



CURIOUS & CURIOUSER

More about the play, playwright and production

9 CIRCLES by Bill Cain

A Journey into Light – An Interview with Playwright Bill Cain by Steve Moulds

Bill Cain, Jesuit Catholic priest has written for the stage and television. His first play, Stand-Up Tragedy, was originally staged in 1989. His second play, Equivocation, won the Steinberg Award as the best original play staged in Regional Theater in 2009. His third play, 9 Circles, won the Steinberg Award for 2010, making him the only playwright to have won the prestigious award in consecutive years. He is currently working on a play about Abraham Lincoln.

Bill Cain answered the following questions about 9 Circles in this interview with Curious' playwright in residence, Steve Moulds.

The shape of your play—with the titular circles, and what you call a journey through darkness into light—is modeled after Dante's *Divine Comedy*. When did that structure occur to you, and why did it feel right for this story?

There was no plan to the making of this play at the start. I wrote the first scene, wrote "CIRCLE 1" at the top instead of "SCENE 1," and mailed it to my agent Beth Bickers. I am not sure where that impulse came from, but it was a good one. I didn't know Dante at the time and had never read *The Divine Comedy*.

As I worked on the play and it was turning out to be a descent into self, it was time to read the *Comedy*. I approached it with schoolboy reluctance. But it wasn't long before I arrived at the astonishing story of Paolo and Francesca, two extraordinary people who are in hell not because they are evil, but because they were unlucky. The unique nature of Dante's vision of hell as a place filled with people of *all* sorts—many of whom deserve compassion and some outright admiration—moved me. And by the time I arrived at the very core of hell, and discovered a world in which violence was coupled with sorrow, I was a Dante convert.

This was the most complex and beautiful dramatic vision I had ever encountered. And, I suppose, the most adult. An ability to see clearly (not that he didn't have his own vengeful, dark, hilarious biases) and a way to accept complexity beyond what I had encountered before.

I wasn't struggling to make my work conform to Dante's. The story I was following naturally conformed to a story told in 1300.

At the center of your play is Daniel Edward Reeves, a character who struggles not only with his actions, but also his feelings about those actions and his reasons for them. How did you chart a path for such an admittedly unstable character?

You say "admittedly unstable character" as if he's an exception to



some rule. I think for all of us stability is tenuous. An accident, a death, a trauma, even sudden success can knock us from our moorings very easily—and this can be for good or for bad.

At the core of the character, Reeves is a young man reaching beyond himself. There's a huge and well-earned self-protective layer, but inside that there is a young man eager to learn, to admire, to be shown a path. Above all, he wants to become a man—which is part of the reason he joined the service.

As he says in the first circle, "I'm not smart, but I can learn." And he does learn. He is still learning at the very last moment of the play.

The Iraq War has officially ended since you first wrote the play. Do you think people are already writing their versions of what this war has meant?

I think we are forgetting the war as suddenly as we began it. I wish more people were actually reflecting on what it meant.

How have the four other productions of *9 Circles* differed?

There are some simple ones. Cast size has varied. Racial mix. But the intensity seems the same... and the extraordinary level of commitment that the situation of the soldier seems to command.

The thing that seems different to me about this play is the level of compassion it generates for a man from whom, at the start, we distance ourselves entirely.

Like Dante, we find compassion. Even in hell.

8 years, 9 months in Iraq - Key Dates in the Iraq War

March 20, 2003: President George W. Bush appears on television screens across America and says, "My fellow Americans, at this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger."



May 1, 2003: Standing under a banner that read "Mission Accomplished" aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, Bush declares that major combat operations in Iraq is over.



October 2, 2003: The head of the CIA's search for banned weapons in Iraq says his group has found no weapons of mass destruction.

December 13, 2003: Coalition forces capture Saddam Hussein at the bottom of a ventilated "spider hole". He offers no resistance.

January 30, 2005: Iraqi voters cast ballots in a milestone election. It is the first free election in half a century.

March 12, 2006: Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi, a 14 year old Iraqi girl, was gang-raped and murdered together with her 6-year-old sister, mother and father, in their home, by U.S. soldiers who then set fire to the girl's body before decamping. The soldiers who participated in the incident reported that it had been perpetrated by Sunni insurgents. This became known as the Mahmudiyah killings.

