Interview with Karen Sunde
Jim Ball
2/14/11

KS: Yeah, yeah you were talking about theatre and spiritual spaces –UN as a – but it ties exactly into something I may have written better, in fact I may have something of it on my website of an idea I have that theatre exists for the community to celebrate itself, learn itself and celebrate itself, and that if you don't have all the elements you don't have theatre, you don't have it, and if that isn't its purpose, it has no purpose. It's about community its about whoever comes in that door. From wherever, what age what ethnicity, what background, what anything, they become one in that space, in the process of theatrical performance going on. If it's working.

JB: Absolutely. Absolutely. It produces community in these ways then?

KS: Yeah, yeah, because there's that energy you talk about if you're a performer. That energy that simply goes from you with the people you're working with, through the piece you're working on – it's usually a text, though not always – goes through that to deliver to the audience. The audience has their own reaction as individuals, but that inevitably – ask any comic actor – inevitably takes on its own unique character for that performance, and its part of the amalgam of the people that are there. It's their spirits working all – responding.

JB: Together, yeah.

KS: Responding together, yeah, and as an actor you take that in, you've got that third eye that's constantly calculating where you are with that audience and adjusting what you're doing to get them – get into a better relationship with them, so they're getting the material more.

JB: Mmmhmm. You said first though that it's a way for a community to learn itself, and I wonder if you can elaborate on that.

KS: I use the word celebrate, ultimately, because I think that's the end place of any given performance, you hope that community is having a celebratory feeling about itself. And that can have to do simply with understanding finally, some dilemmas, understanding the humanity of others… So when I say learning, we learn that, too. Within that process you're learning about whatever's being presented, and that's hopefully giving you insights about you, and the guy next to you, and the guy next to them.

JB: I agree 100%.

KS: So to me that's what theatre is for.

JB: Absolutely. Absolutely. And theatre – do you think theatre is uniquely positioned amongst the arts to do this perhaps?

KS: Well it does it with language, which is of course what makes it different. I think that music and dance – any, you know, visual arts certainly have the same elements and can have the same response. What theatre does, I suppose, is articulate specific ideas. You get the language, and it's the job of the playwright to find out how to… couch those ideas so that they deliver to a whole audience. [Waiter arrives with beverages] Whoever that audience is. The best way to get those ideas.

JB: That's excellent.

KS: But that's just off the top of my head.

JB: No that dovetails very nicely with not only my deeply held beliefs about theatre but also a lot of the things I was seeing in *In a Kingdom by the Sea*. And at a certain point I want to talk more about learning, and the sort of scenes of learning that are both in the play and also to me seem constitutive of peacekeeping operations in a different way. So I wonder if we can take a step back and talk about the play specifically, I realize it's been a few years since you wrote the play.

KS: A few.

JB: [Laughter]

KS: I began this research 22 years ago. [Laughs]

JB: Great, well why don't we start there, can you sort of tell me the story-

KS: You can't even conceive of 22 years

JB: [Laughs] Oh yes I can, I can remember where I was in 1990, or 1989, absolutely, absolutely, I had just moved or I was just about to move back to the states from Malaysia, as a young child –

KS: I was gonna say, you must have been small.

JB: But yeah so I wonder if you could maybe start there and talk about how the research began, how you got into the project and just sort of narrate to me, sort of the whole arc of it?

[0:05:00]

KS: Well oddly, I was working full-time off-Broadway as an actor, and other things having to do with the theatre company that I was an associate director of. In 1985, yeah, yeah, 1985 I think was the 40th anniversary of the UN.

JB: Absolutely.

KS: Now I noticed this – I mean there was some kind of symposium at Columbia having to do with it, and I don't know how – I suppose the reason I was drawn by that is that, now that I trace back, ever since I was thirteen years old in the Midwest, Minnesota, southern Minnesota then, I had thought about one world. We had little debate contests and there was one that the American legion, had an essay contest: "One World: Yes or No?" And I imagined that this was a spin-off from the whole idea of the United Nations.

JB: Sure.

KS: So because I remember that, I remember how I won that contest, and how adamant – it seems like everything- I've written all kinds of things. All kinds of stuff. And I have of course performed in many kinds of stuff. But if I look back at those things I've chosen to do they all seem to have this core of cross-cultural interest in people coming together from different places and cultures. Even when I say write about women and men, there's that, or artists and other societies, there's plays like that. That seems to have driven me.

JB: Absolutely.

KS: '85 came, the 40th anniversary, and I went to this Columbia symposium partly because I had been so distressed by the US's, at best indifference about the UN. In general people here had a very negative attitude.

JB: Very often still do.

