

Julie Jensen  
[JulieJensen723@gmail.com](mailto:JulieJensen723@gmail.com)  
(801) 433-8580

**Truth at Close Range;**  
**Notes Toward a New Genre**

*by Julie Jensen*  
*with Laura Munts*

I have spent more than sixty years in the theatre, directed two dozen plays, written more than that, taught theatre at six universities, seen 7,462 productions (give or take a few dozen). I was sure I knew every style, every movement, every square inch of the great tapestry of this art form.

I was wrong.

In early 2025 I was asked to direct a new play, *In This Meantime* by Laura Munts (with Reb Fleming and Elaine Jarvik). Out of respect for my sanity, I hadn't directed in more than thirty years. But I liked this play: a single character, a compelling story, a performer aging out of her profession and her life. The character was funny, vulnerable and smart. The story, original yet familiar.

I was also charmed by the audacity of a playwright and an actor who wanted to hire their director before approaching a theatre. We would come as a package. We would, in effect, be auditioning for a slot in someone else's season. So I said yes, because I was hungry for something new and something honest.

The Question of Where. We first approached Pygmalion Productions in Salt Lake City. They saw a run-through and thought the play damn good. It fit their mission. But every slot in the coming season was full. We'd have to wait.

Reb Fleming, the actor in the show, did not receive this news quietly. "I can't wait till next season," she said. "Hell, I could be dead by then."

She was right. Waiting, as Beckett tells us, has no meaning. Waiting would not improve the play; it would not improve the performance.

We thought about offering it to other theaters. We thought about performing on Pygmalion's dark nights. Each accommodation seemed to be a betrayal. So we backed off.

Then I remembered Joshua Padrón, Artistic Director of Long Wharf Theatre, who had produced a one-woman show in living rooms throughout New Haven as a way to deepen community connection. Out of Hand Theatre in Atlanta had been doing something similar for more than twenty years, producing plays in homes to enhance civic engagement.

Could we use that model?

No one said, "We can't do that." No one said, "Yeah, but that's not how it's done." In fact, we all said, "Yes!"

And so the play would be performed in people's living rooms.

A New Genre? We need to be honest here about what we were actually doing, because it took us a while to understand it ourselves.

Many plays are “ta-dah plays.” The curtain goes up. The lights come on. The actor performs. The audience watches in the dark. Something is delivered and revealed. Ta-dah. They applaud. They go home. They were entertained and that’s all that was expected.

*In This Meantime* is an “ah-ha play.” It does not entertain and release the audience. It wakes them up. Something shifts, how they see themselves, how they understand the world. A guest walks in as one person, and leaves, quietly, as another – as one who has been asked an unexpected question and whose answer has been unexpectedly heard.

Or put it plainly, a ta-dah play entertains you. An ah-ha play wakes you up. One gives you a good night out; the other gives you something you carry home and live with.

How We Made It. Our defining decision was that our audience would be small – twelve to fifteen people each paying from \$25 to \$35, everyone with a front-row seat. No projection. No exaggeration. No performing. Subtlety would carry the play.

We met once a week. No deadline. No responsibility to comply with anyone else’s schedule. We had, each of us, the luxury of being in our own meantime.

All three of us, Reb, Laura and I, attended every rehearsal. The playwright was always in the room. That is not how it is usually done. For this work it was essential.

We agreed to dissolve our siloed roles: director, actor, playwright. These roles are, after all, a construct, a useful construct in a traditional production, less useful here. We all made suggestions about everything, from adding dialogue to the lilt of a character's accent to the precise angle of a chair.

Rehearsals were held in my living room. Something comforting in that. No accommodation necessary. Quiet, unhurried, civilized. We had our work. So we worked.

Quiet, simple, honest. It became our mantra, the standard against which every choice was measured. Acting, writing, directing, set, costume, printed program and post-play conversation. We felt like Michelangelo, taking away everything that wasn't Sophia, the protagonist.

This performance style was most challenging for the actor. Reb had spent her life in the theatre. For this production she was asked to give up her training, set aside her defenses and unmask herself in public. This was not to be a performance; it was to be a conversation with an intimate.

The minute we detected something artificial, the whole thing collapsed. We could not have an honest play in a dishonest production.

