

Interview With Emily Mann

Alexis Greene

Emily Mann was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1952, the youngest daughter of Arthur and Sylvia Mann. Her father was a professor of American history, first at M.I.T., then at Smith College, and finally at the University of Chicago. Her mother is a reading specialist.

As a playwright, Mann has carved a reputation by writing documentary plays or what she calls “theater of testimony,” beginning in 1974 with *Annulla Allen: Autobiography of a Survivor*, based on interviews she conducted with a woman who escaped a concentration camp. Subsequent plays include *Still Life* (1980), drawn from the testimonies of a vietnam veteran and the two women in his life; *Execution of Justice*, commissioned by San Francisco’s Eureka Theater in response to Dan White’s murder, in 1978, of mayor George Moscone and city supervisor Harvey Milk; *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years* (1995), which Mann adapted from ‘having our say,’ Sarah L. Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany’s experiences of being African-American; *Greensboro: A Requiem* (1996), based on the events surrounding the Ku Klux Klan’s assault on an anti-Klan rally in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1979; and *Meshugah* (1999), an adaptation of a novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer. She has also adapted Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* and Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and most recently, Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*.

In tandem with playwriting, Mann forged a career as a director, working at regional theaters around the country. In 1990 she was named artistic director of McCarter Theater in Princeton, New Jersey. This interview results from two meetings, in 1997 and 1999, which took place in Princeton.

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Alexis Greene: Why do you make theater?

Emily Mann: Well, I guess a very simple answer is that, like most human beings, I need to hear stories. I need to tell stories, I need to make stories. By telling stories, I hear back from other people and get their responses.

AG: Why make theater as opposed to film, for instance?

EM: It's live conversation. It's more dangerous, more volatile. In the kind of theater that I like to make, there's a conversation going on between the actors and the audience. And hopefully it shakes you up enough, or stimulates or moves you enough, so that when you walk out you are continuing the conversation. It leaves an indelible mark on your heart and soul. I don't know any other art form that has quite that power to change another human being.

I always use the quote from the scholar Cornel West, from the lecture he gave when he won the Madison Medal at Princeton [University] a couple of years ago. He said the most important question at the end of the 20th century was, 'How to be fully human in America.' We have to start looking at those values that are not market-driven. We have to start looking at tenderness, love, intimacy.

Part of that task is finding ways to have public conversations. We must see in our country that we are part of each other, that we are all in the same ship, as he put it. "We go on together or we go down together.

AG: Relating that to theater, I would say that your plays are a combination of the public and the private.

EM: Very much so. Because in order to have a public conversation that matters, you have to have lived very intensely and have that private story to tell. [Conversely], you must be able to glimpse that private world, to have a full understanding of what the public conversation is. Or isn't.

AG: *Execution of Justice* and *Greensboro* are attempts to hold that conversation when the public dialogue has been violent.

EM: *Having Our Say*. All of [them]. I mention *Having Our Say* because of what [the Delany sisters] went through. The truth in Bessie [Delany's] life is not at all sweet. At one point she talks about how she really hates white people, and then a nice white person comes along and she has to eat crow. There's nothing cute about that. Bessie was an angry woman. She knew the other side, you see. Now, she talks about it in a way that's screamingly funny, but if she was 20 years younger, you wouldn't find it so funny. [When] two old ladies over a hundred years old are recounting these stories, they suddenly became very undangerous.

But there is a history lesson there, for blacks as well as whites. Authentic history, lived history. It's taking the private into the public arena and saying, 'Yeah, have a great time, but talk about it, because it's the real thing.' No one after seeing [*Having Our Say*] can really be terribly smug.

AG: However, the sisters seem to have made a peace that is not found at the end of *Execution of Justice*, for instance.

EM: They found a way to die. And because they believe in the Almighty, they are somewhat at peace with that. Bessie has real hope that she'll go to heaven. Everyone knows Sadie will.

AG: What is theater's function from your point of view? To give history lessons, to teach?

EM: A lot of functions. Someone has said that theater's function is to entertain, to teach, and to inspire. Entertainment, education, inspiration. I would subscribe to all three. I'm a big believer in entertainment, by the way. I think the next step in South African theater may be humor and joy, that what people there really need to be able to do is laugh a lot.

AG: Your plays are often serious in tone, but there is a great deal of irony, which is a form of humor. *Having Our Say* seems the most outrightly comedic.

EM: *Annulla* is funny too. I think that one of my signatures is finding the humor in tragedy. *The Three Sisters* that I directed [at McCarter] was hilarious. My *Hedda Gabler* was very funny. It's a way to share an experience on a deeper level with an audience. They relax, they connect. They see themselves on stage through laughter.

The only piece [of mine] that does not have enough [humor], in my opinion, is *Greensboro*. I thought there would be a lot more — well, there is in the David Duke section: it makes you screech with laughter, because it's so appalling. There's a lot of humor in *Still Life*. They are very serious pieces of work, but there are laughs of recognition, of release, some of horror. And some plain old fashioned bellylaughs at the absurdity of the conditions that people are living in.

