"No one claps at the end of a novel" - A Conversation with Laura Wade

By Christina Wald, University of Cologne, Germany

Laura Wade's play *Colder Than Here* premiered at Soho Theatre directed by Abigail Morris in February 2005 followed shortly afterwards by her Royal Court Theatre debut *Breathing Corpses*, directed by Anna Mackmin. Laura was subsequently joint winner of the prestigious George Devine Award 2005, and also won the Pearson Best Play 2005 award for *Breathing Corpses*. The interview took place in London in July 2005, when Laura was working on a revised version of *Colder Than Here* for its New York opening as a MCC Theater Production in September 2005. Currently, Laura is working on new play commissions for Soho Theatre, the Royal Court Theatre, and Hampstead Theatre as well as adapting an unfinished Jane Austen novel for the stage, under commission to West End producer David Pugh. Laura's newest play *Other Hands*, from which we feature an extract in our fiction section, has recently premiered at Soho Theatre. Laura was awarded the 2006 Critics Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright.

Interview taken in London in July 2005

The writing process

Christina Wald: When you burst onto London's theatre scene in February 2005 with your debut play, *Colder Than Here*, and your second play, *Breathing Corpses*, running almost simultaneously at two of Britain's leading new-writing venues, Lyn Gardner remarked, "At just 27, Wade has gone from the playwriting equivalent of 0 to 90 in what seems like seconds."[1] I am interested in your preparation for this ostensibly sudden start - how did your interest in the theatre begin, which experiences did you make with the productions of your previous plays, and what role did young writer programmes play in your development as a writer?

Laura Wade: I was interested in theatre since I was really tiny. I remember going to see plays from the age of five or six and just thinking it was incredible. I totally believed it, I thought it was magical, and I still have that "childhood wonder" at theatre. I know that some writers work from wanting to make political points, whereas my writing just comes from an absolute total love of theatre - it's my favourite thing in the world. So I suppose I've always wanted to be involved. When I was younger, I wanted to be an actress for a few years and then decided I'd be terrible at that. And then, when I was about sixteen, I thought perhaps I

[1] Lyn Gardner. "Death becomes her." The Guardian, February 2, 2005.

wanted to be a director. So I wrote lots of letters to theatre companies around near where I lived, which was in Sheffield, and one director at the Crucible Theatre was very kind and let me come and watch some rehearsals. There were rehearsals for a new play, so they had the writer with them in the rehearsal room and I got to be friends with him and I thought he was really cool and he encouraged me to have a go at writing. At that point I wrote my first play, *Limbo*, around the edges of school work, and really loved doing it. *Limbo* ended up being produced; I showed it to some of the staff at the Crucible Theatre and they were looking for a play about young people. When I first started I was very much writing about myself - so this is a play about a young girl who is about seventeen and happens to live in Sheffield and have a life very similar to mine… It was all quite autobiographical at that point. But seeing my play being produced, I was hooked. I went off to university to study drama and I produced a couple of plays at the university theatre. After that, I spent a few years still fiddling around and not quite being able to find what I wanted to write about - I was going through the process of finding my "writing voice," I think. When I moved to London, three years after finishing university, it really kicked in and it was the "Young Writers Programme" at the Royal Court that really that helped everything fall into place. They run groups for writers between the ages of thirteen up to about twenty-six. You have a course of ten weeks, one evening per week, with a group of fifteen of you which is run by Simon Stephens. It's just a wonderful, wonderful opportunity because it really taught me a lot more about things like structure, approaching the writing with more rigour and having tools in your toolbox to tackle a problem. Another thing they really encouraged us to do was to read a lot. I hadn't read enough before and I think the best writers I know are the ones that read everything and see everything. It encouraged me to work a lot harder and it was while I was on that course that I wrote *Colder Than Here*.

CW: How does the Royal Court select the people who are allowed to take part in these courses?

LW: For what they call the "Introductory Course," you just have to apply. You don't have to have ever written before, you don't have to submit anything, so anyone can do it. And then they do a second course which they only run about once a year. This "Advanced Course" or "Invitation Course" is only for about ten people they pick because they feel they have some promise.

