

# A Conversation with Joanna Glass by Emilie Syberg

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## **E.S.: Can you talk about your writing process?**



**J.G.:** The best description I've heard of this process was Edward Albee's. The question was asked of him many years ago and he said, "I know when I am with play" (as with child) "and when I'm not." I've only had a couple of experiences where I thought I was with play, and I worked for four or five months only to discover that I wasn't-- it just wasn't there. But most of the time I know when I am "with play". That's a wonderfully confident feeling to have, and with me it disappears very quickly. So I have to keep reminding myself during those days when I'm not inspired, and it's raining, and everything's going wrong, and the cat's vomiting, that I knew emphatically that I was with play, and I must have faith and force

myself to go to the desk and do it.

And I try to keep in mind the "wright" in "playwright". As in millwright or boatwright. In playwriting you are working in a very precise, restrictive, form. Basically the construction is confined to a minute-a-page. So you may be "with play", but the challenge is to wrestle with it and build it.

## **E.S.: Why write this story now?**

**J.G.:** Within a couple of years after working for Francis Biddle, I very badly wanted to write it all down, because it had a tremendous effect on me. And I did write it down, and I had a one-act play that was about forty minutes long. But I knew, again, innately, that it needed to be a full-length play.

I have to be a little careful here because I don't like to--as a woman--use excuses of domesticity. However, I did have three children in two years, due to a set of twins. Three in diapers—diapers, not Pampers—I mean, there was laundry. There's a line in the play where Biddle says, "Holding things in abeyance is a woman's plight. Biology decided that. Certainly I didn't hold everything in abeyance - a writing career did evolve - but I think that this particular play required me to have a deeper knowledge of aging and illness. Of one's mortality. I tried to go back to it about ten years ago. At the time I was living in Toronto and my partner, who has since died, had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. I stopped working on it then because I was more nurse than writer during that period, and I was dealing with dying daily, and I was unable to write about dying while in the midst of the process.

So here I am, in my sixties, writing about 1967 and '68. May I say that, even though women of my generation often did hold things in abeyance, we're fortunate in many ways. We haven't tied our identity up so completely with jobs and titles and retiring at sixty-five, and then just consigning ourselves to the golf course. That we do wait, if we've really had to wait, gives us a tremendous sense of urgency, in middle age and after, to get out there and do.

## **E. S.: While reading *Play Memory*, *Yesteryear*, and *If We Are Women*, and looking at past interviews, there's a sense that much of your work is autobiographical. Can you talk about that, and how *Play Memory* compares to *Trying* in that way?**

**J.G.:** *Play Memory* is about a childhood with an alcoholic father. It is much more autobiographical, because it really covers the formative years--and the formative years are so formative. We all struggle with that, all of our

lives, in one way or another--with whatever formed us. That frame of reference is indelible.

I come to understand that more and more the older that I get. For instance, *Trying* is about the last year in a life of enormous accomplishment. Biddle was first a Harvard-educated lawyer, later he became Attorney General under Roosevelt, and then Truman appointed him Chief Judge of the Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. But in the last year of his life the things that preoccupied him most were the fact that one of his sons had died young, and that he had never known his own father. His father died when Biddle was six.

I was young enough, when I worked for him, to be rather amazed at that. I was a green girl from the Canadian prairie; I was so impressed with all of his credentials, by the oldness and illustriousness of his Philadelphia family. But here was a sick old man who had a great deal of pride, who hated my knowing how difficult it was for him to make a phone call, how forgetful he was, and so on. And whose real psychic pain resided in the two great losses in his life. Those losses are what he was about in his final year.