AG: What was it like growing up in your family?

EM: I had a sister, a father, and a mother. My father, was an American historian; he died in 1993.

AG: Your grandparents were Jewish?

EM: Yes. My mother's family came from [Ostrolenka, Poland]. Her mother came over in her teens with her older sister; everyone else stayed in Poland and was killed during the [second world] war. That's what *Annulla* is really about.

AG: Did they talk to you about that background?

EM: Both my grandfathers were dead by the time I got conscious, and my grandmother wouldn't talk about it. When I went to Poland, to see her village, she kept saying, 'Why do you want to go there? They killed us there. What are you doing?' But I had to do it. My mother on the other hand would talk about what she knew, and my father always told me about what he knew.

Our family really was an extraordinary family to grow up in. My father believed in the education of women — he taught at Smith College for 11 years. He pushed [me and my sister] to formulate and articulate ideas. The dinner table was a place where big ideas were discussed from the time I was a very little girl, and we were expected to participate. It was almost like a daily seminar. My father taught by asking questions about what we thought, what we believed. [He] would tell us what happened in the news that day, and we would have to think through where we stood on these matters. On the one hand, it was the greatest education a child could have, on the other, it was rather tyrannical, and very hard to come up to his standards. But I'm grateful that he pushed us. His best friend was another American historian, John Hope Franklin; he was like a second father to me.

AG: You dedicate *Having Our Say* to your father.

EM: I thought a lot about fathers while doing that play. The sisters talk so much about their father, what he taught them, what growing up on a college campus was like. I very much connected first of all with that story, because John Hope [Franklin's] first teaching job was at Saint Augustine's School, where the sisters' parents met, and he had taken me there and introduced me as his daughter. My father missed the play — he had just died. He would have loved this play.

AG: What would he have liked?

EM: He would have liked the gentleness. He would have loved the history lesson. In the portion where there's a civil rights slide montage, there's a picture of him and John Hope marching from Selma [Alabama] to Montgomery [Alabama], which was a big, big, big moment in my life as a child. I sat at home and was very worried about him. It was really his one political act. He did that out of his love for John Hope and his belief in human justice and freedom. He thought it was the moral thing to do. I admired him enormously for that.

AG: How old were you?

EM: What year was the Selma march? 1963? I was eleven almost.

AG: You have said in interviews that the Vietnam War tore your family apart.

EM: My father, strangely enough, was for the war, and I was against the war. It caused a huge rift between us. He at one time said that, if I had been a boy, he would have sent me to war, because he was a believer in fighting for this country. Our people found freedom here, and it was my duty to protect it.

And I said, sorry. If you sent your son to the Vietnam War, you would lose a son, because I wouldn't go. It's against everything I believe in.

We had a real domestic war over it for many years. Then, when I wrote *Still Life*, and he saw it in Chicago at the Goodman Theater, he embraced me and said, 'I will never agree with you, but you have earned the right to your opinion, and I respect you for that.' That's how we resolved it.

AG: Did writing that play help you see his side?

EM: Oh, yeah. I've always seen his side. There was an incredible intelligence in my father, but also, in my opinion, a naive and romantic idea of what America is. He enlisted for World War II; he thought he was fighting the bad guys, and he saved a lot of people — his own people. He was right about that, but he thought that Vietnam was cut from the same cloth.

I understand that he felt that, but it saddened me that he didn't want to hear that this may not have been the case.

I think he felt, from the late 1960s on, that it was no longer his world. He didn't understand it, he didn't like it. In some ways he was prescient. He did see the future of the civil rights movement in this country and was very depressed by it. He saw what separatism would do. He was concerned about the Black Muslim movement, he saw that there was going to be a rift between blacks and Jews.

But I was a radical kid and didn't buy his concerns. I probably am closer to him politically now, and I bet that he would have moved more my way. We would have met in the middle. He was sort of moving that way when he died.

AG: Sometimes the kind of theater you write is called documentary theater, documentary drama, docudrama. Is there a term you prefer?

EM: The late Barney Simon, who co-founded the Market Theatre of Johannesburg, dubbed the plays Theater of Testimony, because in South Africa, they come out of that tradition. And I would say that is true. I hate [the term] docudrama. Docudrama means it's an amalgam of fiction and documentary. I'm very pure with the documentary form. I always have been.

AG: How does a documentary play differ from a history play?

EM: A documentary often has people speaking in their own words.

AG: Why does the form appeal to you so much?

EM: I love how real people talk. The impulse to start writing *Annulla*, for example, was simply that. [In the early 1970s], I thought I'd leave the theater as a profession, because there weren't enough pieces I wanted to direct. As arrogant as this sounds, the people I had met were a whole lot more interesting than the people I [saw portrayed] on stage, especially in new work. So I went out to get new stories.

I went to Europe in the summer of '73, with my tape recorder and an itinerary to meet my college roommate's family and then to go to my grandmother's village [in Poland]. We didn't know if [the result] would be a book, an article, or a series of edited transcripts, but we thought it would be something along those lines, either in journalistic or oral-history style.