April 28, 2006: Photographs from Abu Ghraib prison spark international outrage after they show detainees in degrading positions.



June 16, 2006: A checkpoint manned by U.S. soldiers was attacked and overrun. Specialist David Babineau was killed and Pfc's Thomas Lowell Tucker and Kristian Menchaca were captured, tortured, and killed. These soldiers served in the same unit as the perpetrators of the Mahmudiyah killings.

July 11, 2006: The Mujahideen Shura Council released a graphic video that showed the bodies of Pfc's Tucker and Menchaca. This video was accompanied by a statement saying that the group carried out the killings as "revenge for our sister who was dishonored by a soldier of the same brigade."

December 30, 2006: Saddam Hussein is hanged. He was 69.

January 10, 2007: Bush deploys 30,000 additional troops, a "surge" strategy designed to quell violence and restore security.

November 27, 2008: The Iraqi parliament ratifies a security agreement with the United States that says U.S. combat forces will be completely out of Iraq by December 31, 2011.

December 18, 2011: In a final tactical road march, the last U.S. troops in Iraq cross the border into Kuwait.

A Shrink in the Army

An Interview with 9 CIRCLES Military Advisor by Heidi Schmidt

Katie J. Kopp, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and active duty soldier at Fort Carson, CO. She received her doctorate in psychology from the Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University in La Mirada, CA, in 2008. Katie has been in the Army since 2005 and currently serves as the behavioral health officer for an infantry brigade. She deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) in 2009 and plans to go again in the Spring of 2012. She currently lives in Colorado Springs with her husband, Kevin.

You spent a year in Afghanistan? What were your responsibilities?

I was deployed for 12 months as the behavioral health officer for a brigade combat team (approx 3,500 soldiers). My job was to hold regular clinic hours for walk-in and scheduled appointments, travel to all of the bases where soldiers from my brigade were located, and consult with commanders regarding individual soldiers or group dynamics.

Did you experience resistance from the soldiers under your care? How did you deal with that?

I think in the last 10 years of being at war there has been a shift in the military's culture and attitude about mental health and seeking treatment. Certainly there are still soldiers who are resistant to the idea of seeking treatment, just like there are civilians who avoid mental health! I try everything I can to reduce the stigma of seeking help, including spending a lot of time just hanging out with the soldiers (more so in Afghanistan than back in Colorado), speaking their language (no clinical words, lots of cussing), traveling frequently and making sure I'm a familiar face so that they don't see me for the first time after a traumatic event. A lot of times my therapeutic relationship with someone might start with someone pulling me aside with a "Hey Doc, quick question for you..." and then it builds from there.

Could you tell us a little bit about antisocial personality disorder?

Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) refers to a specific disorder as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM-IV), which provides diagnostic criteria for all mental health diagnoses. According to the DSM-IV, the primary criteria is a "pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others occurring since age 15 years" which can be manifested in a variety of ways, including breaking rules and laws, lying, aggression, disregard for others, impulsivity, irresponsibility, and lack of remorse for hurting others. It's important to understand that two individuals with APD may look quite different from one another, and depending on the severity and specific manifestation of the disorder it would not necessarily render someone unfit for military service or any other job. During combat, the behavioral



health providers and the unit leaders always need to be vigilant to any indication that a soldier is unwilling to follow the Rules of Engagement or is for any reason unfit for continued service in a deployed environment and then respond accordingly.

What's a stress debriefing?

It is standard operating procedure at this point in the war to meet with soldiers in groups after a traumatic event occurs, particularly if another soldier from the platoon is killed in action. Part of this debriefing is to provide the soldiers with expectations for how they may respond in the wake of a traumatic event (e.g., problems sleeping, social withdrawal). I talk to them about having a "normal reaction to an abnormal situation." Many of the things that combat soldiers do in war is not "normal" in any sense of the word, and sometimes these soldiers find themselves trying to process situations without having any previous experiences with which to compare their current thoughts and feelings.

When is a conversation you have with a soldier confidential, and when isn't it?

During my initial meeting with a soldier, we begin with a discussion of the limits of confidentiality. Before he even sits down with me, the soldier has already been presented with documents outlining those same limits. There are some fine points, but the major limitations are that if someone discloses suicidal or homicidal thoughts, domestic violence, or child abuse, I am required by law to report these things and protect the individuals involved. In the military system, our limits of confidentiality also include reported violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (such as Reeves' war crimes) and concerns about fitness for duty or deployability.

