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Over the Transom


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**Facing (and Fixing)
the Problem of
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Moving

**Getchell Winner
Explores Choices**



Hoon Lee in
Williamstown
Theatre Festival's
production of
Seared, a new play
by Theresa Rebeck

MOVING

by Sean Michael McCord



Eric Kelley Photography

Samantha McCoy (played by Savannah Williamson) won't get off the phone as her father Paul (played by Phil Horst) tries to help her pack up for college in the September 2017 production of Moving by the Charlottesville (VA) Playwrights Collective.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PAUL: Male, 29 in 1985; character ages over 20 years. A screenwriter.
LAURA: Female, 25 in 1985; character ages over 30 years. A teacher.
SAM: Female, 18 in 2005. Paul and Laura's daughter.
TERRY: Female, 29 in 2015. An architectural engineer.
ROBIN: Female, 25 in 2015. A student.

FOR PRODUCTION

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SYNOPSIS

Over the span of 30 years in one apartment in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles, lovers come together, fall apart and move on through life's choices.

EXCERPT FROM MOVING

ACT I: THE FIRST STORY

SETTING: Los Angeles, August 1985

Paul's apartment. It should have art deco flourishes, such as arched doorways and round windows. There are doors leading off to the bedrooms and kitchen, as well as the front door that leads outside. The room is filled with moving boxes and no furniture, a lone typewriter, and a 1980s telephone. One or two framed pictures are still visible.

PAUL McCoy is drinking from a beer bottle in one hand and talking on the phone with the other. He's been packing all day and looks a little worn in his old jeans and t-shirt, certainly not dressed to meet a cute girl.

PAUL: Thanks for checking on me, Barry. I'll be out of here soon. Penny took all the furniture with her, so most of what I have are LPs, books, my typewriter. She picked most of that stuff anyway, it was her style. I've just got an apartment full of boxes now, and several large German guys on their way back to move the last of it. I'm putting my stuff in storage and staying with a friend until I can find a small place in Hollywood somewhere. I just gotta get out of here. *(pause)* I don't know. Penny says I wasn't "mature" enough, that I wasn't ready to commit. So yeah, she shows how committed she is by taking all her crap and moving out. I'm all alone now, so I'm just going to curl up in a ball and cry my guts out. *(pause)* No, you dick, I'm kidding. When have you ever known me to cry? I'll be fine.

There is a knock at the front door.

PAUL: Oh good, the movers are back.

Paul gets up and goes to open the door, but the phone cord isn't long enough and there's no good place to put his beer down. With his back to the door, he calls out.

PAUL: Come on in, it's not locked!

The door opens and LAURA PALMETTO enters. In her mid-20s, she is well dressed but not formal, wearing a light, button-down sweater, even though it's August. She looks nice. Laura steps into the apartment and glances around curiously, not sure what to do next. Paul still hasn't actually looked at her.

PAUL: (over his shoulder) Start with the boxes along the back wall. I just have a few more things to pack up. Did you bring any tape?

LAURA: (startled) No.

PAUL: (still with his back to her) That's all right, I guess. I probably have enough. (into phone) Where was I? Oh yeah, I'm not mature enough. Hey, wanna hear a joke? Did you hear about the blond actress who was so dumb that she slept with the screenwriter? (laughing) Seriously, I'll be okay. Plenty of cows in the pasture. Thanks, Barry. I'll call you when I get my new number.

Laura has listened to the whole conversation and is clearly mortified. Paul hangs up the phone, turns, and finally sees her.

PAUL: You're not a large German man.

LAURA: "Nein."?

PAUL: Who the hell are you?

LAURA: I'm here to look at the apartment. Are you Stan?

PAUL: I'm Paul. Stan is my landlord.

LAURA: Stan said I should come by and look at it. I didn't know you were still moving.

PAUL: (a little annoyed) Why did you just walk in?

LAURA: You told me to.

