

# BACKSTORY



# HARMLESS



Your behind-the-scenes look at TimeLine productions

YESTERDAY'S STORIES.  
TODAY'S TOPICS.

**TimeLine**  
Theatre Company

Dear Friends,

I am thrilled to continue our 10th Anniversary Season with a world premiere by one of Chicago's most astounding and confounding writers, Brett Neveu.



While *Harmless* marks Brett's debut at TimeLine, I imagine that his name and work are not new to many of you. His plays

have been produced at theaters throughout the city, and he has quickly become one of our most heralded playwrights.

Brett brings to TimeLine his unique voice and, with *Harmless*, one of the most contemporary plays we have produced. It's a terrific fit with this anniversary season, during which we transport you from the 18th through the 21st Centuries with four plays that transcend their eras.

*Harmless* is set in 2004, with the war in Iraq serving as a distant backdrop. But World War II, or the Korean or Vietnam wars, or (fill in the blank) conflict might just as easily have served as the unseen instigator for the play's action.

I first heard a reading of *Harmless* in early 2005, and — as usual after seeing or reading one of Brett's plays — I was riled up. I wasn't agitated because I found the subject matter enraging (although I did, at times) or because I found it offensive, but because I couldn't stop an argument in my head that Brett had started.

**"I'm still a bit irritated, and, as a result, grateful to Brett for being so brilliantly irritating."**

Damn him! The reading was done in a brisk, crackling 60 minutes, and I was ready to head home and move on to other things. But his play just wouldn't let me go.

I couldn't stop thinking about issues like responsibility, creative expression and society's role in helping soldiers transition from combat situations to "normal life" — issues that, I admit, are much easier for me to avoid than tackle.

The next day I opened the newspaper and read about an alarming number of soldiers who had returned from Iraq and during their first six months at home been charged with aggravated assault, murder or some other violent crime.

With *Harmless* still on my mind, my response to the article wasn't what it probably would have been earlier in the week. Disgust at the alleged crimes was too easy a response; I couldn't just shake my head and happily flip the page to check the weather or sports scores. Because I had heard this play the night before, I knew the article demanded more thought, reflection and, ultimately, compassion. My mind hung on the young men who were called out, and I felt that, somehow, someone had failed them. It was clear who the "victims" were, and they obviously deserved my sympathy, yet there was little mention of where the "aggressors" had

just come from or what or who helped them during a traumatic period of their lives.

I wasn't making excuses for why these young men had turned to violence at home, but I also wasn't prepared to jump to conclusions about who was most at fault. As I'd discovered the night before at the play reading, the answers — and the victims — were harder to identify.

As you'll see in Brett's theatrical world of hyper-reality, he dares us to dig deep and grapple with big ideas, even when we don't have all the pieces laid out clearly in front of us.

Even after having read *Harmless* numerous times and having heard it aloud on various occasions, the argument hasn't subsided in my head. Nor have I forgotten that newspaper article that struck me 20 months ago. I'm still a bit irritated, and, as a result, grateful to Brett for being so brilliantly irritating.

It is my sincere wish that you have the same wonderfully confounding experience with *Harmless* as I have had these many months. I'm thrilled to release my internal argument onto our stage with director Ed Sobel's production and engage you in the conversation.

Fondly,

**We hope these resources enhance your theater-going experience at TimeLine:**

#### Sunday Scholars Series

On **Sunday, February 4**, immediately following that day's performance of *Harmless*, TimeLine will host our Sunday Scholar Series. This free one-hour panel discussion will feature experts talking about the themes and issues of the play.

Information about scheduled panelists will be made available at [timelinetheatre.com](http://timelinetheatre.com).

The Sunday Scholars panel is moderated by TimeLine Board member **Peter H. Kuntz**, managing director of programs and production for the Chicago Humanities Festival.

Please note that you do not need to see the February 4 performance of *Harmless* to attend the Sunday Scholars panel.

To confirm event start time or for further information, call (773) 281-8463 x 24 or visit [timelinetheatre.com](http://timelinetheatre.com).

#### Post-Show Discussions

Stay after performances on **Thursday, January 25; Sunday, January 28; and Thursday, February 1**, for our free post-show discussions.

Moderated by the production dramaturg, these brief, informal discussions are your opportunity to hear from the cast and production team about their experiences, ask questions about and comment on the performance and engage your fellow audience members in a conversation about the themes and issues of the play.

#### Lobby Displays

Don't miss our historical lobby displays, available for perusal before and after each performance. They also can be downloaded at [www.timelinetheatre.com](http://www.timelinetheatre.com).

