

*Theatre/Practice: The Online Journal of the Practice/Production Symposium of the
Mid-America Theatre Conference*



Volume 13, 2024

Jan and Joe

a short play
by Joe Stollenwerk

With an Introduction by Dan Venning

When I first read Dr. Joe Stollenwerk's play *Jan and Joe* for the 2022 MATC Playwriting Symposium at the Cleveland conference, "Revolution," I was floored. In the play, the character "Joe" speaks of a revival of *Follies* he saw in 2011, having attended to see Bernadette Peters but being captivated by Jan Maxwell. "Joe" also mentions being "kicked in the gut" by reading of Maxwell's death in the *New York Times*. The thing is that I had exactly the same experiences as this character in Stollenwerk's play at that revival and upon reading that headline. (In our rehearsal for the reading at MATC, directed by Shawna Mefferd Kelty, we took to calling the playwright "Dr. Joe" and the character "Joe." The thing is that the character "Joe" is a dramatic creation of the playwright, just as the character "Jan" is a dramatic creation imagining the voice of a deceased Broadway star.) Stollenwerk's play may not be *The Baltimore Waltz*, but it demonstrates, beautifully, some of the revolutionary powers of the theatre: to reimagine ourselves and, as Marvin Carlson has highlighted in *The Haunted Stage*, to give voice to ghosts, real and imagined.

-Dan Venning, PhD
Union College

Cast:

JAN: an actress

JOE: just a guy

Setting: nowhere in particular

The style is presentational, mostly direct address, and try not to get sentimental.

The five “scene titles” and “End of Play” should be read aloud or projected.

I. Joe

JOE

I am no Paula Vogel. And this is no *Baltimore Waltz*.

Headline: July 5, 2015: *Time Out New York*: “Jan Maxwell Shares Why She is Retiring from Broadway.”

II. Jan

JAN

The reason I stepped away? Do you want the short answer or the—you want the long answer. I can see that.

Well. The answer is that theatre just stopped being worth it. There are so few roles for a woman over the age of thirty, let alone pushing sixty, and the good roles are even fewer and farther between. But I’m obviously preaching to the choir.

Of course, I love doing it. Loved. It was nice to come back to New York in the summer and do a show here or there. I mean, I did plays at the Potomac Theatre Project on 16th Street, for Pete’s sake! You don’t do that unless you love it.

At its most mundane, it was *work*, of course, but always with flashes of the indescribable. It’s the work that matters—God, that such a cliché. But it’s true.

I think, though, that certain things in my life made certain other things in my life come into greater perspective. And there’s a grind to doing a show, and then being off work and all that down time, and then jumping into another show. And I guess at some point it just wasn’t worth what it used to be. Compared to other things.

Like what? Well, family. Family, mostly. And then, the cancer. That was ... oh, I guess you could say that was the real pisser. Not even the first cancer. The second. They don’t tell you that it’s not the overcoming, it’s the re-overcoming. You put in all this effort and emotional investment in surmounting the insurmountable the first time that when it comes knocking at your door a second time—well, I don’t need to go into all that.

III. Joe

JOE

I probably shouldn’t cop to this, because I’m an artist and a scholar and I should be as dignified as possible and above it all. But I must admit that I love to meet great actors at the stage door after a show. There is something thrillingly fangirlish about it.

When I choose to wait by a stage door for a performer, my goal is to think of something to tell this person that, ideally, they will remember on their deathbed.

I wish I could say I was joking about this.

I picture Cherry Jones years from now in hospice, lying there, wondering if it was all worth it, and then she'll remember the guy who met her after a performance of *Doubt* who told her how much he loved her performance in the show as well as in the movie *Cradle Will Rock* and what a beautiful and important work of art that was.

When I met Cloris Leachman after a performance of *Show Boat*, I asked her to sign my VHS copy of the 1979 Disney movie *The North Avenue Irregulars*, in which she played a sexy small town romantic who helps to bring down the mob. I think Miss Leachman thought I was insane. That stage door meeting was an epic fail.

So, with Jan, I think it was this combination of such extreme and tangible awe for her talent juxtaposed against her early retirement. I fixated on her, wanting to create some vehicle for her triumphant return to the stage, or maybe I just wanted to have her as a fabulous friend.

I wanted to write about this. I couldn't seem to get my head around it. And then few years ago, I had a few glasses of wine and started to write this play. It was awful—sentimental and far more self-indulgent than what you're sitting through, if you can imagine. I didn't get very far. The thing about having a couple glasses of wine to kick start the writing juices is that a couple turns into an orgy of wine so quickly.

That was Friday. On Sunday, I read the *New York Times* headline that felt like someone had kicked me in the gut: "February 12, 2018: Jan Maxwell, Celebrated Theatre Artist, Dies at 61."

I didn't know her. Not really. I mean, saying "not really" is a vast understatement. But she had touched me, touched my artistic soul, whatever that is. It felt so unfinished.

IV. Jan and Joe

JOE

When I went to see Jan Maxwell in *City of Conversation* at Lincoln Center in 2014, I couldn't wait to meet her afterward. The play was fascinating and the production was excellent, but she was just ... well, I hate to stoop to hyperbole, but she was otherworldly.