The most surprising scene in the play belongs to Yellow Boots — an unhoused woman who lives behind the theater, brushing her teeth outside, who overhears a humiliated Sophia calling herself a stupid old cow. Yellow Boots says simply, "You are wrong about cows being stupid. They are complex problem solvers. And God knows they don't cry over spilt milk the way you people do." That woman is standing three feet

from the guests. If anything in the room is performative, she disappears. If the play isn't genuine, don't bring it into a living room.

The Script. We made changes throughout: cut unnecessary description, sharpened dramatic builds, clarified the ten separate characters.

The play would run forty-five minutes, the conversation after, fifteen. The entire event, not counting food and drink, would last an hour.

Who knew? An hour is exactly right. This production is a distillation of a life, the conclusions one reaches near the end, offered to people sitting close enough to feel the weight of them.

The Play Itself. *In This Meantime* focuses on aging, a subject often avoided, disguised or lied about. Sophia is a septuagenarian actor figuring out what she is supposed to do between now and when she dies. She's not morbid. She's practical.

Sophia is so funny it hurts. She is also cringeworthy. She is the wrong person in the right place. The right talent at the wrong age.

The play's dramatic question is not whether Sophia will get what she wants. The answer is yes. And no. And also something else, something closer to acceptance. The play ends not with triumph but with raw honesty. Sophia's final words are a command and a plea, "Don't look away. We are still here." In a living room, sitting three feet from the actor, these words land viscerally.

The Hosts and the Setup. We needed people to bring this production into their homes, which would require its own particular courage. Hosts would invite friends to

pay to come to their home and watch a play in a format most had never encountered, putting their social capital on the line. They would introduce the play, emcee the conversation and serve food and drink. They would be, in every meaningful sense, a producer.

Our hosts' venues ranged widely, from large, elegant living rooms to more modest ones. This range was intentional. This model was intended to be accessible across the socioeconomic spectrum. To our delight, hosts have lined up around the block.

We also hired a stage manager: someone to handle logistics at each new venue, communicate with the hosts in advance and make sure the room was right before the actor walked in.

The room setup is precise. No more than fifteen guests in a semi-circle. No one further than nine o'clock or three o'clock on either side. The actor in an armchair, with a side table. The entire set travels in a shoebox.

Yes, and.... We rehearsed potential guest interruptions: the ringing phone, the buzzing watch, the fidgeting leg, the interrupting trip to the bathroom. We turned each one into a "yes, and." We did not tune out the room. We embraced it. Our guests would be the other half of the conversation. They would not be an audience to be managed. They would be participants to be included.

The actor could not help but see them. Could not help but respond to them, within the confines of the play. Each performance would be genuinely different. There would be, in this model, many opening nights.

The Conversation After. At the conclusion of the play, we asked our guests to talk about what the experience was like for them: their reflections on the content of the play, their proximity to the actor and to each other. We invited them to be as vulnerable as the playwright and the performer.

And our guests were more than willing.

One of them said, “She became my friend. I couldn’t take my eyes away.” Another, “It’s so important to talk about this stuff. And we never talk about it.” And, another, “Every issue raised was mine and struck home. This experience changed my life.”

People are hungry for meaningful human interaction. We live in a time of deception and duplicity. When the public square becomes untrustworthy, the theatre must become the truth-teller.

What is This ‘Thing’? Each element of this model has precedent. The solo confessional play has a long lineage. Living room plays have been around for decades. Post-show conversation is as old as the coffee house. But the genre we are describing is not any one of these things.

This genre lives in the writing, in the production, in the venue, in the proximity, in the conversation after. Remove any one element and you have something else entirely. It is the combination that creates the genre.

Here there is no fourth wall to break because there was never a fourth wall to begin with. In this model, there is nowhere to hide, not for the actor, not for the

audience, not for the writer. And there are more living rooms than stages, more hosts than producers. More art gets in.

Having spent more than sixty years studying, practicing, teaching and loving this art form, I will tell you this is a new square inch. This is a new genre. This is Truth at Close Range.

A Final Word. We made this up. All of it. You are invited to do the same. I'm going to write for this genre because I am fascinated by what happens in a room when a person tells the truth to people close enough to feel it.

\*\*\*