Then as I began to work on *Annulla's* transcript, and looked at the year ahead and wondered what I wanted to do, and got accepted as the last Bush Fellow at the Guthrie Theatre [in Minneapolis] — I thought this transcript could be a play. I don't remember why I decided to take that fellowship. Part of it was because I didn't have a job. I remembered how much I loved the theatre, I had this transcript, I thought it might be a new way to make a play. All of that brought me to the Guthrie. And then I met an actress, Barbara Bryne, and I made the play for her. And I haven't really looked back.

AG: What particularly attracts you about documenting and reportage?

EM: It's a product of my upbringing. It has to do with being an historian's daughter, I think. You have to have earned the right to make these assertions. For example, in *Still Life* I wanted to prove something to my father about that war, and to a lot of people who were hawks on the war, a lot of people who believed in that war. A lot of them had been soldiers themselves, so I took it from the soldier's point of view. If I had simply written a fictional piece, if I had made up Mark and his wife, maybe his girlfriend, they could always say, well, that's out of your imagination, [those are] the feverish imaginings of a young playwright. I wanted to say: this leading character lived through it. You may or may not believe him, but this is what he told me. Just deal with what he says he lived through, and then let's talk. But don't tell me I made it up, because I didn't.

Now I chose, out of hundreds of hours [of conversation], to show these particular stories, and I chose to give this particular point of view. There's no such thing as an objective documentary. It's got to be subjective. These are some of the most personal pieces I can imagine ever writing. But it's authentic speech. [These are] authentic, lived stories.

AG: Personal in what way? Where are you in *Still Life*?

EM: I'm every character in *Still Life*. The whole piece comes out of me. I needed to answer particular people about Vietnam, and I put together a piece from real life and I shook a lot of people up because of that. I shook up the people I wanted to shake up.

AG: And yourself?

EM: That one was absolutely traumatic to write. To work on. When I gathered that material I was so shattered by it I couldn't touch it for months. I was scared of knowing what I had learned, I was frightened of the responsibility I had. I was scared of what it did to me personally. It made me physically ill. Having gone through what I went through with them, and after Mark had confessed to me what he did [in Vietnam], I was absolutely shattered. So going back to this material was painful, and it took a great deal out of me to begin to shape the piece. Perhaps that's why it has power. There's a lot of blood on the floor, from all three real-life participants and myself. I didn't ask them to go through more in the telling than I did in the writing.

AG: You say that people come to you with projects. What kind of a chord does a project have to strike for you to take it up?

EM: Each project takes so much out of me that it really has to go very, very deep for me. It's got to be a story or a set of characters that I cannot shake off, that I'll wake up thinking about or arguing with in my mind and heart.

AG: One of the things I find remarkable about your writing is that you dramatize so many perspectives among the various characters.

EM: How do I do that? I guess when a huge public event happens, and it's traumatic, which is the basis of *Greensboro*, of *Execution*, [there is] a huge spectrum of response to it. I'm of different points of view. I'm always interested in getting lots of viewpoints, because by doing that, you might get close to what's really going on. If you're listening to the Klan talk about what happened at Greensboro on November 3rd, and you're [also] talking to the Communists and the lawyers, you might get a better idea of why and how the event occurred. There's usually not a simple answer to any of the questions I raise, and hopefully the questions raise more questions. You keep peeling the onion back until you begin to get to more and more of the heart of it. That's my hope.

AG: The multiplicity of perspectives is a signature of contemporary life, not to mention postmodern theater

EM: I like having a lot of images at once, having things overlap, things happening simultaneously. When I was in South Africa [in 1997] people were on cell phones, people listened to the radio, there was a TV going, [all while] you were talking to somebody at lunch. That is the modern experience of things. I think we can take in a whole lot more on stage than just the single voice. Sometimes that's all you want, but there are times when you want a lot of information coming at you, a lot of emotion, a lot of different kinds of people. And you can take it all in.

It's a complicated event. Theater is based on time; you have a finite amount of time to get your story across. And if you take the complicated stories that I like to take, it's a question of how you can get the complexity that each one demands crammed into that amount of time.

AG: The way time functions in your plays

EM: It's a huge question in how I work.

AG: Even though the events take place over months or years, the viewer has the sense of it all happening at once.

EM: That's right. There you go. It's really hard to do.

AG: What is the process? Do you collect information first? How do you decide whom to talk to?

EM: *Execution* was a good example of that. *Execution* started out with the Eureka Theater, [in San Francisco]. Oscar Eustis, who was dramaturge at the Eureka at the time, set up interviews for me. I wanted to meet with [the George] Moscone people and Harvey Milk people and Dan White people. I started with those, and then somebody might put me on to Harvey's best friend 10 years ago, who can tell what Harvey was like when he was getting into office. A lot of that information informs the piece even though it isn't in the piece. The more I pared it down, the more I could tell the story of the trial. And I used the Cop and Sister Boom Boom as the two extreme viewpoints.

