

Jacob Juntunen Artist Statement

To understand me as an artist, we have to go a ways back, long before my current position as head of SIU's MFA playwriting program. Long before I was the father of a six-year-old. Back to some of my earliest memories. It'll work best if we don't do it in order.

After dropping out of high school in the Bay Area, I moved to Portland in 1992 (yeah, I spent the 90s in Portland—and it shows). I got super depressed making endless sandwiches at a deli and went to Clackamas Community College (CCC). The professors saved my life, showing me how to smile. I met my mentor, Sue Mach, in her playwriting class, and I met Edward Albee when he visited CCC. I even got to work with Albee in Houston, but that's a whole other story.

I ended up an undergraduate at Reed College where a visiting Czech professor showed me a scratchy VHS tape of the Polish theatre artist Tadeusz Kantor folding a sheet into a shroud to wrap up his performance. Cut to me on a plane to Kraków, not speaking a word of the language, but with the address of Kantor's archive. Kantor was a painter, sculptor, and theatre-maker, and he led me to my core belief: Theatre is a painting that sings.

Smash cut to me in 2016, founding Contraband Theatre to find a way to make work outside of institutional confines. For our inaugural production, my script *Hath Taken Away*, I found an abandoned church on the top of a hill in cornfields and filled it with theatrical lights. When spectators drove up, the church glowed in the darkness. There was a single row of seating in a rectangle around the small playing space in which my characters created a séance, looking back on their midwestern, Evangelical lives. It was exactly what I meant.

This is going to sound counterintuitive, but I write to find optimism in the darkest places. My writing explores how faith is lost—in one's self, in one's family, in one's nation—but how one survives those losses. My characters usually lose faith on the cusp of success because of my own feelings of banal guilt about leaving folks behind in order to thrive. My art explores being a refugee from toxic members of my family and a fugitive from the paycheck-to-paycheck world of my high school dropout self. I've lived so many different lives that I don't fit in any of them anymore, and I'm attracted to those types of out-of-place characters.

Now it's time to go back as far as I can go. Squirrel feet scratching on the roof. A golden retriever turning circles on a rope-braid rug. Fluorescent lights above as I'm wheeled down the hall, parents on either side of my gurney saying I'm going to be okay/saying goodbye. These are my earliest memories: my bed sliding into the hospital theatre for open-heart surgery at five years old. Counting backward with anesthesia and vividly understanding I might never wake up. Is it any wonder death haunts all my plays? But I'll tell you death's biggest secret: it's what makes life meaningful. To this day, that bright powerful mystery hurts my chest.

Beginning my third decade of playwriting, I'm no *wunderkind*, but I don't worry about fame anymore. Instead: an audience drives through darkness, discovers a glowing church in a cornfield, watches actors mere feet away summon a world, and then, those spectators stumble half-blinded under the stars to their cars, seeing the world differently. That's what I make.