

# Q&A WITH DIRECTOR STEVE KIDD & ACTOR PHYLLIS KAY

by Artistic Director Tony Estrella



**Steve, Gamm patrons have admired your acting on our stage since *The Crucible* almost 20 years ago. How does it feel to be making your Gamm directing debut?**

SK: Yeah, it's really exciting! Actors who work here for the first time will be the first to tell you that there's something very special about The Gamm. They consistently describe a unique culture of joy and support. That legacy has been intentionally cultivated by directors at The Gamm. The work is hard and the standard is high, but it's rounded out by respect and a shared

purpose. We understand how fortunate we are to do the work we love for audiences who care. I've learned so much from Gamm directors and gratefully carry their examples.

**Phyllis, many Gamm patrons have admired your work as a Trinity Rep resident artist for decades, even while you've been a patron and supporter here yourself. Yet, only now are we lucky enough to have you on our stage! How does it feel?**

PK: Everything just lined up beautifully and it feels exactly right. Tony, I'm about to praise you to your face, so settle in. I think you're a visionary artistic director. Over the last 20 (!) years, your seasons have included astonishing choices, with something for everyone who identifies as *human*. I am so grateful and happy to be working on this play with you and so many people I love.

***The Children* was written in 2016 for characters in their 60s, but Kirkwood doesn't specify a time for the play. Do you think that's intentional?**

SK: I do! If in 40 years this play is still being produced, I'm sure many of the same tensions will exist. So it speaks to audiences beyond our lifetime. That said, certain cultural and scientific references ground it somewhere around the mid-2010s. The three characters are part of the baby boom generation who had a significant impact on social change in the UK in the late part of the 20th century. They made decisions based on the ideology of the day which associated abundance, growth and materialism with success. Those beliefs are still pervasive. But there's a much greater awareness, especially among younger people, that those values and habits often run counter to societal priorities like addressing climate change. Kirkwood brings that huge conversation down to a single choice these characters must make in a tiny seaside cottage.

**The play is thematically concerned with our delicate relationship with the environment. What makes theater such a compelling form for engaging big ideas?**

SK: I think we go to the theater for different reasons and with different expectations for ourselves and fellow audience members. It's one of the few places where we're asked and expected to turn off our cell phones to protect the focus of everyone in the room. I appreciate that despite the ever-present pull of our phones, we still reserve the theater as a space for undivided attention and collective empathy. The real-time structure of *The Children* takes that even further. We meet the characters when the lights come up and we are all in it together until the play ends. No scene changes to look at your program, no intermission to check your phone and think about your life after the theater.

I've loved some movies and TV shows about frightening futures because of climate change, but I find myself changing the channel if I sense there's a "lesson" coming. Plays depend less on visual images to draw the viewer in and drive a point home. It's the language spoken by live actors that engages our imagination and makes us weigh the conflicts and actions of the characters against our own. Would we make the same choices? Maybe we are surprised by how we feel or think. Maybe we find that we are more selfish or benevolent than we thought. Regardless, I think a theatrical experience is more likely to generate conversation and initiate change when we leave the theater.

**What are the challenges of approaching a play about an important social issue?**

PK: Ultimately this is a play about people living in a time where they must confront both mundane and unimaginable complications. I approach this work like any other story. It's all human problems and I try to figure out how to solve them from my character's point of view.

**It's been three years since COVID-19 killed millions of people worldwide and led to shutdowns and mask mandates. Might today's audiences experience this play differently than pre-pandemic audiences?**

SK: I think so. In reading the play for the first time with the cast, I was brought back to the summer of 2020 when we no longer had to "shelter in place." We were between surges and able to spend much of our lives outdoors. Inconvenient practices had become more or less routine, like standing 6 feet apart, masking up, incessant hand sanitizing, etcetera. There was almost a sense of normalcy. But there was also massive uncertainty. Would kids go back to school? Would businesses reopen? When could we fly again? Would there be a vaccine? To me, that period is similar to the sort of "familiar uncertainty" that Rose, Hazel and Robin are experiencing in *The Children*. But unlike most of us, those characters have an opportunity to respond in a way that could make a huge difference in the lives of others now and in the future.

**For such a serious and frankly terrifying subject, *The Children* is surprisingly funny! How does humor work in the world of this play?**

PK: What I like about Kirkwood's writing is that each of her characters has a distinctive voice. They all use humor to deflect and defend, but in very different ways. I'm not crazy about plays in which all the characters' words seem to have identical rhythms, tone and content. Same, same, same. I see it alot! *The Children* is the best kind of material to work on because Kirkwood seems to have avoided this trap.

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