



TOP **Bartlett Sher**
BOTTOM J.T. Rogers PHOTO Rebecca Ashley

THIS PAGE Daniel Oreskes, Daniel Jenkins, Jefferson Mays, Anthony Azizi + Dariush Kashani in *Oslo* at Lincoln Center Theater PHOTO T. Charles Erickson

Playwright J. T. ROGERS and director **BARTLETT SHER** were first brought together by producer André Bishop for *Blood and Gifts*, a play about the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in the 1980s that Lincoln Center Theater produced in 2011. Their next collaboration, *Oslo*, became one of the improbable successes of the New York theatre season in 2016: a new play, running three hours, with 14 actors playing multiple characters. (A third play, still in the planning stages, is yet to be announced.)

Oslo is a beautifully crafted and remarkably even-handed play. An “intellectual thriller,” in Bart’s words, it culminates with footage from an iconic moment in 20th-century world politics: the 1993 Rose Garden Ceremony marking the signing of the Oslo Accords, when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat shook hands—Israel recognizing the PLO as Palestine’s official representative, and the PLO recognizing Israel’s right to exist—with President Bill Clinton standing between them. *Oslo* isn’t about these three instantly recognizable, larger-than-life figures, however; rather, it tracks the secret backroom negotiations by Norwegian diplomats Terje Rød-Larsen and his wife, Mona Juul (played by Tony Award winners Jefferson Mays and Jennifer Ehle) that led to the signing of the Accords.

In some ways, the backstory to the play is as improbable as the events it dramatizes. Rød-Larsen and Juul happened to have a daughter who went to school with Bart’s daughter. Bart brought in Rød-Larsen, an expert on the Middle East and Central Asia, to talk to the cast during rehearsals for *Blood and Gifts*, and urged J. T. to have a drink with his friend, the diplomat—who revealed that he had covertly organized the backchannel talks. “I think I probably knew this was a play the moment I was hearing the story from Terje,” J. T. says. “The protagonists are not Israeli or Palestinian or American. And that became a clear path to write a play, as opposed to giving a lecture to the audience about it.”

On the eve of *Oslo*’s move to Lincoln Center’s Vivian Beaumont Theater, a Broadway house, J. T. and Bart sat down to talk about their collaboration.

Theatre Is Built on Human Connection

BARTLETT SHER + J.T. ROGERS

BY STEPHANIE COEN



BARTLETT SHER | J. T. writes my favorite kind of theatre. He's a very agile writer. I love the politics, I love the ideas, I like the theatricality, I like the complexity. And when it comes to politics, I like his politics with a small 'p.' Politics at the highest level, for me, deals with historical conditions, as Brecht would've asked, forces the audience into a relationship to a conflict or situation, and asks them to make their own decisions.

J. T. ROGERS | And deals with the *polis*, you know, from the root of the word, which is: what are you watching, and how are you part of the larger question?

BART | I'm always interested in looking back after the fact. The history play is very attractive to me, because it has that distancing effect. What's the phrase? Art, like light, needs distance. *Oslo* is about political ideas, it's about engagement, it's about history, and it allows you to enter those conversations with real ideas, real language that conveys complex thoughts, and find your way toward your position in relationship to that history and your decisions about where you fall in those politics. Not in the confines of Netflix, but in the public space of a theatre in New York City.

J. T. | There are subjects that I'm really fascinated by politically, as a citizen. As a writer, you always want stories that are big and have complexity. And one of the three or four that has always been there for me is—in quotation marks—"Israel/Palestine." It was like trying to find a way to write about Rwanda [in *The Overwhelming*, his 2007 play about the genocide in Rwanda in 1994]. You have to find the way. And for me, it was like, oh, the protagonists are not Israeli or Palestinian or American. And that became a clear path to write a play, as opposed to giving a lecture to the audience about it.

From *The Overwhelming* to *Blood and Gifts* to *Oslo*, I was working on continually moving up the ladder of power. I wanted to see if I could write a play at the level of power where people were actually in the room altering things. That was the engine for the writing of it. But there was also the Shakespearean model of the history plays, where things are constantly elevated; as the drama increases and the play gets deeper into itself, characters begin to arrive who have more power.

BART | You go from this couple, who have an idea about trying something, and in each stage it keeps expanding in its possibilities until you're at the White House. We call the play an intellectual thriller; it's a thriller of ideas, not an action thriller. There is an actual pressure, there are people's lives on the line—they could die as a result of the circumstances involved. The risks are incredibly high, but they must be solved with the mind. It's one in which you

have to watch people go through something very pressurized.

J. T. | The struggle in writing any kind of larger political play is to make it a personal story set against larger events, as opposed to a play about larger events. Can you whittle the gaze of the audience as tight as you can, and then expand, and then whittle again? That's what Bart visually does as a director. I'm going to mix metaphors, but what he does is open the iris and close the iris, and open the iris and close the iris.

