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Multi-faceted writer Kurt Andersen



Kurt Andersen is truly a brilliant writer, having mastered just about every form there is: fiction, journalism, even musical theatre... well, the talky part. There's even less reason to dislike him when it is taken into account that the only job from which he has ever been fired, that of editor-in-chief of *New York* magazine, is the only job for which he has ever been qualified (or so he said when delivering the commencement speech, which I as a student at the school was fortunate enough to witness, for the high school graduation of his daughter's grade in June). Here I had the incredible opportunity to speak with him back in December, and we discussed everything from Harry Houdini to a comparison of Barack with Bonaparte.

Hi, Kurt, how are you?

I'm good. How about you?

I'm great. How's LA?

Y'know, as you'd expect: really sunny and warm and... a nice place to be right now.
[laughs]

God, it's freezing. It was like 20 degrees here [in NYC] today.
Yeah, so I hear.

What are you doing out in LA?

This place called the Art Center College of Design, a couple of years ago—it's a graduate school for graphic designers, industrial designers—they asked me to be their, quote, "visionary-in-residence" for a term and I said "Yeah, as soon as my youngest daughter's done with high school and if I can come in the winter, I'll do that!" So she's graduated from high school and it's winter, so here I am. And since both my wife and I have fairly portable jobs, we've moved to LA for the semester.

Wherever you can escape this ridiculous winter, more power to you. All right, the first thing I wanted to ask you is a project I heard you were working on: a musical about Houdini.

Yeah, I have been involved with that for many years with my friend David Rockwell, who's best-known as an architect but is also a theatre designer, and he and I began talking about that a few years ago, about doing something together, and we came up with the idea of Houdini, and... we developed it. We've gotten a director involved, and a lyricist, and a composer—Danny Elfman is doing the music—and various people, incredibly experienced book writers are being talked to... so I'm sort of the creative consultant, the producer, basically, on that project. And, you know, it's show business, and with any show business I've ever been involved in I always assume it's not going to happen, just defensively, so... [laughs] You can't bet on it. But this looks pretty hopeful; it's moving forward.

Yeah, I've heard enough about it from so many different places that it seems pretty likely. And at one point I even heard Hugh Jackman was attached.
You know, there's conversation going on, so I hope that happens.

One of my favorite movies is *Scoop*, which deals with magician-y things, and he's in that, so I was like, "Oh!"

Well, as it turns out, he's a big magic/Houdini buff. So I think that's why those conversations really got going. When this project was first announced, nymag.com interviewed me and they asked me, "Who do you want to be in the starring role!?" and I said, "Oh, it's too early to talk about that. *But* if I had to, Hugh Jackman would be great, obviously!" And apparently his people saw that, and one thing led to another, so there you go. So, yes, that would be fantastic.

Well, I'm excited. Because of Houdini's birth name being Erik Weiss, my family likes to joke that we're related to him. You never know!
Could be! Is your family Hungarian? That's where his family comes from.

You know, we are! I'm going to have to investigate this. So, you also wrote the

book several years ago for another musical based on a comic strip, *Broomhilda*, right?

That was entirely pushed and done by my friend Martin Charnin, who did *Annie*, the musical, and he's done other stuff since then but he basically thought, "Well, I had good luck turning a comic strip into a musical; maybe I could do it again!" So he came to me with *Broomhilda*, and at that point I had never written musical theatre before, and... we worked on that, and that still exists, and, again, in the great always-might-happen limbo of show business it could happen but it hasn't happened yet.

Yeah, that was your first foray into musical theatre writing. What got you interested?

You know, it's funny, as a very little kid my parents had a record of *West Side Story*, which—for some reason, at five years old, I would play it again and again and again and learn the music. So I had that, but for whatever reason it never really... I wasn't like a musical theatre kid or anything, and then I sort of thought, "Oh, okay, that's this old form from the middle of the 20th century that I don't really get." And at a certain point, in like 2001-2002, I saw several shows that made me suddenly think, "Man, you can do interesting things with this form." And I don't know how much it was the fact that I happened to see these three really good shows within a few months of each other, or that I was of an age where I could appreciate it, or whatever. But I saw *Hairspray*, which a friend of mine actually wrote the book to, and then I saw this show *Urinetown*, which was fantastic; there was another one, or a couple more, that I saw. But those were these two musicals that... I mean, *Hairspray* is a more conventional musical, but I thought, "Man, it's really good, and it's really well-done on every level," and my friend David Rockwell had designed the sets for that as well. And this other very *strange*, very funny, very self-conscious kind of musical, kind of off-Broadway-ish, called *Urinetown*, and I thought, "Oh, I've been exhorting this whole genre unfairly. This is interesting." I didn't immediately set off to say, "By god, I want to write a musical!" but when Martin Charnin came to me and said "Might you be interested in this?" I was suddenly more interested than I would have been if he'd come to me a year before.