Dante's Inferno and 9 CIRCLES

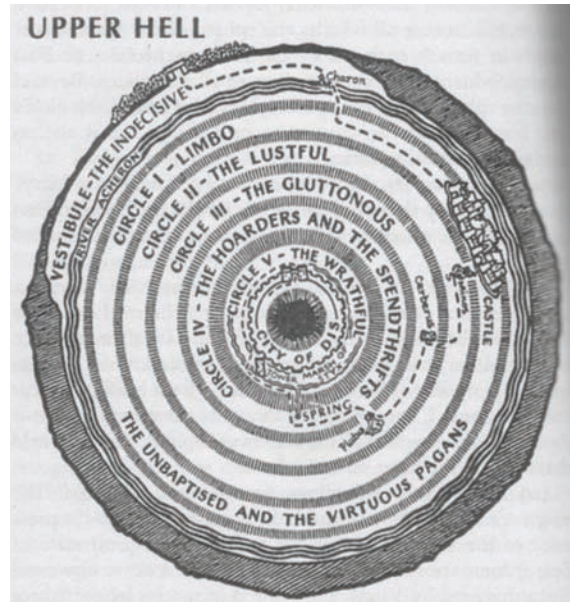
By Heidi Schmidt

“As with The Divine Comedy, 9 Circles tells the story of a journey. Both travelers undertake the journey unwillingly—all other paths are blocked. Dante—the hero of his own work—is never alone. He always has a companion, a guide through the mysterious worlds he enters on his journey, as does Reeves. Both are moving ultimately towards the light, and with both, it is a woman who takes the journeyer across the ultimate threshold to compassion.” – Bill Cain

Written between 1307 and 1320, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is a comprehensive tour of Hell (*Inferno*), Purgatory (*Purgatorio*) and Heaven (*Paradiso*). Dante serves as his own protagonist, and the poem begins with him lost in a dark wood. There he meets Virgil, the Roman poet, who serves as his first guide in a journey through Hell, imagined as a deep pit of 9 concentric circles burrowing into the earth. Each circle represents progressively more egregious sins.

From here, Dante proceeds out of Hell, into Purgatory, where Dante learns to acknowledge and purge his sins, and then into Heaven. As readers, we can see *The Divine Comedy* from two perspectives: we can look through Dante's eyes as he observes the inhabitants and conditions of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven; we also see Dante's own personal journey as he recognizes and eliminates his own sins – as he comes to know himself through his passage through hell and into the light of the heavens.

“And,” says playwright Bill Cain, “Heaven and hell are not so far apart. In *The Divine Comedy*, they are adjoining territories. To get to one, you have to pass through the other. Although some of the people you meet in hell are



undoubtedly evil, many are not. There are many good, beautiful, unlucky people in hell and a great many mediocrities on their way to heaven. One of the joys of the journey is Dante's surprise in finding that he has good friends in both places. There are sympathetic moments all along the way. And there is compassion for the damned. At the very center of hell there is terrible violence, but the ones perpetrating the worst of it weep as they do it.”

As Cain reminds us, Dante is guided “across the ultimate threshold to compassion” by a woman – Beatrice – who guides him through the heavens and to his final guide, St. Bernard. In *9 Circles*, Daniel Reeves is accompanied along his journey of self-discovery by several characters played by three actors – two men and one woman. We like to think of these actors and characters (and the audience, as well) as guides and fellow travelers along Reeves' journey.

“At the end of the Comedy, you reach not a bloody battlefield, but a vista full of blinding light where you can see what you have always hoped for – the love that moves the universe.” –

Curious Theatre Company is a non-profit organization whose mission is to engage the community in important contemporary issues through provocative modern theatre.

Tickets for 9 CIRCLES by Bill Cain can be purchased at 303-623-0524 or at www.curious theatre.org. Performances run January 14 – February 18, 2012

Curious and Curiouser is prepared for Curious Theatre Company by Christy Montour-Larson, Steve Moulds and Heidi Schmidt.

Special Thanks to Bill Cain, Captain Katie Kopp, Krista Lewis, Sara Poorman and Kate Roselle.



Rodin's *The Gates of Hell*