

## Kurt Maxey's *Pity The Proud Ones* Arises Out of Robey

**FEATURES** by [Stephanie Jones](#) | October 24, 2011



Ben Jurand and Darrell Szenasi in "Pity the Proud Ones"

As a toddler, Kurt Maxey was brought to LA in 1951. After graduating from USC and receiving a master's degree from Loyola, he eventually worked as a field representative for a trust fund. During that career, he began writing scripts on the side.

Now he's a retired pensioner. And last Saturday marked the premiere of his first fully produced play, *Pity the Proud Ones*, at Los Angeles Theatre Center.

It was nurtured within the play development program of the LATC-based Robey Theatre Company — the same program that yielded the 2011 NAACP Award-winning plays *The Emperor's Last Performance*, *Transitions*, and *The Reckoning*. And Robey produced the premiere, which is directed by the company's artistic producing director Ben Guillory.

The play is set far from LA and nearly a century ago — in St. Augustine, Fla. in 1915. In the story, half-black James Perez is searching for his Irish father Martin O'Grady at the town's leading bordello. Martin owes his son a lot of money, and he hopes to obtain some of it via America's possible entry into World War I — but even more imminent is the arrival of a powerful hurricane. Why is the play set in St. Augustine? Maxey replies by referring to the town's status as the oldest (1565) continuously occupied European-settled city in what became the United States.



Kurt Maxey

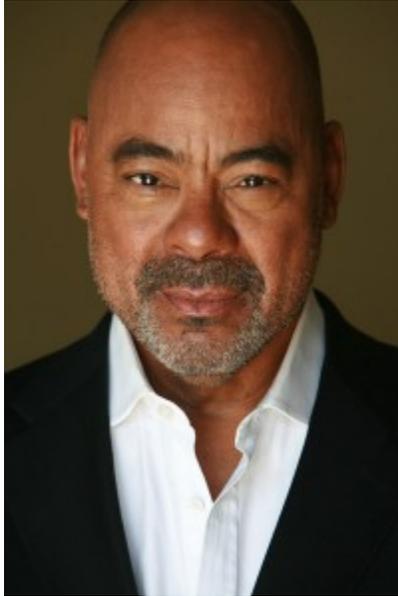
According to Maxey, the play is about 70 percent fiction, 30 percent fact. “Some of my family,” he acknowledges, “are from Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Kansas, Virginia, England and Ireland...I had relatives that ran a ‘boarding house’, which now [in the play] has become a bordello...It was always assumed that our family had Irish blood in our background. So, I know I’m black and part white and part [Native American] but I also assumed I was part Irish. So, I just took those elements and mixed them.”

He traveled to Dublin in November 2008 for a week of research on the Irish aspects of the play. “It was out of historical and sociological curiosity,” he says. “I found a commonality between the Irish and the Afro-American Negro in terms of economic, racial, and political disenfranchisement. Both groups have felt the heel of a boot pressing against their necks. Both groups have been denied basic rights and freedoms. Both groups have had to strive and struggle to stand tall. I plan on going back to Ireland again.

“The play is based on the idea that when people are consumed with too much anger and pride, they are unable to confront the roots of their personal demons, thereby becoming incapable of improving [their] quality of life,” says Maxey. “So, if you’re angry and prideful, you sometimes block out solving your problems – the conflicts *are* the problems – because your pride and anger are guiding you.”

Maxey has written plays, screenplays and short stories and participated in workshops and readings at the Mark Taper Forum (Blacksmyths), an earlier version of LATC (Wordsmyths), East West Players and South Coast Repertory. He had worked on this particular play, then put it aside, but resurrected it about six years ago. When he enrolled in Robey’s Playwrights Lab four years ago, he started working on it in depth.

It’s the fourth play from this installment of the Playwrights Program, under instructor Aaron Henne and dramaturg Dylan Southard, to be fully produced.



Ben Guillory

Guillory, when asked about Robey’s playwrights development programs, begins by first “going way back to when I first came to Los Angeles. [In 1984], there was only one black theater company. It was the Inglewood Playhouse...in a bunker in an Inglewood park that flooded out when it rained. It was on a slant so if it rained, the water went down.

“There were some great people there doing work. I went to see about a half a dozen plays there. Each of the plays was about wonderful subjects – the Black Panthers and family life and the black community – and there were some people working very hard, including the playwrights. But they hadn’t had any kind of real training to become dramatists.

“They wanted to tell a story and they were passionate about a story. It was a good story and should be told but it wasn’t a play quite yet. Most of the time...there were first drafts or second drafts and they hadn’t been developed. They had a lot of potential but it wasn’t done yet. And they were producing them because they had no place really to go.”

In an effort to “figure this out” – to find out how to train a theatrical community that didn’t have adequate facilities or programs – Guillory and Robey co-founder Danny Glover in 1994 put together a readings series, two years before Robey’s first full production.