I've worked with many talented directors, but with Bart, the thing that's so fruitful is that he approaches text—both staging it, and dramaturgically with the actors—the way I approach text. Which is, how do the language and the ideas lift? After we worked on *Blood and Gifts*, we made a conscious choice to do a bunch of projects together. And then André came and said, "I want to commission you to write another play," which is not always the norm and why I'm really grateful. But I knew what Bart could do.

BART | This went through many workshops and unfolded in a slow and complex way. It was a lot of material.

J. T. | But there were moments where I could say, I don't have to worry about that, I know that he can make that work. And that allowed for swiftness in the final writing because I didn't have worry about, well, how would a director do that? I just knew that it was going to get done.

We started working on the play when I wrote what is now 40 pages of act one and was then about 80 pages. I just had a reading with actors I put together and obviously had Bart come just to hear it. I didn't want to give him anything till I was in a place where I knew where I was going. As with a lot of good directors, there's that sort of "shark circling blood in the water" thing; as the writer, you have to be like, "Yeah, not yet. You can't see it yet." You've got to figure it out yourself, before you're ready to have somebody pushing back on it, which is his role. From there, we did a number of workshops together, the next big one without even a finished script, and I kept writing. And as I was writing it, Bart was putting it on its feet so he could understand what the play actually is as a thing, and then he would ask why this and why that?

BART | The first thing I did was a kind of classical version, which is the version you have to treat as though you don't have any opinion just so you can see what's there. Because the opinion can short-circuit the subconscious level at which he's developing his own ideas. Because once I start to get in there saying, no, it needs to do this, and the scene isn't doing

this—then I'm basically shaping the structure. Which is not what I should be doing. Once we get past a certain point, I will say, I can't do this.

J. T. | Again, having a working relationship, the connective tissue between the author and the writer—intellectually as well as aesthetically—becomes really useful. When that director comes to you and says, "I can't stage this scene," you're like, "Oh, well, it's got to go." Instinctively, you know that it's a textual issue. It doesn't matter if it's well written.

BART | "I can't stage a scene" may not mean I can't physically stage it. It may mean that I can't make sense of what to tell this actor to do right now. And we have great actors. But when you get to a certain point, and you know you have nothing to say and it's not making sense, you start to go, okay, let's think about this.

J. T. | There are distinct moments in the play where there are scenes that came directly out of the rehearsal process of Bart and me talking, or the actors and Bart coming to me and saying, "I don't understand what I'm doing here." So I would literally write a scene—and this is the toughest thing for a playwright—that would explain something for the character and the audience. Some of these scenes were created as Band-Aids, but then later become crucial to the play. And then there were other scenes that felt so important in the rehearsal process; they were the "Eureka" moments for the actors and for Bart. But when we went into previews, Bart would say, "Well, now that they're saying it in front of an audience, we don't need this scene anymore."

BART | The distinction between the interpretive artist and the creative artist is very critical here. As the interpretive artist, I have to know the boundary and the job I have in relationship to his job. He gives me this preexisting reality out of his subconscious and out of his research and out of his ideas for what it is. My first responsibility is to realize what that is. I should never give creative solutions, like creative writing solutions, to solve interpretive problems. So I can say things like, "The more I've worked on [the scene], the more I think the real question here is about recognizing the existence of the State of Israel." I can't say, "We need a scene that does this." I can talk in general terms about where we're heading, as the interpreter. Then he takes that information, and if I'm lucky, he's going to go somewhere I don't expect. Because he's a creative and interesting and brilliant artist. But if I tell him to go somewhere, then I've crossed the boundary around how this very delicate relationship operates between the interpreter and the creator. And in my interpreting it, I may go places he'd have never expected.



Oslo at Lincoln Center Theater
PHOTO T. Charles Erickson



Jennifer Ehle + Jefferson Mays
in *Oslo* at Lincoln Center Theater
PHOTO T. Charles Erickson

J. T. | I'm just doing the galleys for the book right now, and I'm very spare with stage directions. Just philosophically, because when I read them in a play, I can't hold them in my head, so I try to never have stage directions.

BART | And I automatically ignore them anyway.

J. T. | It's the opposite of screenwriting. In screenwriting, the playwright gets to write all that stuff, and it's wonderful. But it's interesting because there's one scene where I have quite a bit of stage direction, and Bart did it a completely different way. And so now I have the challenge as I sit here with the script, getting ready to go to galleys, of: do I keep the original stage direction? Do I put in what he did? Or do I cut it completely?

And I say that because it's an example of having the working relationship. The joy for an author is always when the director and/or the actor comes up with a solution or an interpretation that's better than yours, because then the play is something larger than yourself. As the author, you have to train yourself to speak as infrequently as you can, because when you speak, it has weight.

BART | Right. And also what's happening in the rehearsal room is you have a layer of text or a scene that he has worked on consciously or subconsciously. I have the job of talking to

actors and explaining the subtext that's going on in the scenes. Some of which I can consult with him about, and some of which I can't. So, for example, there's a scene [in *Oslo*] that gets out of control in the first act where Abu Ala begins by telling these stories, and they're all telling jokes, and then it incredibly quickly erupts because somebody says the wrong thing.

