

GHOST LIGHT

CONCEIVED AND DEVELOPED BY
JONATHAN MOSCONE AND TONY TACCONE

WRITTEN BY TONY TACCONE

DIRECTED BY JONATHAN MOSCONE

A co-production with Oregon Shakespeare Festival



Berkeley Rep

Berkeley Repertory Theatre presents
the world-premiere production of

BERKELEY REPERTORY THEATRE
TONY TACCONE, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
SUSAN MEDAK, MANAGING DIRECTOR

GHOST LIGHT

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JANUARY 6–FEBRUARY 19, 2012
THRUST STAGE · MAIN SEASON

Ghost Light runs 2 hours and 30 minutes with
a 15-minute intermission

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Pre-Show Discussion Questions

1. What is a ghost light? What is the purpose of a ghost light? What are some of the superstitions associated with ghost lights? What might the title reveal to you about the play's themes?
2. What is a ghost? Why might a ghost choose to appear to a living person? To whom might a ghost appear?
3. Read a synopsis of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, or the play in its entirety. What is the story in the play? What are the major themes? Describe the relationship between Prince Hamlet and his late father, King Hamlet.
4. Research the life, career, and death of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone. What was his relationship to San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk? To San Francisco Supervisor Dan White? How did George Moscone contribute to the gay rights movement?
5. Research the gay rights movement with particular attention to the 1970s in the United States, especially in San Francisco.
6. What is an assassination? What is the difference between an assassination and other kinds of murder? Why are political figures often in danger of being assassinated? What effect does the assassination of a public figure have on society?
7. *Ghost Light* explores many ways a person can deal with loss. Research the stages of grief to see how a person's reaction to death varies over time.



Ghost Light looks at the time when George Moscone served as California Senator and Mayor of San Francisco...

The 1970s

What do you imagine when you think of The 1970s?

Hippies? Bell Bottom Jeans? *Saturday Night Fever*? *Grease*?

The 1970s are often remembered for their cultural icons, but that wasn't all.

The 1970s were full of **MOVEMENTS** that would change the face of the country forever.



- Before the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the early 1970s were full of anti-war protests.
- President Nixon and his administration were caught breaking into Democratic National headquarters. This eventually led to Nixon's resignation and is known as the Watergate Scandal.
- The environmental movement got its footing with the creation of Earth Day and rising awareness of the need to help save the planet.
- The gay rights movement took huge strides with leaders like Harvey Milk and George Moscone.

A little more about George Moscone...

George Moscone was born in San Francisco in 1929.

Before starting to run for office, George Moscone spent time in the Navy and started a law practice. He had a wife and four children (one of them directed *Ghost Light*!).

In 1963, he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

In 1966, was elected to the California State Senate and was tapped by the Democratic Party to serve as majority leader.

He locked up the Senate to push through a vote to repeal California's anti-sodomy laws; an early and major victory in the battle for gay rights!

After 10 years in state senate, successfully ran for mayor of SF and was sworn in on Jan 8, 1976.

While mayor, he prevented the San Francisco Giants from moving to Toronto, helped bring diversity to local government, and worked toward the construction of the Yerba Buena Center downtown.

George Moscone's decisions were not always popular. In 1978, a Conservative Local Government official named Dan White shot and killed Mayor Moscone, along with supervisor Harvey Milk.

George Moscone (right) and Harvey Milk



About the Play

How *Ghost Light* came about:

Jonathan Moscone, the artistic director at California Shakespeare Theatre (Cal Shakes) and the director of *Ghost Light*, is the son of the George Moscone, who was elected mayor of San Francisco in 1976 was assassinated by Dan White in 1978. White also shot and killed Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician on that day. Though many regard George Moscone as one of the early champions of the gay rights movement, it is Harvey Milk who has received much of the public's attention.

In 2008 the academy award-winning film *Milk*, a bio-pic about the life of Harvey Milk, was released, and there is also a famous documentary about him entitled *The Life of Harvey Milk*. No dramatizations of George Moscone's life existed. After spending a day on the set of *Milk*, Jonathan Moscone knew that he wanted to create an artistic response to his father's death in the medium that he knows best—theatre. Thus, *Ghost Light* was born.

Co-productions:

There are many factors and steps that go into writing and producing a new play—it can get very complex, and *Ghost Light* is no exception. Here is a timeline on how this play came to the Thrust Stage at Berkeley Rep:

- 1) Jonathan Moscone talked to Bill Rauch, the artistic director at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in Ashland, about including a piece about George Moscone's assassination in *American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle*, which is an OSF project that is commissioning 37 new plays that have sprung from a moment of change, inspiration or conflict in American history. Bill liked the idea, and gave the green light to *Ghost Light*.
- 2) Jonathan asked Tony Taccone, the artistic director at Berkeley Rep and an emerging playwright himself, to collaborate.