#### Study Guide

Also online, you may obtain a production study guide, our compilation of all the historical background, contextual articles and additional resources collected during production of *Harmless*.

**10 YEARS  
OF MAKING HISTORY.**

#### BACKSTORY CREDITS AND PHOTO CAPTIONS

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**Special thanks to The Saints, in memory of Fred Solari**, for their support of TimeLine's dramaturgical staff and materials during the 2006-2007 season.

*Pictured on front cover (from left):* Actor David Parkes; costume design renderings by costume designer Lindsey Pate; actor John Jenkins; actor Juliet Hart; costume design renderings; and lighting designer Charles Cooper.

*Pictured on back cover (from left):* Playwright Brett Neveu and director Edward Sobel; actors Juliet Hart and David Parkes; scenic design model by Keith Pitts; costume designer Lindsey Pate; and director Edward Sobel with actor John Jenkins.

Born in San Pablo, Calif., Brett Neveu was raised in Newton, Iowa, a small Midwestern town similar to those that are the settings for many of his plays. And though his works tackle issues of national importance — school violence; the effects of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001; drug addiction; the dissolution of the nuclear family; the legacy of slavery — they're always filtered through the modest lives of the residents of these small towns.

"These plays look at how people in power, the decisions that they make, trickle down into everyday life," Neveu says. "These are families and people just struggling along, people who have to go to work, make a living and keep everything balanced. Then some arbitrary decision throws that balance off."

In the Louisiana-set *Heritage* (2006) the state government decides to renovate an old slave plantation, using inmates at a local prison as cheap labor. This decision sets off a tragic series of events that amplify how the legacy of that dark chapter in American history and its present

implications on class systems continue to ripple through the lives of whites and blacks, inmates and prison guards.

*The Last Barbeque* (2000), an early work originally produced in Chicago by The Aardvark, deftly examines that distinctly all-American activity, the backyard barbeque. But Neveu subverts it by focusing on a family that concerns itself with the minutia of preparations — the setting up of a croquet set, the location of the charcoal — so as not to concern itself with its imminent dissolution.

Edward Sobel, who directs *Harmless*, previously collaborated with Neveu on the world-premiere productions of *American Dead* (2004) and *Heritage*. As Director of New Play Development at Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Sobel also has commissioned Neveu twice.

"There's incredibly rich subtext in his plays," Sobel says. "Brett often writes characters who are dealing with great depths of emotion but who are unable or unwilling to articulate them."

*Positive Aspects to a Nuclear Winter* — produced in 2003 with its original title, *the go*, by Chicago's Terrapin Theatre — depicts a man, Ross, who volunteers at a drug rehabilitation center by day and struggles to be a single parent to his young daughter by night. Barely able to keep the façade intact, Ross finally crumples under the pressure of his disintegrating family and past failures, effectively abandoning his daughter while goading the crystal-meth addict he counsels into building a new meth lab.

Similarly, in *Eric LaRue* (2002), the mother of a boy who shot and killed three classmates struggles to come to an understanding of how she should feel about this act of violence. The local pastor, well-intentioned but ineffectual, sets up an informal meeting between the mother and the mothers of the victims. The result is simultaneously darkly comic and devastating: None of the participants quite know how to say what they are feeling.

"Brett's plays operate like a mystery," Sobel says. "He's very skillful in his ability to disclose

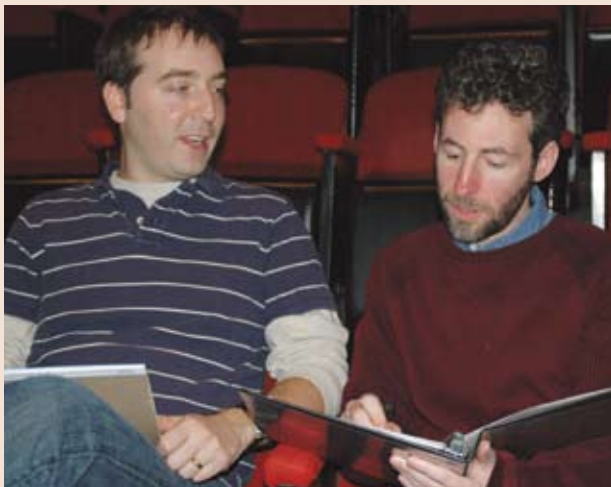
— or withhold — information. You don't know why these people in his plays are behaving the way they do, but you sense the reason is important and will be revealed to you."

An important presence at several Chicago theaters for the better part of a decade, Neveu is beginning to attract attention internationally. *Eric LaRue* was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in London last year as part of its "Postcards from America" series. The play garnered praise for its clear-eyed look at the forces that drive a young man to commit horrific acts of violence and the dazed search for understanding such brutalities leave in their wake.

*Harmless* is the latest installment from this increasingly exciting writer — and a step in a new direction.

"There's a coldness to *Harmless* that's less present in other of Brett's work," Sobel says. "Whereas a play like *American Dead* is incredibly compassionate and has characters who are trying to thaw emotionally, there's an underlying anxiety about the world in *Harmless*. I wouldn't characterize Brett as an angry writer, but this play feels anguished to me.

"This is a sharp, pointed little play. It's like a stiletto: You're walking along, and suddenly you feel a pain in your side and the blood is beginning to blossom on your shirt. And before you even know it, you've been hit."



Left: *Harmless* marks the third time Brett Neveu (from left) has collaborated with director Edward Sobel on a production.

Opposite: Playwright Brett Neveu.

"[*Harmless*] is a sharp, pointed little play. It's like a stiletto ... before you even know it, you've been hit."



Known by several names throughout history and often regarded as a failing of the victim, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) only became officially recognized as a psychological disorder in 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association included it in the third edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)*.

Triggered by a traumatic, life-threatening event, PTSD manifests itself in such symptoms as flashbacks, nightmares, insomnia, hyper-vigilance and other psychological effects indicating increased arousal, avoidance and re-experience of the traumatic event. Combat veterans are at particular risk for the disorder.

Written evidence of PTSD occurs in Egypt as far back as three thousand years, with additional accounts affirming its presence among Greeks and Romans. In "A Short History of PTSD: From Thermopylae to Hue Soldiers Have Always Had a Disturbing Reaction to War" (*The Veteran*, 2005), writer Steve Bentley observes the many labels it has

accrued. In the 17th Century, the Swiss termed it "nostalgia;" around the same time, the Germans referred to it as *heimweh*, "homesickness;" later, the Spanish named it *estar roto*, "to be broken."

In America, the beginning of the Civil War ushered in a new level of power and efficiency in weaponry. This resulted in greater numbers of soldiers who suffered negative psychological effects. Dr. Jacob Mendez Da Costa, a surgeon, wrote an account of these effects — including heart palpitations, sweating, tremors and fatigue — that he termed "Soldier's Heart." (The illness also was known as "Da Costa's Syndrome" at the time.) The Army began screening soldiers for susceptibility to the malady; those who showed signs of the illness in battle were prescribed digitalis, which strengthens the heart's contractions, or sent home. This discharge was not entirely honorable: The victims were thought to lack discipline, and their symptoms seen as indicative of faults located in the person.



A medic in Vietnam applies pressure to his wound. (United States Army)

World War I brought with it still greater advances in weaponry. PTSD sufferers now were thought to suffer from "shell shock" — that is, a physiological

concussion to the brain brought on by the intensity of artillery fire. Still, those who suffered from shell shock were considered cowards or deserters. In England, more than 300 soldiers were executed for those charges between 1914 and 1918. It was not until August 2006 that the British Ministry of Defence issued formal pardons to those soldiers.

In World War II, prevailing attitudes moved PTSD from the physiological realm back into the psychological. The military began extensive screening of draftees and, according to Bentley, rejected roughly 5 million men. Nevertheless, PTSD — or "battle fatigue," its then-current *nom de guerre* — was fairly rampant in combat veterans. Still, the pervasive belief that the illness was a deficiency of the victim remained: Sufferers often were only prescribed a period of rest before being returned to the front lines.

As opposed to World War II — which has been called, somewhat oxymorically, "The Good War" — America's participation in the Vietnam War was viewed with well-documented moral disdain. Returning soldiers were not greeted as heroes; on the contrary, they were openly and loudly derided. These factors, among others, paved the way for legions of PTSD cases in

returning veterans. Indeed, for a time it was called Post-Vietnam Syndrome, and the sheer multitude of victims was a driving force in the American Psychiatric Association's decision to finally recognize PTSD as an official mental disorder.

As recently as 2004, the year in which *Harmless* is set, roughly 161,000 Vietnam veterans still received disability payments for PTSD.

Despite being an accepted disorder, evidence from the Iraq

War shows our military is still struggling with ways to identify and treat those suffering from the malady. The Department of Defense has issued reports indicating an attempt to better recognize early warning signs of PTSD.

Nevertheless, with a dearth of available reinforcements, the DOD, according to an article in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* (March 2006), is sending traumatized soldiers back into battle.