CW: To which degree, do you think, can playwriting be taught? Which specific skills can be taught?

LW: It's a very difficult question, isn't it?! There is something about being a playwright that is

a way of looking at the world which cannot necessarily be taught. It's about this raging curiosity about people and that is an essential character trait. But there's something about spending time with other writers that's really useful, especially learning about other people's processes and trying out other people's writing exercises. The Royal Court course is very good in that it allows you to do that. It doesn't say "this is the only way to write a play and this is how you structure a play and if it doesn't conform to this five-act-structure then it's not a play." They really teach you to find your own way. I think if courses are structured in the wrong way, they have a potential to be damaging. But in my experience, it was enormously helpful.

CW: You have just mentioned your love for the theatre. Could you imagine writing something other than plays, novels for example?

LW: No, no one claps at the end of a novel. It is the liveness of theatre that excites me. You can't have two hundred people sitting in a room all reading a novel at the same time and experiencing it together. I think that's the aspect of it that excites me the most - and the collaborative nature. Writing plays is lonely enough, really. Because it takes months and months to write something before you have that gorgeous month when you are in a rehearsal room and you've got actors around and a director and you get to see everybody making it into a "real" thing. Novelists seem to be on their own all the time and I don't think I'd like that, not really. And novels take years to write - I'm not that patient.

CW: Are there other playwrights whom you find particularly interesting and who have influenced your writing, or are there maybe different playwrights for each play?

LW: It's always difficult to tell when you've been influenced by something, because you try to resist that. You are always trying to speak in your own voice… But there are always playwrights that I go back to. I think Caryl Churchill is wonderful. She's my playwriting heroine, in terms of the way that she finds a new form for every play she writes. And the story fits the form; it's never about structure as a form of fireworks. So I love her work. I'd love to have a career as long as hers. Continually doing something new throughout such a length of time, that's wonderful. I read her work a lot. I love Martin Crimp. My writing is not anything like his at all, but he inspires such a love of language, and his plays, even when he's describing something horrific, make me smile because of the way that he's chosen the perfect words to the perfect phrases to describe something. Reading his work is very invigorating. And I like David Eldridge. I read his play *Under the Blue Sky* quite a lot while I was writing *Breathing Corpses* because it was another example of a narrative that is stranded but all the

plot lines are nonetheless linked in some way. And I like Joe Penhall's work very much as well - and Sarah Kane, she was a genius.

CW: You have mentioned Caryl Churchill as your dramatic heroine. Do you share her feminist commitment? Would you consider yourself a feminist writer or as a writer interested in feminism? Do you think that gender plays a role for your plays?

LW: I don't think I write from any necessarily feminist impulse. I think being a woman I have an interest in writing good female characters and we are still working against a long, long theatre history that has been very male-dominated. There are not enough really good female roles in classical work. So in terms of providing quality roles for female actors, yes, I suppose I have that at the back of my mind. When I first started out, I determined that I would never write a play that had more men in it than women. But then I wrote *Breathing Corpses* and that has got four men and three women, so I messed up. But other than telling stories about women, to some extent, I am not sure I necessarily call myself a feminist writer.

CW: You have also referred to Sarah Kane as a writer whose work you admire. Although critics responded much more positively to your debut than to hers, I was reminded of the reviews of *her* debut when I read the reviews of your plays, because reviewers again wondered how a young woman can write about such sinister or shocking topics. Several articles played with the idea that you are obsessed with death and expressed concern for your mental health. Did you have the feeling that your gender played a role in the way that your public persona was created?

LW: I don't know really. I hadn't thought of my gender playing a role. But yes, I think that girls are not supposed to write about nasty things. People tended to be quite surprised when they met me. They expected me to be some kind of little goth chick and some of the reviews even seemed to be a little worried about my mental health. To me it is absurd to assume that I am obsessed with writing about death, or that writing about death is a necessarily unhealthy thing to do because I think death is something that we should be allowed to consider. And think about it and discuss it at any time. Not only when we are directly confronted with it.