- 3) After lots of interviews, Tony began writing the play that Jonathan would direct.
- 4) The play was cast, rehearsed, and performed in Ashland at OSF in summer 2011.
- 5) Tony made revisions to the script.
- 6) In December, rehearsals for the Berkeley Rep production started. With mostly the same cast, adjustments are made to the script, blocking, and set.
- 7) *Ghost Light* is performed in Berkeley.

Ghost Light is a **co-production** (co-pro) between OSF and Berkeley Rep, which means that the two theatres share the costs and resources required to put on a play, and that the production will run at both theatres. Co-pros, which have become very popular in recent years, have many advantages. From a practical perspective, plays are very expensive, and spreading the costs among multiple theatres is an economical option. From an artistic standpoint, it allows theatre artists who wouldn't normally get the chance to work together to collaborate on a project.

Genre:

Like many plays, *Ghost Light* does not fit neatly into any particular *genre* or category, and instead bridges several. Though based loosely on historical events, *Ghost Light* is not a history play, or a biographical piece on George and/or Jonathan Moscone. It is a type of **memory play**, which is a piece that explores an event or series of recollections, usually from the main character's perspective. A classic example of a memory play is Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie*. These types of plays are less concerned with an objective, realistic, or chronologically accurate presentation of events, and more interested in examining a particular point of view.

Ghost Light takes the idea of the memory play one step further. Not only is it about Jonathan Moscone's recollections of his experience of his father's death, but it is also about the nature of memory itself. In an interview with Jonathan

Moscone and Tony Taccone, the two talk about how memory can be influenced more by desires and needs than by facts. For example, Tony shares a story from Jon's mother, saying that she once met a man who claimed to have gone to college with George Moscone at a school that he never attended. This man's need to have gone college with George Moscone was stronger than his memory of actual events.

What is a ghost light?

A ghost light is a bare light bulb mounted on a stand that sits onstage in an empty theatre. It is a tradition to never leave a stage in the dark. Practically, it is to keep people safe and prevent them from tripping over cables or falling of the edge of the stage. However, theatres are also notoriously superstitious places, and the story goes that a light left onstage will keep the ghosts of the theatre at bay.

Connections to *Hamlet*

Ghost Light has many ties to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Here are some things to watch out for or to be aware of before attending the play.



Synopsis

At the beginning of *Hamlet*, Hamlet's father, the King of Denmark has just died, and Hamlet's mother is marrying his uncle, Claudius. Hamlet is in deep mourning for his father, yet he is also enraged at the way his mother is remarrying his uncle so quickly. (At the time this play was written, marrying your husband's brother was considered to be incestuous.) At midnight one night, the ghost of the old king appears to Hamlet and a group of soldiers. The ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius for the throne, and demands that Hamlet murder his uncle in revenge. The apparition disappears when a cock crows at dawn, leaving Hamlet in a tormented state of mind.

Hamlet spends the rest of the play struggling with powerful and conflicting emotions:

- Should he kill his uncle and risk going to Hell for his sins?
- Rage at his mother and uncle's treachery
- A desire for revenge
- Ennui/indecision—he doesn't want to kill anyone, but he feels as though he must appease his father's spirit
- A heightened sense of alienation from the world—no one can truly relate to the way he feels
- Isolation
- Disenchantment and cynicism with the world and deceptions of the court

Some connections to *Ghost Light*:

- The character of Jon in *Ghost Light* is directing *Hamlet*
- Hamlet's insanity, cynicism, self-destructive behavior, and inability to act
- Father's assassination
- Ghosts
- **Meta-theatricality** (or using theatre as a way to understand a play) at one point in *Hamlet*, the prince gets a troupe of actors to perform a play that will expose the king's murder before the court. *Ghost Light* also contains a play-within-a-play.

Memory and the Brain



This play also contains references to the way that memory and grief work within the human brain. Parts of the character Jon's subconscious and dreams start hijacking his waking life. See the teacher resource guide for some useful links to diagrams and explanations of the different parts of the brain.

Post-Show Discussion Questions

1. Refer to your research on superstitions about ghost lights. How does the title relate to the story? What is the effect of the appearance of the ghost light in this production? When do ghost lights appear metaphorically in the play? Give examples of moments in the play when ghosts are driven away or appeased.
2. Refer to your research on Hamlet by William Shakespeare. In what ways is Jon Moscone similar to Hamlet? In what ways is he different? How is Hamlet's relationship to his father similar to Jon's to his father? How is it different? How are the deaths of Hamlet's father and Jon's father similar? Different? What is the effect of ghost sightings on both sons? How do both sons deal with madness? Action? The desire for revenge?
3. Hamlet is a revenge tragedy, although there are comedic elements. What is the difference in mood and tone between it and Ghost Light? What makes Hamlet a tragedy? What makes Ghost Light not? Compare the endings of both plays. How is reconciliation achieved in both these plays between the dead father and the son in mourning?
4. Ghost Light's playwright chooses to mention another play, Hamlet, in his own script. Why do you think a playwright might make connections to other plays? How did the connections enhance (or detract from) your experience of the play/Jon's character? What did you see that was similar to the play? Connections between the characters?
5. What do you learn about the late George Moscone from the play? About his public image? About the private man? What does Jon appear to know about his father? What clues does the play give about their relationship?
6. How is Jon Moscone affected by his father's public notoriety? How does he appear to feel about his father's legacy within the gay rights movement? What is Jon's relationship to the gay rights movement? Why does Jon bear such animosity towards Harvey Milk?

