



The Velocity of Eric Coble

The prolific Cleveland-based writer's career is packed with impulsive twists and crises averted

BY CHRISTOPHER JOHNSTON

Estelle Parsons and Stephen Spinella in *The Velocity of Autumn* at Arena Stage.

TERESA WOOD

YOU'RE PLAYWRIGHT ERIC COBLE. YOU'VE SPENT two decades getting more than 40 original plays and adaptations produced on six out of seven continents and racking up numerous awards. Now, it's April 2012, and Estelle Parsons is lined up to perform the lead role in a reading of your first Broadway-bound play. No worries, right?

Coble still shudders at the memory of the looming catastrophe. Larry Kaye, Broadway producer, had enlisted Molly Smith, artistic director of Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage, to direct Academy Award winner Parsons and Tony Award winner Stephen Spinella in the reading of his high-intensity two-hander *The Velocity of Autumn*.

Previously produced in Boise and Cleveland (where Coble is based), the play captures Alexandra, an age-challenged

woman fighting to keep her home and sense of self, in a surprise encounter with her son Chris, who breaks into her Park Slope apartment to prevent his mother from executing her threats to blow it all sky high with Molotov cocktails. Parsons liked the script when she read it, but wanted to hear it before she would commit. Now, the rehearsal room at the Arena was charged with a sense of "If Estelle says 'yes,' then it's probably a go. If she says 'no,' then we will have to rethink it."



Coble

On her day off from the musical *Nice Work If You Can Get It* on Broadway, Parsons traveled by train to D.C. with a tired, sore throat, greeting all with whispers that she was sorry, but she was very sick and would do her best. As she quietly curled into her chair with a cup of tea and her script, Coble's hopes sank. "Great," he thought, "she's got 90 minutes of talking *and* big emotion. This is going to go really well."

Then it went really well. As the play opens, Alexandra, asleep in her favorite chair, is startled by Chris, who climbs a tree to sneak in her window. "Estelle screamed, 'Get out of my house!' full out," Coble says, incredulous. "She went to level 10 immediately, laying waste to him—she was just on fire for 45 minutes." Afterwards, he thought: That's what professionals do.

"It was really astonishing," Coble continues. "As soon as it was finished, Estelle fell back into whispering about how she was sick and how sorry she was. It was a total shock."

For her part, Parsons recalls, "I was amazed, too, because I was not really up to things, and the play starts at such a high level, and you can't start it if you're not up there. It's a trap for an actress, because if you want to start slow and build up, you can't. I found that so interesting to do, and see where it led on this wild journey through the play."

The Velocity of Autumn is the third of Coble's "Alexandra Plays," which the writer labels a triptych, not a trilogy, since they examine the same woman at three different points in her life—paradoxically, in the same year. The first, *A Girl's Guide to Coffee*, features Alex, a 20-something wrestling with her artistic bent and desire to explore the world while toiling

as a barista. The second, *Stranded on Earth*, takes place about 20 years later, when Alexa is a frustrated painter dealing with her role as wife, mother and commercial graphic designer and wondering whether putting down roots was the right choice.

“I was intrigued by the idea of how your identity, relationship to the world and commitment to art change as you age,” Coble explains.

The story for the third play was inspired by his experiences with his aging mother, who, with his help, remains in her home close to his, as well as with his grandparents, neighbors and even older actors he knows. “Alexandra’s a fiction based on about a hundred personal truths,” he states.

Of the embattled mother and son, director Molly Smith (who is also making her Broadway directing debut) observes, “The two characters have the conversations we wish we could have with our parents and grandparents who are aging and going through these huge life transitions.”

After the great success of the D.C. reading, the team did a second reading in New York in December of 2012 and had hoped to open the play on Broadway in the spring of

2013. The only theatre available had 1,400 seats, which Smith and Kaye felt was too large for the intimate play. Instead, Smith got the play scheduled at Arena for fall 2013.

Coble worked closely with her on refining the script, and after seeing nearly 20 performances of the highly successful production at Arena, made a few “surgical as opposed to sledgehammer” rewrites in anticipation of a Broadway production. In December, Kaye formalized a deal with the Shuberts for the 780-seat Booth Theatre, where the show is set to open April 21.

“Even though everyone wanted to go last spring, everything has gotten better because we waited that year,” Coble says.

Previews start on April 1, and those who know the wry-witted Coble appreciate the April Fools connection. “He’s one of the funniest people I know,” says Kenn McLaughlin, producing artistic director at Stages Repertory Theatre in Houston, where Coble has had many productions. “When we are together, he can make me laugh until my sides hurt.”

