

4 Questions With... THE OUTSIDER's Paul Slade Smith

by Mark Shanahan, curator of the "Script in Hand" series at the Westport Country Playhouse

Paul Slade Smith is an actor and playwright living in Brooklyn, New York with his wife, actress Erin Noel Grennan. Paul received a Helpmann Award nomination for his performance as Willy Wonka in the Australian premiere of the Broadway musical *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Stateside, his acting credits include the original Broadway casts of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Finding Neverland*, and the 2018 Lincoln Center revival of *My Fair Lady*; U.S. national tours of *Wicked* (Doctor Dillamond) *My Fair Lady* (Jaime), and *The Phantom of the Opera*; and productions at American Repertory Theatre, Chicago Shakespeare Theater, The Goodman, Steppenwolf, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Paper Mill Playhouse, The Goodspeed, Geva Theatre Center, Asolo Repertory and Theatre Under the Stars in Houston, Texas. His TV credits include NBC's *The Blacklist*, and, on HBO, *The Other Two* and *The Gilded Age*. Paul is the award-winning author of three plays: *Unnecessary Farce*, *The Outsider* and his latest, *Theatre People, or the Angel Next Door*.



Where did the idea for THE OUTSIDER spring from in your imagination?

In a book review I read about a political campaign, there was a passage about what I'll call an "oh no!" moment. (In my own mind, I used a less family-friendly phrase.) It was the moment the staff realized their candidate was irreparably bad. I immediately thought "that's a great catalyst for a play". But then, always liking to turn things on their head, I wondered: what if the candidate is bad not because he's incompetent — which was the story told in the book — but because, despite being extremely competent, he's just incapable of being a politician, of putting on the show?

THE OUTSIDER is a sharp political satire, but it has a wonderful, heartfelt message about the value of public service. Given the current, divisive political landscape, what keeps you hopeful?

The secret I always honestly share is: I didn't set about to write a play about the value of government, of democracy. But once I was writing a plot in which, by necessity, these were the things my protagonists were frantically fighting for, I realized that I had to define these concepts — and then imagine how to explain them to someone, at a simple, elemental level. And what I've discovered is: the explanation Ned gives truly speaks to audiences everywhere, regardless of their political bent. That's proven true in productions in red counties, blue counties, everywhere it's played. And the fact that there is a storable, definable goal — a thing we all want government to be... that's what gives me hope.

The Outsider is becoming a runaway hit at theaters across the country. How has the play taken off in recent years, and do you often go to see productions of your work? What's that like?

I love being a part of productions, as I have been, and occasionally traveling to see them (if there's a personal connection for me to the production), but I also love knowing the play is out there on its own, speaking for itself. It's a joy to hear from theater artists who reach out to me because they're having a blast with it and/or are really moved by its message. I love that the script is a little, unassuming book wending its way into people's lives.

You are an accomplished actor as well as a playwright, having appeared on Broadway and many regional theaters including a recent production of DROOD at the Goodspeed. How does being an actor impact your work as a writer?

In countless ways, I suspect. I've probably learned dialogue from feeling its rhythm on stage. And suspense, and surprise, and building a joke, and extending a joke. I've learned the value of giving each character a first entrance that defines the character. And I definitely always set out to write no "lesser" roles. Some smaller, some larger, but I want every role to be a joy to play. I want every actor cast in my plays to say "oh this is going to be fun."