7. Describe the Boy and the adult Jon. How are the Boy and the adult Jon similar? Different? What insights does the Boy give you about the adult Jon? How has Jon changed as he's gotten older? How has he stayed the same?
8. What is the effect of combining facts with fantasy? Which moments in the play feel real? Which moments feel imagined, or fantastical?
9. Jon says, "The important point is that the audience has got to believe that the ghost is real...and scary." Which ghosts appear in the play? What is the purpose of each ghost, or visitation? Which ghosts does Jon believe are real? Which ghosts do you believe are real, if any?
10. What role does Mister play in Jon's subconscious mind? How are Mister and Jon connected? How are Mister and Robert connected?
11. What part of Jon's subconscious mind might the Prison Guard represent? What is the significance of Jon killing the Prison Guard?
12. Refer to your research on the stages of grief. What stage, or stages, does Jon experience in the play? What stage does he appear to have reached by the end? What do you predict will happen to Jon personally and professionally after the story? Why?
13. What is the effect of having actors playing multiple roles? What is the effect of having multiple actors play the same character, but from different perspectives?
14. Having seen the play and read what a ghost light is, what do you think the title means?

Classroom Activity: **Write your own *Ghost Light* Monologue**

Staging Autobiographical material: *Ghost Light* is a very personal play. Tony Taccone & Jonathan Moscone drew on Jonathan's experiences, memories, and subconscious to create the characters and situations in *Ghost Light*.

Now it's your turn to try it!

Step 1:

Think of an event that has changed your life. It can be a tragic event like the death of a loved one, or an important event like the birth of a sibling. Write down as many details as you can think of that are related to that event:

- What time was it?
- Who else was involved?
- What were you wearing?
- How did it make you feel?
- What was your life like before the event?
- How is your life different afterward?

This is your chance to brainstorm, so write as much as you can. You can always edit later. **Note:** You will be asked to share these so only write what you are comfortable sharing.

Step 2:

In *Ghost Light* the character of Boy represents Jon Moscone at the time of his father's assassination. Create a character that represents you at the time when your "event" took place. Give the character a name; it could be a nickname you had when you were young or a new name that you create.

Write a letter from this character to a loved one related to the event – it could be a family member, friend, the character's future self, etc. Be creative!

Paragraph 1: Tell them what happened.

- Describe the event from the point of view of the character using the details from the brainstorm.

Paragraph 2: Tell them how this makes you feel.

- Include hopes and fears for the future.

Paragraph 3: Tell them why you are sharing this now.

- Think about what might prompt someone to share a story. Is there another big event happening now that is making your character remember? Your character can't stand not talking about it? You had a dream that triggered the memory?

Step 3:

Share this letter with a classmate or read them to the entire class.

Take it a step further: Turn your monologue into dialogue

Now that you have completed your *Ghost Light* monologue, try the following exercises to take your work to the next level:

Step 1:

Repeat the first exercise, except this time, try it from the point of view of another person (or animal, or object!) who witnessed the event. You can write this letter to the character's future self or to your first character.

- For example, you might write a letter from the point of view of the chair you were sitting in when you first held your baby sister.

Step 2:

Think about your initial character and the one that you created in Step 1. What would happen if the two characters ran into each other again? Write a scene about these characters' encounter.

- Where/how might they meet? What would they say? Would they have a conversation about the event or would they avoid it?

Step 3:

Repeat the letter writing exercise and the scene writing exercise as many times as you'd like. Then, try putting your work together, alternating between letters (or monologues) and scenes (dialogue).

Get some friends together and read your work to put on your own personal version of *Ghost Light*. You don't even have to memorize your work. Professional theatre companies will often put on what they call "staged readings" of new work. This is when professional actors get together to read new work to test out how it sounds and see if it is ready for a full production!

Teacher Resource Guide

Hamlet:

An intense study guide from the textbook company Glencoe McGraw-Hill:
<http://hamletguide.com/pdf/glencoestudyguide.pdf>

The Brain:

This page explains different areas of the brain and how they function:
http://www.brainwaves.com/brain_diagram.html

This page from Medicine Net contains links that explain how stress operates in the brain.