I went to a cop bar one night to meet with a man, who, somebody had told me, was a real [homosexual] hater. He's the one who says, "The city is stinkin' with degenerates-." At that point in my life, I was hugely pregnant. He was talking to a pregnant woman, [so] he felt it was his duty to tell me he was going to protect women, tell me what the problems were with homosexuals. To walk through the Castro [district] very pregnant, I got a lot of very interesting stories from people: gay men who wanted to meet me, who wanted to be me, who wanted to kill me, who were revolted looking at me. It was a very "fertile" time.

I also have “the look.” I don’t have it much anymore, but when I was younger I used to go on a train ride or a plane ride, and by the end of the trip, the person sitting next to me had told me his entire life story, without my asking — often without my wanting to hear.

AG: How did you arrive at that illusion of simultaneity?

EM: I don’t know. I hear lots of voices at once in my head, often. That’s true in *Still Life*, too. They’re answering each other even if they’re not directly talking to each other. That happened in court [in San Francisco], where these people who were not allowed into the court had to jump up and say, ‘but but but but.’ That’s the chorus of uncalled witnesses [in *Execution of Justice*]. So they had to speak. So you have real time and court time, and you have out of real time, which is the chorus. Now why? I don’t know why. I just felt it had to be there. I heard them in my mind. I think that happens to people a lot more than they’ll admit to. While we’re talking now, there’s probably stuff going through your head, things that you’ve heard I’ve said, things that I’ve said to you — you can be listening to me and other things can be going through your head. I do the same thing when I write. I write it all down. It’s writing down what I say plus the interior monologues sometimes of what you’re saying.

AG: I have this image of you surrounded by paper.

EM: Oh that’s also true. Clippings, shards of paper. In the old days, I didn’t write at a computer obviously, I was like an old-fashioned film editor. I’d paste up different lines and speeches on the wall; it was like [being a] collage artist or a filmmaker. I still think that way. Sometimes I even write that way. I’ll cut and scotch tape and mold a piece. It’s difficult. I like to handle it in my hands.

I’m very upset usually when I’m working, so there’s an emotional side. Then there’s the craft side to all of it, when I’m shaping and honing something, [when I’m] the play wright, w-r-i-g-h-t. You learn how a piece is constructed, and what time is in the theater, what you want a section to accomplish, both emotionally and [in terms of] furthering the plot or the story, or whatever you are working on shaping.

AG: Are you a rewriter?

EM: Oh, God, constantly. I rewrite until opening night. I think it’s because I was a musician as well, and I’m very aural. I have to hear a piece to know it’s alive. It may look great on the page but it may not come off the page. I can work like mad and think, gosh, I think I’ve got it, and I’ll hear it, and huge pieces will lie inert for

me. And not because the actors aren't doing their job. I can write very quickly. I can shift and change and edit very quickly, if I can hear what's needed. What I need are actors. I love actors. Me as a writer working with actors, I can really go far.

AG: Have you directed *Greensboro* anywhere?

EM: No. And that's why I'm not sure the piece is finished. I'm quite sure it's not finished. I feel like I haven't got my hands on it the right way.

AG: What do you think it needs?

EM: I'm not sure whether to keep the interviewer or not. I still like her, so I sort of want to. But I think she may need more of a pay off. I was not pleased with the production. I was pleased with it before it went upstairs [to the main stage], before it was teched, but I thought that all of that technical design got in the way of the piece. So maybe it's finished. It really worked in the [rehearsal] room.

AG: Worked in what sense?

EM: It got the story across, I understood everyone's point of view, and I got blown away and upset and was deeply moved. The strands all came together for me.

AG: There's a lot more exposition in that play it seems, than in others you've written

EM: It's so complicated a story. I'm not sure the exposition works actually. I'm not sure how much is needed. In fact, everyone was really pushing me to put more exposition in, and that's what I did. I'm not positive they were right. And I think it shifted the balance of the interview, too.

I wrote [the play] differently than it was expressed on the stage. Like the first song, to me, was a hot spiritual, and had a lot to do with bridging the audience and the stage, and being all part of this event that made us need to remember. [In the production at McCarter], you got a rather alienated, cold look at those people while he's singing that song. Which was a choice, but wasn't what I had in mind. So then you had to get people engaged [during] the next beat. You know what I mean? I thought we were always a step behind where I had written. But then there were people who adored that production, so maybe I'm just being a persnickety playwright. Kids loved it. It was a very hip production for teenagers, a kick-ass kind of show.

AG: Are you writing political theater? Is that a dirty question?

EM: No. The poets and playwrights I most admire — Athol Fugard, Henrik Ibsen — were all called political writers, and they each said, well, you know, I write about the human heart and the human soul. What do you mean political theater?

AG: Political theater in its purest definition probably wants to change people's political attitudes.