KS: Yeah, they certainly did then, and there was just so much criticism. And yet here in my baby-heart had been this feeling that this was such a good thing, so I conceived an ambition at that point, '85, I'm going to write about this. I'm going to find a way to write about the UN that can deliver to Americans, so that they get a sense of the values, of the value of the institution, really. That's my high-minded goal. So it began there, and by, I suppose it was '88 I had time to turn to this, really say now I'm going to do it. And it must have been sometime that winter that I got myself into a circumstance where I was able to go in and research at the UN here in New York.
JB: In Turtle Bay.
KS: Yeah. And I would have to go back in my notes to be sure what happened first, but I think that I had a friend who knew someone working there who was able to get me one of these visitor's visas, or whatever for a certain period of time. But at the same time I

decided, okay what I'm going to write about, I'm going to write about the UN, there's all these development programs, and how am I best going to make dramas? Because my work was making dramas, making theater. And I zeroed pretty quickly on peacekeeping. To say, ok I'm going to find exciting stories there. It's going to have action, adventure, and I should be able to fashion something that will appeal to a general audience. Cause it's always me, I always want to get as many people into the room and appeal to as many people as possible, even though I come from a kind of classical background, I want to reach the audience. So I figured ok, peacekeeping should give me something. Maybe it was when was the Bosnian stuff going on?

JB: That came later, that started in the, '89, '90, '91. The big years of UN peacekeeping in Bosnia were '92 – '93.

[9:39]

KS: Ok, well then it wasn't that – but something made me think I'm going to be able to find heroes here, action heroes. So I went to – and in order to start I tried to get an appointment and succeeded with Brian Urquhart.

JB: Yep, I'm familiar with his work.

KS: Mr. Peacekeeping. So he was at the Ford Foundation, and I went up to meet him and to talk to him about what I wanted to do. And all the way through I found people in general very interested that somebody was interested, somebody might, an artist might want to write about them. Anyway, Brian said ok you should go to the military attaché, and that was a guy by the name of Dermot Hurley [ph] it was something strange about the way he spelled his name, I'll have to look it up. But he was the deputy military attaché. So he gave me entrée to talk to Dermot and he became my partner. So we'd have many meetings there and he'd provide me – we'd talk, he'd provide me with the Litani magazines – cause I started looking at UNIFIL – but also everything. Oh I can remember we had a couple meetings with Marrack Goulding, who was then the Under-Secretary for Special Political Affairs. I think we had lunch once, and then when I was about to make a trip to the Middle East, which I was to make – I'd get there myself, but once I was there they would take care of me in the different places I was going. But I remember coming up into Marrack's office – he called, wanted a meeting, and he said to me, "I'm sorry Miss. Sunde, we can't let you go into Lebanon." So obviously I'd been studying UNIFIL a lot, and thinking about focusing there, and suddenly I couldn't go to Lebanon, he said, because there'd been too many Americans kidnapped right at that period. And in fact, there had been this colonel, lieutenant colonel William Higgins. And there were down in the lobby, bulletin boards with pictures and articles and you know. And this was true of anything that was a traumatic event happening to UN personnel, or anything of interest I suppose. So he was pictured there, now that had happened in '88.

JB: Mmmhmm, I believe so February of ’88, I did – I was doing a lot of the reading of the historical as well. So that happened before you were –

KS: I suppose, again I’d have to track back and know whether that- but I can remember being at the UN and seeing these bulletin boards, but this was still Spring, because it was spring of ’89, March of ’89, that I planned the trip and he said, “I’m sorry we can’t let you go into Lebanon.” But I went, and I must have also been corresponding with the information officer, Timur Goksel, by that time because I can remember I wanted to, specifically to meet with him. As it turned out, he was not there at the time that I went, he was on vacation in Turkey.

JB: And that was the information officer of UNIFIL, the Sami character?

KS: Yes, UNIFIL, the Sami character. Okay, so I went, and, where, all the places. Landed in Tel Aviv, obviously, went to Jerusalem, UNTSO, is that the? It’s the headquarters in Jerusalem, they took me to the Golan Heights, there was a plan for me to go to Egypt that didn’t pan out in the end, turned out they didn’t have time, or there was some emergency, it couldn’t be arranged, so the Golan Heights, all around Jerusalem, and then I went to Cyprus. You mentioned being in Cyprus.

JB: Absolutely, I was in Cyprus on a family vacation, a friend of my father’s from back in the day was American ambassador to Cyprus in the late ‘90s. So we actually went, stayed at the ambassador’s residence for a week and got our own little peacekeeper led tour of the green line, of the demilitarized zone in Nicosia at one point.

KS: So you really came by this largely with family too, that’s interesting.

JB: In that part – It’s funny, you know at the time of course I was a junior in High School, I had no idea that I’d be getting a PhD someday in anything, so - but, it’s been a moment that I return to, and an experience that I return to as my research has progressed, for sure.

[15:00]

KS: I’ll tell you a secret about the play, the church I describe, the cathedral that’s been turned into a mosque, that Hogan describes, that was in, what, Nicosia, was on the Turkish side when I went there.

JB: Interesting.

KS: Yeah, heh, it was a powerful experience. And that was pretty much, no doubt I made it more elaborate than it was, but it was a profound experience to realize this layering. So I was around Jerusalem, and well went to Cyprus. And I think someone was going to help me, get into – seems like I went right up to the border, yeah I did, went right up to the

border of Lebanon, with Lebanon, and did not get across. So I have not actually gotten there.

