

Bardian

BARD COLLEGE WINTER 2018



S. Asher Gelman '06: Not Just Basking in the Afterglow

S. Asher Gelman '06 assumed that his first play, *Afterglow*, which he wrote and directed, would be “a teeny tiny off-off-Broadway show that would run for eight weeks and quietly close with no one knowing about it.” He could not have predicted it would become, according to TheaterMania.com, the “sleepers hit of the Off-Broadway season.” Prior to his successful debut, he had never even tried playwriting.

Growing up in Chevy Chase, Maryland, Gelman was a self-described “theater brat who caught the dance bug.” At Bard, he double majored in dance and theater, focusing on choreography, directing, and performance. “Dance and theater are very different forms but related, like two sides of the same coin. I was interested in how to tell stories in both mediums,” he says. Gelman studied under JoAnne Akalaitis in drama and Aileen Passloff in dance. With a background in dance and theater, Passloff was a great mentor and influence on the development of his work. “She pushed me and challenged me as an artist and human being,” he says. Immediately after graduation, Gelman moved to Tel Aviv. “I’d spent a lot of time there and apprenticed with the Batsheva Dance Company during college. I fell in love with Tel Aviv. I graduated at the end of May and was on a plane by the beginning of June,” he says. There, Gelman pursued his career in dance. “It made the most sense based on my location. The language barrier made it challenging for me to work in theater, and the Tel Aviv dance scene is phenomenal.” Living in Tel Aviv for a decade, Gelman danced with contemporary and modern dance companies, including Vertigo Dance Company and Inbal Dance Theater, and briefly formed his own company, the Ouroboros Dance Collective. “I also danced for a year in a children’s show that was a complete rip-off of Disney’s *Aladdin*,” he admits with a laugh. “We all have to pay our dues.” In 2013, he cofounded and became artistic director of The Stage, the premier organization for English-language performing arts in the city. The following year he directed its inaugural production, *The Vagina Monologues*, which he had seen performed several times at Bard and considered a relevant work to bring to Tel Aviv. “That’s how I revived my relationship to theater,” says Gelman. “Soon I realized that the work I wanted to do, I could not do in Tel Aviv.”

In 2016, Gelman and his husband, Mati, a chemist turned photographer whom he met in Tel Aviv, moved to New York City. Uncertain about what to do there, Gelman signed up for a playwriting course taught by Richard Caliban '76 at the Gotham Writers Workshop. “The very first writing exercise I did for that course became *Afterglow*. Looking back, it was one of those crazy moments in life, a first-time-at-bat situation,” says Gelman. “I sent it to a few people, they liked it, and a friend told me to do a reading of it. That first reading—watching these characters I made up on my computer become real and make people laugh, gasp, cry—made me think I wanted to do this.”

Afterglow explores the emotional, intellectual, and physical connections of three men—Josh and Alex, a married couple in an open relationship, and Darius, a young man they invite to share their bed one night. The show opened in June 2017 at the Loft at the Davenport Theatre and was received with tremendous enthusiasm and critical acclaim, with reviews in the *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *Pride.com*, and even a segment on *Saturday Night Live*'s

Weekend Update. Gelman’s raw, insightful examination of love, loyalty, and commitment broke with theater convention. The actors played several nude scenes and even shared steamy, romantic showers on stage. The show’s run was extended multiple times and had a following of “Glowhards,” devoted fans of the play who kept coming back. “None of us were anticipating that our show would last for 14 months,” says Gelman, who attributes its success to his creative team. “They turned my little play into a really big hit.” At the beginning of the process, Gelman contacted Caleb Hammons, senior producer at the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College, for advice. Hammons told Gelman to find a general manager to take care of logistics so he could focus on artistic choices. Gelman, who now runs the Manhattan-based production company Midnight Theatricals, hired Evan Bernardin as general manager to help him assemble his team. “It’s a rare and wonderful thing to find a group of collaborators who are such phenomenal workers and storytellers,” says Gelman.



S. Asher Gelman '06. PHOTO: Mati Gelman

“Dissent is really important to me. I want to be challenged. Criticisms of your art are not criticisms of your person. The best ideas don’t have to be your ideas. We all created it together. We all had something at stake.” *Afterglow* originally opened as a two-act play, but the actors pushed for a rewrite to transform it into a 90-minute one-act. “I wrote seven different versions in 48 hours. We went back into rehearsal for one week, rehearsing the new version in the morning and performing the original at night. It was intense. The script was truncated in length but expanded in scope. I firmly believe that if we had not made the shift mid-run, we would not have lasted as long.” *Afterglow* closed in August 2018, but has been licensed for new productions in Salt Lake City, Buffalo, Fort Lauderdale, Chicago, Amsterdam, Mexico City, and London’s West End. “It’s amazing to me that other people want to do my play. I’m not super protective, and I am looking forward to seeing someone else direct it.”

Meanwhile, Gelman has moved on to his newest play, *safeword.*, an exploration of power dynamics through BDSM and food, slated to open Off Broadway in April. “We have expanded the creative team that worked on *Afterglow* and diversified it. When you find your people in this city, you hold on to them.” He is also producing Preston Allen’s musical *We Are the Tigers*, slated to open Off Broadway in February.

Appreciating the value of connection, Gelman cochaired his 10-year reunion committee. “I was excited to come back. Bard challenged me and forced me to investigate the way I think about things. It wasn’t enough to express whether you liked something or didn’t like it—our professors and peers pushed us to dig deeper, to articulate *why*.” He is also the youngest and the first alumni/ae member of the Fisher Center Advisory Board. Instrumental in the creation of the Passloff Pass, which subsidizes \$5 tickets for students to attend select Fisher Center events, Gelman is passionate about connecting Bard students and the younger generation with Fisher Center programming. “The Fisher Center, and the people who inhabited its spaces, had a profound and lasting effect on me. I lived in that building’s rehearsal spaces during my undergraduate days, yet I felt there was a separation between the Fisher Center performances and undergraduates. I credit [Artistic Director for Theater and Dance] Gideon Lester and [Executive Director] Bob Bursey for bridging that gap. It’s wonderful to know that the Fisher Center is a place where students can feel at home. Joining its board felt like coming home; I’ll always be Bardian and proud.”