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Secret Hour

By Jenny Stafford

Produced by The Public Theatre
March 2024

an Audience Guide
by Christopher Schario

THE AUTHOR:

JENNY STAFFORD has written the following about herself online: Jenny Stafford is an award-winning book writer, lyricist, and playwright whose works have been heard on Broadway, regionally, and internationally.

Broadway: Cirque du Soleil's *Paramour*.

Shows: *The Homefront* (with Sam Salmond, Village Festival 3of New Musicals, Village BETA series, NAMT finalist), *The Artist and the Scientist* (with Brandon Anderson, CAP21), *Extended Stay* (with Scotty Arnold, Rhinebeck Writers Retreat, Florida Festival of New Musicals), *Prodigy* (CCU, Collaborative Development Project, Two Rivers Theatre Company, and Indiana University), *Beating a Dead Horse* (winner of the 2017 Reva Shiner Comedy Award, Bloomington Playwrights Project and the Athena Project), *Secret Hour* (Boulder Ensemble Theatre Company, And Toto Too, Prologue Theatre Company, Virtual New Works Festival, Capital Repertory Theatre New Works Festival), *Eleanor and Dolly* (Butterfly Effect Theatre Company, Athena Project), *Color Inside the Lines* (Denver Fringe Festival), *The Goree All-Girl String Band* (with Artie Sievers), *To Have and to Hold* (Prospect Theatre Company, Barrington Stage), *Cinderella* (commissioned/produced by the Spotlight Youth Theatre), *Two Bugs are Better Than One* (commissioned/produced Off-Broadway by the New York City Children's Theatre, all with Willem Oosthuysen), *The Star Child* (with Sarah Underwood and Josh Freilich, French Woods), *Awakening* (with Joel B. New and J. Oconer Navarro), and *Skittles* (Woolly Mammoth).

International: *Alive* (The Space UK, Edinburgh), *Color Inside the Lines* (2021/2022 Edinburgh Fringe Festival), *Some Kind of Weasel* (2020 Edinburgh Fringe Festival), Cirque du Soleil's *Paramour* (Hamburg, Germany).

Her work has been featured at the Lincoln Center Songbook Series (*The Lyrics of Jennifer Stafford*), Prospect Theatre Company, The National Alliance for Musical Theatre Songwriter Salon, the New York Musical Theatre Festival, 54 Below, Ars Nova, Joe's Pub, and numerous other NYC venues, including multiple inclusions in William Finn's *Ridiculously Talented* concert series.

Awards include winner of the Capital Repertory Theatre's New Works Festival, ASCAP Plus Awards (2020, 2021), Best Solo Show (*Color Inside the Lines*), the 2017 Reva Shiner Comedy Award and the Paulette Goddard Award. Two-time finalist for the Kleban Prize, finalist for the Yale Institute for Music Theatre, the Eugene O'Neill Musical Theatre Conference, the National Alliance for Musical Theatre Conference, and the Ronald M. Ruble New Play Competition. Second prize in the McLean Drama Company Playwriting Competition.

She's been an Artist in Residence at the Rhinebeck Writers Retreat, Village Theatre, the Johnny Mercer Writers Grove at Goodspeed, the Catwalk Institute, Hypatia in the Woods, Barn Arts, Goodspeed Musicals, CAP 21, the Ross Ragland Theatre and the Berkshire Playwrights Theatre. Dramatists Guild member. MFA, Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

Jenny is also a prolific teaching artist, teaching with the Metropolitan Opera Guild (where she was awarded the title of "Master Teaching Artist"), the New York City Children's Theatre, Trinity Music NYC, and Colorado Christian University. She has been a guest lecturer/artist at New York University, Baruch College, Indiana University, Santa Clara University, SUNY New Paltz, and Fordham University. She also spent two summers teaching theatre and songwriting at Shanti Bhavan in Bangalore, India, with Artists Striving to End Poverty.

PLOT:

Thirty-five-year-old Kate is a workaholic university Ethics professor with only one rule for her students—do not lie to her. She asks her students (and the audience) to answer the question, “Is your greatest ethical responsibility to yourself, or to others?”

Ben, her husband of eight years, is an unemployed programmer. However, as Kate and her husband struggle to have a baby, she finds herself in an ethical dilemma of her own.

Their relationship is buoyed in large measure by a kind of game they've devised — *Secret Hour* — during which the two share the truth and only the truth. But the dynamics of their marriage are thrown severely out of whack when an automobile accident exposes a dark secret Kate has been holding deep within. She doesn't want a baby and unknown to Ben, has had an IUD throughout their attempts to conceive. Unknown that is until the doctors inform Ben that they replaced it, which she requested before they put her under anesthesia. Kate, while drugged up, also blurts out to Ben that she's on birth control. Yikes. Big surprise for Ben.

Later, it is revealed that Ben has been interviewing for a job on the West Coast. Assuming all along that if he got it, Kate would quit her tenure track teaching position, which she loves, to follow him. Neither had the courage to bring either of these very juicy and hurtful secrets up during *Secret Hour*.

THEMES:

Stafford has said, “Among other issues, the play is about “how you change as you grow, what it means to be one's authentic self.”

The play is also about:

- The risk and fear and vulnerability that comes with loving someone and the potential of losing them. And the things we do to mitigate that fear.
- “You have to love me and accept me as I am.” Is that really possible in a relationship?
- The whole point of Kate and Ben’s *Secret Hour* is to share the deepest parts of themselves with their partner. Yet both withhold the truth of their deepest needs from one another.
- What is the line between honoring yourself and honoring your partner and honoring the relationship?
- How much change is allowed in a relationship? If one party changes, what are the repercussions for the other?

CHARACTERS:

KATE: Kate is a stand-up. Quick, witty, ironic, she gets off on the improv that makes great teachers inspiring. She’s a fiercely driven intellectual whose mind makes her very sexy. She’s a hit at a cocktail party. After Ben lost his job as a programmer, she had to take the teaching gig to support them. She unexpectedly fell in love with it and now it is where she finds her own authenticity and value in the world. She does NOT want to have a baby. Period. Yet she adores Ben and is terrified of losing him--a risk WAY too severe for her to contemplate. So, she lies to Ben by omission. There’s no evidence if you have an IUD. No pills, no devices, it’s in there and unseen. She feels eventually he will accept that they cannot have kids and move on. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. The ethical problems in this are not lost on her. Stafford says Kate’s journey is a journey toward authenticity. “I think we see her go on this journey both in her relationships in the play, but also in her work as an ethics professor, which forces her to grapple personally with the larger ideas she’s teaching.” Kate is desperate to keep Ben and believes the lie will forever be a secret.

BEN: Ben is quick, smart and impulsive. Likable and funny, he often talks before he thinks. Like many men in our culture, Ben believes his identity, his status as a man, as a provider, as a husband, are all tied up in his career. Which he has blown, through his own dereliction, and now he’s not a highly paid programmer, but a member of the Geek Squad at Best Buy. He is lost and desperate to find a label that will fill the emptiness left by the loss of his career. He keeps taking up “hobby” type stuff to give himself something interesting to do. Like buying a rock polisher to make a collection. He believes fatherhood will return to him his sense of self-worth that lies in the wreckage of his career. He has a rigid protocol for getting Kate pregnant which includes monthly pregnancy tests, trying EVERY conceivable sexual position and speculation that there are lots of medical procedures that are still on the table to help them, which Kate is not happy to contemplate since they would obviously reveal her secret. He adores Kate and would rather eat his shoe than hurt her. That is, until a career opportunity opens up on the Coast, and he takes several interviews before she finds out he’s planning on moving them away from the career she adores. Ben’s career secret is as important to him as Kate’s IUD secret is to her.

LEAF: Leaf is a free spirit. An intuitive, creative empath who creates each day moment by moment. Where other people experience events as accidents or impediments, Leaf sees everything as a potential

for growth. He has fallen in love with Ben and Kate. He does his best to look after them, finding more things to fix in their house so he can stay near to them. Also, he lives in a treehouse and enjoys the indoor plumbing at Kate and Ben's. They tell him what to do and he attends to them, witnesses them, accompanies them. He occasionally steps into their conversations, that he's overhearing without their knowledge, and corrects errors, omissions and outright lies. Kate and Ben's journey is so touching and revealing to Leaf, that it compels him to return to his own parents, from whom he is estranged, and attempt to heal the fissure in that relationship. As the lights are about to come down, one of the last things we see is Leaf, calling his parents on the phone and saying, "Hey. Um...it's me. It's...Anders." And suddenly this odd character is more real than he's been before.

Secret Hour was developed through the National Winter Playwrights Retreat with the HBMG Foundation, and the Boulder Ensemble Theatre Company Writer's Group. It received readings through BETC and And Toto Too, a workshop production through Prologue Theatre, and was presented as part of the Virtual New Works Festival, starring Kate Loprest and Vincent Rodriguez III (Crazy Ex-Girlfriend).

Secret Hour was the winner of the 2021 Capital Repertory Theatre New Works Festival, and was nominated for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is there a secret in your heart that you would be terrified to share with anyone? What would happen to you if you shared it?
2. What in yourself is the most important part of you? What gives you your sense of self? Worth? Value? Would you give up any of that for the love of another person?
3. How did your opinion of Kate change when you learned her secret about the IUD?
4. When we learn the news that Ben has had two interviews and is planning on taking the job (which will ruin Kate's career) the audience will start taking sides. Whose side are you on? Why?
5. Is Kate's IUD lie worse than Ben's job lie? Are they equally wrong or is one more corruptive to the marriage than the other? Explain.
6. Kate knows her lie will break Ben's heart every month she doesn't conceive. She has no idea how long this will have to go on. What is her life like, knowing this?
7. How does our culture judge women who decide against motherhood? How does our culture judge men who have no discernable career? Are these judgements fair? Relevant? Any of our business?
8. How much change is allowed in a relationship?
9. What is the line between honoring yourself and honoring the relationship?