CW: When you begin writing a new play, do you know what you actually start with? Is it a specific topic, or are you attracted by a particular character or a constellation of characters? Or is it maybe a formal interest, as the time structure in *Breathing Corpses*?

LW: I suppose it depends on the play. *Colder Than Here* started because I had an interest in natural burials after I've read a newspaper article about it. And also, as a writer you are always looking for stories that haven't been told before. *Colder Than Here* particularly came out of the idea of natural burial and of someone planning their own funeral - I had never seen that

dealt with in a piece of drama. Usually ideas bubble away to the back of my head for a year or two until they are grown enough to become a play. With *Breathing Corpses* it was quite different, because I started with the character of the chambermaid finding corpses in the hotel. First it was going to be just a play about her, but then, through exploring her character, I got interested in what it is like to find a body and the different situations that can happen in. That snowballed into the idea of three corpses which will somehow be connected. I came to the idea of this circle and the idea of writing an impossible story, and so found a structure that was exciting because the audience would have some work to do in terms of putting the stories together. I think if it had been sequential, I would have gotten less out of the individual relationships. I wanted to have a linear structure of themes rather than of narrative. The *themes* were in a linear progression. I imagined the structure in the shape of a bowtie: It starts out wider in the beginning and closes in - and in the middle of that is the fight scene, which is the core - and than it spreads out again.

CW: I think you generally mix comic and serious elements in a very successful way, which makes it difficult to categorise your plays in terms of comedy or tragedy. Is that something that you aim to do, with having a special function of comic elements in mind?

LW: I suppose it comes out of an attitude really. My own sense of humour is slightly dark. And I think there is room for humour, even when the subject is really serious. Humour makes the tragedy feel bigger somehow. And particularly with *Colder Than Here*, I wanted it to be humorous, because I didn't want it to become melodramatic. I don't know if it's a specifically British thing, but I wanted to write about people's ability to make jokes in that kind of situation and to show how people get on with their lives, and that there can be humorous elements to that. I used to think of it as a graph, whose top line was the lightness and the humour, with the seriousness as another line underneath. And that the top line could fall down underneath occasionally, but you need it to get back up because the audience are capable of seeing both lines and connecting them by themselves.

From Page to Stage

CW: What are your experiences with joining rehearsals? Do you feel that there are repercussions in your work - do the rehearsals lead to immediate changes in the script, and does watching rehearsals maybe also have a long-term impact on your writing?

LW: I love being in rehearsals. Not just that you get to see some people but just to see how people react to the text and what they find difficult. Sometimes it comes out in a completely different way than how you imagined it. Actors are fascinating. I feel admiration for them, the

way that they start off on the first day, you do a read-through, and then they spend weeks going deeper and deeper and deeper into it, their performances are developing and developing. So I find I learn a lot. There are some writers that don't really want to be in a rehearsal at all. I stay until I get kicked out. I just love watching it come together. It's mind-blowing at times.

CW: Do you make minor changes in your work during the rehearsals?

LW: Yes. We made more changes to *Colder Than Here* than to *Breathing Corpses*. Partly because in *Breathing Corpses* the structure is so tight that we tried to get it right before we went into rehearsal, because it is the kind of play where you take out a line in one scene and it has a repercussion somewhere else and it all gets very complicated; it's built like a house of cards really. I worked with the director before we went into rehearsal, and we had a draft that we were really happy with before we started rehearsing. But with *Colder Than Here* it was a bit more open. There were a few things that I hadn't made clear enough. The interesting question in terms of changing things in rehearsal is whether something is wrong because you've written it wrong or because it doesn't fit with the way the actor is playing the role or with the actor's particular set of skills.

CW: Did you ever feel that you had to defend your text? Were there changes that the director or the actors suggested which you didn't like?