**E.S.: Since Sarah is, in effect, you...did you find your older self commenting on the younger? Editing her?**

**J.G.:** I don't think so. Of course, the play was buried, and it's hard to remember impressions that were made so long ago. I had to go back and try to become again that girl who was quite close to the Saskatchewan prairie, because I'm very far away from it now. And, with the prairie signifying what it does for me, which is a great deal of sorrow and unhappiness, I've done that very human thing of shutting down on a lot of memories. You shut down because you have to function, you have to get up in the morning and get on with life. So I had to get in there and dig, and remember what a blank slate I was in the presence of Biddle, had to remember the way in which his accomplishments and his ancestry led me into American history. Growing up in Canada we got much more British history than American (and a great deal of British literature). We did, however, have to memorize all fifty states, and Canadians are always a little insulted that the country is right on top of you and it's a rare American who knows our ten provinces.

**E.S.: Can you tell us about the actual experience of working for Biddle?**

**J.G.:** I was less in tune with his old age, and his illnesses, and his plight, than I am now. I was much more in tune back then--much more dazzled by the enormous difference between his background and my background. Biddle's family bought a great deal of what is now New Jersey in the late sixteen-hundreds. From William Penn, actually. And then there's the way in which my mother's family ended up in Saskatchewan. Every family has its own lore; and my mother's lore was all about pioneering. My mother's grandparents went to Saskatchewan to homestead; their wagons overshot and went to Alberta where, luckily, they found some dinosaur bones that were sold to give them the money to go back to their intended acres in Saskatchewan. My mother was illiterate all of her life. Biddle was actually born in Paris. His father had gone to Yale; his father, as is in the play, had known Benjamin Franklin's great-granddaughter. It was this kind of introduction to American history that made me want to know about Philadelphia and the Declaration of Independence. Sometimes--this is not in the play--he would love to just educate me. And then there were other times when I would be very bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and I'd ask about something--and he was too preoccupied with the finality of his life, with what he knew to be his final year.

**E.S.: What would you include among your career highlights?**

J.G.: Certainly a phone call from Alfred Lunt was wonderful. My first play, *Santacqua*, now in the rubbish, was produced at the Herbert Berghof Studio in New York in 1969. In the early Seventies, after I'd written that little one-act about Biddle, Herbert urged me to send it to Lunt. The day that Lunt called was a hot summer day in Detroit. He said that he liked my one-act very much but he could no longer perform because he was going blind.

Another play, *Artichoke*, began at Long Wharf Theater in New Haven in 1974. It starred Colleen Dewhurst, and getting to work with her was thrilling. Getting a Tony nomination was a high point. It was for *Play Memory*, which had been directed by Hal Prince, who remains a friend. That was the mid-eighties. It was nice to be nominated but we all knew that, about two blocks away, on another stage, was David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. We knew it would win for Best Play, and it did... The theatre, really, is such an archaic thing to do. I love that about it. Other than the electric lights, you could still be in the cave, and someone tells a story and others gather to listen. In this age of computers and chat rooms and exploring Mars, I love the idea that we still go to a theatre and gather to listen.

**E.S.: What are the inherent differences between American and Canadian theater?**

J.G.: It's fairly complicated. It wasn't until Margaret Atwood came along that Canadians began to establish their own literature, to have their own voice--because they are inundated with everything American. Television, the movies, Time and Newsweek. Hip-Hop. And with the population being so small - thirty-five million - about the same as California - it's hard to find the country's unique identity. The Canada Council--which is like the NEA, gives enormous amounts of money to Canadian theaters, with the stipulation that attention must be paid to Canadian plays. So there is always a tug of war, a controversy, when a theater decides that they really need a Neil Simon or they want to do *Fiddler*. It is such a struggle for Canadians not to be British and not to be American, and the main point is that all of the arts in Canada are heavily subsidized. The U.S., on the other hand, is internationally famous, perhaps infamous, for the very low priority that the government--perhaps the tax-payers--gives to the arts.

**E.S.: What would be Biddle's reaction to the current political situation?**

J.G.: Well, of course, this can only be hypothetical. I think that he would be terribly depressed. His great regret was being party to the internment of the Japanese during the Second World War. Today we are told that, apparently within the next six months, we are all of us going to be issued cards that we show at the airport that will contain our own personal color code: a color code that will announce our character and our offenses. I know that Biddle, even given the knowledge of 9/11, would say, "Have we not learned anything?"