EM: I want to give people stories they haven't heard before and information that they didn't know about before. I'd like to be challenging to a set of already held beliefs. A [politically] conservative friend of mine said that [*Greensboro*] was the most challenging theater, so intellectually stimulating that it made him want to come to the theater again. Watching the play gave him a real shudder, because he realized that people like Newt Gingrich and the right wing of his party, which is the Republican Party, were closer to a David Duke than he was comfortable with, and it scared him and made him question his affiliation. That's what I mean about challenging people's points of view.

AG: In some sense *Execution* and *Greensboro* are more outrightly political plays because of the events that generated them.

EM: You could say the same thing about *Still Life* and the Vietnam War. But what you've got is an intimate look at three people. Somebody might say, well, that's not political because it's so personal. You know? Well, why not? Does the balance of private/public have to be more public to be a political piece? That's why I can't answer the question. What fascinates me are people going through [political] events that have huge personal ramifications. The new piece, *Meshugah*, is about the survivors of the Nazi camps and the choices they had to make in order to survive. Are we allowed to judge what people do to survive in a wartime situation? What are the ethical and moral issues that the survivor has to deal with? Some people might have looked at her situation and [said,] better she should have died. Others might say, well, I'm not going to judge her, because I'm glad that she wanted to live that badly. There are no answers in this play, but there are a zillion questions that I think have resonance, not just for this particular person and time in history. It's going on in South Africa right now, it's going on in the streets of America. Now is that a political play? I don't know the answer to that. I know that it's a play with huge moral and ethical questions. I know it's a play that deals with the politics of fascism, and good and evil, and oppression. It's also a love story. I don't know the answer.

AG: The subjects of your plays are groups or characters who are among the oppressed on our world horizon: Women, Jews, African Americans, Gay Men.

EM: Absolutely. No question about it. And all [the plays are] dealing with trauma of some kind, or some kind of traumatic event. Mostly I think my plays deal with the question, 'How does the human being, and how does this society, deal with traumatic events, whether war or assassination or rape or abuse?' One of my friends, who studies the brain, says that *Still Life* is to her the model for trauma, that the piece actually works the way traumatic memory works. Each [character in *Still Life*] has a traumatic memory of their event, and [I made it] my trauma, learning about their traumatic events. And how [the play] is constructed is how the brain works when it deals with trauma-jumping, putting things together that don't want to go together. A putting together, but in the wrong order. A lot of political plays are agit prop. I think there's a place for it, but I don't write it. I hope I don't write it.

AG: Why?

EM: Because I'm not writing a piece as agitation propaganda, I'm not writing it to get people going on a certain event, like *Waiting for Lefty's* strike. I'm not doing that. I'm actually asking a lot of hopefully complex questions about what it is to be alive now in this society.

AG: The critic David Savran stated in an essay that you write about relationships between parents and children in the same way that Arthur Miller writes about the relationships between fathers and sons. What do we hand down from fathers to sons, what do we hand down from one generation to another.

EM: Oh my God, did he really say that? That's what *Meshugah* is about totally. The Isaac Bashevis Singer character and the woman, Miriam, are just married, and she wants to know when they're going to have children, which he promised they would, until he found out what she had done. And he says, 'no, there'll be no children, and she says why, and he says, because what you know must not be passed down. We have to be like mules. The last of a generation.' And that's the last line.

AG: The play is called *Meshugah*?

EM: [Yiddish for] crazy. In the 1980s, Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote [chapters of a novel] that were serialized in the [Jewish Daily] *Forward*. He never had a chance to edit it before he died and make it a real book, so it's kind of a mess, and I've

made it into a play and reshaped it. [The play] is an adaptation, it's not a documentary. The basis for Singer's fiction is the stories that were told to him. He used to go to lunch, and someone would tell him their story, and then he would write that as a short story. That's how he worked. The material is so raw, you can still see the seams, so in a lot of ways, it's a continuation of a documentary work, because of that. But the raw material is a novel.

AG: Your plays seem to me to be about personal moral consciousness, which by extension becomes America's, or society's, moral consciousness.

EM: That's absolutely accurate.

AG: But what is moral consciousness?

EM: What's just and unjust. In *Meshugah*, this woman survived [by being a] whore. The Singer character can kind of deal with that — it takes him a while, but he can get past that. She whored with Nazis. Not so easy to swallow, but that's how she lived. But by the end of the piece, he comes to Israel with her, and it's revealed to him by a survivor of the camp that she had been an accomplice. She had been chosen to walk around with a whip and move people to the gas chamber. She was a Kapo. He realizes he loves her. He realizes he didn't go through the camp — he won't judge her, he can't judge her. It's in the past, and he has to love her and go on. But he can't have children. He can't get past that.

My mother read this and was furious that he married her. I was really surprised. I said, 'What do you mean, mom? She wanted to live.' [My mother] said, 'Better she should have died.' I was amazed. One of the rabbis that I talked with for help on the piece said he had a very hard time with the play. At a time when anti-Semitism is rising again in the United States, what with white supremacists, Jewish children being shot at — you don't show that there were Jewish women who were whores. He didn't like the licentiousness of the male character, he didn't like the loose and easy way of the Warsaw intelligentsia. They weren't God-fearing.

