



Focus on Playwrights: Portraits and Interviews

Susan Johann

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In 1989 Susan Johann was hired to photograph Christopher Durang for a magazine article about his play *Naomi in Her Living Room*. The playwright was known for his outrageous comedy, so Johann anticipated a session with a rather wild, young eccentric. To her surprise, the man who came to her studio was mild mannered and buttoned down. Johann found this twist captivating, and it was then that this project was born. Over the ensuing twenty-year period, she photographed more than ninety playwrights, including many winners of the Pulitzer Prize and other prestigious awards.

Johann photographed Wendy Wasserstein, Anna Deavere Smith, August Wilson, and Nilo Cruz in the weeks after they won the Pulitzer. Tony Kushner sat for his portrait between the productions of part 1 and part 2 of *Angels in America*. Eve Ensler came to Johann's studio during the week she was previewing her famous one-woman show, *The Vagina Monologues*, and George C. Wolfe sat for her the morning after his play *Spunk* opened at the Public Theater.

Each playwright was photographed in Johann's studio using the same film, a single light, and a plain backdrop, creating a portrait that captures and distills something essential—an intimate view. Her interviews explore the writers' personal and creative journeys including their inspirations, roadblocks, and obsessions, which influenced their work on paper and on the stage. Even those who know Edward Albee's plays intimately, for example, may be surprised by his incisive wit and inimitable voice as revealed in his interview with Johann.

Beyond the book, *Focus on Playwrights* is also a live, multimedia presentation in which Johann narrates an inside look at creativity—the theater and photography. It has been given at such venues as the New Dramatists in New York, the Eugene O'Neill Theater, the Tryon Fine Arts Center and at the Photo Expo in New York.

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