

An Interview With Carlyle Brown

In a recent interview with FST's Literary Manager, Cristin Kelly, playwright Carlyle Brown discusses his work and the creation of his play, Pure Confidence.



Cristin Kelly: *Pure Confidence* is about an unusual piece of history. How did you get started writing it? What was the impetus behind it?

Carlyle Brown: Mostly, it was the commission (*Pure Confidence* was commissioned by the Actors Theatre of Louisville and Alabama Shakespeare Festival). I was talking to the director of the production at Louisville and he was having a conversation with Marc Masterson who had just gotten to Louisville as Artistic Director. He had just come from his first Kentucky Derby. So, he asked me if there ever any black jockeys. I said “*Were there ever any black jockeys?*” and then the poor guy was looking at my tonsils.

CK: *So, you already knew about the black jockeys?*

CB: Yeah, and the way that I knew about it was because earlier I had a commission at the Houston Grand Opera to rewrite a book for a musical called *St Louis Woman* with music by Harold Arlen. It was adapted from a book by Countee Cullen of the Harlem Renaissance. The central character was this jockey - a black jockey. So, to write the story I had to write, I investigated and found out about black jockeys. You know, you go walking around with some useless piece of knowledge, someone might ask you a question and there it is. So, that’s how it happened.

CK: *Did the ideas start to emerge right away in this conversation?*

CB: When I sat down to write and actually thought about it, it seemed pretty rich dramatically. Like, Simon wants his freedom and the Colonel doesn’t want it to happen. We’ve got characters with motive already and I just asked myself, “Wow, what does that relationship look like? Somebody owns a horse *and* a man.” What does that relationship look like? And at the core of that is, you can make people do a lot of things, but you can’t make anybody be great. That’s intrinsic. So if you own a guy and he gives you monetary value, because of his greatness, you can’t whip him or threaten him. You have to talk to this person, you know?

CK: *The power structure changes.*

CB: You have to have a relationship. That’s how it’s done.

CK: *I read that Simon Cato is based on a real person or a collection of real people. Is that true?*

CB: A collection. There was a jockey named Simon and there was another jockey named Cato. I put the names together in some way of honoring them. A lot of these guys, their lives were extraordinary. There were legions of them. Their lives were not too dissimilar to Simon in the play.

CK: *Do you know what happened to them?*

CB: They just sort of disappeared into history. There were lots of them. They dominated the sport. Look at basketball today - that's what the sport looked like before the Civil War and even up to the turn of the Twentieth century.

CK: *Were they really famous, like basketball players are today?*

CB: Oh, yeah. Horse racing was like that. It was like America's first national sport. And you have to remember that we're talking about a time where the average person was a good horseman.

CK: *So, to be really great was something huge.*

CB: Yeah. You know there was one guy, Austin Curtis. He had so much money that he had to have an agent manage it.

CK: *Wow. That seems pretty unheard of.*

CB: It's unheard of, but at the time, it wasn't.

CK: *Is there much scholarship on these black jockeys? What was your research like?*

CB: The best book on the subject is a book called *The Great Black Jockeys* by Edward Hotaling.

CK: *Are any of the other characters in Pure Confidence based on real people?*

CB: No, not really. These guys just came into my head. They are kind of archetypes. One of the things that I wanted to do was write a Southern story. It comes from a conversation that (director) Kent Gash and I had during the period I was in residency at Alabama Shakespeare Festival. Why is Southern literature so . . . *particular*? There's something about Southern storytelling which is a little larger than life - I would say exaggerated.

Like, in a story by a New England writer, you'll have two guys driving down the road with a half-pint of whiskey and they go around a 35 turn doing 40 and they hit an old guy and he falls down. In a *Southern* story, they've got, a fifth of Jack Daniels, they're doing 90, and around the corner they hit an old black guy and he flies over the barn, you know? The characters are reckless. They're impervious to reason. I think it's very much a Southern thing. The Civil War is like that - reckless. You're attacking the part of the country that is industrialized and makes all the guns! So I went at the play trying to tell it as a Southern story - not just the atmosphere, but the narrative.

CK: *You're a Southerner. Have you ever written about the South before?*

CB: There's another slave narrative play of mine but that's quite different. When *Pure Confidence* opens, we look at characters that we see, we recognize. They're archetypes. They're pretty close to being stereotypes. I think if there's anybody that inspired the Colonel, it's the Looney Tunes cartoon character, Foghorn Leghorn.

CK: *I wanted to ask you about these archetypes or stereotypes. You have a great quote in an article you wrote about Pure Confidence that's about taking what the average person thinks they know about slavery and beating it "with a hammer right before their eyes, in an attempt to incite a clash between the myth and the interpreted truth." What do you think that myth is?*

CB: The myth of the people. The myth of who they are, Some critics complained that the characters were stereotypes - that they were stereotypes that conflicted with other stereotypes. Why wasn't the Colonel whipping him, and beating him? Of course if we present it that way we can't really have a discourse about where these things are really at.

And of course, people are just terrified to talk about slavery so you kind of have to trick them into the conversation. They get a little laugh and they guffaw a little bit until they realize that what they've been laughing at - that every scene in the first act is really about a monetary transaction. Of a human being.

That startles them, right? And because of the relationship that Simon and the Colonel have, they don't really have to lie to each other. They know what's going on.

So, Simon can tell him he's full of shit, but that doesn't necessarily mean he can change him. And, the Colonel's not a bad guy, except he's immoral in the sense that he accepts an immoral system and allows himself to benefit from it.