JB: Well, needless to say, neither have I, yet I'm writing about it too. [laughs]

KS: Well you have, you know, the imagination, the theatrical imagination, but, but, so this was all, this was in the Spring, I then began corresponding with, got some actual soldiers from – I should say too, at the Golan and around there they would take me out, and they took me to some checkpoints and things like that, so I got to see how they were operating, and I was recording all the time. I learned long before then if you want the stuff you record it. [laughs] SO I was asking them all the time about how they did things and getting a sense of the mechanics of their patrols and all that. And then, where was I…

JB: You began corresponding…

KS: Oh corresponding, yeah, I got some soldiers that are in, who were with UNIFIL, and one in particular whom I named the character Thomas Bohanna, that's his name, he even, he'd draw me, by mail, this was all pen-pal stuff, later, and he took some pictures and sent them. So I did that, and that now was into the Summer. Now at the end of that Summer, August I believe, I had a commission to write for Actors Theatre of Louisville. They had read – I have this play about Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theatre, they loved this play – but they said, they were having a Russians in context festival, and they said, "Oh we love this, but we can't do this play because we have the real Moscow Art Theatre coming to the festival and they are bringing a full length play," but they said, "could you give us a one man play about Chekhov? To write that for us." And I said, "Ugh, I hate one person plays that's not a drama, that's a lecture." But I worked at it and I found the way to satisfy myself that it was a sort of a play, and when I went there for the first rehearsals, I arrived one day, and the next day was on the TV in the café where I had breakfast, was this video of Higgins, hanging. And he was a local boy. A Louisville boy. And so, when in conversations with Louisville, people, when they said to me, "What are you writing next?" I said, "well I want to write about peacekeeping, alright, the UN," and they said, "Well we'll give you some money to start." I went – had to go home to New York, I think I was there about a week to get rehearsals started, went back to New York, and a week later it took to hit me, duh, this was my play. I would look - wanting to have an American at the center of whatever I wrote because I figured that was the way to reach American audiences. Maybe unfortunately for me and the play, turns out this American at the center was not quite such a clear-cut hero as Louisville might like him to be. They didn't yet know – agree for sure – that that was him, because they didn't find the, hadn't found the body, until the next December after that. But there he was hanging, so it was a big big event. Anyway. So that's - it took that long, I was already on track to write something, I wanted to write works, maybe, plural about the UN, when I realized this should be my play.

[20:12]

So that's the beginning, that's where it began.

JB: Ok, wow, that's quite a genesis. And so then, then it-

KS: And as I believe I was already in touch with Timur.

JB: With uh-

KS: With Sami, because already, because I remember that I wanted to visit him. And this was before I realized – I knew about Higgins being kidnapped, of course, but before I had any idea that would be what I would be writing about.

JB: So that, at that point you began writing, did you still have a relationship with the UN at that point?

KS: Well, not – well I was, sure again, I'd have to track back and I'd see, but I'm sure that I kept on and would have been even more specifically honing toward this incident. So I had more specific things to find out about. And I, again I'll have to look back in notes to see what I actually did at that point, but I know that I would have intensified the stuff with Timur, and ultimately, after the play was written, eventually the guy who had been the actual ops officer read it and said he couldn't believe that I hadn't been in the place at the time because I had evidently managed to relay the incident largely as it did happen.

JB: Excellent. Well fantastic. So I suppose, I'm curious, you said you were able to talk with peacekeepers throughout, so I wonder if you can tell me just a bit more about the content of those conversations, and how you went about – to the extent you can remember-

KS: yeah I might have to-

JB: just collecting information from them.

KS: Well again, when I was there I was obviously coming from a general point of view, I just wanted to know "how does it work? What are you – How do you feel about it? What's the action like? What's it like when you are reporting something? The sequence of command?" I was just trying to absorb and learn what I could –

JB: as much as possible

KS: - about how – and I can remember once, I got a strong impression… You know I'm from the sixties, and although it's strong in my family, the military tradition is in my family, dad was in the Second World War, my uncle was a big – stayed in, and became major in the air force, became a prominent figure. So I had that back there, but then I went through the sixties where military stuff, anything having to do with armies was, got to be quite a black- negative, felt very negatively. And one of the things that struck me so strongly was admiration for the kind of people that were involved, the intellectual, cultural level of the soldiers. That I met, that I came into contact with. I think some of them were Finns, at one place. Again, if I go back to notes I'll remember specifically, who they were.

JB: Well we can follow up with email about specifics like that.

KS: Obviously I have lots of tapes.

JB: Oh sure, I mean to the extent to which you'd be willing to share any of that would be fantastic. Yeah, no I mean, a lot of that line, Sami has the line in the play where he talks about "Marines are trained for one thing and it ain't peace" you know, and that is a debate that sort of happens in peacekeeping these days, the degree to which peacekeeping should be delivered by people, professional soldiers in this way-

KS: It still does?

JB: Certainly.

KS: It seemed to they were really developing, and this is what I thought of value, really developing a culture of – and we've been involved in a lot of things since, just even the US, of situations in which we've become something other than soldiers, something other than fighting soldiers.

JB: and things that soldiers weren't doing soldiers are doing as well.

KS: And that's one of the evolutions that I thought was particularly potent and especially this character, cause he came into it,

JB: Absolutely with his own sort of cultural ideas

KS: Being this sort of Jimmy Cagney, whatever, this kind of bravado, American bravado, about the marines.

