

WRITING LIKE A FISHBONE

By Anthony Weigh

Article for Backstage Magazine, STC Australia.

In 2006 I was part of the fortunate band of actors who toured the STC's production of *Hedda Gabler* to BAM in New York.

I remember getting to our hotel in lower Manhattan late one night, the shock of a frigid New York winter in my lungs, especially after the long sweaty days of summer rehearsal on the harbour at The Wharf back in Sydney.

In comparison, arriving in New York felt like being flung into the belly of a great beast.

I was shown to my room by the sort of smiling bellboy they only have in New York and after fumbling to press a dollar note into his hand as a thank you for all his smiling, I opened the heavy curtains on the wall of windows to see what I could see.

What I saw was a shock.

It was the huge gaping wound that has come to be known as 'Ground zero'. Floodlit. Silent and covered in a dusting of snow. Like a gargantuan rubble animal that had decided to curl up and go to sleep in lower Manhattan just beneath my window.

In the haze of jetlag, unfamiliar city streets and the bellboy's many 'your welcome's, I had failed to notice that our hotel was, in fact, directly opposite the former site of the twin towers of the world trade centre in New York City. Which, by January in 2006 was (and still is) one of the world's largest construction zones.

I lived in that hotel room for 5 weeks. Sticking blue tac in my ears each night to stop the noise of the pile drivers from waking me in the morning and watching a sort of strange non progress being made on the building site below.

It had an impact.

One day I wandered over to an exhibition in a nearby shopping mall designed to give visitors an impression of what the completed site would eventually look like.

There was the now famous model of Daniel Liebeskind's *Freedom Tower*, which would replace the twin towers and, at it's base, Michael Arad's twin gaping holes of cascading water entitled *Reflections on Absence*, which were to form the memorial to the dead of September 11th 2001.

Near the models were quotes from members of the public about the intended memorial. One stuck out like a sore thumb. It was from a mother of one of the murdered that day and was in response to Arad's twin subterranean waterfalls.

It read: "When I think of my son I look up to the sky. To heaven. Not down to this hole in the ground. My son was a hero. We need something that reaches up to the sky. Not this."

The moment I read that quote I knew I had the makings of a play. The play that would become *Like a Fishbone*. In fact one of the characters uses this quote almost verbatim.

I was intrigued with this bereaved mother's desire to make sense of the senseless. To take a horrific event like 9/11 and turn her son, who was without doubt a victim, into a hero.

I began to ask myself: Why do we need to tell ourselves stories about death? What purpose are the stories serving? Why can't death just be death? What is it in the human mind that needs to believe in something greater than life as it is?

When I was approached by Nick Marchand at Griffin Theatre Company to write a play for his company I immediately seized on the memorial to the dead and that mother's response to it. Luckily Nick was up for the ride.

I began to do a lot of research into the memorialisation process in New York and in London after the bombings there in 2005. I became a bit of an unwelcome hanger on at Architectural firms in both New York and London and used my residency at the National Theatre in London to blag my way in to design meetings. More than once I was asked: '...and what is it you're doing here again?'

I wrote the play as a way of wrestling with the question that that dead man's mother put to me that day in that shopping mall. Why shouldn't she have her statue, then? Why should she be constantly reminded of the horror of that day by the presence of two great flooded holes in the ground? Why should she have to face the reality of death? Isn't it our very denial of death that gives many of our lives meaning?

I wanted to see if I could write a finely poised argument, a thriller that shuttled back and forth across the blade of a knife between two points of view.

When I finished the play the outcome of the argument I had written took me completely by surprise.

I had anticipated that I would come out on the side of the architect who's position is that we must face the truth about death...it turns out, like all really human stories, that the answer isn't nearly as black and white as that.

The other thing I realised when I stood back was that I had written a play solely for women. At every turn men tried to insinuate themselves sneakily into the drama, as men have a way of doing. It was a hard job keeping them offstage. But I seem to have succeeded in doing that. At least the last time I looked there are no men in this play. I'm really thrilled by that.

One of the reasons that I'm particularly pleased is that all the actors I could think of in Australia and in London (where the play will also have a production) that I wanted to hear from were women.

I feel like I've heard enough from the blokes. I wanted the only voice on stage to be a woman's and (dare I say it and with all due respect to Marta Dusseldorp who is playing the Architect in Sydney) a middle-aged woman at that! I'm really looking forward to watching 3 of Australia's great female actors do breathless battle on the Wharf 1 stage for 80 taught minutes.

My sincere hope is that our play will be an exciting roller coaster ride for you. That it's an edge of the seat experience where your prejudices are challenged and your sympathies questioned.

Hopefully, like me, you'll come away with more questions of your own: Why is belief in God the single most important fact in many, many people's lives? And why...if we count ourselves amongst the non-believers, can we see other's belief as such a threat? Finally, are there situations in which a well-placed lie is more helpful than all the truth in the world?

Anthony Weigh, London, March 2010.