<http://www.medicinenet.com/stress/article.htm>

A 7-minute NPR piece about the evolution of the brain (it also comes with a transcription). At one point in the play, one of the characters says, “Come on mama, time to go sleep with the reptiles”—this refers to the reptilian level of development in the brain, which is explained above:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129027124>

Ghost Light:

“Memory Be Green,” KQED’s 30-minute documentary about the making of *Ghost Light* can be viewed online:

<http://www.kqed.org/arts/multimedia/article.jsp?essid=81376>




IRREPRESSIBLE GHOSTS

BY PHILIPPA KELLY

GHOSTS ARE PART OF THE WAY in which we understand our brief time on this earth. Originating from the words “gast” and “geist” (breath, spirit), they have long been thought to beckon from the afterlife, disembodied entities seeking to reconcile unfinished business from the material world they’re no longer a part of. “A ghost ... due to trauma, is stuck in our physical world and needs to be released to go on,” suggests veteran ghost-hunter Hans Holzer. He is referring to physical ghosts in “documented” hauntings — but his words apply equally to those psychological ghosts that reach out and grasp us, dragging or luring us back into the past — sometimes temporarily, in the middle of the night, and sometimes almost permanently, finding their own places in our daily lives. Unintegrated experience, unfinished business — this is the stuff of ghosts.

Ghosts could be said to live in the shadowy place that lies between rational thoughts and emotions, partaking of both. No matter how we struggle with ghosts through the workings of reason, they keep coming back, tugging from unreachable places in the psyche. This is the beauty and complexity of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in which Tony Taccone’s *Ghost Light* has its roots. *Hamlet* concerns a physical ghost; but the play also involves a psychological haunting, an internal drama that’s played out within the young prince’s troubled mind. There is the information given to Hamlet

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by the physical ghost (while others have seen the ghost and can verify its existence, it speaks to Hamlet alone); and there is the haunting of the prince's mind by doubts. These doubts paralyze Hamlet, and he must struggle with this paralysis in order to act. The more Hamlet broods, the more he calls everything into question: the reliability of the ghost itself; what awaits us when we shuffle off this mortal coil; the meaning of duty and obligation; the futility of revenge; and, indeed, the futility of life *without* revenge.

Since Sigmund Freud gave his famous reading of *Hamlet* at the end of the 19th century, Shakespeare's prince has become synonymous not so much with revenge as with contemporary psychological anguish — with the emotional imprisonment experienced when ghosts from the past interrupt the forward motion of our lives. (In the wake of Freud, the propensity for brooding and indecision has become known as the Hamlet complex.) Just as Hollywood ghosts slip through walls, unimpeded by the solidity of wood or masonry, so too do psychological ghosts resist all efforts to rationally deal with them. Shut the door on ghosts and they'll just re-emerge. No rational thought process can totally suppress a ghost that has unfinished business with a psyche.

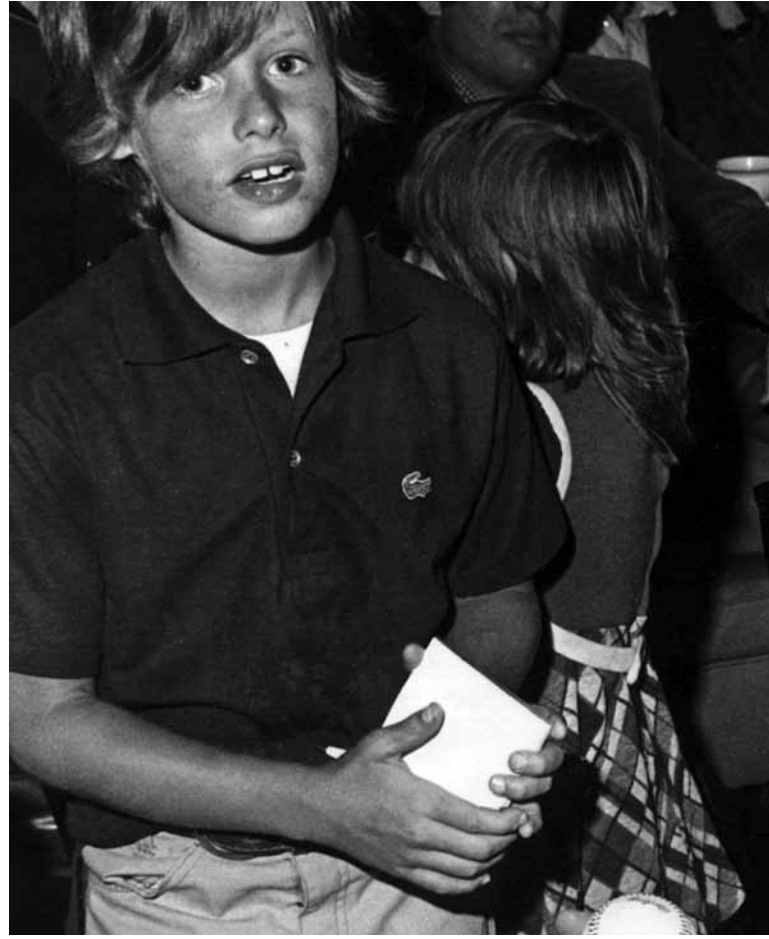
While the ghostly silhouette of Hamlet's predicament haunts Tony Taccone's play, *Ghost Light* is premised by a real-

life event that most people in the audience will either remember or know of. In 1978 George Moscone, the mayor of San Francisco, was assassinated by a man who blamed his crime on a temporary insanity caused by an excessive consumption of Hostess Twinkies. In *Ghost Light*, set many years after the elder Moscone's murder, we encounter his son (in this play named Jon) who is staging a production of *Hamlet*. Everyone associated with Jon's production — the actors, the crew, the costume designer — is constrained by the turmoil of a director who can't banish or come to terms with his own history. He struggles to move forward with the play and with his life.