Guillory believes that theater that specifically explores people of color was — and still is — a necessity. “The aesthetic that we develop here, it’s an aesthetic of people of color. That’s what we do and those writers at the Inglewood Playhouse, that’s what they were doing, but they had not had an opportunity” to go to a theater devoted to “a black aesthetic, developing that, discovering that, defining that, exploring that.”

Mainstream resident theaters of those days occasionally trained and hired black actors and produced African American plays — Guillory himself trained at American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. According to Guillory, these efforts helped the companies access government funding. But

as a result of mainstream companies cherry-picking the best black playwrights and other writers of color, African American-specific theater companies were often left without resources. Guillory likens the situation in black theater of the '70 and '80s to what happened in baseball when Jackie Robinson was drafted to the then-Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, which was the beginning of the end for baseball's Negro Leagues. This was the topic of Robey's 2001 co-production of Christopher Moore's *The Last Season* at Stage 52.



Ben Jurand and Caroline Morahan in "Pity the Proud Ones"

“It’s about the last season of the [Negro Leagues], when Jackie Robinson was admitted to the Dodgers, which sounded the death knell for the black baseball league. The largest money-making operation in the black community in the United States was the black baseball leagues at that time. And once Robinson was signed by [Dodgers president] Branch Rickey, that went away in basically a couple of days, because it broke down the wall of segregation. The other owners started cherry-picking the best players from that league. So, that league crumbled very quickly...but there was residual collateral damage. Black industries that were completely focused on the black community – some of them, many of them, went away [or] thinned out. We became exposed as a community to the good, the bad, and the ugly of the rest of the nation.”

Guillory recalls another Robey co-production, Thomas Gibbons' *Permanent Collection*, which was last seen in the LA area at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in 2006. “In it there’s a line talking about a black and a white guy having a debate about the aesthetic of a certain museum,” says Guillory. “And the black guy retorts to the white fellow’s comment, ‘You have not needed to study us as a black population. We as black people have needed – absolutely needed – to study you. Our survival has depended on it for the last 400 years.’ That has been an absolute necessity and that’s the difference.”

In other words, Robey attempts to direct some of the attention to a primarily African American perspective, recognizing cultural differences without turning the art into an “us versus them” argument. The goal is to enjoy the benefits of the American melting pot without ignoring how the ingredients got there. Since the '80s, Robey and several other African-American-specific companies — for example, Towne Street Theatre and Ebony Repertory in LA — stepped up to the plate.

Guillory is proud of the writers that go through the Robey's Playwrights Program. He loves to cultivate, nourish, and mold them into well-rounded playwrights.



Ben Jurand, Caroline Morahan, Darrell Szenasi, Staci Mitchell and Dorian C. Baucum

“They’re all rising,” says Guillory. “It is the nature of the program, and each artist is so individual. They all march to a different drummer in their own time in their own way. I learned that a while back — that there’s not that kind of competition. That’s why the Playwrights Program is working. Everyone has a very distinct, individual voice and the atmosphere is to support and collaborate but still retain an autonomy of one’s self and know that that’s okay – as it should be.”

Many types of writers can be seen in the program, from first-timers to established writers to those trying to figure out if they can in fact write at all. Guillory’s favorite type happens to be writers who may not have the natural talent but have the drive and discipline he respects.

“There are some who come through the door with gifts and then there are those who come in with simply a tremendous appetite and desire to want to do this. They may not be as ‘gifted’, but...they come in with this really absolute need to want to do this,” Guillory says. “[To] tell a story, [to] want to be part of something, [to] want to be a part of the creative process...I find that to be very, very admirable. Maybe even more admirable than someone who has those gifts and it comes somewhat easily to them so they don’t have to work as hard.”

For Maxey, the Playwrights Program is an invaluable experience and a safe place to learn.

“I feel safe here, so I can write whatever I want and I get input and criticism that’s supportive,” Maxey says. “I’m in a cocoon. I feel safe, but in feeling safe I’m able to take more risks.”

“The images that our general audiences are accustomed to – black and white – [are] not so much in this play,” says Guillory, returning the conversation to *Pity the Proud Ones*. “It’s in a way somewhat reversed that, and [that] gives it an authenticity and a revelation to our audience because any of us who witnesses it can say, ‘Oh, yeah. I don’t usually see that but I know it’s true. I know things work like that.’ It might even be distasteful to some but that doesn’t make it any less true. So, to exhibit that is important. And the play does that.”

*Pity the Proud Ones*, presented by Robey Theatre Company in association with The Latino Theater Company. Opens Oct. 22. Plays Thurs.- Sat. at 8 pm; Sun. at 3 pm. Through No. 13. Tickets: \$30. Students/seniors, \$20. Los Angeles Theatre Center, Theatre 4, 514 S. Spring St., LA 866-811-4111. [www.robeytheatrecompany.com](http://www.robeytheatrecompany.com).

\*\*\*All *Pity the Proud Ones* production photos by Adenrele Ojo