I remember thinking, the very first time we did it, "This isn't working. I think there's more here in the scene." Because I had to really push the actors to understand what each side didn't trust about the other, as to why it could go on a dime. And so there's a weird interpretive thing going on, which has so much to do with the kind of Chekhovian part where you're just asking all the questions that aren't on the surface of the writing but which are all underneath. But to get the actor to do what he actually intends, how a director communicates that is maybe totally different than what the playwright thinks it is.

J. T. | An analogy is that all I'm obsessed about is the sock. It's all about the sock. And then Bart comes along and says, so, the sleeve, what is the sleeve? And I'm like, why are you talking about the sleeve? But then that is the thing that actually unlocks it for the actor.

Even though we did three or four workshops, the rehearsal process was insane. I had never bothered to count the scenes of the play; all of a sudden, we're like, holy fuck, there are 64

scenes. We were literally running the play for the first time one or two days before the first preview. But again, because of the relationship, sometimes Bart would be staging scene A, and I knew that I was free to run over to the actors who were in scene B and just start giving them changes, and running lines and changing things, because he didn't need to be worried about that. He just is going to interpret. We don't have to waste time with "Can we get together and can we all read the new stuff?" Let me just give it to them. Then he can just look at it and go, "Yes, no, yes, no."

BART | One advantage of Lincoln Center is that long preview periods really matter. Because you get that really important time to develop and shape and shape. Some of the biggest choices you make you don't know to make until you get all the way to previews.

Theatre is built on human connection. The audience gets to do the thing that can happen only in theatre, which is transfer into the events, assign their politics to whatever it is, experience it on a human level, and then change. So they're transformed by what they learn through the conflict of the dramatic situation, not through the intellectual reading of information or anything else. It's actually through the drama. And it's through the experience of the historical events, like the Greek plays. It's about learning. That was always important in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, too: what does the main character learn?



Anthony Azizi, Dariush Kashani, Michael Aronov,
Joseph Siravo + Jennifer Ehle in *Oslo* at Lincoln Center Theater
PHOTO: T. Charles Erickson

J. T. | I think the reason the story initially interested me is it's about people who are constantly having to learn new information. I was interested in what kind of story I could tell where the people in the play have to learn information, and have to impose their ideas on other people, even at the cost of their own lives. The intellectual ideas are blood and sinew, and the characters will die for them. And so sometimes you find yourself finding stories set outside of the normal American storytelling character set, because we've shied so far away from that in our day-to-day culture.

If you had told me that "You're going to have to bet on your own body of work, J. T.," and predict which play is going to go to Broadway, it would not be this play. So I'm delighted and surprised [to be moving to the Beaumont]. But my own excitement as an author aside, I feel like I'm constantly struggling against this idea that there's only one kind of play that can be successful in the U.S.: a domestic play about a family with four people at max, and one set, maybe with a turntable. And some of those plays are amazing. But it seems like the menu is small. And so it's exciting to think, wow, people are going to get to see this the way I got to see a number of large, sweeping historical plays as a young person that were really influential to me. And it just feels rather thrilling to be part of that.

BART | The Beaumont is a really good social intellectual space; it's a place where people have to listen to words, it's a space of language, and it's a space where ideas have to be shared within a community. It's not "us and them"; it's a community space. And it's required for a play like this to have the impact it needs to have.

J. T. | In many ways, I wrote the play for the Beaumont, in the sense that I knew what the Mitzi was, and I was like, I want to write a play—and I knew it was going to get done—so I wanted to write a play that could barely be held by the Mitzi. So it was a challenge, like, all right, now, Rogers, let's see if you can get better.

BART | One of the things about the play is that it's about impossible foes being forced into a room to talk to each other. We're in an era where that is a very complicated question, as much as with the Israelis and Palestinians. So I think that will resonate. I think that you want to have a show in which, no matter what your point of view is politically, you feel you should see it and weigh in so that we could create the illusion of a shared understanding of what our republic means. Because that is really critical right now. And so that conversation is worth having.

J. T. | In the making of a piece of theatre like this, it's almost like I don't allow myself to think about what effect it will have on people and what conversations [it will] start. Because A, I'm too busy trying to make it, and B, it's hard enough to write—you don't need to add those voices yourself. Looking back now, I was sort of naïve in my thoughts. *Oslo* had more of an effect than I thought and created far more conversations about now—as opposed to just what the play's about—than I anticipated, which has been affirming as well. Like, really affirming. And, also, that age-old thing that we all pay lip service to, but you have to be reminded of in your own work, is you can only do the work that you really want to do, and that's the only work that's ever going to get a conversation in a larger way in the community.

BART | You know, I think that the entire experience of doing this has created in me a greater faith in theatre than I had before. Which is always reassuring, I guess. It's a complicated story. It demands a lot of its audience. And audiences never once, from the very first preview, were anything but deeply engaged from beginning to end. There was an enormous amount of thirst for the ideas. Thirst for the conversation. Thirst for the truthfulness of the engagement itself. And that, you know, that's pretty great. **SDC**