Ghost Light is filled with its own host of imaginary characters of the phantasmagoric variety: from family ghosts living in the recesses of long-term memory, to fantasies designed to distract and entertain us, to people we momentarily encounter in a time of trauma who somehow stay lodged within our being to sustain and communicate with us in ever-mysterious ways. There is the past we are haunted by and the future we yearn for, or the past we yearn for and the future we are daunted by. The ghosts that each of us lives with are as varied and unpredictable as human nature itself. None of us can escape these ghosts, and we may even find that we don't want to banish them completely. They are, indeed, what make us who we are.

BY JULIE MCCORMICK

GEORGE MOSCONI IN BRIEF





GEORGE MOSCONE WAS BORN IN SAN FRANCISCO in 1929. He was raised by his Italian-American parents: George Joseph, a prison guard, and his mother Lena. In 1954 he married Gina Bondanza. They eventually had four children: Jennifer, Rebecca, Christopher, and Jonathan. After a brief stint in the Navy, Moscone opened his own private legal practice.

It was his college friend, John Burton (later a member of the U.S. House of Representatives), who first got Moscone to run for political office. At his urging, Moscone ran as a Democrat for a seat in the California State Assembly in 1960. He did not secure the position, but in 1963 he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. In 1966, he was elected to the State Senate, and quickly was tapped by the Democratic Party to serve as majority leader. While in the Senate, Moscone gained a reputation for charisma and making decisions that could be considered controversial: he passed a bill to reduce the penalty for simple marijuana possession, spearheaded the creation of a school-lunch program, and also got the legislature to repeal California's anti-sodomy laws, an early and major victory in the battle for gay rights.

After 10 years in the State Senate, he successfully ran for Mayor of San Francisco, and was sworn in on January 8, 1976. During his time in office, he prevented the San Francisco Giants from moving to Toronto and appointed large numbers of people previously denied a political voice — women, members of the LGBT community, and

people of color — to positions within the local government. Moscone actively supported the city's agreement to integrate the police and fire departments after a lawsuit was brought against them for discrimination in their hiring practices. Through creating a broad base coalition of local leaders to meet with the community and ensure voter consensus, he gained public approval of the construction of the Yerba Buena Center downtown.

These moves, however, were not popular with everyone. In 1977, John Barbagelata, the conservative candidate for mayor who narrowly lost to Moscone in the '76 election, attempted to have Moscone recalled. Though he easily retained his post, Moscone had to continually battle opposition from all sides, including the city's Board of Supervisors. Conservative Supervisor Dan White resigned from the board in 1978, which meant that Moscone could appoint another supervisor whose views were more in line with his own, and thus have more of his agenda approved. This worried anti-Moscone conservatives, and to prevent this from happening, White went to City Hall to meet with George Moscone and ask for his job back. When Moscone refused, Dan White shot him four times, then went across the hall and killed Harvey Milk, an openly gay supervisor who had discouraged Moscone from reappointing White. Their deaths shocked the nation and threw the city into mourning; individuals and communities continue to process their loss and reflect upon their legacy.



ILLUMINATING MEMORIES

A conversation with Jonathan Moscone & Tony Taccone

Madeleine Oldham, Berkeley Rep's resident dramaturg, sat down with Jonathan Moscone and Tony Taccone to talk about the trials and triumphs of collaborating on *Ghost Light*.

Can you start by talking about how this project came about? Cause it's sort of a weird project...

Jonathan Moscone: It is. Everyone assumes that I wrote it and Tony directed it.

Really?

JM: I think it's just an assumption people make because it's "my story." The subversion of that assumption is actually the DNA of this entire project.

I heard about *American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle* [an Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) project that is commissioning 37 new plays that have sprung from a moment of change, inspiration, or conflict] through OSF's Artistic Director Bill Rauch. I decided that I might be interested in looking at this moment in history from my perspective. I threw this little idea at him in an email and he replied within seconds saying, "Okay, great." I called Tony wanting to collaborate, because I knew that my fear around going into this alone would abort the project.

Was there something particular about this moment where you said, "Okay, now is the time for me to tell this story?"