PAUL: I don't even know you.

LAURA: You said "come on in, the door's not locked".

PAUL: I thought you were the movers.

LAURA: This really isn't my fault.

PAUL: Yeah, okay.

LAURA: Maybe I should come back later.

PAUL: No, it's okay. Sorry if I was a little short. Can I offer you something to, uh...

He trails off as they both look around the room and see nothing but boxes.

PAUL: Can I offer you a box?

She smiles for the first time.

LAURA: I'm good.

PAUL: My name is Paul.

LAURA: I know.

PAUL: How do you know that?

LAURA: You told me. You're Paul. Stan is your landlord.

PAUL: Who are you?

LAURA: (a little puzzled) I'm the woman who's here to look at your apartment? Are you okay? Do you have memory problems, or...?

PAUL: No! What's your name?

LAURA: Oh ... I'm Laura.

PAUL: Pleased to meet you. My name is Paul.

Laura looks at him for a moment, now not sure if he's kidding. He is.

Getchell Award Winner Sean Michael McCord Explores the Impact of Life Choices in *Moving*



The 2018 Charles M. Getchell New Play Award winner is Sean Michael McCord (above) for the play *Moving*. McCord, who studied film at UCLA, currently works at the University of Virginia Library in Charlottesville and is pursuing his MFA in playwriting as a member of the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA. His plays have been produced in Virginia, Kentucky, Colorado, California and Stuttgart, Germany. McCord is a founding member of the Charlottesville Playwrights Collective and hosts a monthly radio program on WPVC-FM. At the 2018 SETC Convention in Mobile, AL, McCord's play was given a staged reading with response by Craig Pospisil from Dramatists Play Service, followed by a Q&A with the audience. The following interview is a compilation of a pre-SETC interview featured on the SETC website and a follow-up with McCord several months later.

DARREN MICHAEL: What is the inspiration for writing your play *Moving*?

SEAN MICHAEL McCORD: *Moving* takes place in a single apartment in the Silver Lake neighborhood of L.A. over 30 years. Not coincidentally, that was my apartment in the 1980s when I was a young and hungry and unproduced screenwriter. I loved that place, my first bachelor pad in my 20s. The building had been around since the 1930s, and it intrigued me to realize that other people had lived there before me, and others would after me, and they all had their own stories that took place in that same space. The building itself, too, had its own interesting biography, and I tell some of that story in the script.

In 2012, I wrote a short play which took place in that apartment, recounting how, after a breakup, I had met a girl as I was moving out of that apartment and she was moving in. When it came time to write my first full-length play as part of my graduate playwriting program at the Hollins Playwright's Lab, I turned back to that original story and imagined what might have happened to those characters over several decades if they had stayed in the same place. Their story was not my story; I left L.A. and moved to New York, and then eventually to Virginia. By breaking free of my own biography, I was able to create wholly new characters with whom I shared some DNA, but who

Read the remainder of the 2018
Charles M. Getchell Award-winning
play, *Moving*, online at:
www.setc.org/moving

became their own people. It's a fascinating process.

Each act of the script jumps forward several years as different characters move in or out of the same space ... I loved the idea of placing a story over 30 years in one house, and how that space might affect the people who inhabit it. Of course, the day you move into or out of a home is always inherently dramatic, as it is a time of great change. The format allowed me to explore different important passages in many lives: the day you meet someone special, the day you fall apart, the day you move away, and the day the you truly commit to someone. Ultimately, it's a story of how the choices we make when we are younger impact us later, and how we get wiser over time.

MICHAEL: So playing with time dramatically is intriguing to you.

McCORD: Most of the full-length plays I've written, I play with time a little because it's such a theatrical device. It's something you can do on stage in a way that can really

involve the audience. A screenplay can go all over the place but watching a movie is such a passive experience. With a novel, it's in your head but [on the stage] to see time laid out before you and have characters that are slightly out of time, it's a living memory. I love being about to depict that on stage. That will get people's attention.

