

Icarus

STUDY GUIDE

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IN CONVERSATION WITH DAVID CATLIN

interview by dramaturg Shannon Fitzsimons

What attracted you to the myth of Icarus and Daedalus?

Lookingglass has always been fascinated with flight and defying gravity and stories that express that. [Lookingglass Ensemble Member] David Kersnar and I used to joke about wanting to do some cheesy musical called "I Am Icarus," complete with power ballads! But in all seriousness, I always just loved that story and all the metaphor that's tied up into it. We go through our lives hoping to take risks, having fears around those risks, and then we hopefully confront those fears and are able to leave the nest and fly, but sometimes we crash and burn. I think everybody has, at some point, had a dream about flying. It's a very primal desire, to know what that would be like.

In reading the Icarus myth I was struck by how Daedalus made the wings that caused his son's death. How does a parent survive that? I'm the father of two daughters, and I spend a lot of energy worrying about whether I'm doing an okay job or not. I worry if they are going to go out into the world and make good choices that aren't flying too close to the sun or too close to the water. It's also an opportu-

nity to explore the tension parents feel between family and work and their attempt to find balance within that. Sometimes I don't feel like I'm devoting enough time to either family or work. I imagine there are a lot of other people in the world who feel that way as well.

You presented a workshop version of this piece at the Getty Villa in Los Angeles this past spring. How did that come to pass, and how was that version different from what you're working on in Chicago?

A few years ago we were approached by the Getty, and they commissioned us to write a play from Greek or Roman source material. We were asked to present a staged reading of the work, but we ended up creating a more fully-realized show that came out of a staged reading unexpectedly, because people were just expecting us to sit in front of microphones and have music stands and have scripts. All of the props came out of the backpacks that the actors wore onstage. The music stands at one point were taken apart and became the palace that Daedalus builds for King Minos. So it was a very simple,

low-tech aesthetic.

In this process, we didn't want to go with a staged reading because it felt strange to offer as part of our season, but we liked these stories, so we decided that it would become more of a psychological examination. The heart of what I'm interested in exploring is how does someone survive the catastrophe of losing a child? I can't imagine surviving that. I think I'd become just completely catatonic. To me, the most therapeutic things in the world are stories. I think for us as a culture, stories are one of the ways that, aside from actual medicine, we find solace, that we find comfort, that we find healing and redemption. And I believed that's why the Greek stories have endured so long, because they demonstrate for us people surviving some very, very dark moments. So the frame for our story is one of a person who has been through a terrible experience and is now catatonic. It's the story of Icarus that draws him out and allows him to re-emerge into the world, to come out of the cocoon he's enclosed himself in.

Like *Lookingglass Alice*, which you also wrote and directed, *Icarus* is intensely physical in its storytelling. How fully-imagined are those choreographed moments when you write, and how much do they evolve during rehearsal?

As I'm writing I will likely have a sense that's there some sort of movement sequence or dream that, for example,

is supposed to give the sense of flight or that feeling you get when you're first meeting someone, when you're first falling in love. I like the phrase, "falling in love," which indicates a free fall, which is a theme within our play. It's also a theme within Alice, that she falls a lot. So we've choreographed something that is hopefully a little dizzying, both for actor and audience, to experience.

But then the specifics of how that ends up being manifested on stage is always better than I imagine, because of the talents of Sylvia [Hernandez-Distasi, *Icarus* choreographer and LTC Associate Artist] and our cast. Our performers are not just good at creating whatever you ask them to, but they're good at creating new ideas as they go, both in their heads and in their bodies. They will come up with things that are beyond what I can imagine. Then Sylvia will take those ideas, combine them with some ideas that she's had as well, and begin to string them together into larger sequences.

I'll have a laptop in the rehearsal room, and if we are able to achieve something visually or physically I'll cut any text from the script that was used to get us from Point A to Point B verbally. So the script can be very fluid. In a lot of processes, there is a kind of sanctity to the script, and a show is directed in a way that you are doing everything you can to make the words work. And with great plays, that's great. It can be an honor to make Thornton Wilder's great words work, Shakespeare's great

words work. It's more getting out of the way. But in our process that's not always the case. What's important is the story being experienced, and so the script can be quickly cut for the sake of the overall story and for what we want the audience to experience by the end of the play.

There are a number of different versions of the Icarus myth. Were there any in particular that you found helpful or inspirational?

