



*Jeff Augustin (left) and Josh Brody during the first rehearsal of “Last Tiger in Haiti,” May 31 at La Jolla Playhouse. Photo by Jim Carmody*

## Alumnus’ Heritage Featured in Play Premiering at La Jolla Playhouse

UC San Diego’s Department of Theatre and Dance ranks high in the nation for a reason—the rigorous training it provides to its graduate students with faculty who are acclaimed theatre artists and its unique partnership with the world-renowned La Jolla Playhouse. Proof of that collaboration’s success lies in, “The Last Tiger in Haiti,” an award-winning play by UC San Diego alumnus Jeff Augustin, ’14, which premieres during the playhouse’s upcoming 2016/2017 season, June 28 – July 24, 2016, in the Mandell Weiss Forum. This marks the first time that a former UC San Diego theatre student’s production has premiered during the playhouse’s regular season.

Now in early rehearsals, “The Last Tiger in Haiti” is a beautiful example of storytelling that conveys a haunting, compelling tale, whose characters themselves use storytelling as a type of currency with which they establish their worth, explained Augustin. At the center of the play is Haitian *restavek*, a form of modern-day child slavery.

“Restavek children come from nothing and live in cruel servitude, but the way they define themselves through the stories they tell raises vital questions about who has the right to tell one’s story, and interrogates our notions of freedom and identity,” said Augustin. “I really believe that it’s important for art to share stories about global issues and attempt to educate audiences on something they may not have heard about. If I, one generation removed from growing up in Haiti, hadn’t heard of it, I knew I needed to find a way to tell this story.”

Augustin, the youngest of seven children, attributes his inspiration to his mother.

“Growing up she would tell us amazing and fantastical Haitian folktales. The legends fascinated me. And the tradition of oral storytelling in Haiti captivated me,” said Augustin. “The folklores are all the same; the fun comes from discovering who the best storyteller is.”

He credits UC San Diego theatre faculty with helping him to understand the craft of theater and film.

“They helped me create a container for my voice,” said Augustin. “What excites me most about the upcoming season at La Jolla Playhouse is really being able to share my work with the community that nurtured me and influenced my growth as an artist and person.”



*Actors reading through “Last Tiger in Haiti” during the DNA series, a collaboration with La Jolla Playhouse.*

Augustin explained that with the training he gained in seminars and workshops with playwriting faculty, he launched his career through the Wagner New Play Festival (WNPF), an annual event at UC San Diego named for the late Arthur Wagner, founding chair of the theater department, and his wife, Mollie, that features original, ground-breaking, premiere productions by MFA playwrights working in collaboration with directors, actors, stage-managers and designers. In addition to the guidance of theatre and dance faculty members, UC San Diego MFA playwrights are paired with either the La Jolla Playhouse’s Resident Dramaturg Shirley Fishman or Director of New Play Development Gabriel Greene, each of whom attends workshops and rehearsals, and meets with the writers to discuss their work throughout the developmental process, up to and including performances.

When Augustin was a student participating in the WNPF, he first encountered Greene, who along with Associate Artistic Director Jaime Castañeda, read the first act of “Last Tiger in Haiti” before asking for a second act. Augustin’s fellow alumnus Joshua Kahan Brody, ’13, a Princess Grace Award winner, co-founder of San Diego’s THE TRIP and director of “Last Tiger in Haiti,” was the one who brought Augustin’s play to the playhouse’s attention.

“It’s a beautiful opportunity to premiere Jeff’s beautiful play across the street from where we went to school,” noted Brody.

Augustin explained that he and Brody were workshopping the first act of the play at New York Theatre Workshop in the fall of 2014. At the same time, La Jolla Playhouse was planning the 'DNA Reading Series' and was talking with Brody about possibly directing for the series.

“So, Josh sent the first act of ‘Last Tiger’ to Jaime and Gabe, and they really responded to it,” said Augustin. “It’s rare for a theater to agree to program a play based on a first draft.”

He admitted that working on a new play is taxing and terrifying, so having a supportive collaborator is important.

Christopher Ashley, artistic director of La Jolla Playhouse recently noted the close relationship between UC San Diego and the playhouse during the first rehearsal breakfast and script reading. In fact, the two distinct programs also collaborate on the WOW Festival and the DNA Reading Series, as well as the WNPF. Additionally, graduate students regularly fill residencies at the playhouse, gaining experience in all aspects of theater production.

“The Theatre and Dance MFA program helps shape some of the strongest writers, directors, actors, designers and stage managers entering the industry. Sharing facilities and offering MFA residencies in our seasons helps us develop strong ties that go beyond the students’ time here,” said Ashley.

Augustin, whose work Ashley describes as “skilled in subtext, language and imagery influenced by Haitian heritage that allows him to create utterly real and remarkably fantastical worlds,” said that audiences can expect a few twists and turns from “Last Tiger.”

“I can’t say too much or I’ll spoil some things,” he warned, adding, “You can expect a battle of wills, the bonds of love that tie us together, and the magic of storytelling—characters tell Haitian folktales that literally come to life.”

The UC San Diego Department of Theatre and Dance regularly ranks among the top programs in the country. It shares a close relationship with the Tony Award-winning La Jolla Playhouse, and UC San Diego MFA theatre students participate in at least one professional residency. Upon graduation, many students go on to work professionally in theater, film and television.

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