JM: There's a whole long, chronic feeling that became acute with the filming of *Milk*. I went to see a day shoot at

City Hall. Everyone was extremely welcoming and very nice. I watched a scene being filmed from the sideline just next to Gus Van Sant [the director], who asked me if this is what it looked like, and instead of saying, "I have no idea — I was 10 years old and wasn't even at Harvey Milk's inauguration," I turned to him and said something like, "It wouldn't be so fancy." He [Harvey Milk] was a supervisor — it wasn't a big deal. And so they pulled the red carpet away. I thought, "Oooh, this is fun!"

Tony Taccone: Influence!

JM: But then I watched a moment when Victor [Garber], who was playing George, swears Sean [Penn, who was playing Harvey Milk] in, and he flubbed the line. He said "the City and Country of San Francisco," and then he said, "Oh, I'm so sorry Gus," and Gus said, "Don't worry, it's part of a montage. We won't hear what you're saying." In that moment Victor looked at me, and I thought, "Oh good, thanks for screwing up the one line that George has in the movie, that didn't even make it into the movie!" It wasn't such a dramatic event as it was maybe just that little click. I wouldn't say it was the straw that broke the camel's back because that makes it sound like an explosive moment, but it was just that it all added up. And when I put that together with contacting Bill, I think those were connected.



I thought: If Gus Van Sant and Sean Penn can respond as artists to this experience, why can't I? I am an artist. And I have a lot of the dramaturgical information already in me. Why not? As opposed to approaching from the perspective, "I'm going to set the record straight and screw them," it was, "Why not join in this conversation and do it in a way that felt authentic?"

When I talked to Bill very early on, before I even talked to Tony, I said this wouldn't be a historical or realistic piece. The things in my head that I've never shared might resonate with more people than just my therapist. Bill really bought into that idea, and then I realized I needed someone to help me get it out of my head. And I didn't even think too hard, I just went right to Tony.

And when you did that, were you thinking of Tony as the writer or as a kind of co-collaborator?

JM: A person in the room whom I could share this journey with in complete trust.

TT: The fact that there were no clearly defined roles turned out to be an advantage for us. I once asked Ariane Mnouchkine, the famous French director, about how she casts her plays, and she said that everybody in the company plays everything for six months and then it becomes extremely clear who should do what. To everybody. I think we kind of in our own way did the same thing. We talked and talked, and after six months or so it became pretty clear that I was going to write it and that Jon was going to direct. It didn't start that way—it came out of our creative dialogue about it, and that was really cool.

So then during that dialogue, how did you finally settle your roles and begin creating something?

JM: Just over time, the *mise-en-scène* of our visits started to morph into my lying on the couch in Tony's loft space.

Literally?

TT: He would start out sitting, and I would be sitting across from him with my laptop, and I'd ask him stuff, and he would gradually just lie down, like, list to the left. [He demonstrates.] He would also grab his head a lot. Grab his temples, trying to channel what he was thinking. I kept trying to get him to go farther. What happened on the day your father was killed? I asked him about his dream life. I asked him about his waking life. I asked him about his brothers and sisters. I was really interested in the boy. The boy Jon Moscone. I was really interested in him talking about just the evocative sensation, the emotional sensation of what was going through that 14-year-old boy's body.

Because I was connecting to that for myself. Look, I was born with a major stutter, which I wasn't able to overcome until I got to college. So when Jon talked about the silence that surrounded him, I was all over that. Yeah. I completely get that.

I also had an intense relationship with my own dad, who I idolized but who was far away. He was always at work, he was always someplace else. And then he'd be there. So when Jon described his father, one of the things that surprised me was when he said, "My dad was a really good dad. When he was there he was totally there, but he was also gone a lot." So in this little prism, I was sort of transmuting my own experience through his.

This story is so public, and so many people have so many opinions and ideas about it, and think they know what happened or what the story is. You sort of circumvented all of that by just finding the points of connection.



“People impose their own stories on this story because it’s so important to them. People have become closer and closer and closer to my dad in their memories. So they have this extraordinary sense of ownership through memory. That is playwriting. They’ve written their own play over time.” **JONATHAN MOSCONE**

JM: It’s just that the last name translates to a generation of people. There are so many people who have a personal connection to George that is all theirs. I remember seeing the last performance of the show at OSF and a man sat next to me. He was an assemblyman at the time my dad was head of the State Senate, and he told me he was a pallbearer at my dad’s funeral. In my head I added that up to about 40 pallbearers hoisting that coffin. It reminded me of a story I had told Tony, that over the years so many people have told me that they were the last person to see my dad alive in his office. In which case I joked, “Well, if his day is so busy...”

TT: Then he wouldn’t have had time to get shot!

JM: “Yeah, his day would’ve been so jam-packed and fun-filled!”

TT, JM, MO: [Inappropriately raucous laughter.]

JM: So people impose their own stories on this story because it’s so important to them. People have become closer and closer and closer to my dad in their memories. So they have this extraordinary sense of ownership through memory. That is playwriting. They’ve written their own play over time.