[25:06]

JB: Was that something that you saw, the American bravado, was that something people commented on over there?

KS: There actually weren't that many Americans involved.

JB: Sure, and there aren't.

KS: So this guy was unusual in that he got this command. And that's part of – I bring that up in the play and that's totally true, they're saying, "Why did this guy get this? Why did he want it?" and they say, he wanted it, they pushed him, and it was usually army, why was it a marine? How did it happen? I don't know altogether but I did get an insight. The Karen – Laurel/Karen, her name is Karen, she's real, so I was able to interview her in Louisville, and that gave me a lot of insight, cause she'd known him since high school, into the kind of guy.

JB: Fascinating.

KS: So I did that the second time I went to Louisville, when I went down for the performance. And I don't think, yep, they hadn't yet found the body, and so she's the one who said, "the toes."

JB: So she was the first to sort of know

KS: Well she at least, that's the, you know you get folklore from people, from any kind of witnesses, but she said that – when there was all the question about is that him it could be anybody it might not even be a person hanging there, she said she recognized his toes.

JB: Interesting, interesting, well I want to step back a bit before we get too deep into the play and ask a question about the terms of the production because I know that on the back of the published version and also on your website there are these quotes from the New York Observer that suggest that it was going to be produced at the UN and that they ultimately said "no, no, no, no" I wonder if you could tell me that story as well?

KS: Well the first stage readings were at the Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, so that's the first place it was staged and a woman came – was in the audience, a Lebanese-American, who was getting her PhD at Columbia, and she said, "this has to be seen in New York." She was especially moved by saying that she'd never seen three-dimensional Muslims, or middle-easterners period, on the stage in this country. So she wanted, so she began, she stopped what she was doing and started raising some money so she could do stage readings of the play here, and she arranged, I think we even rehearsed, I can remember looking at the Dag Hammarskjold library for this purpose then, suddenly – well as, in, Williams is the journalist who had written about it, there's an article in the UN Secretariat about the play, I can, if you haven't seen it, I can…

JB: No if you have a copy of that, or even I've had trouble trying to track down those articles, that the blurbs are pulled from.

KS: Well sure, I'm sure I have copies

JB: I'll email you later.

KS: Sure. So he, he found out about it then, which is odd because by then I'd been researching the Israeli-Palestinian play that's also set in the security zone –

JB: … Bride Came to Abraham…

KS: Yeah, yeah, and I met him and his then wife was a principle in UNDP, and I think it's through her that I met him, or maybe it's the other way around, anyhow he did the article and then when this happened, he made the political irony about it, and said "from somewhere high up came the word that it's too political." And that's what we've found since in dealing with the UN. Went through a long thing with Abraham, visiting both the Israeli consulate, would it be, and the Palestinian mission to the UN. Officials in both places have read it, we've done a special reading at the Israeli – but to get them both to agree that it can be performed at the UN seems to be next to impossible.

JB: Why do you think that is?

KS: well, because somebody always will have an objection. Now the Israeli counse-cultural attaché told us he was embarrassed, he says, "I'm reading this and if I were telling you what this is like I'd have to blue pencil, so that we can't say this, can't say that, can't say that." So that I mean, in the case of that play it's probably you can't say you took my land. And, we said, but this is a drama, this is a character's point of view, the character has to be able to articulate. But I mean, I suspect, when you ask me why, that it is that kind of thing, that if there's anything that might offend anybody it's not to be allowed officially on the stage of the UN. I'm sure lots of things happen without that but I think there's a principle that you have to get all parties to agree for something to happen, because that seemed to be what went on there. But with this play? I don't know, all I know is, it was on, and then it was not possible. So we had to quickly, we quickly got a couple other places, and one of them was the Ralph Bunche, CUNY graduate center, that was one place. Then we had another performance somewhere else that was a kind of a private place. Not a house, but it wasn't an official institution, public institution. So you want the observer article, and the….

[31:41]

JB: Anything you have that's easy to grasp on to, that's easy to, you know, for my researches, and part of the reason I was pushing this line so much for the moment was I am thinking about how and where theatre is allowed to appear in UN spaces, right? The sort of politics of presence and absence.

KS: So I say it probably has absolutely- neutral, inoffense- unoffensive…

JB: Can't reference actual specific conflicts, only broad – so they have a new post at the UN a cultural – I forget the title, a high level undersecretary who is just sort of doing PR and these types of engagements with the arts and so on, and so, but the folks that they've done projects with have been sort of the cast and crew of Battlestar Galactica or these other sorts of- if it's science fiction it can possibly have any sort of bearing on real conflict, right?

KS: Exactly, you're not pointing any fingers, nobody can….

JB: Well let's, um, you still have energy?

KS: Oh yeah!

