THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN

Now playing in the Kreeger Theater
September 6- October 20, 2013
Written by Eric Coble
Directed by Molly Smith

The Play

Alexandra sits at the center of her Brooklyn home, cornered and ready to attack. Once a fearless world traveler and artist, she is now 79 years old and growing more forgetful and frail. Her children don’t trust her to live on her own. They are prepared to take drastic measures to get her to move out of her home. However, even the threat of the police is not enough to move Alexandra.

Enter Chris, the wayward third child, on a mission to infiltrate the apartment and talk some sense into his mother. Now in his late 40s, Chris has been wandering the country for years. He did not even come home for his own father’s funeral. Now he’s climbing back into the living room of his childhood home. Alexandra is unwilling to compromise with his siblings, but Chris is ready to fight for common ground.

Life, freedom, dignity and family are at stake…and the clock is ticking. The police arrive in one hour.

“I’m a cornered animal, Christopher. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

–Alexandra

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Funded in part by the D.C. Commission on the Arts & Humanities, an agency supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.
Although Eric Coble was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, he grew up on Navajo and Ute reservations in the southwestern United States until he was 15. He took to acting in high school, and continued to study theater at Fort Lewis College and Ohio University, where he received his master’s degree in acting. All the while, he wrote plays.

Among his plays that have been produced around the world (including at the nearby Kennedy Center), Coble receives much attention for his Alexandra Trilogy (see article). Coble’s other notable works include a stage adaptation of The Giver by Lois Lowry and Side Effects May Include, with former Seinfeld writer Marc Jaffe. His awards include a regional Emmy nomination for Ask Gilby.

Coble is currently a staff writer for the nationwide radio program Footlight Parade, an occasional contributor to NPR, and an actor and teacher at Great Lakes Theater Festival. He lives with his family in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, where he is a member of the Board of Education.

Chris and Alexandra’s New York:

Brownstone Brooklyn: After WWII, many families left the city to live in growing suburbs. Some brownstone homes and offices were abandoned, neglected, and eventually torn down to make room for more modern homes. In the 1960s and 70s, a community of families began protesting the demolition by buying them up, renovating them and advocating for laws to protect them. (Alexandra’s family most likely bought their home at this time.) These activists became known as “brownstoners.” They saw the restoration of brownstone houses as key to the preservation of history in the neighborhood.

Rising Costs: Brownstones are no longer being built in Brooklyn. Thus, the demand and price for these historic homes has risen dramatically. According to a 2012 NY Times article (see resources), the average cost of a brownstone in Park Slope had risen to nearly $1.45 million. In nearby Carroll Gardens, brownstones bought in 1974 for $50,000 have sold for $1.6 million in 2012.

The Alexandra Plays chronicle the life of an artist named Alexandra. Playwright Coble says, “I was intrigued with the notion of how we define personal freedom, art, commitment, and self-identity and how those definitions change as we age. The Alexandra Plays is my trilogy to wrestle with all this.”

The First & Second Plays

A Girl’s Guide to Coffee “looks at the themes from the perspective of Alex, a woman in her early 20’s, free and smart and sexy and utterly confident.”

Graphic Depictions, the middle play, “explores [these themes] from Alexa’s point of view, in her mid-40s, with a family and steady job and many, many roots holding her down.”

Activity Imagine a trilogy about your life. Write a synopsis for each of the three plays. The first should be an important story from your life right now. The second play describes a moment from your 40s, and the third synopsis is a story about you in your 70s.

The Velocity of Autumn is the last part of a trilogy of plays. The Alexandra Plays chronicle the life of an artist named Alexandra. Playwright Coble says, “I was intrigued with the notion of how we define personal freedom, art, commitment, and self-identity and how those definitions change as we age. The Alexandra Plays is my trilogy to wrestle with all this.”

The First Brownstones: Brooklyn brownstones were first built in the early 1800s in response to a growing middle class, many of whom were laborers and immigrants. Brownstone, a sedimentary rock native to New Jersey and Connecticut, replaced brick and wood as the primary construction material for the façades of these new houses because it could be cheaply shipped.

The Brooklyn Brownstone

Brownstones are row houses: one of a group of houses that line the same block and share side walls. Brownstones are made of brick, but have façades (fronts) made of brown sandstone.

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The Alexandra Trilogy

The Velocity of Autumn heads to Broadway later this year after being at Arena Stage.
NEW YORK MUSEUM ADVENTURES

Alexandra “I took you out too, you know...I was the museum mom!”

New York City boasts nearly 100 museums, many of which Chris and Alexandra visited together when Chris was a child. Alexandra remembers these trips as a time where she felt the most connected to her son. She says, “That’s how you should remember me – a young woman running past exhibits with her little boy, laughing.”