And I think I did that too, in a way. The process of talking to Tony was constantly swimming between fact and fic-

tion: “That’s what it was like — well, I think that’s what it was like...” And that’s when I’d grab my head.

That’s when Tony started to get interested in the repetition of that behavior where I would say, “That happened — wait, I’m not sure — maybe it did. I’m not sure if it happened that day, or if it happened at all, or maybe it happened a couple of months prior...” You could see Tony just start buzzing away at his laptop. In my head I thought, well, that’s not very interesting. It was like he was digging a tunnel.

TT: I only interviewed two people: Jon’s mom and Corey Busch [who was Mayor Moscone’s press secretary], in part because I had already worked on a play called *Execution of Justice* that was a docudrama about the assassination of Moscone and Milk and the many events that led up to it. [The play was presented by Berkeley Rep in 1985.] So I knew a bit about the history. But I did interview Jon’s mom, who told me a story that corroborated in a more painful way what Jon just told you about — people coming up and saying to him, “I was the last person to see your dad alive.” She told me a story about meeting a guy at some event where he comes up to her and says, “I so wanted to meet you. I went to college with George.” And she said, “Oh really? Great.” And this guy named this college that George



never went to. And she said, “Gee that’s funny. I don’t think George went there.” And he said, “No no no, you’re wrong.”

So she’s having this bizarre experience where she tries a couple of times to tell him the facts, but after 20 minutes she actually gives up. Because, as Jon said, she realized that that guy’s need to own that memory of going to school with George Moscone was deeper than any set of facts.

I’ve been thinking about memory a lot the last 10 years or so, and I’ve come to understand it as a desire construct. Entirely. Even if it’s a negative construct. It reaffirms something. Whether it’s our worst fears — our worst part of ourselves or the best, it doesn’t matter. It’s a desire construct.

Another reaction we’ve had a lot is that when people come to the show, and they always say to me, “I can’t believe how well you captured Jon. It’s brilliant. It’s perfect.” I did not for one second while writing that character imagine Jon Moscone. I’ve stopped telling people this; it doesn’t make any difference. Now I just say thank you. But I imagined a guy, Jon, who talked a lot like me, thought a lot like him, and just had some issues. And the issues he has are a total combination of mine and Jon’s.

JM: He’s more of a gay Tony.

TT: So there you go. But I’ve come to understand and respect people’s desire to own the story in some way — the desire to have it be about their dad, their mayor, their family — their pain is sometimes overwhelming.

JM: And beautiful. I don’t think every writer in the world knows exactly all the circuitry that’s happening underneath their words. I think you actually did write me. I just don’t think you intended to.

TT: Stuff happens unconsciously.

What was it like for you, Tony, showing Jon the first draft?

TT: Scary. Scary as hell. Before I actually said, “I think I’m writing this,” I remember for a couple weeks up to that being really scared.

I was in Montreal for about 15 days. I waited by the phone like an eighth-grader waiting for a girl I liked to call back about a date. It was kind of pathetic. And I got no response. Nothing. I thought, this is what it’s really like to be a writer. You’ve put something out there, no one’s responding. I went through a whole emotional cycle: he doesn’t like it, he’s trying to figure out how to tell me, it sucks, the project’s dead. He hasn’t read it yet, how could he not read it?

Then I got home and I called, and he said flat out, “I haven’t read it; I’m really scared.” As soon as he said it, it made spectacular sense. Of course. Of course he hasn’t read it. I was so wrapped up in my own worry that I couldn’t get past my own insecurity about it. I think there were times when we both stumbled into the magnitude of what we were actually trying to do. And were surprised by it, and thrown a little bit. But I think we did a good job of actually saying, “I’m scared.” He led the way with that. Because I was never a big fan of saying that. I’m more of a fan now, frankly, because it’s true. It’s helpful to have another person know that I’m scared.

JM: I think even though we fell into more divided, clearly defined roles, they weren’t really reflective of the shared experience that was happening. There were times when Tony would respond emotionally as a writer and then I would respond emotionally as a director, and we would claim that kind of identity. You know, “I don’t know how to do that scene,” or “I can’t hear that now.” We were creating the experience, thinking more as theatre makers, not strictly as a writer and a director.

So it makes sense to me that people are confused about whose role is whose. We did have to assign each other the roles, but those were almost like the buoys that we would hit that would guide us. We would hit these moments in the water where we would have to check in with each other about our individual fears around the project. Most of the time it was just checking in — sometimes it would be a little frenetic, but we would always work through it. There’s not a conversation you can’t have with Tony. He’s all about, “Sure, let’s talk about it.” Maybe that was somehow operating within my head when I thought of asking him to work with me on it. I chose him in my head because it made me comfortable. I imagined Tony and it felt good. There’s nothing dangerous.

TT: There’s kind of nothing off limits, which is a little scary.

JM: You’re right. There is danger, but there’s nothing off limits.