JB: Good, cause I can talk for hours. So great, you were able to talk to those folks, so I have some- you brought up that it was the moment of seeing the televised image of Higgins, the hanging and so on, that sort of catalyzed the moment-

KS: Well this is odd, it seems serendipitous that I should already have all this in mind and be in Louisville. That was the thing, and then the Louisville theatre said they had an interest in it, in the next thing I'm writing. And indeed they did, and the dramaturg, Michael Dixon, wonderful guy, worked with me as I did it, critiques, and you keep writing and re-writing, and it came round to when it was ready, and he told me afterward it did not get performed there. And he said, we fought over this more than anything in our history, over whether to do it. And, I can't say altogether what, except that I got the strong response from a lot of theatre people, right after, major theatre people would say, "oh this is great, but I don't think my audience…" and it has obvious casting problems, only one female, and not necessarily a major role, and a lot of middle easterners. Imagine this is in the 1990, if you think it's a problem now, which it isn't so much now, since we've had so much more call for dramas with middle easterners, but then the idea of casting that in wherever, palo alto, or wherever…

JB: So let's actually talk about, you brought up the question of gender, which does appear in interesting ways throughout

KS: yeah, woooo.

JB: Seems like you have a lot to say already before I've even posed a question, so go ahead

KS: pose the question and I'll see…

JB: Well for me, what I'm interested in, the starting point would be I guess the place that Hogan's character seems convinced that women just don't get war, or something, he tells Sami at one point, and there are these very sort of essential notions of the masculinized space of peacekeeping that imagines that war is associated with men and masculinity and peace with women and femininity, and I was wondering I guess on the first hand whether these essential notions of gender came out of your experiences talking to peacekeepers or if there was something else in the character of Hogan that you were developing or something else entirely.

KS: Well, apart from the generalized observation that it does seem that men have made more war than women, but women haven't been in a position to, either, you could argue that, for sure, but the generalized idea that women, it's always the woman that wants the home to be safe, and protect that, and doesn't like the idea of any kind of warfare, l think that's probably a truism that I probably agree with. But initially, here, the way that he presents it, it has to do with him and her, and the fact that she objected to him going in the army, and I think that's probably unusual too. What's unusual in the 22 years past is how much the women have become equal players in the armed forces. Which, I've got another play that deals with that question in that, not again, by chance, it's just simply another wonderful American story that hadn't been told, and that's about the WASP

JB: I haven't seen that one.

KS: Well I just tell you as an aside, because it feeds into this, there were in World War II, there was a unit of women flyers created, Jacqueline Cochran was actually the source of it here, who flew every plane there was, who taught the men to fly the ones they were scared of, and- this wouldn't be such a surprise to your generation, but right up through adulthood in my generation there were bitter fights about whether you could let women fly planes, combat missions, we got into these last wars we've been in and it became- that obstacle was overcome, women proved to be very effective. At any rate, still at the time this was written you didn't find women so much coming to the fore, certainly not as combat…

JB: did gender come up at all when you were in conversations with peacekeepers or other things?

KS: No, I don't remember any of that, but you know it went without saying that there weren't any women around that I could recall. So it really wasn't an issue, because there was no reason to make it an issue I was trying to find out about the work they did, not

pushing it. The reason I respond so strongly when you said women is that I had such fights over whether there should be a woman in the play. People reading it early on, and I suppose this means in Louisville, would say, "what's she doing in there?" or other people, as I was developing, "why do you want a woman in here?" And I don't know why they said that but I can remember defending it ferociously because I said it's the way to understand the character, because I met this woman and she gave me his inside, from talking to her, and I believe that the character was very strongly influenced by this particular woman, therefore she's important.

JB: I can't imagine the play without her.

KS: You know, but I did at first, at first, they said "what do you want a woman here, this is a man's arena." So I was getting it more cause I was inserting a woman, which I would think anyway would give it an interesting foil, no matter what it would help to show the men to have a woman there.

[39:45]

JB: Yeah and thinking about Laurel, the other way that I had started to think, I re-read the play again yesterday, and was thinking again about gender in it, and thinking about questions of reproduction, and the way that it's on the one hand with Laurel, and with Todd, the son, on the one hand that it's not only literal biological reproduction I mean, but also the way that Todd ends up emulating and reproducing this form of life of his father, and his father figure, Hogan on the one hand, but then at other places you see that the conflict itself is a conflict that goes across generations where the culture within the peacekeeping operation and the culture outside it that its interacting with keeps reproducing itself in these ways. I don't know, this is a lot of just, I wasn't sure if that had been something you thought of when you were working through or if you had any comments.

KS: Fascinating, can you try to explain-

JB: try to elaborate, sure you know-

KS: How the culture reproduces itself

JB: Sure, there is one point at which I think it's Sami and Hajj are arguing about something and Sami has the line, and this is where that connection to gender comes in, has the line that 'the women in your villages want peace,' and Hajj responds to the effect that 'well the UN is here breeding spies in the village' and at the same time… Yeah it's complicated even for me at this point, I guess I'm not articulating it very well, but I guess that's because it's not fully formed, so, so thinking in terms as well then of how not only this sort of seemingly intractable conflicts where generation after generation reproduces

this feeling of animosity towards the other they are engaged in struggle with and then within the peacekeeping operations being a site where certain ideas of military culture are reproduced and disseminated and passed on, even Hogan going there is learning from Sami about how UNIFIL operates and continues in these ways, and we still have UNIFIL today after having so many generations of peacekeepers going through it, so yeah I don't have any sort of question that I'm arriving at, just this series of ideas that have been percolating in my mind recently, and I guess if you don't have a specific response we can move on, but I just, since we were on the subject of gender I bring it up.