There [have been] a lot of wonderful reactions. What is right and what is wrong? What can you abide and what can you not abide? My mother's response blew my mind: 'better she should have died.' That there's a line beyond which morally, ethically, you cannot go. Oh yeah, I'm always dealing with questions of moral consciousness.

AG: How would you relate *Meshugah* to your earlier plays, then?

EM: It's like coming full circle. Because if you say that *Annulla* is my first

play, this is the same territory. Jewish refugee, trying to live her life.

AG: And again, a moral question at its center.

EM: They're the same question really. How did you survive? What did you do? Could I have done it? At what point is it better to be dead?

AG: Did you wrestle with how faithful you had to be to the novel?

EM: Absolutely. But Singer is such a magnificent story-teller, that I strived to stay within the bounds of his story-telling and make that work theatrically. Which meant I might have to write, or change things around, but stay true to his intention. That's hard, but it's a lot like my other works. I never distorted Mark in *Still Life*, I always helped the words and the language say what he wanted to say.

AG: In the novel, there is no scene showing Miriam in the concentration camp. Would you have considered it a breach of honesty to write such a scene for the play?

EM: No, but I cannot think of a Singer work where he does that. In any of his novels, with all those refugees, all those survivors of camps, you never see a camp scene. I have a gut feeling why: there's no way to dramatize it. He writes about how they drink their coffee now, how they eat their soup now. How they go on. He's very Chekhovian that way. He doesn't suddenly go off to past events and dramatize them. He stays in the present, with the tiny moments that reveal the infinite variety of the human soul. That's what I love about both Singer and Chekhov. That's what is both heartbreaking and humorous.

AG: Is Singer or Chekhov a moralist as a playwright?

EM: No. They're both highly moral people. They have a sense of what's right and wrong. But I don't think either would begin to say they have the answer, or even an answer.

AG: Should a playwright be a moralist?

EM: I don't think so, because then you're talking about propaganda. The great writers keep unearthing the questions. The more you know, the less you know. Both Singer and Chekhov were anti anyone who thought they had the answer. They were anti-fascist.

AG: Violence in your plays seems to be male.

EM: That's true.

AG: It's not that women are not strong.

EM: They are very strong. They are also capable of violence.

AG: But the women are victims, except perhaps for the Delany sisters, who, whatever their life experience, never believed they were victims.

EM: Right, although they knew that they had a lot of prejudice against them for being women, and black women, so they knew about the barriers.

AG: What has it meant to be a woman writing in the theater?

EM: It's got so many facets to it. Are there fewer opportunities [for women] who have something to say? Yes. Are there fewer opportunities for anyone who has something to say? Yes. For women, more so. I don't know how to talk about it.

AG: Did being a woman and wanting to write plays impede your career, not figure at all, help you?

EM: From a career level, I certainly think it hurt. I [once] called a colleague at a major theater, a director, who said, 'Oh, Emily, it's so great to hear from you, your name comes up all the time.'

'Oh, really? For what?'

'Well, you know, whenever we bring up who are the major women directors in this country, your name is always number one.'

And I said, 'Oh, how sweet. Listen, when you're talking about directors and my name comes up, call me.'

I thought that was long over. But it's not long over. That's one of the reasons I had to take over my own theater, because I was just sick of the gender war. I'm so sick of it. I don't write plays necessarily about boys and girls falling in love, and I don't write comedies, and I don't write plays that necessarily are about the state of male and female relationships. But because I will bring up tough issues and problems, and deal with them hopefully on a rigorous intellectual level and a tough level and on a level that isn't always fun to watch — and a lot of my plays are more on the instructional side than entertaining, though I try to get the entertainment there as well — I think I come under a lot of attack. My male colleagues who do similar plays come under less attack, because they're not as

threatening.

AG: Are you objecting to the term female director, woman director, woman playwright?

EM: Of course I am.

AG: Why?

EM: Because I'm a director. I can direct anything that hits me on a gut level.

AG: There's something ironic here. At one point women in the theater were asking to be recognized because we were being left out, and now having been recognized as women directors, playwrights, and designers, we don't want that. Has there been a ghettoizing?

EM: Absolutely.

AG: This is not a contradiction?

EM: No. At a certain point I want people to say, Emily Mann wrote the play, Emily Mann directed the play, Joanne Akalaitis directed the play. Of course I'm female. That's part of who I am. One would never deny any of this, in fact it's a very exciting, informing part of who one is — you bring your entire soul and personage to what you write and direct. As an artist, you bring your whole self, so of course I bring that I am a woman to the work. Can't leave it behind. Don't want to leave it behind. But what it means to be female for me isn't necessarily what it [means] to be female for anyone else. And at some point haven't we earned the right to be the unique artist that we are without the rubric first of female playwright, female director, black musician, black composer, black director. I think we've come to that point.

AG: What does it mean to be a woman and a director, a woman and a playwright?

