

only was she trying to get to know her friend again, but she had an agenda, and pushed him to open up. At the time that was hard for me to understand. But since that trip, I've done some journalism on my own. I'm doing a profile of Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein, and I was following her on the campaign trail. They're not going to give you anything real. So I understood the frustration, the difference between them giving you a line and giving you what you want: to know, what does the person actually think, what does he ask himself when he goes to sleep at night?

As you worked on the book, you were afraid that it may have lost relevance by the time it was published.

The so-called Arab Spring started six months after we got back, and the resulting refugee crisis has now surpassed the refugee crisis in Iraq, which I had documented, so I questioned if it was worth making this book. But no matter what happens, the Iraq War is something our generation hasn't really reckoned with. Syria was a largely middle-class, largely educated country, and it's not the kind of place you'd think would turn into a war zone. In Damascus, we walked around remarking on what a stable place it was, with no idea that something like this could ever happen.

Who do you envision as the audience for the book?

I'm thinking of Americans my own age, and it was me, too, before I went on this trip. I think a lot of us have forgotten about the Iraq War: it's not our problem, and what goes on there is easy for people to ignore. It's still our problem, and Syria is an extension of that. I'd like my own generation to read it, and to look again at what happened to get us there.

What are you working on now?

I have some ideas for other books, focusing on immigration issues and migration in general, subjects that have gotten under my skin. And maybe I'll stick to home; there are so many issues in the United States that deserve attention.

Theater

And the Tony Goes to...

Veteran stage actor Reed Birney wins Broadway's highest honor | BY JOHN O'ROURKE



IT APPEARS THERE IS truth to the adage, "Good things come to those who wait." After nearly four decades in the business, veteran actor Reed Birney

won his first Tony Award in June, for best featured actor in a drama for his performance in Stephen Karam's moving play *The Humans*.

The recognition was hard-won for the 61-year-old Birney, who studied at the College of Fine Arts. He landed his first Broadway role in the comedy *Gemini* in 1977. But that early success was followed by many lean years, offset by roles in off-off-Broadway productions, occasional guest appearances in television shows such as *Law & Order*, and teaching gigs. Several times, he contemplated leaving acting altogether.

"There were many long periods where I was flat on my back with despair," says Birney. But, he adds, "despair is the enemy, and you lose too

Reed Birney (from left), Sarah Steele, Jayne Houdyshell, and Arian Moayed in a scene from Stephen Karam's Tony-winning play *The Humans*.

much of your precious life being sad when sad doesn't help you one little bit."

His fortunes began to turn around in 2008, when he played a ruth-

less journalist who rapes a woman in the off-Broadway drama *Blasted*, by Sarah Kane. Critics—and a whole new generation of playwrights and directors—took notice. He was then cast in a revival of William Inge's *Picnic* in 2012, marking his return to Broadway after a 35-year absence. And, two years ago, he received his first Tony nomination, for his performance as cross-dresser Charlotte in Harvey Fierstein's drama *Casa Valentina*.

The Humans, which won the Tony for best play, transferred from off-Broadway to Broadway in February. Charles Isherwood wrote in his *New York Times* review, "I have written many times of Mr. Birney's excellence, but his perfor-

mance here moved me so deeply I find myself reaching for new superlatives.” In his portrayal of family patriarch Erik Blake, Birney “draws a heartrending portrait of a loving husband, father, and son slowly withering inside, in a state of bemused bewilderment at the unforeseen turns his life has taken.”

Birney describes the role of Erik Blake, an equipment manager for a Catholic high school in Scranton, Pa., as a regular Joe. “I think he is like many men in America now who are struggling to make ends meet and take care of his family,” he says. “I don’t think he could ever afford to have big dreams. The reality of surviving took all his time and energy.”

The actor was drawn to the play because of the quality of the writing. “It’s one of the most meticulously crafted plays I have ever read,” he says. “And the part is astonishing. I get to go through virtually the full range of human experience every night. The best part of having been alive this long is that I am as beaten up as the character.”

Birney feels fortunate to have landed the part, given that his typical role is the guy in a suit—a teacher or a politician. He currently plays Donald Blythe, US vice president, on the Netflix hit series *House of Cards*. “At this late date in my career,” he says, “it’s very unusual to get to do something you’ve never done. I was nervous about people buying me as a janitor. The challenge was to find a way to play a man who has led an unexamined life. Erik has never had the luxury of self-reflection.”

Three other BU alumni won 2016 Tony Awards. Producers James Nederlander (CGS’80), Jon B. Platt (CGS’74), and Sue Wagner (CFA’97) won for best play, for *The Humans*. Wagner, one of Broadway’s most prolific producers, won a second Tony, for best revival of a play, for *A View from the Bridge*.

Wagner had already won four Tony Awards before this year’s ceremony. “My favorite kinds of plays and musicals are the ones where you’re laughing so hard you think you’ll pee your pants, and suddenly you’ve burst into tears because you recognize yourself up there,” she says. “That’s what people come to the theater for. It’s a shared experience, and if that experience is hollow or just surface, it doesn’t interest me. For me, it has to pack an emotional wallop.”

Gallery



JUDITH SHUFRO (CFA’61) is a painter and an art teacher in La Jolla, Calif. “My current focus celebrates the produce here in California and it energizes me,” she says. Her painting *Carrots* won first place at the 2016 San Diego County Fair in the acrylic, still life, and florals category. *Lemons* and other works were shown in the Gotthelf Gallery in La Jolla this year. Visit Shufro’s website at judithshufro.com.

↑ *Carrots*, 40” x 30”, acrylic on canvas, 2015

← *Lemons*, 40” x 30”, acrylic on canvas, 2015