KS: Yeah, yeah, and I'm not even sure that I yet understand what you mean except that you say it goes on, and the problems go on, and what I was so much focused on was the idea that someone, in this case Hogan, someone can come to see that there's another way of operating, can come to see and understand the usefulness of the, frankly, techniques developed by UN peacekeeping to change things, to alter the way people respond to each other in a way that benefits both sides. To me it was such a profound step forward, mankind's step forward, and it seems to me it was developed completely practically, by well, if we do this and this and this, as much as it is explained to Hogan by Sami, and then later on, to me it's fun the way Hogan takes over and says 'well here's how you do it' you know, as though, he's absorbed it, and now he understands how to do it, and now he's going to show you how to do it, just the how to do it. How to get people to stop shooting at each other. The steps it takes. The reasoning, the humor, the humanity that is in that process is phenomenal, and definitely a, god, major contribution to the world. Ironically, while I was doing this, while I was working on this study, that's when they won the peace prize, I remember I started out being really dismayed that America thought so little of the UN and I'm gonna do something about-

JB: And he mentions Hogan, the secretary-general mentions Hogan in his acceptance speech, for the peace prize.

[44:55]

KS: Oh really

JB: Cause it was right in the middle of

KS: I don't even remember, but I do remember them getting the peace prize.

JB: Mmmhmm, it was Perez de Cuellar

KS: de Cuellar, he was such an image of. That was profound for me too, this little quiet soft spoken man, that he could sit there, well, with Iran and Iraq, after 8 years, and get them to a place where they stopped.

JB: absolutely. Well let's go back to this relationship between Hogan and Sami for a moment, because that relation I think, there's this one scene in the play that feels very much- and we've seen Hogan, we see Hogan in all these flashback scenes in High School going through this- and I picked up on when you said learning earlier, that pedagogical environment seems to pattern a lot of the later things and we do have this complex scene where Sami is trying to teach Hogan and Hogan thinks he can teach Sami a thing or two, so I wonder if you could just talk a bit about the place of either high school or pedagogy or learning in the play, or if you thought of it at all, but for me just it speaks very much as this sort of pattern that repeats itself throughout the play. And if I'm off-base tell me that too.

KS: Well no, it's the difference between, I'd have to – well number one if I looked at it with your question in mind –

JB: It's been a few years I realize

KS: it's supposed to be published as a single edition soon, anyway, I'd need to take your question and look at it to figure out what you mean by - because I've learned, the writer doesn't know what's been written and many, many times… I can remember right from the beginning, my second play, I can remember somebody was seeing the first draft readings of a play of mine told me what it was about, told me, articulated a theme that is definitely there, it's inside of you, but you don't have the means to verbalize it

JB: That's how people like me get jobs

KS: because you're, you know you're doing, it's just coming out of you.

JB: Absolutely, the verbalization, the articulation is the play itself…

KS: well, it's coming out of you and you don't pass it through an analysis, in fact you would probably damage it if you did. But so that later on I could say, well and that helped me re-write, he said well you haven't brought this theme out enough and its there. Anyhow, I don't know, pedagogically.

JB: Ok. Or even just high school, his high school experience with Laurel, and I realize that came out of his uh, the literal biography of this character.

KS: If you just think about so much of what motivates us, that's what interests me, what motivates us arises from obstacles we felt in high school, you know? You want, what do you want? You want most when you're a teenager that people should like you. So how are you going to do that? What conflicts come because of that? He didn't want to play football, you know? If he'd only played football you could see how he'd be a hero, so how's he going to be a hero? [inaudible]

JB: well excellent. So yeah, I guess another set of questions I have is around, I guess, two parts to this one, the place- going back for a moment to that video image and the place of projection technology, and you have all these media images that appear in it again and again and it almost takes on this ripped from the headlines documentary element as well in the play. There's even certain lines that resonated for me – when you hear the voice-overs of all these press reports and so on that sounded a lot like the, because so much of it is true to the actual story, so I am curious to what extent you intended it to have this sort of documentary function or if you thought of it in that sense at all?

KS: Well it was clear it had to have the way to convey it. How you going to convey it? How you going to convey it to Americans that never cared about it, maybe you heard about it one time on the news. All these things are having an international impact. Now 22 years later, I mean it's almost as though we can only now begin to understand because we understand this instant, instant everything, and it was really just beginning then.

[50:04]

JB: But your depiction remains relevant now I would say.

KS: But, it's the way, like I say, we receive events, how did events come to us, so it becomes a theatrical device, in terms of telling the story. And it gets to – because it is real, and because I could take from actual things that were happening, and I put things together, you know you do that with a drama you – but to a large extent I didn't have to fudge much in terms of timing, there is some major timing stuff which I don't even know if I remember now. But yeah, that's how they operate, in the first place, the nerve center itself is based on getting information. Gee, I never thought about this, I never thought about it now, I didn't think about how what I was setting up then has been so fully realized now, everybody knows that, you know, they just get their little thing and they've got the world in their hand.

