

Singular Obsessions: Interview of Poet Oliver de la Paz on Playwright Joshua Young

written by Guest Contributor | November 12, 2017



Reading Joshua Young's play, *When the Wolves Quit*, was a pivotal moment in my theatre career. I was an aspiring literary manager jaded by reading the same types of plays over and over again—plays that didn't speak to me—and I was starting to feel like I'd bet on the wrong horse. Discovering Joshua Young's cross-genre work was a breath of fresh air. It helped me realize how much could be done with dramatic formatting, and how much larger the world of dramatic literature was. It helped me refocus my energy on championing fringe artists rather than trying to break into the theatre mainstream.

When the Wolves Quit and *To the Chapel of Light* were also my introduction to small press publishing in general. I started reading everything I could get my hands on, and grew to love small press drama as well as poetry and prose. Scouring the Internet for more small press plays (and rarely finding them) led me to launch [Plays Inverse Press](#), a home for small press authors interested in experimenting with drama.

Josh was the first author to take a chance on me, trusting Plays Inverse with his play in verse, [The Holy Ghost People](#). Six releases later, when he mentioned the possibility of a third play, *This is the Way to Rule*, to round out the trilogy that *Wolves* and *Chapel* began, I jumped on the opportunity. Thus, [Psalms for the Wreckage](#) was born.

Josh wasn't always a playwright, though, and his path to drama was years in the making. *Psalms for the Wreckage* trilogy chronicles that development, with each piece leaning more heavily into dramatic language and structure. It's as much a portrait of an author's shifting relationship with genre as it is a collection of scripts in verse.

This interview is the first of a three-part interview series: I first talk with Josh's long-time mentor, Oliver de la Paz; then with *To the Chapel of*

Light's original publisher, J. A. Tyler of Mud Luscious/Nephew Press; last, I interview Josh himself to discuss his journey in drama. These interviews provide an in-depth look at how a writer of poetry and prose can morph into a playwright, along with insights into teaching, writing, and publishing along the way. No author's style develops in a vacuum, regardless of genre, and my hope is that this series will help writers discover Joshua Young's work and encourage them to take their own steps toward playwriting.

In the following interview, I chat with [Oliver de la Paz](#), one of the first readers of *To the Chapel of Light* and *When the Wolves Quit*. We discuss Josh's early experiments with genre, teaching, and some of Oliver's personal projects, and he offers great advice for mentor/mentee writing. J. A. Tyler's interview will follow in early December.

Tyler Crumrine: Before it was published with Mud Luscious Press, *To the Chapel of Light* was Joshua Young's undergraduate thesis at Western Washington University while you were his advisor. What do you remember about Josh's early work, and about him as a student in general?

Oliver de la Paz: Joshua was always prolific. He was an undergraduate student of mine and I had him in class for my Introduction to Poetry and Advanced Poetry seminars. He was really interested in a number of different forms of narrative, but early on he was specifically interested in prose poems, which I nudged him towards somewhat early on in his career. Mostly, I remember how serious about writing he was, how much he loved it and how infectious his energy was in the classroom.

Josh says in the introduction to *Psalms to the Wreckage* that you really helped [him] find what Chapel was. Could you elaborate on that some? Was *To the Chapel of Light* always a screenplay in verse, or did the manuscript's hybrid elements come later?

No, the book wasn't always a screenplay. As I had mentioned earlier, Joshua was a very prolific writer. So prolific, in fact, that his organizational impulses couldn't keep up with his output at that time. When Joshua sat down with me to discuss the work, he initially had it structured as a bunch of prose poems. What I talked about with Joshua was the density of the work—how it was difficult for a reader to navigate from one poem to the next to the next while also carrying the weight of a narrative and the tonality of a subject. I showed him the prose poems of Tom Andrews and his Cinema Verite prose poems, which are funny and smart, and use the language of cinema. Joshua and his brother Caleb were also deeply enmeshed in film as filmmakers, so I figured it was a natural fit to show Joshua some of the work of Tom Andrews. He went away for a few weeks and then came back with the fully formed concept of a screenplay in verse. It was quite a remarkable thing to see.

He started writing *When the Wolves Quit* during a course of yours on obsession & the long poem. Can you talk to us about that course some? What inspired it, and what was the curriculum like? Do you see the lasting impact of that class

in Josh's work today?

The course was a variation on two courses I had taken as a graduate student. My mentor, Alberto Rios had taught a class on "The Obsession" when I was a student at [Arizona State University]. Much of the class centered around prose narratives and works that had a singular narrative focus sustaining the movement through the narrative. Additionally, I had taken a course on the long poem as a graduate student, which had been taught by Susan McCabe, who is a professor at USC now. She had us analyzing and writing sustained works while engaging the long poem collections critically.