A World War I veteran at Netley Hospital, England, 1917. (British Pathé)

**In the 17th Century, the Swiss termed it "nostalgia;" around the same time, the Germans referred to it as *heimweh*, "homesickness;" later, the Spanish named it *estar roto*, "to be broken."**

- 1871** During the American Civil War, Dr. Jacob Da Costa's paper categorizes PTSD symptoms as "Soldier's Heart."
- 1914-1918** In World War I, PTSD is termed "shell shock" and believed to be a physiological response (i.e. concussions to the brain) caused by the impact of explosions.
- 1941-1945** The United States involvement in World War II sees nearly 2 million soldiers suffering from PTSD-related symptoms, which will be recognized as psychological by the war's end. These symptoms are called "combat exhaustion" or "battle fatigue."
- 1950-1953** Nearly 25 percent (roughly 50,000) of American combat veterans in the Korean War are believed to suffer from PTSD.
- 1961-1975** 2.8 million American soldiers serve in the Vietnam War. One later study estimated that nearly 500,000 have exhibited either full-blown or partial PTSD.
- 1980** The American Psychiatric Association includes PTSD as a psychiatric disorder in its third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.
- 1991** Though the percentage of PTSD sufferers is much lower in the Persian Gulf War, owing to relatively limited combat operations, studies in 1995 and 1999 will show a growing number of soldiers experiencing the illness in the years following the campaign.
- 2003** A New England journal of Medicine study finds one in six returning Iraq War veterans suffer from PTSD.
- 2004** Nearly 30 years after the cessation of fighting in Vietnam, more than 160,000 veterans receive disability benefits for PTSD.
- 2006** Within six months of each other, The San Diego Union-Tribune, The Hartford Courant, and CBS News report the U.S. Department of Defense is sending thousands of soldiers suffering from PTSD — many of whom are on antidepressants — back into active duty.

Given the horrors encountered on the battlefield, it's no surprise that so many combat veterans attempt to channel their experiences through creative outlets. There is a rich history of soldiers, burdened by all they have seen, who have returned home and sought to make sense of their experiences by incorporating them into works of art.

Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* drew on his experiences as a young man sent to the front lines in World War I. Eschewing tales of heroism and derring-do, the novel instead paints a picture of the pointlessness of war, with the protagonist, Paul Bäumer, growing increasingly numb to the monotony of artillery fire and death. When his death occurs, it happens on a day so quiet that the report reads only, "All quiet on the Western Front" — further underscoring the limited value a war places upon human life.

Scores of WWII veterans have sought to make sense of war through poetry, prose and visual arts.

The poet and novelist James Dickey, perhaps best remembered for his 1970 novel *Deliverance*, recalled his days as a WWII fighter pilot in the poem "The Firebombing," which opened his

1966 National Book Award-winning collection *Buckdancer's Choice*. In this excerpt, Dickey comments upon the disconnection between the firebomber and his victims:

*It is this detachment,  
The honored aesthetic evil,  
The greatest sense of power in  
one's life,  
That must be shed in bars, or  
by whatever  
Means, by starvation  
Visions in well-stocked pantries.*

Kurt Vonnegut's seminal book *Slaughterhouse-Five* was inspired by his experiences as a prisoner of war during the bombing of Dresden, Germany, in 1945. The novel's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, like Vonnegut, was captured during the Battle of the Bulge. He and fellow POWs found refuge in a subterranean meat locker. Both Vonnegut and Pilgrim emerged from their underground refuge to find a destroyed city: 135,000 German civilians had perished during the bombing. In one interview, Vonnegut remarked, "People in our war, the good war, were sickened by [the killing] afterward and would not talk about it. When we went to war, we had two fears. One was that we'd get killed. The other was that we might have to kill someone."

**There is a rich history of soldiers, burdened by all they have seen, who have sought to make sense of their experiences by incorporating them into works of art.**



Kurt Vonnegut prior to shipping overseas during World War II.

Joseph Heller served as a bombardier in WWII, and his experience would pave the way for one of the most successful novels of all time. In telling the story of Capt. John Yossarian, a bombardier terrified of dying, Heller perfectly captured the absurdity of war, summed up by a title that has since become a mainstay in our lexicon: *Catch-22*. The catch was a bureaucrat's dream — an illogical, no-win situation. Yossarian runs up against the power of the catch when he attempts to get grounded from his flight missions: The only way to be grounded is if the medical officer thinks one is crazy; however, if one asks the medical officer to be grounded, that person is obviously not crazy.

