anything else." He describes San Francisco as edgy, dirty and possessed of a self-awareness and sense of humor about itself, qualities that could easily be applied to Nachtrieb himself. In *Hunter Gatherers*, when one character claims, "Driving is the worst part about living in the city. Well, that and all the sadness," you can hear Nachtrieb's voice loud and clear, wryly critiquing life in San Francisco even as he celebrates it.

"Peter is the sort of playwright who demands excellence of himself in the development of his scripts," says Lisa Steindler, artistic director of Encore Theatre Company, which commissioned his play *T.I.C.* in 2006 and staged it last year. "He works and reworks. He experiments and fails. He tries and succeeds." *T.I.C.* is a mystery thriller exploring the themes of privacy, voyeurism and exhibitionism in an age where technology makes oversharing a daily practice. As he's riffing wildly on contemporary issues and big ideas, humanity sneaks in; the stories are at once outlandish and very real.

"We *know* all of the people in his plays,"

Steindler avows, "and their predicaments are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. The result is a thoughtful and entertaining jaunt through issues of our times. Peter hits all the buttons: humor, darkness, honesty and complexity."

Nachtrieb's efforts to spill his vast ideas onto the page means that he tends to over-

write. But as he distills his comic gems, he saves the bits and pieces he trims off for later use. "For each play he writes," says director Daniels, "there are tons of characters and situations that are on the discard pile. For *BOB*, Peter created a whole scene in which the main character professed his love for Reuben sandwiches and for prostitutes who are good listeners—those were a glorious six hours, then it was all tossed, and a wolf who was learning Fosse dance steps took center stage."

Says Nachtrieb: "I guess it's the fear that at some point you're going to run out of ideas. It makes you hold onto the ones you have. I'm less scared of that than I used to be. In life you're always going to try to find new challenges. Unless you're done. And I'm not done. Maybe I won't be able to write well at a certain point, but I won't ever run out of ideas." ❏

Margot Melcon is the literary manager and dramaturg at California's Marin Theatre Company, and an American Theatre Bay Area Commissioning Fund grantee, supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

create!

Photo credit: Brian Galston

America's #1 play this season,
Peter Nachtrieb's *boom*,
developed at Brown,
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