



Anna Botsford and Elliot Sicard in "Unsafe."



Jim Dalglish, playwright of "Unsafe."

“Culturally, [9/11] was a watershed moment for the country. We no longer felt safe.”

*Jim Dalglish*

# Survival Instinct

## Phoenix-like themes emerge in post-9/11 psychological thriller

Playwright Jim Dalglish turned one of the most traumatic experiences of his life into art.

Dalglish, author of some 25 plays, many of which have been staged around the country, still has a day job as a digital strategist. On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, he was a software specialist setting up a presentation for a client, Standard and Poors, in a meeting room in Standard

& Poors' building overlooking the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan.

As the first plane hit the tower, Dalglish recalls his shock that “they told me to go on with the presentation.” As the horror unfolded, Dalglish was soon outside “covered in dust” and two days later on a train heading home. He first wrote about that life-altering event in a short play “Professionals,” which received a 2002

production in the Provincetown Theatre Company Playwright's Festival.

The aftershocks of that day stayed with him. Dalglish worked for several years on a feature-length play about a family fractured by alienation and addiction, each one reeling from still-haunting memories of 9/11.

“Culturally, it was a watershed moment for the country,” he says of that day. “We no longer felt safe.”

His psychological thriller, “Unsafe,” a semifinalist at the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater

Center in 2008, will be presented in a coproduction between Boston Public Works Theater Company and Cotuit Center for the Arts. It will be staged March 31–April 10 at the Cotuit Center for the Arts. From April 14–30, “Unsafe” will be at the Plaza Theater at the Boston Center for the Arts.

“I wanted to take advantage of this synergy. It’s basically the same production we’ll be bringing to two different audiences,” says Dalglish, a North Dakota native who graduated from the University of North Dakota before heading East to earn his MA in creative writing at Brown University (his thesis advisor was Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and out lesbian Paula Vogel).

Besides his personal experience on 9/11, Dalglish drew on two other sources as inspiration for his multi-character play.

First, the young gay hustler Will is based on the gay friends Dalglish knew in the early 2000s who’d gotten into the party scene and attendant party drugs like crystal meth. A community that had been decimated by AIDS just a decade

before was now letting itself be harmed by another kind of terror.

Meanwhile, Will’s stepmom, Lisa, whose 40th birthday party opens the play, evolved from Dalglish seeing a video interview with Dr. Oliver Saks about Williams Syndrome. Dalglish was fascinated by a striking little girl named Heidi with an exceptional gift for music, which is typical of those with the condition.

Setting these elements against the backdrop of a freshly post-9/11 New York City during a blizzard, Dalglish unleashes internal and external demons that emerge as metaphors for examining culture and family.

The staging of “Unsafe” at the Cotuit Center for the Arts grew from Dalglish’s former job as managing director of the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater (WHAT) and his relationship with Cotuit Center for the Arts Executive Director David Kuehn who, says Dalglish, “has great taste and has created an amazing arts center.” When 100 people attended a reading of Dalglish’s short play “Bark Park” at the center, it led to a full, sold-out production

that was voted “Best Theater” for 2014 by the Cape Cod Times.

A reading of “Unsafe” followed to an equally enthusiastic reaction. Dalglish recalls that 120 people showed up for the reading in the middle of winter, and all of them remained for the talkback that followed. Kuehn liked the audience engagement that the reading generated, so he told Dalglish, “Let’s do it.”

In the meantime, after dividing his time between New York, Cape Cod and Boston, Dalglish moved to Boston full-time last year with his longtime partner, Rob Phelps, who is the managing editor for *Boston Spirit*. One of the first things Dalglish did after settling in town was to join Boston Public Works (BPW), a collaborative of writers who produce their own plays.

Dalglish will direct the production of “Unsafe,” relishing the chance to work with actors and create the world of his play.

“We will use the Black Box [theater] as a post-industrialist concept of the wreckage of the World Trade Center,” he says. An

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ancillary art show to the production uses videos, artwork and written responses from the audience to the play and to 9/11 itself.

Dalglish has in the past directed his own plays and those of other writers. While directing at the Provincetown Theater Company, he met actress and playwright Lynda Sturmer and the two have collaborated on several works including "A Talented Woman," the winner of the 2013 Jeremiah Kaplan New Play Prize and a semi finalist at the 2013 National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center. Their two-character short play "Super-Lubricated," about a widow who buys condoms from a gay male clerk in a drugstore, was a highlight of the Women's International Theater Festival in Provincetown this past October.

"Super-Lubricated" was just accepted into a gay theater festival in Dublin, so Dalglish and Sturmer will head to Ireland the second week of May.

Dalglish's work is too wide-ranging for him to be called

a "gay playwright," although he routinely incorporates gay themes and characters into his works. His most recent play, "Lines in the Sand," is about a bullied gay teenager and the older man who befriends him.

Dalglish acknowledges that for people with careers, whether in or outside the theater, "the last thing you want to do is go home and write. But I was disciplined and I do it. There's no way anyone wants to be a playwright," he says. "It is a horrible compulsion. It's crazy to work in a medium where you need 50 people to produce your work—it does not exist until it's in front of an audience."

But there is nothing quite like the moment when the lights go up on such a personal, intimate creation. "All of my plays are my best friends. You're with them for so long that the characters take on an amazing dimensionality as they travel from my own imagination," says Dalglish. "To see them fully realized is a thrill." [x]

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The festival, says May, has long made women's films a significant part of its program. Among the features she's excited about this year include "Margarita, with a Straw," Shonali Bose's well-regarded second film after 2005's "Amu." It's about Laila (Kalki Koechlin), an outgoing young woman with cerebral palsy who leaves India and her protective family for the U.S. where, among other adventures, she embarks on a lesbian relationship. May also has high praise for "While You Weren't Looking," a South African film directed by Catherine

Stewart about several couples including a black woman who works in real estate and who is cheating on her white wife, and their bohemian daughter dating a gender non-confirming woman in the Khayalitsha township.

"I love the focus on international films," says May. "We are so lucky in Boston because our audiences are sophisticated. They want complex stories that show a different side of LGBT life that they won't get from mainstream films." [x]

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