CK: *What have you learned from audiences' reactions to this play?*

CB: That's a really big question. I had a lot of fun writing this play. With the "n-word" and stuff like that I didn't think this play really would get very far. Now, you guys are the sixth production, so what do I know?

The thing I hadn't thought before was that audiences were ready to deal with this issue in the way that audiences have. They get it, you know? They see it.

CK: *Has it opened up the conversation?*

CB: Oh, yeah. Some of the actors in the Denver production said that they had these talkbacks and people were into things like "What can we do now?" It doesn't seem to be a history play to people. It seems to be a play in which they feel like, "Oh yeah, this is who we are." That they feel it in a very present moment. In terms of race in America, that's very gratifying.

CK: *Based on your observations of the audience response, do you think our conversations are more honest now?*

CB: No - I think around the play people seem to have really honest conversations. They don't know what to do.

When you sit there in the audience, you can tell that they get it. It's just the way people respond. I knew where I wanted to put the laugh lines. Often when the Colonel says, "Look, you can negotiate for yourself. I might be you, and you might be me..." "...And white folks ain't gonna never let that happen." It was, amazing to me that very often there's this kind of universal understanding - like (the audience says) "Oh, yeah right." For me, as a black person, hearing it come from white people, is like, "Whoa." I find that (to be) an uplift in consciousness.

I think there are a great many things that people don't know how to talk about because we don't have any practice in it. I think that people can recognize it. That's positive.

CK: *Absolutely. And maybe the first step towards talking.*

CB: Mm-hm. And then, they cry at the Caroline/Mattie scene at the end of the play. It just seems to me, particularly from that scene, that people want to have that conversation.

CK: *Talking about having that conversation with the audience - the FST audience who saw you in The Fula From America (in FST's Stage III series last season), do you think that they'll see themes emerging from your work?*

CB: Yes. Freedom. They'll see that.

As far as any other kinds of themes in my work, I have no facility in talking about that usually. I approach my work that way.

CK: *Was it different using your own history to write Fula as opposed to fictionalizing a part of history you've only read about as you do in Pure Confidence and many of your other plays?*

CB: It's really a question of when I approach it, when I'm writing a play, history is really the garment issue that I might be interested in. So, I think that in context for me, it's more about memory. It's about national memory.

It's like in *Pure Confidence* - when I said there's this conflict between what the audience thinks they know and what it's told is the case (in the play). Even dramatically, that creates a tension, and that's what we want to do when we create plays. Any kind of art starts with a kind of tension. That tension is part of our relationship with the audience.

African-American history, of course interests me, because I can delve in it from my point of view. I arrived at doing research and looking at history going, "Oh my God. What if *this* happened *here* and *this* happened *that way*?" It's about how you reconstruct memory.

For the most part, I think in this country, there is a kind of generic black play in the sense that there are black people *in* it and they are all looking inward and grappling with their victimization. There's a history of that in terms of mythos, because it's sort of a safe way to look at 'the other.' So, I'm interested in constructing something else. When I look at history - I don't know why it hasn't really happened in the theatre - but when Black Power and black pride came up, all of the young people then went to school and they began to look into the culture - just like women's studies - to look for themselves. And then they saw something totally different! They just did, and that was, of course, a boon to publishing at the time. So, what I've discovered there is that there are some interesting things about the way in which we, as a culture, remember our past. It's about memory. And in that, the way we remember, exists our cultural bias. That's kind of what I'm interested in triggering.

CK: *The other thing I wanted to ask you about is your unusual pre-playwriting career. You were on boats?*

CB: Yeah, I was a chief mate and a captain of tall ships. Schooners, mostly. I did that for many a year.

CK: *I would imagine that gave you some life experiences to ponder upon...*

CB: [Laughs] Let's just say that there were a few.

CK: *And now you're based in Minneapolis.*

CB: Yeah.

CK: *You're landlocked!*

CB: Yeah, I'm landlocked, I guess. That was sort of the contradictory appeal to it - getting away from New York where I had some friends and distractions. If somebody came along, with like a trip that was a good trip to a beautiful place, I wouldn't know how to say no. It was a good life, and certainly it was a great window on people.

CK: *You must have learned a lot. Can you apply that to your writing?*

CB: Absolutely, absolutely. There's something about being on these ships with people (that's) like the sense of a living family. And in some ways, part of your job as a skipper is to be an actor, to be this fantasy for people. People live in close-quartered situations - they have to depend on each other, so you just see a lot of things in human nature. There's some that happen all the time - like when you're in a gale or a storm at sea - your underwear in a bunch kind of things - (you see) the kind of things that people will do to give themselves a sense of normalcy.

Everybody does that and it's always peculiar to them - some sort of bizarre thing that propels them. Those things are pretty common

CK: *It's its own sort of theatre.*

CB: That's right. It's like life is its own sort of theatre. How can we put life on stage? I think the trick is that life is just a moment-to-moment sort of thing,

CK: *You're also a teacher now. The young people you encounter - do you feel like they're more open to having these sorts of conversations we were talking about in terms of race and where our society is than older generations?*

CB: Yeah, absolutely. The world looks entirely different to them. Just go on Facebook and MySpace and just look at people's friends. It's amazing how most of them are really diverse. I think in a lot of ways young people are past that. Still, I think that they're interested in things like *Pure Confidence* because antagonisms by appearance, those kinds of things, still exist in the culture. I think they're interested. I run into a lot of kids who are just interested in social science.

CK: *It seems like a big shift is taking place.*

CB: Yeah, yeah. They just don't know what to do, but I think it's out there.

CK: *Is there anything else that you'd like to say to the FST audience about the show?*

CB: You should just let them know that I'm not there physically, but I'm glad to be back!