



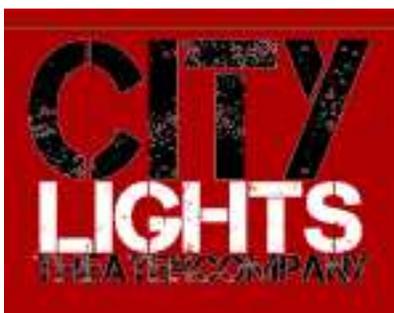
Written By Billy Aronson

Directed By Virginia Drake

September 23, 2010 — October 24, 2010

Playdates - they're not just for kids! *South Bay Premiere*





**City Lights Theater Company**  
***First Day of School***  
**Study Guide**

By Mac Williams

**Director Virginia Drake takes some time out of rehearsal to answer some questions.**

1) What about "First Day of School" attracted you to want to direct it.

The characters. Their situations. The dialogue! We KNOW these people. We work with them, stand in grocery store lines with them, sit in back-to-school nights with them, we ARE them! Placing these absolutely normal people in such extreme situations makes for very rich comedy. Yet in the middle of that comedy is a recognizable truth and poignancy. There is an absolutely delicious subtext in virtually every interaction. I loved the idea of working with a comedy that contains both surface humor and its funny behavioral underbelly. I loved that these people are in a world with the same issues I face: being responsible at work, getting their kids through school, setting up family gatherings, washing the laundry and going to the grocery store, taking care of aging parents. And in the middle of all this, they utterly yearn for what they have sacrificed in the process, which is to do something selfishly new and exciting. Additionally, the play contains some real tour-de-force dialogue in its many monologues, overlapping lines, quick exchanges. This is great stuff for collaboration between actors and director. Lastly, can you even imagine how much fun it would be to come to rehearsals nightly, watching and listening to the actors playing out all this?! It's WAY better than TV!

2) "First Day of School" is a story about adults, in a funny situation, yet its not

farce. How do you as a director find the balance between comedy and a straight play and making sure that it does not go over the top?

Well, I guess I don't agree with you on the "farce" issue. This play is replete with slapstick-styled physical humor, ridiculous situations; huge shifts in emotion and action, as well as wild sexual innuendo. That reads "farce" to me. BUT.... and this is very important... the characters must always read true. They are absolutely identifiable people from our daily lives. And there lies the humor! The characters don't see what they are doing as funny. As a matter of fact, they are often in a state of panic, desperately trying to sort out the predicaments they find themselves in. But WE get to see how incredibly ridiculous they are. And so in many ways, we are laughing at ourselves, because we've said that, done that, felt that, fantasized about that. Honestly, I feel that as long as the actors are true to the people they are playing, I think that they can get away with anything.

3) Explain the director's process for you, when you first knew that you would be directing "First Day of School".

First, I read the play again, trying to find its builds, transitions, and structure so that I could begin to understand how Billy Aronson so masterfully kept me laughing for all 97 pages! That began with spotting entrances and exits, and similarities or spin-offs in various pieces of action. I started picking out how the French scenes bounced off each other or topped one another. I paid a lot of attention to the dialogue. There is very little stage direction in this play, so the dialogue provides terrific clues. Whether it's the monologues, the overlapping dialogues, or the short word/phrase exchanges, or repeated words, each is reflecting a particular sub textual panic, desire, mask, confusion, anger, playfulness that the characters are experiencing. And of course, all this must also be revealed in behavior and movement. So I started looking at the play almost as a dance -- when are things symmetrical, wide open, tightly pulled in, asymmetrical, simple, chaotic, calm? When is the tempo bound up, released, speeding up, slowing down, scattered? What do the pauses do to set up or reflect on the characters' interaction?

I was eager to provide the actors with a staging framework in which they could discover each other's sense of humor, and play to that, celebrate it. I function as the ultimate audience member, spotting what they are doing that really works, seeing what they are trying to accomplish and helping them to get to that point.... and always, ALWAYS being ready to back off from old choices when wonderful new ones present themselves.