



DELAWARE
THEATRE
COMPANY

INSIGHTS

DTC's Teacher Resource

**fully
committed**



FULLY COMMITTED

By Becky Mode

Delaware Theatre Company

October 17-November 4, 2018

A Word from the Playwright

“[*Fully Committed* is] not a hard play to interpret. I guess I’m happiest when people come away really feeling for the guy at the other end of the phone. Whether it’s working in a restaurant or in some lousy customer services job, it’s so easy to behave poorly on the phone. I’m ashamed to say I’m sure I’ve done that myself. But somewhere on the other end of that phone line is somebody who is getting paid \$8.95 per hour and doing a job that is frequently unpleasant. So if my play inspired a little bit of empathy for that guy, then I’m delighted!”

--Playwright Becky Mode

(from an interview with Tom Milward from
New York Theatre Guide, May 6, 2016)



INSIGHTS

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Delaware Theatre Company

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**40th Season
2018-2019**

FULLY COMMITTED

by
Becky Mode

Directed by
Kathryn MacMillan

Delaware Theatre Company
Executive Director

Bud Martin

Department of Education and
Community Engagement

Charles Conway, Director
Johanna Schloss, Associate Director
Allie Steele, Assistant Director

Contributing Writers

Johanna Schloss

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Delaware Division of the



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Summary and Characters

Summary

The show follows one hectic work day for Sam, a struggling actor in New York City, whose “fall-back” job is managing the reservations at an upscale restaurant. It is the holiday season, and Sam is alone with the phones, two of his coworkers not having shown up for work that day. As the phones ring, Sam must deal with demanding and sometimes hostile customers who are trying to make reservations when the restaurant is overbooked (“Fully committed” is how the chef wants Sam to explain it). Along with handling the many requests for reservations from customers, Sam must deal with an overbearing chef barking orders at him, with the snarky remarks of a fellow actor who is having more success right now than Sam is, and with the heartfelt wish of his father for Sam to come home for Christmas at what is definitely the busiest time of year for the restaurant. The play is traditionally performed by one actor playing all of the parts, conveying the urgency and hectic nature of Sam’s day.

Characters

The actor plays all of the characters in the show, switching voices and physical affects. Some of the main characters found in the play include the following:

Sam—A mid-career actor who has had some success but is now encountering a dry spell, Sam is an essentially warm-hearted Midwestern man who tries to please others; who at times questions the way he balances work, family, personal, and professional goals; and who attempts to do a good job at whatever he is called to do.



Actor Kraig Swartz plays Sam and all of the other characters in Fully Committed at Delaware Theatre Company.

Mrs. Vandevere—A wealthy older woman who is dismissive and haughty with those not of her social status.

Bryce—The over-eager, way-too-zealous-in-his-job personal assistant for actress Gwyneth Paltrow.

Bob—The reservations manager who is not at work but still manages to annoy Sam with his overbearing personality.

Jean-Claude—The maître d’ of the restaurant. He is bossy and condescending.

Jerry Miller—An acting rival of Sam’s. He enjoys his game of one-upmanship.

Sam’s dad—A sympathetic, warm-hearted man who wants the best for his son, yet has his own quiet needs for family support.

Stephanie—A sweet-tempered, overworked British hostess at the restaurant.

Chef—A self-important slob of a person who has temper tantrums to rival those of a toddler.

Carolann Rosenstein Fishburn—A regular at the restaurant who is used to getting her way.

Teachable Themes and Topics

Behind the Scenes with the Actor and Director of DTC's *Fully Committed*

Delaware Theatre Company's production of *Fully Committed* is being directed by Kathryn "KC" MacMillan, and stars Kraig Swartz as Sam, the out-of-work actor taking reservations at an upscale restaurant, and the cavalcade of characters whose voices and personas fill the room with their requests, concerns, demands, complaints, barbs, and banter. It is a comedy that asks the audience to use their imaginations to see and hear all of the people playwright Becky Mode and actor/ co-creator Mark Setlock invented. Yet clearly, it also asks the one actor who performs all these characters, as well as the director shaping the show, to approach the material differently than they might if there were many individual actors playing all of the roles. How is working on this play the same as working on "regular" plays? How is it different? DTC's Associate Director of Education & Community Engagement, Johanna Schloss, sat down with KC and Kraig to learn about their creative process.

Johanna: How is acting in and directing a one-person show different from working in a show with two or more performers? And what attracted you to this play?

Kraig: Any show where you get to play three dozen characters is a thrilling and nausea-inducing challenge. I remember reading it and thinking, "Can I actually differentiate all these people?"

KC: The challenge is a little different, but exciting. How do we put Sam in an environment that speaks to his challenges? And how do we put all the other people on the phone in a way that doesn't look robotic, repetitive, and ridiculous? We want to let folks know they are in good hands, give them the tools to learn the rules of our world, so we have to be very clear in those first few beats. Once Kraig teaches us the rules of the phone call, he can then start to relax them.

Johanna: What kind of training, preparation, or experience helped you with that challenge?

Kraig: We spend all our lives imitating people. I have a pretty decent ear, and I'm a good mimic. When I was in drama school, we had dialect training, and we learned about vocal placement. Between your navel and the top of your head, you can resonate in a lot of different spots. You only get into trouble when you get two characters who talk very close to each other, and their voice is placed in the same spot. If I'm not careful, the chef and Jerry can blend into each other. And I have an okay German accent, but (DTC) still called a dialect coach to help me out.

Johanna: Are there any real-life people you have used as inspiration for some of these characters?

Kraig: I know what every character looks like. I know who they are. And some of them actually are people I know. Carolann Rosenstein Fishburn is a relative of mine—it's absolutely her. I am from the Midwest; I was born in Chicago, but I grew up in Minnesota. The character of the dad is a number of different teachers I had when I was in junior high. One would say, "Okay, troops, let's work on the quadratic formula." A woman at my mother's church is the basis for a male character I do.