In an interview, Heller spoke about how he perceived the war during his service: "It was fun in the beginning. We were kids, nineteen, twenty years old, and had real machine guns in our hands. Not those things at the penny arcades at Coney Island.



Joseph Heller during his service in World War II. (Photo courtesy Capt. Everett B. Thomas)

You got the feeling that there was something glorious about it. Glorious excitement. The first time I saw a plane on fire and parachutes coming down, I looked at it with a big grin on my face. I was disappointed in those early missions of mine where nobody shot at us. ... I didn't realize until I read Paul Fussell's book on World War One that almost everybody who took my artillery shell or bombing grenade was going to be dismembered, mutilated. Not the way it is in the movies where somebody gets hit, clutches his chest and falls down dead. They are blown apart. Blown into pieces."

The Vietnam War also spawned a number of challenging written works by veterans.

David Rabe wrote a trilogy of plays focusing on his experience in Vietnam: *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, *Sticks and Bones* and *Streamers*. In a published introduction to the plays, Rabe recounts the process of writing these works in the wee hours

of the morning: "Often in those nights, I amazed myself. Not at the quality or art of what I wrote but at the kinds of thoughts I was having when the feelings that most filled me then, twined and (I now think) primal, were given a shape in language that made them ideas I understood instead of shifting phantoms possessing me." These three piercing plays, interrogating the horrors of the war, were written "from the wish to discover. Or perhaps from the wish to formulate my discoveries. Or perhaps, even more correctly, from the need to see if I have made any discoveries."

Few Vietnam veterans have been able to write about their experiences as richly or dynamically as Tim O'Brien, whose celebrated collection of stories, *The Things They Carried*, focuses on the tour of duty of a soldier named Tim O'Brien. One story, "The Man I Killed," illuminates the dehumanizing psychic weight of killing another human being. In the story, the narrator has just killed a Vietnamese man. As his fellow soldiers alternately tease him and try to comfort him, he can only repeat descriptions of the dead man's body ("his one eye was shut, his other eye was a

star-shaped hole") and attempt to invent a history for the nameless stranger whose life he has ended.

Given the birth of new technologies, it's not surprising that one of the first creative outlets for Iraq War soldiers is blogs. Through this mode of communication, soldiers are able to "publish" their thoughts with an unheard-of immediacy. In 2005, *USA Today* reported that the number of soldier-authored blogs was expected to top 1,000 by the end of that year.

One of the most notable blogs was written by Colby Buzzell, a former infantry soldier stationed in Mosul, Iraq. Buzzell's blog reported both the mundane and terrifying aspects of a soldier's existence. The blog gained almost instant popularity, with several thousand visitors daily. It was taken down by the Army, which claimed to be concerned that Buzzell's postings contained information too important to be posted. Buzzell, now Stateside, has since released a book about his experiences, *My War*. It joins other first-person accounts of tours of duty in Iraq, such as John Crawford's *The Last True Story I'll Ever Tell* and Jason Christopher Hartley's *Just Another Soldier*.

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**Just prior to the start of rehearsals for *Harmless*, TimeLine artistic director PJ Powers (PP) chatted with playwright Brett Neveu (BN) about his work in Chicago and beyond, what inspired him to write *Harmless* and what is on the horizon for one of the city's hottest writers.**

**(PP)** How did you first get interested in playwrighting?

**(BN)** In one of my high-school lit classes I was supposed to write a final project at the end of the semester. I really had no interest (and kind of stunk at) writing papers, so I asked the English teacher if it might be alright to write a play instead. He looked at me as if I were a crazy person but told me that he thought it would be fine, as long as I followed it through. I chose to write an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Sheesh. I really didn't know what I was getting myself into, but found that I really enjoyed putting it all together. I also received a rare (for me) "A" on the project, which was also motivating.

**(PP)** What drew you to Chicago?

**(BN)** The theater scene. In the early 1990s, my wife and I were living in Minneapolis, and I was attempting to insert myself into whatever I could at a place called The Playwright's Center. Not having much success, I talked to a few friends who were living in Chicago. The group was doing a Pinter play in the basement of a café, and the show was getting good reviews (selling out even!). My wife and I talked, and not having really any strong ties to the Twin Cities, we decided to pack up and head a bit south to

Chicago. Later I would realize that the café that they were selling out only had about 15 seats and smelled like mildew and dying vermin. But it didn't matter by then; I was in Chicago, and I loved it.

**(PP)** So many playwrights can go years without ever having a staged reading of one of their plays, let alone a full production. But you don't seem to go 6 months in Chicago without having one of your plays produced at a great theater. How do you stay so prolific and so connected to a variety of companies?

**(BN)** Luck and perseverance in regards to the productions. I've been in Chicago for awhile now and have gotten to know all sorts of people at all sorts of companies. I started asking folks if they took scripts, and many of them did. So I handed things off a lot. I also wrote plays that were easy to do in a small space (*Eagle Hills*, *Eagle Ridge*, *Eagle Landing*, which was produced by Factory Theater in 2002, takes place at a table in a bar), so that helped secure productions. As far as being prolific goes, I've had a number of opportunities present themselves that required me to write. My residency with Chicago Dramatists gave me the chance to hear my plays read publicly, commissions from vari-

ous companies continue to keep me writing, and then there's the ever-present Midwestern work ethic.

**(PP)** This year you had your first success overseas with a production in England of your play *Eric LaRue*. How was that experience?

**(BN)** It was a life changer. Working with the amazing director Dominic Cooke (and an amazing cast and crew) taught me a pile of lessons regarding my role, my responsibilities — and gave me new insight into my work. The first production of the play was in Stratford, in a converted and ancient boathouse. The intimacy of the theater reminded me of a number of Chicago spaces. But then half a year later, when the production moved to London's West End, the space was much bigger. I was a bit frightened about the transfer to the larger venue, but everything worked out wonderfully. A lesson there, too, I think.

**(PP)** We have been talking for a few years about having you work at TimeLine, but you've always joked that the plays you write are sort of about history, but sort of not. I tend to find your plays to be very historically rooted and also very politically conscious, but I suppose those qualities might not immediately jump out

at all audiences. Do you think of yourself as a political writer?

**(BN)** I don't, but I do think that I write about people caught up in circumstances that politics has informed or helped to shape. I try to inject my characters with a connection to an uphill battle against those far-off folks in power who make decisions that affect them directly. An example would be *American Dead*. The plot centers on a man grieving for his murdered sister, but it's also about that same man carrying the weight of his grief in a town that has been blighted by the closing of industry, the death of the family farm and the prevalence of methamphetamine. These aspects are shaped by those within and also those living far, far away.

**(PP)** The thing that always strikes me about your plays — and the thing that forces me to think about them for days and days afterwards — is that so much of your action is under the surface, whereas a lot of playwrights beat you over the head with "what the play is about." People kid you a lot that your plays are just ordinary people sitting around talking about nothing. But then they walk out of the theater with their minds absolutely racing, and they don't know what just hit them. How the heck do you do that?

**(BN)** That's a question I get a lot and one that's difficult to answer. Mostly, it's the way I hear things. I've always been an observer (like most writers) and as a kid, most conversations were a puzzle to

me. I would try to insert myself somehow, but mostly ended up stumbling. As a result, I think I stood back and tried to figure out the puzzle. My writing is most likely a continuation of that. Also, I grew up in Iowa, where people don't often say what they mean, even in the most tense situations. The need for inclusion in a small town far outweighs the need to tell somebody how he or she really feels, so true sentiment gets shoved far below the surface. A person has to be an emotional map-reader to figure out how to navigate all of that, and I guess I was drawn to that kind of map.

**(PP)** What inspired you to write *Harmless*?

**(BN)** Two things: an article about a similar incident happening in



Cast and staff gather for the first rehearsal of *Harmless*.



California and my inside-my-head argument about art and responsibility.

(PP) This is not the first time you have collaborated with director Ed Sobel. Why do you find yourself working with him so much?

(BN) Ed and I — this is a cliché, I know — have developed a shorthand, which makes rehearsals easier. Ed was also one of the first literary managers who met with me about my work and one of the first theater professionals to take a direct hands-on approach to helping me develop my plays. He's read nearly everything I've written over the past 10 years and has probably had an impact on about every one. He serves as a mentor, a friend and someone I can lean on and trust. Plus, he's a heck of a director — I'm lucky to have him in the room.

(PP) This is also not the first time that you've worked with TimeLine company member David Parkes. He has appeared recently in *American Dead* and *Heritage* at American Theater Company. Is David slowly becoming your muse?

(BN) Muse? Hmm... If he wasn't such a lazy goof and *violently* terrible actor — then yes. OH, MAN, am I kidding! You can tell I'm kidding, right? If I wasn't kidding, I wouldn't have embellished so comically. With the word "violently." See? Kidding.

Seriously, though, I often say — and so does Ed Sobel — that for some reason there are actors who naturally hit my dialogue in just the right way. David is one of those folks; no matter the play, it seems like the role was written just for him. He also has a presence and style that sync up with the characters in my work. David's performances are also well calculated and heavily thought out but give the appearance of ease and underlying gravity. So, in the end, yeah. He's a muse. The jerk.

(PP) I know that you like to be very involved in the rehearsal process. Do you tend to do a lot of rewriting throughout it?

(BN) It depends on the show. Some plays need more rewriting than others, and some need just a tweak or two. Ninety percent of the time the rewrite process is quite heavy, especially at the start. Mostly the rewrites are about clarity, since I do largely rely on subtext, and changes are made based on actors' responses to roles. I often find myself watching the actor grow in his or her role and then finding rewrite ideas within his or her discoveries as they come.

(PP) We have yet to begin rehearsals for *Harmless*, yet you're

already hard at work on another project for TimeLine. It's our company's first new-play commission, and we couldn't be happier to be developing it with you. Set amid the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, it's taking shape as quite a wild ride, even in early drafts of the script. Hopefully TimeLine audiences will get to see it in the near future. How did that idea come to you?

(BN) I had done some research and found that there had not been too many plays written about the '68 convention, but many aspects of the rough-and-tumble Chicago theater scene had been born or tested in the chaos of those days. Story theater and street theater exploded, and those folks creating the wild work — Bob Sickenger, Paul Sills — perpetuated a tone and feel that has lasted to the present day. For the play I wanted to work on for TimeLine, I felt the need to capture that tone and feel of back then and show how politics and theater can collide to help embolden and inform us about our current political decision-making.

(PP) What else is coming up soon for you?

(BN) I have a show called *The Meek*, directed by Brennan Parks, which opens in May at A Red Orchid Theatre, and the film version of *The Earl*, directed by Jim Sikora, should be popping up sometime in the late spring. Oh — and my wife and I just had a baby girl in October. So I may not be so prolific for just a bit.

*Playwright Brett Neveu (right) listens to his play being read by actors Juliet Hart and David Parkes at the first rehearsal of Harmless.*

**In honor of TimeLine's 10th Anniversary, issues of *Backstory* this season feature stories about significant moments during our first decade. In this issue we tell the story of our home, Baird Hall Theater.**

During its first two seasons, TimeLine was itinerant. With no permanent home, the company faced challenges well-known to many fledgling theater companies seeking a place to produce their work — availability, cost, appropriateness, location and the difficulties of building an audience while on the move.

TimeLine's inaugural production, *Summit Conference*, was performed at the Performance Loft Theater in the 2nd Unitarian Church, 656 W. Barry Ave. Its second, *No End of Blame*, took place in a gallery renovated for the occasion at the Flat Iron Arts Building in Wicker Park, 1579 N. Milwaukee Ave.

Between those two productions, the company did something that would alter its fate forever. It rented a small but charming space located in the Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ

*Top: Revelry at TimeLine's New Year's Eve benefit "Step Into Time: Some Like It Hot," the event that led to the company obtaining Baird Hall as a long-term home.*

*Middle: The scene during TimeLine's initial renovation of Baird Hall.*

*Bottom: David Parkes (from left), Whitney Sneed and Juliet Hart in Gaslight, the first play TimeLine produced in its new home.*

for three days — December 30, 1998 through January 1, 1999.

Over those three days, company members transformed the space — known as Baird Hall — into a 1920s-era speakeasy for TimeLine's second New Year's Eve benefit, "Step Into Time: Some Like It Hot."

It was a great party, a huge success, and was memorably followed by a major blizzard that hit Chicago the next morning. But later, TimeLine company members would be amazed by how three festive but seemingly innocuous days became, in retrospect, a pivotal moment in the company's history.





## Three festive but seemingly innocuous days became, in retrospect, a pivotal moment in the company's history.



"I still remember — I was in a show at Northlight Theatre, in the dressing room waiting for my next entrance," recalls artistic director PJ Powers. "My pager went off and it was the Wellington church. They told me their previous long-term theater tenant would be leaving soon and asked if TimeLine might like to move in!"

It was a TimeLine dream coming true, but first Powers had to tell the caller he'd get back to them — he had to go back on stage.

A permanent home came with significant financial and organizational commitments, but the company knew it couldn't let the extraordinary opportunity pass.

Baird Hall has a distinguished history as one of the first off-Loop theaters, starting as early as the mid 1960s. A black box measuring approximately 36 feet square with no structural posts in the playing area and 18-foot ceilings, the space was much admired and perfect for TimeLine's needs at the start of its third season.

Move-in day was in September 1999. During a whirlwind six weeks the theater, dressing room and office spaces were cleaned, renovated, painted and prepared for production. The first play presented in TimeLine's new home, *Gaslight*, opened in October.