I never saw *Urinetown*, despite self-identifying as a theatre buff, but I'm generally an apologist for the more poppy, low-grade stuff because I got into theatre through *Rent*.

Yeah. Well, *Rent* isn't low-grade. I saw *Rent* back when it was off-Broadway, and I liked it—

No, no, *Rent* is not low-grade, but it definitely appeals more to the populace, which is sometimes frowned upon.

Well, I think sometimes something is looked down upon because it's a huge success, as many things are looked down upon for. But, no, and now that *West Side Story* is being revived, I'm actually looking forward to seeing that one when I get back to New York.

[laughs]

Yeah, I'm looking forward to it! I hear some lyrics were translated back into Spanish by the creator of *In the Heights*. Yeah, exactly, which seems like a really smart way to update that. I think it makes sense. I think it'll make it seem less dated

than it might have been.

It's great to see *something* coming to Broadway when *everything* is closing now. *Hairspray* just closed!

I know! And it's partly because a lot of shows close after Christmas, and it's partly because a lot of these shows have run for years already, but—yes, it's the closure of lots of things that's made it a story because of the horrible economy.

I don't think there have ever been so many shows closing in the span of, like, a month.

Right, and because of the horrible economy it's obviously a very difficult time for people to raise the many millions of dollars necessary to put on *big* shows, certainly. In a normal time, if nine shows closed all at once, it would be like, "Wow—nine shows closed all at once!" but there wouldn't be this sense of "And it's going to be a long time before nine shows are able to replace them!" *[laughs]*

It's going to be interesting to see what happens to Broadway in the coming years. Okay, to shift gears 100%, I would like to talk about the recent presidential election. You were an early-on supporter of Obama starting when?

Well, I, like everyone else—well, not everyone else, but most people who were paying attention—became aware of him when he spoke at the Democratic Convention in 2004 and thought, "Wow! This guy is incredibly impressive!" And, basically, as soon as his campaign for candidacy began I thought, "This is gonna be my guy." And he was. For about the past four or five years until recently I had this column in *New York* magazine, and I didn't start writing about the campaign as such in that column—which really wasn't a column about politics, it was about whatever I wanted to write about—but by the end of 2007 that was obviously the interesting thing for me to write about. Well, at least for me, and I became obsessed. So, yeah, the first time I really wrote about the campaign I declared myself as not some sort of objective observer. And, again, it's a column, so you're supposed to be giving your opinion on things. I made it very clear—actually, I remember saying it was possible there could be three New Yorkers running for president: Hillary Clinton, Rudy Giuliani as the Republican nominee, and Mike Bloomberg as an independent. And in September of 2007, that was a plausible possibility. But over the course of that piece, I said, "What I want to make clear is Obama's my guy, as unlikely as that seems, as much of a long shot as he is." But then, you know, it was an amazing campaign. And, yeah, I was for him as soon as I saw the guy. I saw him at a very small gathering in the summer of 2007. I got to see him be interviewed by somebody for an hour and everything I'd thought about him from afar was confirmed by just having that kind of proximity for an hour. And, there you go, he won. I'm very happy.

It was definitely the most excited campaign—well, since I'm alive, but that's not saying much. But it's probably involved people my age more than anybody has done in years.

Well, since '68 and '72. I mean, the first time I ever voted was 1972, the first time eighteen-year-olds could vote, and I lived in Nebraska and I was part of the McGovern

campaign. And basically, since then, I vote every time but I haven't cared this much since I was eighteen years old about who was elected president. And I think one of the reasons that people my age—adults—well, people respond to Obama for their own reasons, but I think the frosting on the cake was the fact that we felt excited as we hadn't in many, many years, and to see that the people your age and in their twenties were also excited just added an intense pleasure to the whole thing. Here, different generations are all enthused by this same possibility.