JB: And knowledge is power, that information is the power of UNIFIL and so on.

KS: In the center of that nerve center, they're based on, their ability to operate, is based on their getting information about what's going on in all their battalions – yeah battalions I guess that's what they called them – at the moment and how the outside political situation is affecting that, and all of that, they needed that in that nerve center. So it's, I suppose a theatrical representation of that place, of that nerve center, it seemed to me to relate pretty directly to what we were beginning to experience in the world as individuals, the immediacy of events and transmitting it into the living room.

JB: interesting, and I feel that all of that is very resonant today…

KS: you're making me think about it, of course I hadn't thought about how long it's been since I dreamed it up either.

JB: I had another question about – so something I found that seemed very true to life, because I've been reading the play, and I've been reading a lot of peacekeepers' memoirs both, some from UNIFIL, some from Sarajevo and other places and so on, and early on in the play and in all of these things, you have each of these characters that we see as part of the peacekeeping mission that come from these different national backgrounds – Ireland, Fiji, Turkey and so on - and they have a tendency to mark national difference even in the moments that they are experiencing cosmopolitan space, they make these comments, "well the Fijians are like this and the, you know, the Americans are like this" and I'm curious if that came out of your experience talking to the peacekeepers as well because it's something that read to me like it could have come straight out of these memoirs and other things.

KS: Really, well I would imagine it's coincidental. I would have gotten some reflection like that, from – one I was dealing with an Irishman, the attaché, so I'd be getting a feeling for his experience in relation to peacekeeping operations. And then I interviewed various other people, and obviously I'd get a sense of them, I don't remember it weighing other than to realize there were these distinct battalions, and they had their own way of operating. The miraculous thing to me as an American is the way these people accepted and expected this international, what, interactions, the way that you'd see that happening. I can't recall anybody saying, "well here's how so-and-so's are."

JB: But it was something that you saw in looking at these places?

KS: just naturally [inaudible]

JB: And would that relate to your notion of this as sort of an evolutionary step forward, peacekeeping as a place – you said earlier that it was a profound step forward for mankind.

KS: Well you walk in, you even walk into the secretariat and immediately you see people from everywhere. And you're seeing them in interaction with one another, and that seems to be the purpose, and that's very moving for an American. Especially when you're an American who has always cared about that, and the possibility of that, and not seen much of it because we have this vast, vast country where people in general- except for the second world war, I think that, I think that took a lot of country boys out to places they'd never been and brought them back with a different feeling about the rest of the world, but for the most part we've been very insular, you don't have to learn any other language and all of that. And then to see people who just do, whose business is to work together, it's very moving.

[56:06]

JB: Absolutely. Interesting. No I agree. I suppose I just have a few general final questions, and again I might, if you think of things as we go along, or you know to follow up in email or so on, I'd love to, you know, continue the conversation in that way. This has been fantastic for my work so far. So, I suppose, would you consider this a piece of political theatre in any way, or considered the politics of it?

KS: Yeah, yeah, I'd have to say yes. I mean it's a hard, in a way it's a, because it's not advocating one thing or another, how do you call that? It's not agitprop at all.

JB: It's objective in its own way, its neutral-

KS: It's, I don't know, it's not neutral because it's for getting it together. I mean it's for what he says in the end, "maybe we could figure out a better way" maybe we could pull a skin on a little – so it's taking the individual, as an American who doesn't quite get it, who thinks in a very parochial way about the importance of- isn't that wild too? How far we have had to move from that 'we are the center of the universe,' in the time that's gone past.

JB: For those of us that have moved from that place.

KS: But that's where he was certainly, and he was that way, in an exaggerated way, even for then, he's a type, not to say ugly American, but almost, an obnoxious American, he was an obnoxious American.

JB: He wasn't very self-aware.

KS: And he becomes aware that it would be better to be other, and that it's in a way kind of dumb to be as he had been. And that's a hard lesson, but it's what he learns with a kind of acceptance, and love ultimately. And I think it's largely through this relationship with Sami, having to confront somebody who says no, no.

JB: And Sami learned from Hogan as well.

KS: Yes, yes.

JB: It was something I really appreciated – unless, it seemed like you were about to say something else, I don't want to cut you off.

KS: Yeah I gotta think where I was. What were we saying?

JB: Well I was going to say that something I really liked about the character of Hogan was, the way that on the one hand it's this very personal story of his experience, but then the very personal story serves easily as a sort of microcosm or allegory for senses of American exceptionalism or going it alone and unilateral action in all these ways. He's a very nice articulation of this pivot between the personal, small story, and the geo-political, large story.

KS: And if you think about too, I don't know if you have the perspective, but at that point, a couple of years after that marine barracks bombing, that was a huge blow to our psyche, just, I mean it was a tragedy for us, but it was completely couched in this, "what are we doing there, anyway?" it was going into a place like this thinking we knew what to do, we knew how to handle it, we could control, even. It's this whole evolution of our relationship in the middle east, which has come so far since then, by some unpleasant circumstances, but we have been forced to learn, so that when- On 9/11, I can remember now, when is that? That's -

[1:00:29]

JB: Ten years ago.