EM: As a woman and an artistic director, it has come to my attention that many of the plays on the [McCarter] stage are by or about women, whether it's *Marivaux* or the *Delany Sisters* or *The Old Settler* or *The Mai* or *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Gee. There are a lot of women. I also hadn't noticed that most of the staff for the theatre are female. They were simply the best people for the job. And now I'm noticing it.

So I know that this has to do with my being a woman. One works from the gut, and it's more than likely that plays by or about women are going to affect me. Which is common sense. I write from my life experience, and I make decisions from that. I also find that when I direct there is a sensibility consistent throughout the plays, even though [the works] may be two hundred years apart. I feel a great link to Lorca and I feel a great link to Tennessee Williams.

I don't have a real answer for you. I have this set answer that I give the press, and I'm not giving you that set answer. So I'm groping here a bit.

AG: Are you a feminist? Is that a bad word now?

EM: These labels are so hard. Of course I am. My definition of feminism is that it is a form of humanism, it simply says that men and women are equal. That's all it means to me, so how can a civilized human being not be a feminist, male or female? So of course I'm a feminist, and I don't think it's a dirty word, and I teach my students at Princeton [University] that feminism is something to be proud of and it's an important movement to be a part of. I wouldn't be sitting here without it.

AG: I can see someone saying that your plays are not typically women's plays.

EM: There are radical feminists who say I am not a feminist. I am not a politically correct person, that is for sure. I almost take it as a red flag, that sort of political line. I will try to disrupt and challenge.

AG: Women should be able to write ...

EM: Anything.

AG: But are there women's points of view?

EM: I go back and forth on this. There are individual points of view, and certainly women's experience in this society is almost by definition different than men's. So that will be reflected in honest writing and in honest creation of any kind on stage. On a certain level, I feel — and I can only speak for myself — that there are certain stories that haven't been heard, and often those are women's stories. And they interest me a lot to get them out. There are a lot of men who write brilliantly about women, so I don't think it takes a woman to write a woman's story. But I would say I feel often a need to get those stories out. But sometimes I simply have to write about the brutes, maybe because I know what it is to be brutalized on a certain level.

AG: Has your writing as a woman changed?

EM: I think I've changed. I've grown hopefully. I write a lot more out of love now than out of anger. I'm not trying to purge pain or trauma, but [I have] a real curiosity to understand myself and others.

There's no question in my mind that I am a feminist. I take for granted that one can do a feminist analysis of all my work.

For instance, I think putting both *Annulla* and *Having Our Say* into the kitchen is obvious feminist aesthetics. To me the kitchen, and watching older women cook food, is where I learned some of the most important truths of life, and where most people, male and female, used to go and put their little elbows up on the formica table and smell all the food and be in a very close and secure place and learn about the world. They might hear terrible things. They might hear about lynchings and concentration camps, and they might hear also about how to pick a good man — or learn about the family history, or how to make chicken soup. Some of the most profound wisdoms came from older women in my life, in the kitchen. I find that you can talk about the horrors of life, and in domestic situations, people will listen. Much more than if you put that in a more austere setting where people put up their guard. People's guard comes right down in the kitchen. Putting [those plays] in a kitchen was a very conscious choice. Now you can look at that from a feminist perspective obviously.

But also, I can talk about politics. Why should that be the province of men? I'm going to ask questions about war. Women have to deal with war all the time. So what I write might deal not just with the warrior, but with what [war] does to our society, what it does to how we see men, how we've been programmed to think about the very sexy man in uniform, that that's what we're supposed to want — that man who protects us and kills for us. Women can also talk about the other side. What is war like for the gentle man, the man with the intellect and the soul and the music. All these questions are feminist questions.

It's a really aggressive act to say, I get to talk about war, I get to talk about the justice system, I get to talk about the holocaust, I get to talk about whatever the hell I please. It is not a male province. It has to do with me. I'm part of the society, I'm part of what the justice system is about, I'm part of the decisions about war. I choose to take part in that discussion. I think women have been kept out of a lot of things. And if you say that women playwrights should be writing domestic drama, and should be telling the truth and secrets only of the private, and only of the domestic, I don't think I can back that. That's one thing women might do really really well; women have a way into the private, the domestic, that men might not have. But we also have a way into the sphere of the intellect and politics and the public issues that have often been decided by men.

AG: How did you get to *Having Our Say*?

EM: It's a kind of nice story. My sister, Carol, is a literary agent, and she gave the book to me just before it was published and said you are going to love this. And I read it and loved it and I didn't think about it again.

Then my friend Judy James was staying at my house, and I gave [the book] to her and said you're going to love this, and she looked at it, looked at the cover, turned it over, looked at the blurbs on the back and said, 'We have to do this book.' And I said, 'Pardon me, do this book? What does that mean?' And she said, 'You and Camille [Cosby] and I are going to do this book. I don't know if it's a movie or a play, I don't know if it's both. You're going to write it, maybe you'll direct it, I'm going to produce. This is it.'