LW: Yeah, there were a few, and I find that if I can defend it, if there is a really good reason and I can explain that reason, then that's a reason for leaving it how it is. When I'm floundering, when I can't think of why I've done it, or I've just done it for some instinct or arbitrary reason, then that's when I will consider changing it. But sometimes, the actors ask for it to be changed when actually they just haven't found the right way to do it yet. And actually to change it would have repercussions in the rest of the play which would perhaps bend it out of shape or change it, steer it off in a direction you're not happy with.

CW: You mentioned that *Colder Than Here* was translated into German and might soon be produced in Germany. As in Germany productions tend to depart from the text much more than over here in England, how would you feel with a production that treats your text as material rather than as a script which is to be followed?

LW: I haven't experienced that yet, so I don't know. I'm very interested because I understand you have a very different approach in Germany, so I imagine I'd just be fascinated if that happens and I'm going to see it. Partly I wouldn't know, because my German is minimal. So I might not even know if they changed it unless they put an elephant on the stage. But I'm interested to see it. Even in any straight translation there are changes you would have to make

anyway in terms of culture. At the moment, I'm having to make some changes to *Colder Than Here*. It will be produced in New York by the *Manhattan Class Company* (MCC) and I'm translating a few words in it into American because there are things that they don't understand. I'm having to work through it and find places where it needs to be changed so the audience is not alienated - for example by not understanding what a jaffa cake is.

CW: Having seen both plays, I had the impression that *Colder Than Here* was much more realistic than *Breathing Corpses*. Would you say that this also applies to the writing or is that impression due to the different registers of the productions?

LW: No, I think that's right. *Breathing Corpses* is quite realistic inside the scenes, but the structure makes it less so. In production it was given a slightly gothic atmosphere, because of all the screaming noises during the scenes and bangs and crashes. Some things were striking and expressionist in the design and I loved that. But I can imagine a different production of it that would make it appear much more realistic.

CW: Did you write any of your plays with a specific theatre space in mind?

LW: I've written a new play for the Soho. For that one - because it was a commission - I did have a theatre space in mind. But when I'm writing, I tend to see the characters in a 'real' space rather than on a stage a lot of the time. Some writers can see the stage all of the time. Writing *Colder Than Here*, I was imagining a mother and a daughter picnicking in a field and not really thinking about stage design.

CW: So the combined space of living room and outside setting in *Colder Than Here* was the idea of the designer?

LW: I think the director and I had discussed it and we both agreed that we hated plays where people are moving furniture on and off - especially as in this play the sofa has to come on and go off again and come on and go off again - it would have been awful. And we both did not like blackouts, either, when the stage management team all come on and start moving things around and everybody has to wait for three minutes. So we were giving that as a brief to the stage designer and then we needed to find a way of coming up with a solution. We found a way of bringing the trees into the living room and the living room into the fields - it was beautifully matched.

CW: To what degree do you write for particular audiences? Would you say that the audiences of the Soho Theatre and the Royal Court Upstairs differ from each other?

LW: I think *Colder Than Here* possibly played to a slightly different audience than the typical Soho audience. Demographically, Soho's audience is rather young but as there were older characters in *Colder Than Here*, we had some middle-aged people coming in. But the

new play for the Soho is quite young. I think the characters are all between their late twenties and early thirties, so it will probably appeal to younger people.

CW: So the audience you had in mind for the new play is comparable to the Royal Court upstairs?

LW: I think so, yes. Although the new play is not as harsh as *Breathing Corpses* and the Royal Court has this reputation for doing things that are quite shocking. Quite daring. I think *Other Hands* is more quietly unsettling than that one was. A bit more subtle.

Colder Than Here* and *Breathing Corpses

CW: I'm sure that Myra's attitude towards her death was one of your main interests when writing *Colder Than Here*. Do you feel that the problems that Myra's family has with her straightforward way of dealing with her impending death represents the way that European societies see death as a taboo?