I like to read many different versions, whether it's Bullfinch's version or Edith Hamilton or D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths, and then assimilate them to make the story my own. My goal was not to be slavishly faithful to any one version of the myth. For example, the character of Ariadne [the daughter of Minos and Pasiphae] does not appear in our version. I have Daedalus directly helping Theseus, instead of doing so indirectly through Ariadne. I didn't want to have too many characters to attend to, since we already have many characters and only six actors playing those many characters. That's just an example of how I made some theatrical choices that weren't necessarily faithful to the source material.

What are the challenges of directing your own play?

Certainly you can fall in love with your own writing. Presumably when you write something, you like what you've written and it makes sense to you, but that doesn't necessarily mean it makes sense to everyone else. That's why I rely heavily on the collaborative structure of Lookingglass, so that my colleagues will help me see what maybe isn't clear to other people. They help provide an outside eye. We also really rely on the preview process for that reason. It's a big challenge, but at Lookingglass the writer and the director are often the same. The advantage to that is that there is a purity of vision. You're not losing anything in the interpretation of that initial written text. I like that when I go to



Anthony Fleming III (King Minos)

see a Mary Zimmerman piece or a Heidi Stillman piece, I'm seeing a continuity of vision—something that started in Mary or Heidi's heart and that ends up intact on stage. I feel that many times when we've been most successful at Lookingglass, there's been that purity.



Anthony Fleming, Lindsey Noel Whiting, Lawrence E. DiStasi and Louise Lamson in the *Icarus* staged reading at the Getty Villa

Lindsey Noel Whiting (Icarus) and Lawrence E. DiStasi (Daedalus) after the fall



POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

In *Icarus*, Patient X (Daedalus) suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. This condition is not uncommon in individuals who have suffered the loss of a child, or another type of traumatic event.

DEFINITION:

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder that's triggered by a traumatic event. You can develop post-traumatic stress disorder when you experience or witness an event that causes intense fear, helplessness or horror.

Many people who are involved in traumatic events have a brief period of difficulty adjusting and coping. But with time and healthy coping methods, such traumatic reactions usually get better.

In some cases, though, the symptoms can get worse or last for months or even

years. Sometimes they may completely disrupt your life. In these cases, you may have post-traumatic stress disorder.

SYMPTOMS:

Signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder typically begin within three months of a traumatic event. In a small number of cases, though, PTSD symptoms may not occur until years after the event.

Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms are commonly grouped into three types: intrusive memories, avoidance and numbing, and increased anxiety or emotional arousal.

Symptoms of intrusive memories may include:

- Flashbacks, or reliving the traumatic event for minutes or even days at a time
- Upsetting dreams about the traumatic event

Symptoms of avoidance and emotional numbing may include:

- Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Avoiding activities you once enjoyed
- Hopelessness about the future
- Memory problems
- Trouble concentrating
- Difficulty maintaining close relationships

Symptoms of anxiety and increased emotional arousal may include:

- Irritability or anger
- Overwhelming guilt or shame
- Self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much
- Trouble sleeping
- Being easily startled or frightened
- Hearing or seeing things that aren't there

Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms can come and go. You may have more post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms during times of higher stress or when you

experience reminders of what you went through.

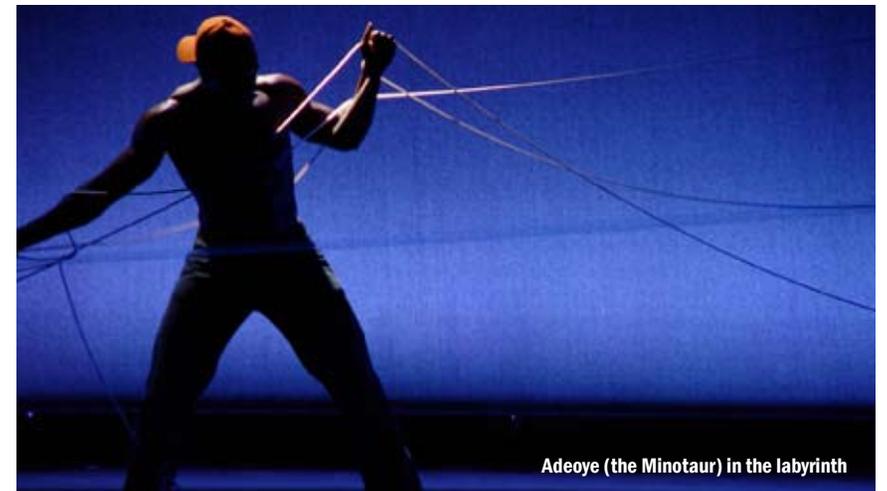
COPING AND TREATMENT:

After surviving a traumatic event, many people have PTSD-like symptoms at first, such as being unable to stop thinking about what's happened. Fear, anxiety, anger, depression, guilt — all are common reactions to trauma. Although you may not want to talk about it to anyone or you don't want to even think about what's happened, getting support can help you recover. This may mean turning to supportive family and friends who will listen and offer comfort. It may mean that you seek out a mental health professional for a brief course of therapy. Some people also may find it helpful to turn to their faith community or a pastoral crisis counselor.

Treatment often includes both medications and psychotherapy. This combined approach can help improve your symptoms and teach you skills to cope better with the traumatic event and its aftermath.

SOURCE:

Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research (MFMER), Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
www.mayoclinic.com/health/post-traumatic-stress-disorder



Adeoye (the Minotaur) in the labyrinth

DAEDALUS AND THE FALL OF ICARUS

BY DR. SANDOOR GOODHEART



Adeoye (Aegeus) and Lauren Hirte (Aetra)

DAVID CATLIN'S PLAY IS A SUSTAINED AND COMPELLING MEDITATION

on the worst fear a parent can have—the loss of a child through parental neglect. The play is framed by the dawning awareness of a mental patient, who moves from catatonia to the beginnings of responsibility, in response to the traumatic events he has experienced.

Within that framework—which takes place in effect within his mind—the story of Icarus and Daedalus from Greek mythology is employed, set off against two others: that of King Minos of Crete (and his relation to his son, Androgeus), and that of King Aegeus of Athens (and his relation to his son, Theseus). The contrast of these three is further contextualized by the introduction of the wives of these

individuals—who offset, enhance, or otherwise motivate their husband's actions: Minos' wife (and Androgeus' mother) Pasiphae, Aegeus' wife (and Theseus' mother), Aetra, and Daedalus' wife (and Icarus' mother), Naucrate.

The family dynamics of these nine individuals is in turn set in motion by sacrifice: by a demand for ritual slaughter (of a "snow-white bull") on the part of the sea god Poseidon (one of the three gods of the Olympian regime—the other two are the sky god Zeus, and the god of the underworld Hades), a demand that is rejected. The fact that after the birth of her son, the wife of Minos is confined to a "mocked-up bull—hollow on the interior" and soon gives birth to the Minotaur ("half bull and half boy"), and that a similar bull ravages the land of Athens (this time "all bull and no boy"), is not coincidental.

Nor is the disaster that ensues. Minos' son is killed in a good faith attempt to slay the Athenian monster, and Minos flies into a rage: demanding the sacrificial slaughter of fourteen young Athenian men and women on a regular basis. Although Aegeus' son Theseus, in a similar act of filial piety, successfully slays the Cretan Minotaur (housed within the Labyrinth built by the artisan Daedalus), a random crossing of signals in the port of Athens is misread by Aegeus as a sign of his son's mortality, and the father takes his own life, plunging into Poseidon's salty and "dusky" waters. Now that Minos' violent sacrificial plot to kill fourteen innocent young Athenians has been foiled

by Theseus, the king attempts to find another scapegoat for his loss. He confines Daedalus and his son to the father's own labyrinthine invention. The plan of Daedalus is born. The father will construct feathered wings for himself and his boy, and fly out of their earthly prison, a plan that proves devastating when the boy flies too close to the sun, the wax melts, and the child falls to a watery death.

The themes that David Catlin uses—the psychological trauma and self-inflicted violence that a patient in a mental health institution is confronting, the dutiful imitation of three sons of their fathers' desires for them, the sacrificial, self-sacrificial, and violent gestures that the three fathers (and perhaps the gods themselves) undertake to deal with loss or its imminent threat—would not perhaps be foreign to readers of French critical theory. *In Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard constructs a vocabulary for the kinds of sacrificial scapegoat dynamics we find on display in the ancient tragic writers and

from which Greek mythological thinking at large may have sprung. What Catlin has shown is what Girard would call the birth of the "monstrous double." Violence arises neither from an enemy from without, nor from a villain from within, but from the good gone wrong, from legitimate sacrifice become violence, beneficial concern become excess and as a consequence destruction. Minos accedes to his wife's innocent request to reject Poseidon's demand for sacrifice. He confines her, she betrays him, and a monster is born of the union: Minos becomes in effect the Minotaur. The father overindulges the child and, upon the child's death, overindulges his own vengeance. Aegeus pursues the opposite course. He abandons wife and child. The child grows, desires to know his father, and seeks him out. The father reluctantly endorses the child's plan to kill the monster that is destroying the Athenian youths (and thereby end Minos' reign of terror). But fearing loss a second time, the father then needlessly takes his