JAN

Mmmm, I think "otherworldly" is just fine.

JOE

Yeah. I do too.

JAN

I do know how to pick 'em. It was such a rich play to dig into. I played a DC socialite who aged from about 50 in the Carter era to 80 at Obama's inauguration. A showy role, to be sure.

JOE

She was mesmerizing. And I've seen mesmerizing before, believe me. She utterly captivated me. And her transformation to age 80 in the final scene—yes, it was helped by makeup and hair, but her physicality, her voice ... she communicated the passage of twenty years with such specificity and grace. I'm gushing, but it's only because there's no real way to describe or analyze the work of a brilliant artist. Words can't do it justice.

JAN

I'll interrupt to tell you that this wasn't the first time he had seen me on stage. A few years earlier, he had driven to DC to see me in *Follies*.

JOE

To see Bernadette Peters in *Follies*.

JAN

You don't have to tell them *that*.

JOE

It makes the story even better.

JAN

Well, he came to see Bernadette Peters, but he left thinking only of me. Little Jan Maxwell from Fargo North Dakota.

JOE

Her Phyllis was funny, sexy, tragic, and scary. She was stunning—

JAN

—even though some of my best lines in the libretto had been cut.

JOE

And I fell in love with the contour of her back. Which is odd since I'm gay, but I think it speaks to her presence on stage. And she is undeniably beautiful.

JAN

I was always a little surprised that I never made it into gay icon territory.

JOE

So after *City of Conversation*, I blathered on and on to her about her work in these two shows, these two very different roles. The next night, I was walking back from whatever show I'd seen, and I passed her on the street, walking with a friend. I *think* she recognized me. I nearly asked her if she wanted to get a drink, but I didn't want to come off looking like a stalker.

JAN

I would have gotten a drink. I love free drinks—(I'm assuming you would have treated).

JOE

The next year, I was back in New York, this time to see what was recently announced as Jan's final theatrical performance: Galactia in *Scenes from an Execution*. A small, intimate theatre, an intriguing piece of political art theatre, and another amazing performance in a demanding leading role. I had to meet her again after, and there's a tiny bit of me that wants to believe that she remembered me from the previous year. She was so gracious and I hope that I communicated my deep sorrow that three live Jan Maxwell performances would have to suffice for this lifetime.

JAN

Well, you summoned me here—without my permission, I might add, but I'll let that go. What do you want to tell me?

JOE

I don't think this can be one of those plays where a ghost appears to the main character and then the main character has a big revelation.

JAN

I would say *I'm* the main character here. And it can be whatever you need it to be.

JOE

I guess I want to know what Cherry Jones wondered in hospice: was it all worth it?

JAN

Was the theatre worth it? Of course it was. I ultimately left because there were too many reasons not to stay. But I think I accomplished a lot in my career. I have a lot to be proud of. And you do know that Cherry Jones is still alive...

JOE

Does it bother you that you were one of the great stage actors of your time and yet, whenever I mention your name, even to theatre people, even to theatre people in the know, they just stare blankly?

JAN

Well. I don't think I needed to know *that*. But no, it doesn't. I was a worker bee, not a star. I was an Undiva. I didn't have a TV show with which to build a fan base.

JOE

I loved you on *BrainDead*.

JAN

Well, only you and my dog watched it. But: in the theatre, I was so incredibly fortunate. I got to create art in small out-of-the-way theatres *and* I got to play Baroness Bomburst in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. Who gets to do that in a career? I mean, that's theatre, right there. *The Sound of Music* one season, *The Coram Boy* the next. *Follies* and *Lend Me a Tenor*. I don't know what else I could have wished for in that respect. That's so life-giving it's almost literally oxygen.

And sure, all things being equal, I wouldn't have minded doing it for another twenty years. Eleanor of Aquitaine and Eleanor Roosevelt—Martha and Medea and Lady Macbeth.

So much of my career—the heart of it, really—came after the age of forty, when I was old enough to appreciate it and wring every bit of joy out of it.

Of course, when they didn't dim the lights of Broadway for me when I died, I did turn over in my grave just a little bit.

And who's counting: five Tony nominations, coming in an eight-year span mostly in my fifties. At least one in each of the four acting categories. I was the second woman to do that: Angela Lansbury beat me by just two years, bless her heart. But let's not be petty about the small things...

V. Joe

JOE

When I was a senior in college, I directed Paula Vogel's beautiful play *The Baltimore Waltz* for my thesis. In my unreliable memory, it was a *stunning* production. Whether or not it actually was, one of my professors paid the show a lovely compliment: Paula had written the show for her brother Carl, who had died of AIDS several years prior. At the end of the play, Carl dies, and then he rematerializes before Paula's stand-in, Anna, and the two of them dance a waltz as the lights dim. My professor said that every time this play is done, Paula Vogel gets to dance with her brother.

I know I am no Paula Vogel. And this is no *Baltimore Waltz*.

END OF PLAY

JOE (Cont'd)

Or:

JAN appears. JOE looks at her. JAN holds out her hand. JAN and JOE waltz together as the lights dim.

END OF PLAY