Truth be told, I originally supported Clinton, but after a while I began to disapprove of how I felt she was running her campaign and I switched.

Well, good for you.

[laughs]

Yeah, I happily voted for Bill Clinton twice as president, and I've seen him speak in places several times and he's an incredibly impressive person, and I've voted for Hillary Clinton for senator twice and she's fine. I just thought... I mean, entirely apart from the fact that everybody thought, "Oh, she can win; he can't win," I would have voted for her, but I would have voted for her with the same... not hold-my-nose, but lack of real enthusiasm with which I've voted for almost every president in the last thirty years. But, yeah, I wholly agree with you. They got slightly bum-rapped, I guess, for things they said in the heat of the campaign. But they both said some things that were deeply unfortunate about race.

I especially was disappointed because I—well, especially from her I expected more than for her to stoop to that. And even after she gave the primary bid to Obama, she took the longest time to officially endorse him, and I was like, "Come on, what are you waiting for? This is not what the party needs!"

Yeah, and if it had gone the other way I would have been pissed but I would have gotten over it. I wouldn't have said, "*And I'm gonna vote for John McCain!*" So I can imagine myself in their shoes to a degree, but the idea of the dead-enders who actually *did* support John McCain, that's just nutty.

Yeah, that's what baffles me. If your politics are such that you supported Hillary... why would you vote for John McCain?

I would like to read the piece where somebody goes and talks to those people.

[laughs] Exactly.

"Okay, you have some distance; now the guy won. How do you feel about having...?"

It was definitely something, though. And obviously everyone was kind of shocked by McCain's move to choose Palin, but I was... he was just, like, blatantly trying to cash in on the angry Clinton supporters, and the way that he did it was kind of appalling. What, you can't even choose a woman who's been in politics for more than half a second?

Yeah. No, I know.

But it made for some good episodes of *Saturday Night Live*, I guess.

Yeah, it did indeed. It made what I guess was a story that was too implausible for fiction even more implausible. I mean, really, if this election from beginning to end had been a movie or a novel, people would say, "That's ridiculous."

Yeah. Well, there are a lot of people who complain about Bush having been in office for eight years, and I *totally* agree about that, but at the same time it's interesting to think that if we hadn't hit rock bottom we probably would not have ended up with this election.

No, that's right. And life works that way, history works that way often. It's unintended consequences; institutions and eras have within them the seeds of their own destruction, and you're absolutely right about that. You know, I think if the economic disaster catastrophe moment had happened November instead of September McCain might have won. And, indeed, if the Iraq War had gone well... I mean, all the alternative histories that could have happened would have affected that.

Yeah, it was the perfect storm. We just finished studying Napoleon in my history class, and it's interesting to think about how so many of the tools he used in his road to success were completely dependent on exactly the very way in which the French Revolution had unfolded.

Exactly. History happens how it needs to happen, and people are quick to say, "Oh, it had to happen that way, because of this and this and this," but nothing *ever* has to hap—the point of view looking backwards always makes everything look sensible, but in any given case, whether it's Napoleon or Obama, you can see all the moments in which the card happened to fall this way and then this way and that's why things ended the way it did.

So your column in *New York* magazine—did you say you just recently finished it?

Yeah, I did, at least for a while. I'm taking a long sort of sabbatical from it. This summer, when the theatrical project came up—and I also sold a pilot to HBO for a possible series and I also have a third novel that I'm working on—I just suddenly had so many other things going on, I just told them I would write through the election and through the end of the year but then I would take time off. So now I'm taking time off from my column.

You've been involved with *New York* magazine for a long, long time.

Well, I was involved under its previous ownership as the editor-in-chief and then they fired me, and then when new ownership came in and they hired this guy who's now the editor, a brilliant editor, Adam Moss, he said, "Please come in and write a column for me." And I didn't want particularly to write a column or to get back into magazine writing, but he's somebody I've always liked and admired and figured he'd do something great with the magazine, so I came back when he came there five years ago.

The magazine is up there. It's one of my favorites. And the website is great too.

The website is really good. And in fact I had nothing to do with it, but I think it's probably the best website for an existing print product there is. I really think they do it better than any other magazine.