**The Guggenheim:**
Art: Non-objective art, abstract art, modern art and sculpture  
**FACT:** Designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright, the spiral building took 16 years (1943-1959) to complete.

**The Met (Metropolitan Museum of Art):**
Art: Art, sculpture and cultural treasures from around the world.  
**FACT:** The museum has over 2 million objects, tens of thousands of which are on view at any given time. It has the largest exhibition of Egyptian art outside of Cairo, including 13 mummies.

**The Cloisters:**
Art: Medieval art and architecture  
**FACT:** Using the medieval tapestries and artwork as a guide, the Cloisters planted many of its gardens with plants indicative of medieval times.

**Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM):**
Art: Multi-arts center for film, theater, music, dance and visual art  
**FACT:** First lady Mary Todd Lincoln attended BAM’s first opera in 1861.

**Whitney:**
Art: Modern American art  
**FACT:** It was the first museum to create branches in other parts of the city to tour its exhibits.

MUSEUM MATCHES

If you like...in DC | You might like...in NYC
---|---
National Gallery of Art | Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Hirshhorn Museum | Guggenheim Museum  
Phillips Collection | Whitney Museum  
Kennedy Center | Brooklyn Academy of Music

**ACTIVITY**

What are the places where you share special memories with a family member? Write a journal entry describing your memories of that place. Then, find a way to illustrate your writing with drawing, collage, photography, etc.

**ACTIVITY**

Chris and Alexandra discuss the Navajo sandpainting ceremonies as a metaphor for memories. Think of an important memory from your life. Using scraps of colored paper, paper clips, or any other items, create an image that represents your memory. Share your images, and then sweep them away.

**SANDPAINTING IN THE SOUTHWEST**

The Guggenheim’s Unique Shape  
Visitors view the art by walking up a ramp that spirals to the top of the building. At the play, listen for Alexandra’s description of their memorable visit.

The sand paintings are meant to be remembered for that moment, then destroyed; they sweep them away with a broom. I always found that metaphor striking in terms of death and the end of life.”  
–Eric Coble, Playwright

The Navajo people of the American Southwest pour colored sands in intricate patterns to create paintings of tribal myths. Sandpaintings are created to cure sickness and promote well-being. Known in the Navajo language as “places where the gods come and go”, these dry paintings are believed to attract the gods to Earth during 1 to 9-day ceremonies. The use of the sands and other painting materials are believed to be harmful in a non-ceremonial setting, so the artists destroy all evidence of their work at the end of the ceremony. Navajos are forbidden to create permanent sandpaintings, although many artists get around these rules by creating partial paintings.

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LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

Alexandra is not just aging, she is showing signs of dementia. Dementia is not a disease. Rather, it is a set of symptoms affecting memory, language, personality, problem solving and judgment. Dementia can be the result of a disease, like Alzheimer’s, or a brain injury, like a stroke.

As it progresses dementia impairs one’s ability to do daily tasks, maintain a social life and continue lifelong hobbies. Symptoms can come and go, creating “good days” and “bad days.”

Those with dementia and their families face difficult questions. How long can you be safely independent? What happens if you can’t live at home? If you are different from how you’ve always known yourself, who are you? Who are you if you can’t remember?

DEMENTIA VS. AGING

Not everyone who ages gets dementia. Here are some distinctions between aging and dementia:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPICAL AGE-RELATED CHANGES</th>
<th>SIGNS OF DEMENTIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making a bad decision once in a while</td>
<td>Poor judgment and decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgetting what day it is and remembering later</td>
<td>Losing track of the date or season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes forgetting which word to use</td>
<td>Difficulty having a conversation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the Alzheimer’s Association’s “Know the 10 Signs.”

FROM THE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

“This story is one being played out in living rooms all over America as the elderly grapple with the loss of who they are – the ‘gracelessness of old age.’ It’s also a play about truth and reconciliation as these two tell each other the truth about who they actually are, not just who they’ve been told they are.”

–Molly Smith, director

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1) What is it like to age?

2) How much control do we have over our life and death?

3) To what degree do our parents influence who we are and shape who we will become?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ON THE WEB
The Alzheimer’s Association: www.alz.org
The Playwright’s Website: www.ericcoble.com
Interview with Playwright: http://tinyurl.com/cobleinterview
Navajo Sandpainting: navajopeople.org/navajo-sand-painting.htm
Brownstones & Gentrification: http://tinyurl.com/osmaninterview

PLAYS
A Girl’s Guide to Coffee by Eric Coble
Graphic Depictions by Eric Coble
Proof by David Auburn

FILM
My Brooklyn: mybrooklynmovie.com, 2012

MUSEUMS
National Gallery of Art
Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden