

CRAIG WRIGHT

Irons in the Fire

BY KEVIN NANCE

Craig Wright

COURTESY OF ABRAMS ARTISTS AGENCY

The playwright-screenwriter is thriving with one foot in Hollywood and the other on stage

When Craig Wright left the Twin Cities to write for television in Los Angeles six years ago, some of his friends experienced that rueful poignancy theatre folk often feel when one of their own crosses the Styx into Hollywood.

“I was happy for him, because Craig was destined for the big time in some way, but I was saddened because he sort of belonged to us,” recalls Bain Boehlke, artistic director of Minneapolis’s Jungle Theater. “He was ours, and then he moved on.” John Dias, the New York–based theatre director and producer, was pithier. “Oh, God,” he told Wright upon hearing the news, “we’ve lost another one.”

Even with constant tension between artistic and commercial imperatives in Hollywood, Wright insists, it’s possible for him to write satisfying scripts for TV.

Even now, some of his theatre colleagues are reluctant to talk about Wright’s trip to the Other Side. “With due respect, I don’t believe I’ll speak to that,” demurs Aaron Posner, who directed several of the playwright’s premieres and is now artistic director of New Jersey’s Two River Theater Company. Pressed, he says: “When I heard he was going to L.A.,

I hoped it wouldn’t stop him from continuing to write plays, because his soul is in the theatre. Craig’s too smart, too complex and too bubbling-up with inspiration not to write more brilliant plays.”

They needn’t have worried. Although the author of *The Pavilion*, *Orange Flower Water*, *Recent Tragic Events* and other plays has since staked an impressive claim in the Hollywood writers’ community—penning memorable episodes of “Six Feet Under,” “Lost,” “Brothers & Sisters” and, most recently, his own show, “Dirty Sexy Money”—he has kept one foot planted firmly in the theatre. Since his journey west, Wright has added to his theatrical oeuvre almost annually with such plays as *The Unseen*, *Grace, Lady* and, in a co-write with his Hollywood pal Larry Gelbart, *Better Late*, premiering through May 12 at Northlight Theatre in Skokie, Ill., and featuring Windy City legends John Mahoney and Mike Nussbaum.

“I do write plays a little less than I used to—getting my own TV show slowed me down—but it’s not like I left the theatre behind,” Wright says in January, in the midst of the Writers Guild of America strike that brought production of movies and TV shows, including his own, to a halt. “I certainly haven’t stopped writing plays, and I look forward to a time when I’ll be writing more plays and doing less TV work. Certainly I can imagine myself post-Hollywood.”



RICHARD TERMINI

Jennifer Mudge and Brian d'Arcy James, with Stephen Bogardus in background, in Wright's *The Pavilion* at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater in New York City.

"Don't listen to that," scoffs Northlight artistic director BJ Jones, a Wright pal who's staging *Better Late*. "The truth is that Craig is capable of working in a variety of media and art forms. He works best under duress, in fact, with a lot of deadlines, which is why he's got so many balls in the air at once. His heart is very much in the theatre, and people in Hollywood have recognized his talent and allowed him to do both. His capacity is huge."

Gelbart, who has done plenty of fence-straddling of his own—working in television ("M*A*S*H"), movies (*Tootsie*) and musicals (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *City of Angels*)—agrees that Wright will continue to inhabit both worlds. "I don't think he'd be satisfied, just working in Hollywood," he says. "It's awfully seductive, but I think he needs the theatre. It's his home base."

When the approach from Hollywood came, Wright was ripe for it. As a playwright based in the Midwest, he wasn't happy with what he saw as the theatre's lopsided center of gravity. "I was semi-resentful of the centrality of New York to the theatre community," he admits. "And although I had one or two plays that were done a lot, I wasn't having *that* much success in the field. I felt I hadn't really broken in; I wasn't part of the club. Beyond that, I had been mostly supported by my wife for many years. So when I had the chance to write for television, the tradeoff seemed attractive. I didn't do a lot of moral arithmetic when the offer came."

The process began when Marc Korman and Jonathan Baruch, Hollywood management executives, received a copy of Wright's

Orange Flower Water. "We fell in love with it," recalls Korman, and soon Wright was flying to L.A. for an intensive series of meetings with cable and network executives, including creator Alan Ball and executive producer Alan Poul of HBO's "Six Feet Under," then going into its third season.

It turned out to be a perfect fit. Both Ball and Poul had backgrounds in the theatre, and several members of the cast—including Frances Conroy and Michael C. Hall—were stage actors. "It was immediately clear to Alan and me that Craig had the two things we were looking for: first, a singular and authentic voice, and second, the ability to write deeply felt characters in naturalistic scenes, in which what was really happening was below the level of the dialogue—a skill not generally cultivated by writers of episodic TV," Poul says. "He had never written a professional screenplay or teleplay, but we hired him immediately. And when he turned in his first draft of an episode, it was as if he'd been writing for the show for years."

Perhaps the biggest shift for Wright was adapting to the exponentially larger number of cooks in the kitchen. Coming from the theatre, where the playwright's words are often regarded as holy writ, Wright found himself submerged in a culture where the writer's product is treated with decidedly less deference. Again, no sweat. "He understood immediately in what ways the food chain is different in TV—where the writer's

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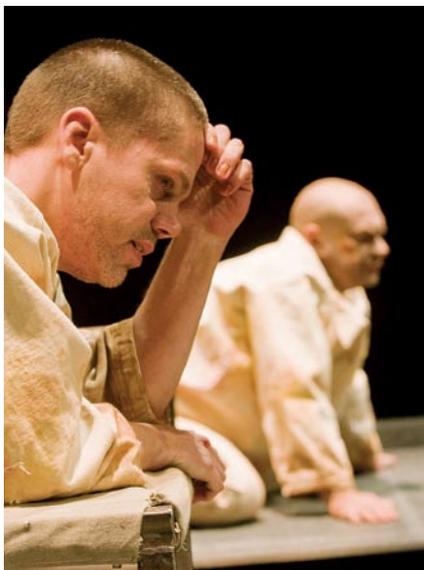
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BRUCE BENNETT

Dwight Clark, left, and John Arp in Wright's *The Unseen* at Stages Repertory Theatre of Houston in January.



JOAN MARCUS

From left, Heather Graham, Hamish Linklater and Colleen Werthmann in Wright's *Recent Tragic Events* at New York City's Playwrights Horizons in 2003.

contribution to the finished product is more collaborative than absolute—and adjusted his behavior accordingly,” Poul says. Adds Korman: “Usually what happens in Hollywood is that you get notes from execs, you get pissed

off and regurgitate whatever you think they want. It's the rare writer who thinks about what they want, then gives them back a version of it that's even better than what they asked for. Craig's a pro at that.”

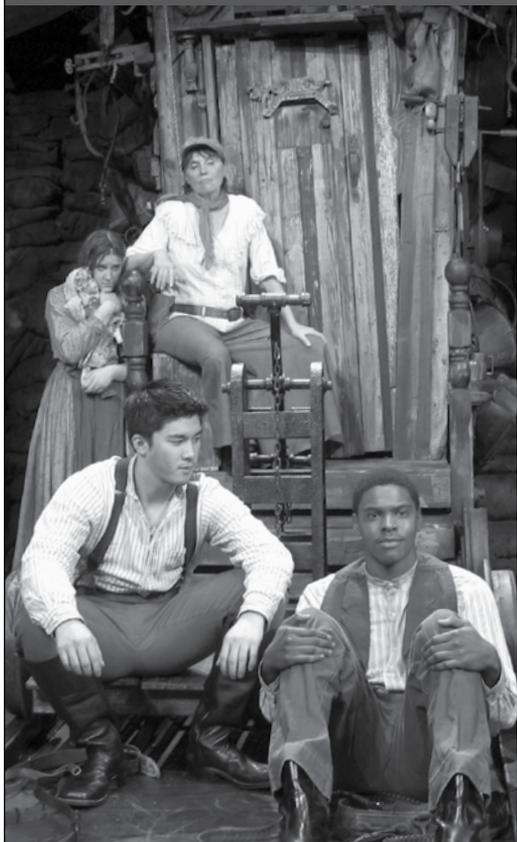
Wright's willingness to work with management has served him well in the industry, but at times it's also made him a bit cranky with some of his colleagues—during the writers' strike, for example. He was completely supportive of the strike's central aim—securing writers their fair share of revenue from movies and TV shows distributed on the Internet—but has little time for Hollywood scribes who moan about their artistic integrity being sapped by interfering studio suits.