Although Coble built his early career on dark, violent comedies such as *Bright Ideas* and *The Dead Guy*, he went on to develop

three other distinct styles—adaptations and children’s plays; his “WTF” plays, like *My Barking Dog*, which feature magic realism and leave audiences either entertained and enlightened or confounded and concerned; and his more recent “talky dramas” like *The Velocity of Autumn*.

“There’s a maturity in the plays he’s written in the past two or three years,” McLaughlin notes. “These characters express themselves with a much greater sense of realism than some of the earlier plays that elevated their comic elements. But what undergirds all of it is a real respect and understanding of the humanity the characters are fighting for.”

The evolving, mid-career playwright says he’s enjoying always learning, and he doesn’t labor too much over the concern by some that he should just write “Coble-style” plays. “For whatever reason, I feel constitutionally unable to stick to that,” he declares.

COBLE’S OWN TWISTING TREK TOWARD

Broadway started in 1968, when he was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. His mother, Jan, serving in the U.S. Air Force in Iceland at the time, had done her research and learned that

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Scotland had a lower infant mortality rate than the U.S. Roughly two years later, Jan decided to teach on a Navajo reservation, based purely on caprice, as was her wont, Coble says, adding that to this day he's still not sure why: "There was no tie other than her desire to be there."

They started in Shiprock, N.M., then did several scene transitions through tiny towns in different parts of the Navajo reservation and one Ute settlement, all in the Four Corners region of the Southwest, until he was 15. His official entry into the theatre life, he claims, occurred when he was in high school in Ignacio, Colo. (pop. 700). In his 15th summer, he and several friends, inspired by *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, decided to stage a stunt-filled spectacular for their parents, featuring bike riders crashing into trees and jumping off garages. The "accident-o-rama" closed early, when the audience collectively screamed, "Stop! That's enough!"

The addiction, however, had taken hold. "I remember that evening just being on this high for a couple of hours," Coble says. "That was really cool. We should do that again!"

The Cobles relocated to Durango, Colo. (pop. 11,000), where his sophomore-year

performance in *Damn Yankees* confirmed his desire to be an actor. While attending Fort Lewis College there, he fed his theatre jones by majoring in English but with a minor in acting. He did as many shows as he could get cast in, and even performed in the evenings and summers for a resident company founded by two New York actors.

Working on everything from Shakespeare to Shepard gave Coble a chance to "absorb, absorb, absorb" the diverse styles, words and rhythms of plays from the inside out. "I learned everything I could about acting, and, unbeknownst to me, learned everything I could about playwriting at the same time, because I was listening closely to the language," he says.

Looking back, he sees even earlier playwriting roots on the reservation, where his mother fostered the Native American storytelling tradition with her son and her students. She kept a scrapbook to record stories that little Eric would imagine and then provide accompanying stick-figure illustrations.

Still in his acting phase after graduating from Fort Lewis College, Coble enrolled ("on impulse," he says) in Ohio University's MFA

program. His arrival in Athens via Greyhound bus in the fall of 1990 marked his first time in Ohio and his farthest point east. His second year, Coble needed a class, so he signed up for playwriting. Then he entered a script into OU's annual new-play festival—"very autobiographical and a farce," he says with a big smile. He also had an epiphany: The experience of having his play well received by fellow students for its two-night run was analogous to his stunt spectacle at 15, minus the bruises and broken ribs. "I don't think I've ever said this before," he says, "but that feeling afterwards was very similar: 'Oh, I'd like to do more of this.'"

Still not convinced that he was a playwright, Coble spent his third year as an acting intern at the Cleveland Play House, part of OU's program to provide professional experience and enable students to earn an Equity card. (He got his MFA in acting, but OU later adopted him as a playwright alum as well.)

Coble liked the Cleveland theatre landscape and the fact that it was an affordable, artist-friendly city, and his wife Carol Laursen moved from Massachusetts to join him on the North Coast and take a job in a diagnostic

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STEVE WADNER

Heather Anderson Boll and Nick Koesters in *My Barking Dog* at Cleveland Public Theatre.



OWEN GARET

Ryan Stathos in *The Giver* at Oregon Children's Theatre.

laboratory at University Hospitals Case Medical Center. Coble accepted a position as an actor-teacher at Cleveland's other LORT member, Great Lakes Theater Festival (now Great Lakes Theater).