Johanna: Who or what are your comic inspirations? Especially for this show?

Kraig: I know it's really old-fashioned, but I'm a huge fan of the old Carol Burnett variety show. Between Carol Burnett, Tim Conway, and Harvey Korman, they taught me a lot about what I know about comedy, and the size of character you can get away with, and the level of commitment you

(continued)

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Behind the Scenes with the Actor and Director of DTC's *Fully Committed* (cont'd)

need to fill a big character. You can make a character as gigantic as you want, but then the reality for that character has to be that big, too—the need and the intention have to be that big, too. A lot of younger actors won't make a lot of big choices because they "don't want to be fakey," and that's an admirable thing to not want to do, but you have to make big choices sometimes, and you just have to increase the level of need the character has. When people are hungry, they are dealing with the very bottom of their brain stem, and they turn into all these outrageous, ill-behaving children, and that's what Sam is dealing with.

KC: [I like] comedy that's rooted in real human behavior. I ask, "What would you do? What do you need right now?" Characters want different things; how does that lead to comedy? And the expectation of the audience—the reversals come from having clearly laid out what we think are a series of human behaviors. I like surprises.

Kraig: KC is also one of my comic inspirations. She's working the room.

Johanna: Are you guys laughing a lot in rehearsal?

KC: No, it's unpleasant.

Kraig: (laughing) We get in trouble with our stage manager. No, [stage manager] Ali [Hassman] is great, because there needs to be at least one grown-up in the room.

Johanna: This script was originally written and performed in the late 1990s, and it was revised and revived just a couple years ago on Broadway for Jesse Tyler Ferguson. How does this version compare or contrast with the earlier version?

KC: Kraig has done nine previous productions of this, but it has been a dozen years since he has last performed it. In this more recent iteration of the script, Sam is no longer quite as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. The original production was written for a very early-career New York actor, and this script is written for someone who is in a place where he might get to play Malvolio in Lincoln Center.

Kraig: This script has updated some references, and Sam's age. In this version, you're dealing with someone mid-career, who has had some success, but it has been sporadic. It's like that actor from *The Cosby Show* working at Trader Joe's. I was so gratified by the outpouring of support for him, and the righteous indignation for him that there was something failure-based about this man earning a living in a field where work, where success is not constant. Sam is at that mid-career point, where he has had a national tour; he has had commercials in his past; and now he is back at that survival job that he has had on and off for a decade or more. His brother says to him, "If you have to keep going back to these jobs, maybe you need to rethink the situation." I'm here to tell you the struggle is real! There are years where I am hanging on by my fingernails, and I work more than 95% of my peers in the actors' union. It's a hard job. I think that's clear, how hard it is.

KC: It's a fun contrast, because you are also watching an actor who has mastered the form, so it looks very effortless, while the play is telling you how hard acting is. I think it's rather a delight.

Questions and Activities

1. Who are the most memorable characters in the play? Sort them into three categories: “fellow workers at the restaurant,” “customers (or would-be customers),” and “people from Sam’s life outside the restaurant.” Now list the various demands placed by these people on Sam in this one work day. How does Sam handle these demands? Were there any that you felt he could handle on his own? Which ones required a resolution that was out of his personal control?
2. Was there any situation which would have made you behave differently than Sam behaved? If so, which one? What would you have done differently? Why do you think Sam behaved the way he did in that situation?
3. Interview a professional actor who has worked in and around your area. How often does he/she work in the field of performing arts? How does he/she find work? What sacrifices must he/she make to work in this field? What are the rewards? What were the surprises about the business to this person? What “survival job,” if any, does he/she have or did the actor have?
4. Interview a restaurant manager or owner about the types of jobs in that particular restaurant and number of employees needed to make the restaurant a success. What is exciting and rewarding about the business? What difficulties or challenges do restaurateurs face? How does a restaurant owner, chef, etc. choose what goes on the menu? What qualities are sought in employees (both behind the scenes and in the “front of house”)?



Sources & Image Credits

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Why Go to the Theatre?

State and National Education Standards Addressed Through Taking Your Students to a Live Theatre Production

When your students view live theatre, they are taking part in a learning experience that engages their minds on many levels. From simple recall and comprehension of the plot of a play or musical to analysis and evaluation of the production elements of a show, students receive and interpret messages communicated through words, movement, music, and other artistic devices. Beyond “I liked it; it was good,” students learn to communicate about the content and performance of an artistic piece and to reflect on their own and others’ emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual points-of-view and responses. And the immediacy of live theatre--the shared moments between actors and audience members in the here-and-now--raises students’ awareness of the power and scope of human connection.

The following educational standards are addressed in a visit to a performance at Delaware Theatre Company along with a pre-show DTC classroom presentation and post-show talkback session at the theatre. *(Additional standards addressed through the use of the study guide or through further classroom study are not included here.)*

Common Core English Language Arts Standards:

Reading: 9-10 and 11-12, Strands 3, 4, 6

Language: 9-10 and 11-12, Strands 3, 4, and 5

National Core Arts Standards—Theatre:

Responding: Anchor Standards 7, 8, and 9

Connecting: Anchor Standard 11

Delaware Standards for English Language Arts (DOE):

Standard 2: 2.2a, 2.4b1, 2.5b, 2.5g, 2.6a

Standard 3: 3.1b, 3.3b1, 3.3b2

Standard 4: 4.1a, 4.1b, 4.1c, 4.2f, 4.3a, 4.4b

Compiled by Johanna Schloss, Associate Director of Education & Community Engagement, Delaware Theatre Company, 2016