KS: Ten years for me, and also ten years from when I first wrote. And when I was first writing these plays I was trying to say, we don't get it, come on, wise up, there's a lot we've got to understand here, and pull back from our arrogance and learn. We need to learn about these people and what their point of view is and what all these factions are and what that means to them. So that's what I was thinking, and on 9/11, I watched this from the roof of where I lived, and all I could think was ok the world has changed, everything's changed, nothing's ever going to be the same. But I'm also thinking, maybe now we will learn, maybe now we will take seriously this whole question, which is us in the Middle East. I'm trying to even remember back to where that question started.

JB: I think I asked if you thought it was political theatre.

KS: talking about Hogan, Hogan and Sami

JB: Talking about the broader geopolitical and the personal.

KS: and the learning, by the conflict, and the wanting to…

JB: So I guess one last question, just a broad question, the broad question of my dissertation, so I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on it, because I think you do and I think you've hit on it a few times, but how do you think theatre can be relevant to an organization like the United Nations? I realize that's a broad sort of…

KS: Theatre relevant to… You mean, outside theater? Doing things that would?

JB: I mean how- I purposely left the question a little bit vague because I feel like it's a question that prompts people in different ways, so how, as a playwright, do you see this play – you had this Lebanese-American woman tell you that they need to be reading this in New York, they need to be seeing this in New York, and we've talked a lot about how theatre can produce community in different ways, so I don't know, it was just to put it out there, is theatre a thing- yeah, what are the ways in which a play like the one you've written, did you think at any moment that it would be something that could help the UN to reassess maybe its practices or Americans to think you know what, I need to go learn something about the middle east –

KS: Absolutely, as I've said the whole motivation for writing was that Americans should learn and empathize with the work of the UN. I mean that- I get into these dilemmas because I decide I want something to happen there, you know, but I'm basically an artist – you're just supposed to do your thing and get what you- but I always have a reason. And in this case it was absolutely that, and so you hope that it gets out there. Now in the professional theatre here, or in any kind of theatre in this country I have yet to find a real interest in this. Like I said I got very powerful responses from people who liked it, who were in the professional theatre, but they didn't feel that it belonged in, or that it would get a hearing in their season. So that really, I've sort of proven that nobody cares that much. It's been used at Stanford as part of the, what is it, sociology of terrorism seminar out there. And they got onto Abraham and they asked me first could they read Abraham for their classes and I said yeah, but if you're really interested in- maybe this one would be more. And so they did, they did this one first. So yeah, my notion was absolutely to present the work of the UN to others. What it seems capable- what I get mostly when UN people come across it is just this great feeling of – you know how they say that blacks were suddenly very emotionally affected when they began to see themselves represented as human beings on television or films, well that's the kind of feeling I got from UN people who come across this, they're just so, they seem so pleased and hungry to see themselves presented. And I'm watching all the time for where and when the UN is represented, like *the Interpreter* , but there've only been a few, there's another thriller…

JB: Even *North by Northwest* begins at the UN

KS: Yeah, now that's back when it was a little sexy, you know

JB: [Laughs] not even Nicole Kidman could make it sexy.

KS: When it was new - But that's what is needed, that's what is needed to get it into popular entertainment, and boy, I mean- after any- and I can imagine I could go in there and I could find stories to tell, and I think they did a good job with *The Interpreter* at least they went quite a ways towards actually telling a story that could excite people.

Because, when the stories are told then people identify with their work. That's very strong with me, but I have the idea that your question was really involving something else…

JB: No, no, no, that was a great answer. My question was perhaps too vague, but also, I personally think that a question like that is about the fact that there's a dozen different things that theatre can do, and I definitely think that the place of theatre and the arts to amplify what the UN is doing, to represent the UN's work in these ways, to publicize it in different ways, is a crucial element of the relationship between the UN and theatre. In part I didn't want to prejudge the question in any way because even my dissertation goes through a dozen different ways in which theatre and performance can be a way of looking at the UN's work, and as you've done here, publicizing it.

KS: Yeah, I did, I drafted a teleplay that I called *The Line* about, actually in the field peacekeeping efforts, a certain place where they're trying to keep the peace, and I got that to a certain point. I kept running up against – as soon as I had this material, I think I must have taken this material to somebody in LA who just said ah forget about it, nobody cares. I also had the idea that a series – a comedy series – could be developed based on DP, a DP place, you know, that you could, could be an ensemble, you've got a unit out there and they've got a job to do and fun stuff that goes on.

JB: I think that's brilliant. My final chapter talks about comedy a little bit, and you know I think that there is a place for comedy and that, if that's a question of how theatre can be relevant to the UN-

KS: That is a great way to bring in cultures up against each other.

JB: Absolutely, I think that comedy is absolutely a way of producing that community differently… But yeah I'd love to, if you'd be willing to share it, I'd love to read the teleplay for *The Line*, too.

KS: Oh well, I'll get it out. What did I do, I made it, the idea I said that it should be like a Captain Kirk, I think I even named – then well there you've got something that was imaginatively based on the idea of the United Nations.

JB: -as this great cosmopolitan dream. Well great, I think that's all I have for now, thank you very much.