She called my sister, and within about four hours she found out how to get the rights. Called up Camille, who had just come home from Europe, who said, 'Judy, I just read this great book,' and Judy said, 'I bet it was *Having Our Say*. You and Emily and I have to do this.' And Camille said okay.

AG: Did you want to do the play the way the book was written? The told-to-format?

EM: Well, I went through a lot of ideas on how to make this a play. First of all, I said, look, I've got a theater, let's not go through the whole Hollywood thing; we don't want them to tell us what to do. Why don't we just have some control over this and do it our own way, and I'll put it on.

I thought I could craft an amazing piece out of this. Judy said it should be acted with an ensemble of 10, but the (image) came into my mind of a white man with a beard and a squirrel gun, and that filled me with dread. I said, I think it should be told, and should be a tour-de-force performance piece for two mature black actors. And Camille went, 'Oh, yes.' And Judy said, 'Ooh, I don't know, how are you going to sustain that? This should be a Broadway play, and that can't be a Broadway play.' And I said, 'Well, I don't know if it is a Broadway play or not, but I really think this is the way it should go, we should go back to just plain old-fashioned story telling. That's one of the things I do well. Let me just try and see if it can sustain a full-length evening with these two women. I did it with one woman, in *Annulla*, I can do it better now.'

So that's how I started. Then Mary Alice and Gloria Foster read us bits and pieces of the book, read what could and couldn't translate into spoken speech, what was overwritten and underwritten, and [I] began to look at how to get these stories out there. I got [the] structure, and I thought, you know, shouldn't there be a relationship going with the audience? First it's rather formal, and they don't like us, and then they invite us in.

Before I'd written it, we'd put it into the season [at McCarter], and I realized our dress rehearsal would be on their father's birthday, which is the day they make the birthday meal. I thought: They're going to be cooking. It just struck me, like it had done with *Annulla*, that they should go into the kitchen. They would invite the audience in, to be there while they were cooking the meal. So that was my little event. It's such great activity, cooking. It keeps things going. Because it takes a lot of energy to cook; a lot of movement, a lot of action. So I built it around how long it takes to cook.

AG: And then you selected the photographs? From the sisters' collection?

EM: Their collection, plus Wendall Harrington, the projections designer, did a lot of research and found a lot of other things, and then of course they put in the picture of my father and John Hope.

AG: In 1995 you announced that you suffered from multiple sclerosis. Do you want to talk about that?

EM: Well, I'm feeling so good. I have this brilliant doctor, named Rene. Camille's greatest gift to me was getting me to this woman in L.A. She came to Utah — to Sundance — with me. When I arrived I needed help walking three steps, and when she left I was walking half a mile, unassisted. It's astounding. What can I say. I'm feeling blessed to have had her.

I've learned a lot. When I first met Rene, she said to me, 'Those who see disease as opportunity rather than a catastrophe get well.' I wanted to literally sock her in the mouth. Thanks a lot. Great opportunity. But by the end of my first two weeks of working with her, I totally understood what she meant. It's been an incredible journey. I've written more, directed more, accomplished more since I got ill, because I prioritize. What is important, what is not. I don't do what is not. Even if it's important, but not of primary importance, I do not do it.

AG: Has any of that seeped into your writing?

EM: I think it has.

AG: Why the Bashevis Singer play?

EM: My son got barmitzvahed in the the summer of 1996, and I was the one parent, and there was no male there to help me. Talk about feminist issues. I got very hip to the fact that I was an illiterate in my own temple. I was very typical of my generation. I came in and talked to the cantor and actually burst into tears,

because I didn't know how, I hadn't been taught. In fact I'd been taught not to pray, not to learn Hebrew.

Here I was alone, my son wanted to be barmitzvahed, and I had to learn a lot to help him do it. So I studied, and then started to read my father's favorite author, who was I.B. Singer. All of the culture started to seep in. I've been very hungry for all of this. I was very ill last summer, and I just stacked up about eight novels and four books of short stories and I read them all.

And by the end I realized I had to do something with this and the first one I read, *Meshugah*, was the one that kept on coming back to me. And I realized, well, I'll just adapt the book, rather than write a piece from it. I love it too much. I'm going to use it as the basis. And that's how I did it.

It just came out of me. It's awful to compare it to projectile vomiting, but that's what it was like. I wrote it in six weeks. I sat down at the typewriter and came out with a play. And structurally I haven't changed that very much. It was just falling out of me. I never worked that fast. It was thrilling. It just had to come out.

It brought a lot of things together. I felt like I was home, you know? I feel incredible kinship with that man. One of my biggest regrets is that I didn't meet him. I had two opportunities and missed them.

AG: I read a profile of Singer in *The New Yorker* a long time ago. There was a side to him I hadn't known about.

EM: Oh, yeah. He was a womanizer, he was really tough to deal with. Very selfish. But you know — impossible Jewish men — I know them, I like them. I'm very drawn to them. I think we would have gotten on.

This interview will be included in *Women Who Write Plays: Interviews With Contemporary American Dramatists*, by Alexis Greene, forthcoming in Fall 2000, from Smith & Kraus.