Once you got into rehearsal, did you ever have moments of thinking, “Oh my god, what did I get myself into?”

JM: [Laughter.]

Can you say a little bit about what those looked like?

JM: I was asked so many questions and requested to talk about it so much, and do a huge presentation on the first day of rehearsal to an audience.

Illuminating memories

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TT: This is in Ashland.

JM: The whole day was very surreal to me. And they were filming it for whatever reasons, and Tony just talked and talked and talked and talked, and I was thinking, “Well, he’s the more vulnerable person right at this moment. My job is actually to direct this play. I can talk about my dad until the cows come home, but in an hour and a half I have to start directing.” So I started to separate the two feelings of “This is huge, ridiculous, I can’t believe I’m doing this!” with “I just need to direct this play.”

That was a helpful realization because that was the constant conflict for me. When the enormity of that realization would enter the room, I often would not know how to handle it. The way I know how to not to handle something isn’t to go into a corner, close the door, and think about it; it’s more like I act out. I embrace it. Big time.

I remember this as a child. When the cameras were rolling in front of my dad, I would do things that would attract attention to myself. I was maybe the slightly cuter version of Rudy Guiliani’s son. But it was the same idea. That’s how I reacted to it. I think it revealed how discomfiting the entire public experience was for me. And that’s what happened at times. I would be directing, and then I would talk about my dad and me while I was directing. Which is like saying, “Madeleine, I’d like you to go downstage left. When I was downstage left and my father and I were downstage left...,” you lose the actor, who’s going like, “Huh?”

The actors would love to hear it on one level, and on another they just wanted to know how to do the play. So every day I felt twice as exhausted and about half as satisfied as I should have, because I felt like I was failing at keeping clarity. But Chris Moore, who plays my character, said over drinks during the run of the show, “How would you have done it any other way? What model were you working from? Of course you fell into that.” They were very generous and lovely about accepting that in me.

There were times when I could separate, and I would give really good

directing notes. Oddly, because of this tension, some of the clearest pieces of direction I ever gave came out of my mouth.

I’d like to ask Tony the same question. This is your second play. This is not a very straightforward situation by any means. Did you ever have a moment of “Oh my god what did I get myself into?”

TT: Ummm...

JM: Please don’t lie because I know the answer.

TT: Never! Not a single time! Yeah, of course. There’s nothing quite like the first time you hear it read out loud. There’s nothing like the first run-through. I was a basket case. Pretending that I was totally on top of it. But Jon could feel me — feel my molecular structure virtually exploding.

JM: It was a painful, painful experience. [Laughs.] Plays develop over time. It’s all trust. The whole process is one big trust exercise. It’s a hard trust when you’re on the front line, which you were. I was too, but you were more so.

TT: It felt like the ghost of every playwright who would cause me anxiety or who I’d had a negative experience with was in my mind. Now I’m the writer and I’m trying to resist being that guy and failing. At that first run-through I was watching the actors and thinking to myself, “There is a melody line there that no one is singing. It’s a musical score, can’t they sing it?!” Of course, I’d had that experience many times as a director. But all I can tell you is that, as a writer, it felt different. A different level of despair.

But I have to say, if this project suffered from anything it was from people caring so much about it. About each other, themselves, the history of it... It’s fraught with caring. The caring is also great because when it works it’s spectacular, but when it doesn’t... Just have fun and get the jokes right!

[At this point, Jon had to leave for another interview. Tony and Madeleine continued talking for a bit longer.]

TT: You know, the stories that Jon and I tell in these interviews are a testa-

ment to what I’m interested in, because it changes over time. Our desire to tell the story in a particular way shifts every time.

That’s so funny, because that’s just like the play.

TT: Exactly, that’s what the play is trying to do.

I wrote one of my short stories about memory, where I went back to my house in Long Island, and it wasn’t the same house. The amazing thing was that the old memory came back again later, because my need to have it be that house was greater than whatever was really objectively true.

So there’s this interest in how memory works, and in the play this guy picks a scab off of a wound that he’s not on top of, and it releases something buried inside him. He can’t control what’s about to happen. And his dream life just...ruptures. What happens in his unconscious will no longer be contained by his conscious life. And it reveals itself in a panic attack — this major panic attack. And he has to deal with that, because it’s a physically threatening event.

There’s a whole theatrical genre of memory plays. Does *Ghost Light* fit in to that?

TT: No, I hope it doesn’t. Because my view of memory plays is that they’re all full of wistful monologues.

“Memory plays” are usually about the content of the dream memories rather than an investigation into those memories.

TT: Yeah, and the memories I’m interested in here are extremely active and dangerous. And they’re anthropomorphized into characters that are going to kill somebody. Kill the host! My view of the traditional memory play is where somebody has a long monologue about nostalgia, or the past, as if the past is dead. My whole point is that the past is never dead. The past is more alive than we can possibly bear. And it only reveals itself in times of either great happiness or great pain. And it’s too obvious to ignore.