Realizing the city was also a great place to raise kids, they decided to remain, and they purchased a house in classic Coble fashion: sight unseen. "It was a neighborhood we wanted to be in," he shrugs. The couple has been married for 19 years and they have a son in college and a daughter in high school. Concerned about his community's schools, Coble ran for a school board position and is near completing his six-year term. "If you're going to put down roots somewhere, you might as well really put them down," he says.

IN THE MEANTIME, COBLE BEGAN mining his *Dramatists Sourcebook* for national theatre opportunities and submitted scripts to local venues. In 1994, Cleveland Public Theatre produced his first full production, *Isolated Incidents*, and the following year, another of his dark comedies, *Sound-Biting*, premiered at Dobama Theatre. Also in 1994, he became a founding member of the Playwrights Unit, a professional development program, at CPH. Two years later, when a playwright failed to complete a script for the Play House's children's theatre, he stepped in and wrote *In a Grove: Four Japanese Ghost Stories*, which Playscripts, Inc. published and continues to be produced today, especially around Halloween. In 1999, his biographical play, *truth: the Testimonial of*

Sojourner Truth, registered a big hit at CPH.

Larger doors opened when *Bright Ideas* premiered in CPH's 2002 season. Inspired by his new-parent experiences with preschool, the "satire of Macbeth" lances the Machiavellian lengths parents take to assure their child's admittance into a prestigious private school. From Cleveland, it moved Off Broadway to MCC Theater, was published by Dramatists Play Service, and went on to have dozens of productions throughout the U.S.

Laura Kepley, recently named CPH's ninth artistic director, has known Coble since she ran the Playwrights Unit as associate artistic director. He quickly befriended Kepley and her husband, playwright George Brant, after she relocated from Trinity Repertory Theatre Company in Providence, R.I., in 2010. "He's too young to say he's the grandfather of Cleveland theatre, but he is," Kepley says with a laugh. "He was such a fantastic ambassador to Cleveland and the theatre community for us."

Kepley, who directed Coble's adaptation of Les Roberts's *A Carol for Cleveland* at CPH in 2012, likes the way he has his own slant on the world and incorporates different styles to accommodate it. "I appreciate that he writes plays that delight young children, and plays that scare the heck out of adults," she says. Last year the American Alliance for Children and Education awarded Coble its Charlotte B. Chorpenning Playwright Award for his body of work in children's theatre.

"Eric is such a good collaborator," says Stan Foote, artistic director of Oregon Chil-

dren's Theatre, where Coble's adaptation of Lois Lowry's *The Giver* played in 2006 before going on to have more than 200 productions worldwide. "He doesn't bring a lot of drama into the writing process. He puts the drama in the script." Foote, knowing about Coble's childhood on the reservations, commissioned him to write their first of several collaborations, *Sacagawea*, which premiered in 2002.

The affable and popular writer has a solid following in Texas, too, thanks in part to his longtime friendship with Stages Rep's McLaughlin. Since Coble's *Pinocchio 3.5* won the children's category of Stages's New Plays Festival in 2001, the theatre has produced one of his plays on its children's or main stage every year—until a couple of years ago, when Coble got too busy with other commitments.

Of his friend's Broadway debut, McLaughlin says, "His distinctive voice is just being discovered now. I am excited for him and for the next chapters of his life."

Upon learning that his play was headed for Broadway, the low-key Coble says he never had "a big, explosive, fist-pumping" moment. "It happens to be a bigger arena," he allows, "but I don't feel that I've 'made it.' This is the next play. I would like to continue to get produced. That's been the goal from the get-go, as it is for every other playwright."

So, true to the blue-collar ethic of his adopted hometown, Coble's taking no time out to bask in the Great White Light. Already a second play, *Southern Rapture*, has received an industry reading, with a cast including John Larroquette, Judith Light and Jerry O'Connell, and has been optioned for Broadway. Outside New York City, *Stranded on Earth* was produced at Geva Theatre in Rochester in March, and will open at Cleveland's new Mama! Theatre Company in June. This May, Coble's new play *Fairfield*, a comedy about an elementary school where Black History Month goes horribly wrong, will be part of CPH's New Ground Festival. He's also working on a translation of *The Giver* for a production in São Paulo, Brazil.

Keeping to his prolific nature, he has six or eight other plays floating in his head that he hopes to write soon. Troubled by the lack of a production on the seventh continent, however, Coble assures that he is exploring ways to start a one-night-only theatre in Antarctica. ❏

Christopher Johnston is a freelance journalist, playwright and director in Cleveland. His play *Ghosts of War* premiered last year at Dobama Theatre.