

## Opening Nights with Director Robert O'Hara, SOA Theatre '96 (Directing)

Written by Chris Erric Maddox, SOA Theatre '03 (Acting)  
Tuesday, 24 November 2009 02:34

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On October 15, a group of Columbia and Tufts University Alumni gathered at the Kirk Douglas Theatre to view fellow Alumnus Robert O'Hara's premiere of yet another successful show, "Eclipsed." Going to the theatre in Los Angeles can be a little unnerving because one never really knows what to expect. *"Will I be entertained? Should I have stayed at home and watched TiVo? Or, better yet, watched a movie on the treadmill?"* As soon as the lights dimmed, however, I was reminded why I continue to go to the theatre, despite the occasional blunder: I might just buy a ticket for a show like Robert's, one of power, intrigue, and age-defying laughter.

I have known Robert for many years, as we both went to Tufts University for our undergraduate degrees, where I had heard about this mysterious up-and-coming director. Nonetheless, my first time actually meeting him was in New York City while I was still at Columbia, where he had already cemented himself in the theatre world directing critically acclaimed shows like "Insurrection" at the Public Theatre.

At that moment, I realized "this guy is special. This guy needs to be followed." And at that time, being a young actor as I was, this was an important epiphany; it was, and still is, important to create alliances with strong directors, writers, and producers.

So after all of these years, after accepting his Obie and traveling the world, it was reassuring to see this very unassuming young man mount a larger-than-life show. It made me think, *yes we can*.  
And he *continues* to do so.

**CM: Robert, you are working a lot these days? Did you anticipate that your life would be like this upon graduating from Columbia's MFA Directing program?**

RO: Yes, I am working a lot these day, and I'm grateful for the work, but it does take its toll on the body and mind, though I always hoped that I would be able to make a living as a writer and director. So to answer your question, I hoped for this, but of course, no one knows what a theatrical career will be like, because there are so many outside forces involved.

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**CM: When you get a call to direct, what kind of product are the producers expecting? Is that the kind of director you want to be, or is there another side of the story?**

RO: I think they are most likely expecting something rather visual and non-literal. I don't get called for August Wilson plays, but I'd love to do one of them. They are mostly done rather literal, so I think folks are used to seeing his work that way, and therefore that's not something someone would normally think of me for, if they are looking for a director. I want to direct all different types of plays, but I will still bring my own theatrical sense to it. I believe I am the director I want to be, and I think it all depends on how one feels about a particular play, and how they imagine it coming to life.

**CM: What does winning the 2006 Obie Award for your direction of the World Premiere production of "In the Continuum" mean to you?**

RO: It means a tremendous amount to me as an Artist to be recognized for my work, and because I was given the opportunity a few years after I won my Obie to be on the Jury for the Obies. I know how much work it takes to see all the shows in NYC and to decide who should be recognized for their achievement. It is, in fact, the first award I've ever been given for my Directing.

**CM: Congratulations! That is wonderful. What is your most important professional relationship?**

RO: I have many very strong and important relationships with various artists, be they Artistic Directors like Carey Perloff or Oskar Eustis or Emily Mann, or if they be mentors from my early career like George C. Wolfe and (director and Columbia Theatre professor) Anne Bogart, or designers like Clint Ramos and Colin Young, or even fellow playwrights like Tony Kushner, Danai Guiria or Tarell McCraney. As for my professional relationships with actors, there are simply too many to mention. I have very exciting professional relationships throughout the field, and I feel it would be a disservice to single out one of them as the "most" important. I value them all greatly. As for "Why", the Why is simple: an Artist needs encouragement and engagement of the mind, body, and soul, and each of my professional relationships function along those lines. Without them, I would not be where I am, or doing what I'm doing.



(L to R) Edwina Findley, Miriam F. Glover and Bahni Turpin in the West Coast premiere of "Eclipsed" by Danai Guiria. Directed by Robert O'Hara. "Eclipsed" continues through October 18, 2009, at Center Theatre Group's Kirk Douglas Theatre (9820 Washington Blvd. in Culver City). For tickets, please call (213) 628-2772 or visit [www.CenterTheatreGroup.org](http://www.CenterTheatreGroup.org). Media Contact: CTG Press (213) 972-7376 Photo Credit: Craig Schwartz

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**CM:** Mind, body, and soul. I love that. Is there a quote or saying that a professor would say, that comes to mind every so often?

RO: Nothing that comes to mind right now other than Anne Bogart really encouraging me to find my OWN Voice and commit to that... to not be afraid to be an INDIVIDUAL Artist. Oh wait... yes, Anne would always tell us that we have to be "attracted" to the people we cast, because if we can't identify what about that individual is attractive, then we can't show that to the audience and insist that they watch an individual for 2 hours. No matter who one casts, they should seek to find individuals that they find "attractive" ... that they want to be in the room with for 4 weeks, whose brains they want to pick and engage.

**CM:** Anne Bogart, another remarkable artist. How do you begin a project? Do you have a certain ritual that starts off every project?

RO: Well, there is the time before you get in rehearsal, which consists of me reading a lot and finding visual references that may or may not make their way into the production, but that Feel and Smell and Sound like the piece I'm about to interact with... it's a courtship... you begin to learn where the play LIVES... its environment... and then you begin to find a "path" that will lead you into the neighborhood of the play... into its nooks... so I try to bombard myself with information, be it directly related, or not.

**CM:** What was your breakthrough directing project?

RO: My first big break as a director was at the Public when I directed the play I wrote for my Thesis production at Columbia, "Insurrection: Holding History", but that was a complete mess of a process, so I don't really think folks think of that as my breakthrough as a director, probably more as my breakthrough as a playwright. As a director, I think it would have to be actually "In The Continuum", which won the Obies, and garnered international attention.

**CM:** Congratulations on your first feature-film directing debut, "My Place in the Horror." How was that experience? Any surprises?

RO: Thank you. By the way, the movie is now called "The Gathering" and I have little doubt that it will probably change titles again before audiences see it, but I like the new title, it's grown on me. That experience was NUTZ, because it was such a whirlwind of activity that is still happening now since we are in post (production.) I will share one surprise, which is that when you see a movie, you don't see actors go up on a line. Filming it, it happens all the time, and I always thought that the director would just call "CUT!" and they would start the scene again until everyone got it right. Well, of course, that's not true, and I had to learn the hard way. Very early, when an actor went up on their line, I called out "CUT" and the whole room turned to me like I was crazy! My AD said very politely that "we just keep the cameras rolling and we feed him the correct line, and since we're doing multiple takes from various angles, we can edit it seamlessly"... and I was like... "oh...duh..." so that was a funny day for me...

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Director Robert O'Hara at the first rehearsal for "Eclipse." Written by Danaí Gurira, "Eclipse" will have its West Coast Premiere at Center Theatre Group's Kirk Douglas Theatre (9820 Washington Blvd., in Culver City). Previews begin September 11, 2009, opening is September 20 and "Eclipse" continues through October 18. For tickets, please call (213) 628-2772 or visit [www.CenterTheatreGroup.org](http://www.CenterTheatreGroup.org).



(L to R) Kelly M. Jenette and Miriam F. Glover in the West Coast premiere of "Eclipse" by Danaí Gurira. Directed by Robert O'Hara, "Eclipse" continues through October 18, 2009, at Center Theatre Group's Kirk Douglas Theatre (9820 Washington Blvd., in Culver City). For tickets, please call (213) 628-2772 or visit [www.CenterTheatreGroup.org](http://www.CenterTheatreGroup.org).