LW: I am fascinated by death and cultural attitudes towards it. I'm reading at the moment about American funerals and they are very different to the way we do it in Europe. Horrifying in some respect to a European person. I am also fascinated by death rituals in other parts of the world. I could talk hours about that. I think Myra has to be provocative. She has to provoke a reaction from her family in order for the play to have anywhere to go. She is trying to provoke them into action and knows that she has to be shocking and detailed enough so that they will be able to cope with her death. I always felt that she has that in her mind but I don't think that she necessarily gets it right in terms of her approach; sometimes she goes too far. I wanted to write a person that was fallible, because I hate literature where people become terminally ill and than suddenly become a saint. I'm sure if I was diagnosed with something awful like that I'd be horrible to everybody because I'd be angry and sad and resentful and scared.

CW: Is there any particular reason why you left the actual death of Myra out of the play and why there wasn't a burial?

LW: I really didn't want it to be a play about someone who died. I have seen that scene of everybody standing around the grave with umbrellas looking sad so many times. I wanted to do a play about someone who is going to die. I wanted to look specifically at the grief that happens *before* death.

CW: Does the family in *Colder Than Here* represent a typical contemporary British family for you?

LW: I think a typical family of that class. It is very difficult really to say what a typical

family is. Sometimes people ask me if it's my family. There are elements of my family, there are also elements of other families that I know. A lot of people my age came up to me and said: "He's just like my dad." My best friend's father, after seeing the play, went to her asking: "Have you been telling Laura about me?" I know him, but I hadn't consciously had him in my head as a model. So if it's possible for people to draw this connection, than maybe it is typical. But I suppose the aim of writing is that you are as specific as possible. And every family is the only one family in the world that operates exactly that way. You make it as specific as possible, and somehow, by making it specific, it can become universal.

CW: I was wondering how the audiences' reactions were during the run of *Colder Than Here* and also during *Breathing Corpses* because you said yourself that they tackle taboo themes.

LW: It's always hard to gauge an audience's reaction - apart from when people walk out in disgust! Nobody left the theatre during a performance of *Colder Than Here*, but we had a few people leaving in *Breathing Corpses* because of the violence. A couple of people walked out during the scene between Kate and Ben - we had a fight director who choreographed quite a nasty fight. I'd seen it several times by the time the audience came in and I knew exactly that he wasn't really holding her hair and dragging her around the stage. But it did look quite horrific. I didn't mind that people found it distressing because that was what it was supposed to be like. The reviewer of the *Daily Mail* said that it was pretty much the most horrible thing he had ever seen and that when he came out in the end, he had to ring his loving wife to remind him that there was some good somewhere in the world. I was delighted. That day we sold out due to that review. We sold every ticket. But some people don't like it and that's the risk you take, I suppose. You rip your heart out and put it on a plate and say, "Here you are. Please criticise." That's what you do. You have to accept it.

But for *Colder Than Here*, the responses I had from audience members were very positive - which surprised me, because I had expected more resistance. Partly because people knew from interviews that I hadn't written it from personal experience, I was worried that people would come back and say, "Well, you know nothing about it. This play has no resemblance to what that experience would really be like." But I had a few people come up to me afterwards and say that it was very like what they had been through with their family. Those that didn't relate could appreciate that it is a work of fiction, which offers one specific story about one specific family but is not trying to represent everybody's experience with grief.

CW: The characters in your plays that struggle the most are men. Would you agree that Alec and Jim are the most vulnerable characters in *Colder Than Here* and *Breathing Corpses*?

LW: I have been fascinated with the way men deal with emotion. The men that I know have been less able to deal emotion than women. In my opinion it is always very interesting to write about someone who cannot express what he is feeling, because you have to find some alternative outlet for that feeling. Men like Alec and Jim tend to submerge themselves in activity. Instead of sitting down and dealing with the feeling, Alec is busy with the heater, and Jim takes all the doors off. I was interested in that but I am not making a pronouncement about men in general.

CW: What is your new play about?

LW: The one I am currently writing for Soho Theatre, *Other Hands*, is about the way that technology affects our lives in modern society in the way that we rely on all these computers for example but we don't actually really know how they work. I combine this with the idea of emotional paralysis. So, I am not writing about death right now. Partly so that everybody can stop worrying about my mental health, but I still have an interest in death and I keep thinking of brilliant ideas for death plays that will have to wait…