*Left: No more folding chairs! TimeLine's Great Chair Adventure — obtaining and renovating 75 theater seats for Baird Hall —was a major project during the summer of 2000.*

One major element was added to the theater several months later: its seats.

Evanston's Coronet Theatre was about to be torn down and scavengers were welcome. So on one sunny Saturday —April 15, 2000, to be exact —company members braved the darkened space to

claim 75 seats and other items. Over hundreds of hours, the seats, which were a little worse for wear, were sanded, painted, steam cleaned and made ready to be installed in multiple configurations. They were used first for TimeLine's Midwest premiere of Tennessee Williams' *Not About Nightingales* in October 2000.

"TimeLine wouldn't be what we are today if it weren't for that series of events that started New Years's Eve, 1998," Powers says. "Timing and good fortune helped us to create a home, and that home has housed 25 TimeLine productions since we rang in 1999 here in style."

### THE CELEBRATION

Please join us for  
**TimeLine Theatre's 10th Anniversary benefit!**  
**SATURDAY, MARCH 24, 2007**  
**7 - 11pm**

**Maxim's: The Nancy Goldberg International Center**  
24 E. Goethe, Chicago

It's been four years since we kicked up our heels with a party this sensational! Help us celebrate 10 years of making history by stepping back in time to La Belle Époque ("The Beautiful Era"). As only TimeLine can, we'll replicate the experience of a decadent night out at the famous Parisian restaurant Maxim's, complete with live entertainment, French-inspired food and drink and glamorous revelry.

*Space is limited and this event is likely to sell out.*

For more information and to purchase tickets, call **(773) 281-TIME x24**.



**Tickets \$100**  
**VIP Tickets \$150**

**Ticket and sponsorship packages are available.**  
**The evening will include an auction and raffle.**

**New Year's Eve 1997** TimeLine's first "Step Into Time" benefit is held at the Mars Gallery in Chicago's River North neighborhood. It is the company's first public event and raises enough funds to mount its first production, *Summit Conference*, which opens in April 1998.

**New Year's Eve 1998** "Step Into Time: Some Like It Hot" transforms Baird Hall on Wellington Avenue into a 1920s-era speakeasy, complete with a whiskey-filled coffin, entry passwords and the Charleston. Seven months later, TimeLine will be invited to make the theater its long-term home.

**April 2003** "Step Into Time: Radio Days" marks TimeLine's return to the party circuit, having discontinued its New Year's Eve events in the face of Y2K. "Radio Days" is inspired by the 1950s and attracts 150 guests to enjoy champagne cocktails and Big Band music on the 40th floor of Mies van der Rohe's spectacular One IBM Plaza building.



## WORLD PREMIERE

by **BRETT NEVEU**directed by **EDWARD SOBEL**

One of the most acclaimed playwrights to emerge in Chicago in the last decade, Brett Neveu has a reputation for blistering dialogue, complex characters and haunting stories. With *Harmless*, he delivers a gripping three-character drama about a crisis unfolding on a small Midwestern college campus.

A creative writing professor is called to the office of the college president for questioning. What has been going on in his classroom to provoke a growing controversy and attract the attention of the United States military? Is there a real threat, or is it imagined?

JANUARY 20 - MARCH 18, 2007

**The Cast** (in alphabetical order)

Juliet Hart:  
*Lieutenant Mindy Ergenbright*  
John Jenkins:  
*President Daniel Wesson*  
David Parkes: *Jim McFehren*

**The Production Team**

Keith Pitts: *Scenic Designer*  
Lindsey Pate: *Costume Designer*  
Charles Cooper: *Lighting Designer*  
Josh Horvath: *Sound Designer*  
Julia Eberhardt: *Props Designer*  
Daria Grubb: *Assistant Director*  
Gabriel Greene: *Dramaturg*  
Seth Vermilyea: *Stage Manager*  
Holly Birdsong: *Assistant Stage Manager*  
Jennifer Martin:  
*Production Manager*  
Bob Groth: *Technical Director*  
Michael Smallwood:  
*Master Electrician*  
Robert Coleman: *Graphic Designer*  
James Keister: *Lobby Display Graphic Designer*  
Lara Goetsch: *Director of Marketing and Communications*  
PJ Powers: *Artistic Director*  
Brian Voelker: *Managing Director*



## JANUARY 2007

Su	M	T	W	Th	F	Sa
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

## FEBRUARY 2007

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## MARCH 2007

Su	M	T	W	Th	F	Sa
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18						

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SATURDAY 4 PM &amp; 8 PM

SUNDAY 2 PM

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