'I have a genuine love/hate relationship with the actual writing. When it's going well, there's almost nothing better than watching a great scene develop before your eyes, sometimes almost faster than you can write it. But when it's not going well, it can be physically painful to continue writing, knowing that everything you're putting down is dreck that will have to be surgically removed.'

MICHAEL: Other than the passing of time, are there particular themes or ideas that pique your interest more than others? Do you have certain tendencies toward what you write? Certain stories that are more attractive to you?

McCORD: That is the beauty of being in a great program like the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University: We are encouraged to try new and different things each time we write. As we speak, I am in my fourth summer here in Roanoke, and in these past four years, I have been given the opportunity to write in many different styles. I tend to write comedies, or at least play scripts with some strong comedic elements, but I am also quite proud of a drama that I wrote last year called *An Obsession with Death*. A few of my fellow theatre folks who've seen that script were surprised that I could write something so dark.

I have been told, and I believe it to be true, that I have a gift for writing dialogue. I am interested in the relationships between people, the things they say and also those they don't say, and how those get revealed through conversation. My stories tend not to be plot-heavy, which means I have to be careful about my tendency to fall into scenes where characters just talk and very little action happens. When I get into a

groove, I can just do page after page of witty repartee, but I am self-aware enough to know that a lot of that may have to be thrown out later, or at least recycled.


MICHAEL: What's your favorite part of playwriting? Your least favorite part?

McCORD: As is true of most writers I know, I have a genuine love/hate rela-

tionship with the actual writing. When it's going well, there's almost nothing better than watching a great scene develop before your eyes, sometimes almost faster than you can write it. But when it's not going well, it can be physically painful to continue writing, knowing that everything you're putting down is dreck that will have to be surgically removed. I love that first reading, whether it's in a formal session at a theatre or just a bunch of friends, when you can finally hear the words out loud, sense how people react, and learn what needs to be worked on.

However, that leads to the next process with which I also have a love/hate relationship: rewrites. Specifically, I've learned that I hate even-numbered rewrites. That first rewrite, rewrite No. 1, is great, especially after a reading. I know what needs to be cut out and I've got some great ideas how to fix things. But the next rewrite, rewrite No. 2, is terrible, like pulling teeth, because I just rewrote it and now you're asking me to do it again?!? Then by the time I get to the third rewrite, I'm in a better place and I know what needs to be done. That seems to be the pattern: odd-numbered rewrites are a pleasure, even-numbered rewrites are a huge pain.

MICHAEL: Could you talk about your



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writing process a bit with *Moving*?

McCORD: I am still working out my process. I have a family and a full-time job in my hometown of Charlottesville, working in the library at the University of Virginia, so carving out time to write can be a challenge. Here at Hollins, we have a class called First Drafts, in which a writer is given specific prompts and roughly 72 hours to write a full script, and we do that every week for six weeks. It sounds like a crazy way to write, but there's something to pounding out that initial draft under pressure that works. Both *Mystery at Midnight* and *An Obsession with Death* were written in First Drafts last year, and they're both two of the best pieces I've written so far, so I may try that again on my own, locking myself away for a long weekend and just write like hell.

MICHAEL: Do you have any major influences on your writing? Any particular writers?

McCORD: I've been writing in theatre only for about seven or eight years, so I'm still figuring out my influences. People have told me that *Moving* is my Neil Simon script, and I cannot argue with that. Not many people in MFA graduate school might list Neil Simon as an influence, but I am happy to. In my first year at Hollins, I did a presentation on *Death of a Salesman*, and now Arthur Miller is one of my favorite writers and people. In the broader culture, I greatly admire Aaron Sorkin. I also want to give a shout-out to my fellow playwrights here at Hollins, especially "the other Sean," my pal Sean Abley. From day one here, he has been one of those writers that I most admire, and I am humbled to follow the

trail of success that he has blazed. I could list many more of my Hollins cohorts, but I might get in trouble for inadvertently skipping one, so I'll just stick with Sean Abley. His is a name that you should all know.