When I adapted the two courses to suit my pedagogical needs, I designed it so that there would be weekly prompts that tested the writer's adherence to the obsession. So I came up with exercises like writing along a timeline or writing an inverse poem in the hopes that the writer would maintain a singular focus on the task at hand. My own personal influence in designing such a course came after having seen the Pablo Picasso exhibit on *Las Menias*, which was on display in the Picasso museum in Barcelona. Picasso had painted his own version of Velázquez's *Las Menias* and had created multiple studies of the work, looking at the painting from different vantage points and different scales. It was quite telling about the process of art making for me—that in order to compose, one had to enmesh one's self in the fullness of the subject. I think Joshua works in a manner akin to a visual artist. He thinks in a big canvas, or, if you're thinking in terms of film, a big storyboard, and crafts accordingly.

I agree, and that storyboard focus is definitely evident in this trilogy. Each entry tackles a slightly different subject via a slightly different genre, but there's a unifying arc to them as well, a singular "obsession" within the trilogy's narratives.

You mention your mentor Alberto Rios, and Josh speaks highly of your mentoring as well. In his thanks, he says "because of [Oliver] I expect more from teachers/mentors." Could you talk to us some about how you view your role as a teacher/mentor, and about the importance of mentor/mentee relationships in writing in general?

I see my role as someone who instills a work ethic and a process to generate work and then gradually pulls away. So in the case of someone like Joshua—who had all the tools—he loved writing and wrote prolifically. Where he needed guidance was in the matter of seeing shapes, patterns, structure, and order in his work.

Other writers require different paths of mentorship, whether that be help in understanding the fundamentals of writing, assistance in the generative stuff of creative writing, or sometimes a mentee is seeking permission to write. I myself was a student who needed permission to write, coming from an immigrant family who looked with disdain at the creative arts. My family had deemed it impractical and so I needed a mentor to tell me, "It's okay to tell your story."

Ultimately the best mentors are the ones who give students the tools to allow

for those students to forage ahead on their own.

Speaking of your own writing, can you talk to us about your current projects some? And, as a writer and teacher, do you find that classes and discussions bleed into your own work, or do you keep those identities fairly separate?

I almost always assign books for classes that I haven't had a chance to read. And often I select the books based on what interests me at the time. So, definitely, there's some "bleed" into what I do in an inspirational sense.

I've got three projects on the desk at the moment—I'm writing a collection entitled *Synaptic Labyrinth* that's loosely based on the Theseus and Minotaur myth and the Autistic Spectrum. I'm also working on a series of ekphrastic poems and a newish work called *Diaspora Sonnets*. Many of these projects were fed by stuff I was reading along with my courses.

You recommended Tom Andrews to Josh as an example of poetry that utilizes the language of cinema—Are their other works you think borrow from other genres especially well, or works you frequently recommend to students in general?

Right now I'm suggesting hybridized works to my creative writers. These are books like the Pulitzer winning *Olio* by Tyehimba Jess, *Hardly War* by Don Mee Choi, the work of Claudia Rankine, *House A* by Jennifer Cheng, and work by my former colleague Carol Guess. Essentially my aim with presenting students with such works is "permission-granting." Some times students get hung-up on notions of genre to the point where it creates impasses. In a way, these hybrid works offer opportunities for problem-solving through these creative impasses.

Lastly, as a consumer of art as well as a creator, what works do you find exciting these days? And are there current authors or trends you're especially interested in following?

I've mentioned a few of them above, but I'm really excited to finish the latest book by Allison Benis White, *Please Bury Me In This*. She's really incredible. I'm also excitedly reading *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* and Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas*.

I have the luxury of being on the advisory board for Kundiman.org, so I often get a sense of what they're reading, writing, and publishing and that always reinvigorates me. Mostly, though, I keep my eyes peeled for works by newer authors.

OLIVER DE LA PAZ is the author of four collections of poetry, *Names Above Houses*, *Furious Lullaby* (SIU Press 2001, 2007), and *Requiem for the Orchard* (U. of Akron Press 2010), winner of the Akron Prize for poetry chosen by Martìn Espada, and *Post Subject: A Fable* (U. of Akron Press 2014). He is the co-editor with Stacey Lynn Brown of *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry* (U. of Akron Press 2012). He co-chairs the advisory board of Kundiman, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the

promotion of Asian American Poetry and serves on the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Board of Trustees. A recipient of a NYFA Fellowship Award and a GAP Grant from Artist Trust, his work has appeared in journals like *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *North American Review*, *Tin House*, *Chattahoochee Review*, and in anthologies such as *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*. He teaches at the College of the Holy Cross and in the Low-Residency MFA Program at Pacific Lutheran University.

TYLER CRUMRINE is a Pittsburgh-based designer & dramaturg and the founding editor of Plays Inverse Press, a small press publisher of hybrid-genre theatre (www.playsinverse.com). Past design and dramaturgy credits include The New York Theatre Workshop, Signature Theatre Company, Bricolage Production Company, City Theatre Company, and others. More at <https://www.crumrine.info>.