“If writers are admitting to being aesthetically compromised, what they aren't admitting is that they're doing it because they want all that money,” Wright says with some heat. “No one's making them stay in Hollywood. If you want absolute control, then don't ask other people to pay for your means of distribution. If you do ask for that, shut up.”

Even with constant tension between artistic and commercial imperatives in Hollywood, Wright insists, it's possible for him to write satisfying scripts for TV. He points to a moment on “Dirty Sexy Money” in which Nick, a wealthy man shamed by his wife into a spasm of philanthropy, abruptly writes a huge check to a fledgling charity. When the awestruck recipient says, “You have no idea what this is going to mean for us,” Nick replies: “Actually, I do. But I'm going to give it to you anyway.”

“The awful complexity of that—the idea that money not only creates answers, it creates problems—is as round and complete

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From left, Paul Sparks, Michael Shannon and Lance Stuart Baker in Wright's *Lady* at Chicago's Northlight Theatre in 2007.

and complicated as anything I've ever put in any play," Wright declares. "And the network never blinked an eye."

Wright's surprisingly high comfort level in Hollywood doesn't mean that he's finished with the theatre. Far from it; the past few years have made him acutely conscious of the advantages of theatre over television.

Time, for example. "I'm not blind to the creative opportunity that my show represents—\$3 million every eight days to make an episode, to work with actors like Donald Sutherland and Peter Krause—but the pace of TV is grueling," Wright says. "It just seems like such a luxury right now to sit down at my computer knowing I'm going to take a year of my life and write a play and make it as good as it can be. It would be such a luxury to write at a more organic, reflective pace that would provide for more correlation between where the work is and where it's headed. You just don't have the time for that in TV."

Writing for the theatre also gives him the best venue in which to ruminate, at a more leisurely pace than is possible in television, on the spiritual themes that are at the heart of so many of his plays. Befitting a graduate of the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, Wright meditated on the unity of the universe in *The Pavilion*, the divine attitude toward ethics in *Orange Flower Water*, and so on. "Someone said of Craig's characters that they're always standing in the gutter looking up at the stars," Posner says. "They can fight and do damage and love and get things wrong, but they're giving it their best shot. They're always pondering: How does love work? What's our relationship to God? To each other? And how do we make it work better?"

All those themes work their way into *Better Late*, about a divorced older man (Nussbaum) who has a stroke and is taken in by his ex-wife and her current husband (Mahoney).

"It's very funny and bittersweet, an autumnal piece of atonement and reflection," Jones says. "We did a reading for an audience and they tore the house down."

For Wright, the play is another chance to demonstrate what may be the theatre's highest calling: the plumbing of the ultimate mysteries. "Like any play that I've ever wanted to write, it's not really about providing answers," he says. "It's about trying to formulate an unanswerable question, and then just living with it for a while. As the play becomes more and more that, I'm happy. It's really easy when you're writing to say something. What's hard is to *not* say something, and to just *be*."



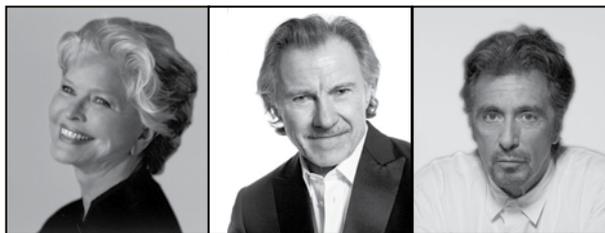
Kevin Nance lives in Chicago and is a frequent contributor to this magazine.

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