MICHAEL: How was your experience at the Getchell?

McCORD: Let me start by saying how wonderful it is that SETC supports playwrights and new works. I encourage all SETC-eligible playwrights to submit their work to the Getchell New Play Contest. I was treated very well by everyone at SETC. They flew me down, put me up in the hotel and gave me a pass to the entire convention. There were way too many great workshops for me to attend them all, but I did endeavor to go to every writer-centric event, and I saw some great shows. For the reading, I was assigned an experienced director and he selected great actors, some of whom had read my submission and recommended it as a finalist, so they really cared about the text and making it work. The discussion with Craig Pospisil and his critical analysis of the play after the reading was very helpful, especially in that room of fellow playwrights and theatre professionals. That discussion helped identify some elements of the script that I may need to rethink.

MICHAEL: Like what? Anything that you want to reexamine?

McCORD: There are questions that came out during the reading that didn't happen in later productions. Things about Paul and the apartment that I never intended to have audiences hung up on. One is that it's Paul's story. It isn't. It's Laura's story, but at a certain point the audience needs to make that shift. That was a choice on

my part, a choice that was meant to be a delightful surprise, not to confuse people. And I think it works better in a production, but in a reading I can see how that confuses people. Even my director in the production identified that early on.

Another issue is that a lot of people think the apartment itself is some sort of metaphor because the apartment has a biography and plays such an important part in the story. It really is just a place. But I told so much about the place and gave it life, people were expecting something. That wasn't my intention. That is something I now have to think about – how to handle that. I have to somehow address that in the text.

MICHAEL: How are things going with *Moving*? Has it changed any since the reading?

McCORD: *Moving* had an unusual path to SETC. The first public reading of the play was at Hollins in 2016 in the Hollins Festival of New Works. It was that reading

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that really helped me with the rewrites that led to the production so I want to give a shout-out to Hollins and to the director, Maura Campbell. At the time that I submitted it for consideration, in the spring of 2017, the script was unproduced. However, that summer I got together with a bunch of my fellow playwrights in Charlottesville and we launched our own theatre for new works, the Charlottesville Playwrights Collective (CPC), and our first production in September of 2017 was *Moving*. Our model at the CPC is that, once their script is selected, the playwright is also the producer of their own show, so I got to build a production of *Moving* from the ground up: selecting a director, auditioning, building the set, etc., all with the help of my fellow playwrights. We had a very successful if limited run, filling our 40-seat theatre for five shows over two weekends, and we actually made money! The playwright, the director, the stage manager, and the actors all got paid (not a lot, but we all got to be

a part of the success of the show), and the rest of the box office went back into funding the next show. Since September of 2017, we've had two CPC productions, and two more planned before the end of this year, all by different playwrights. I mention all this only to point out that, by the time I brought *Moving* to SETC in March of 2018, we'd already had a production of the show. It was very interesting to then present it again as a staged reading to an esteemed theatre crowd, and to get that level of feedback. Up to that point, honestly, I was ready to put *Moving* behind me, but hearing people respond to the reading re-energized me and inspired me to revisit that kind of play again. I have written an outline for a sequel of sorts to *Moving*, following a few of the principal characters into new chap-

ters of their lives. Because of the format of the original, showing people at pivotal moments over 30 years, I realize there are whole new stories to be told with these characters that have come to mean so much to me. My working title is *Moving 2: Electric Boogaloo*, but that may change.

So, to answer all your questions at once, bringing my script to SETC was an amazing experience, I was treated like a rock star, and I hope that more of my fellow playwrights take advantage of the opportunity. ■



Darren V. Michael is a professional actor, a playwright and a professor at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, TN. He is a former chair of SETC's Charles M. Getchell New Play Award Committee.

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