Lawrence E. DiStasi (Daedalus), Nicole Shalhoub (Naucrate) and Lindsey Noel Whiting (Icarus)



Lindsey Noel Whiting (*Icarus*) with Lawrence E. DiStasi (*Daedalus*) and Nicole Shalhoub (*Naucrate*)

own life at the slightest (and in this case mistaken) provocation.

In the middle of this sacrificial and psychological maze sits Daedalus and his child. Daedalus' origin is absent from the mix. His work—his craft, his engineering skill, his artistry—seems to have taken the place of an absent parent. His wife reproves him for not giving enough attention to his son (“A labyrinth is designed to contain through confusion,” Daedalus says, and she replies, succinctly “He’s still a boy. He still needs his father.”). When he is confined by Minos within the labyrinth and concocts a plan capable of sustaining both him and his adoring and emulous son, he has failed to calculate the child’s training, the time the child has not had—and that the father denied him—to learn the dynamics of flight. The child and the father fly; the father is saved; the child dies. Preferring work over fatherhood, the child, Daedalus, has become

ironically his own absent father, the monstrous double of the very force he was endeavoring to escape through his artistry. The source of his escape has become identically the source of his own misery. The cost is his own child’s life, a fate even worse than the one his father inflicted upon him.

This is the core of the play and of Patient X’s trauma. When I was first asked to write about David Catlin’s play, I wondered what could be done to enhance what is surely one of the barest plots in Greek mythology. A craftsman fashions for himself and his son a pair of feathered wings held together by wax. The two ascend. The child flies too close to the sun, melting the wax. The child plunges into the sea to his death. I was hardly surprised that the story occupies relatively little space in the narrative, occurring almost as an afterthought, just before the play’s conclusion.

But by that conclusion, that bare plot turns out the weightiest in the drama. As the unnamed Patient begins progressively to recall the death of his own child, a death in which the Patient’s own behavior may have played a decisive role, the “rosy-fingers” of dawn touch us as well. The Patient finds in the story of Daedalus, and in the telling by those around him of the death of their children (as result of various acts of unintentional and momentary negligence) the courage to tell his own.

That potential insight is the play’s center of gravity. The revelation of the fall of Icarus plays the role for Patient X of the traumatic core. Icarus dies as result in part, the play tells us, of the father’s own negligence. I looked away for a moment, all the stories say, turned to look at the sky, to look in my knapsack, to check on my other child, and in a flash, the child was gone, in the water, in the crowd, as the result of an oncoming vehicle, or in some other unforeseeable calamitous fashion. The play’s conclusion leaves us with a profound sense of loss: grief over the death of the child, intensified by the anger at oneself for the extent to which, either through negligence and abandonment, or through positive enthusiasm and overindulgence, we may have contributed to the child’s demise. Perhaps we can begin to tell our own labyrinthine stories by virtue of others telling theirs, a telling that David Catlin’s complex and thoughtful play does so very well.

SANDOR GOODHART is a Professor of English and Jewish Studies at Purdue University and Director of the Interdisciplinary Program in Classical Studies. He is the author of *Sacrificing Commentary*, *Reading the End of Literature* (Baltimore:

Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), *Reading Stephen Sondheim* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), *For René Girard. Essays in Friendship and Truth*, co-edited with J. Jørgenson, T. Ryba, and J. G. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009), and *Sacrifice and Scripture in Ancient Judaism and Christianity*, co-edited with Ann Astell (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, forthcoming). He teaches ancient Greek and modern drama, contemporary critical theory and philosophy, and the (Hebrew) Bible as Literature. He has long been associated with the work of René Girard, serving as the Executive Secretary of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (formed around René Girard’s work) from 1999 to 2003, and as President from 2003 to 2007.

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