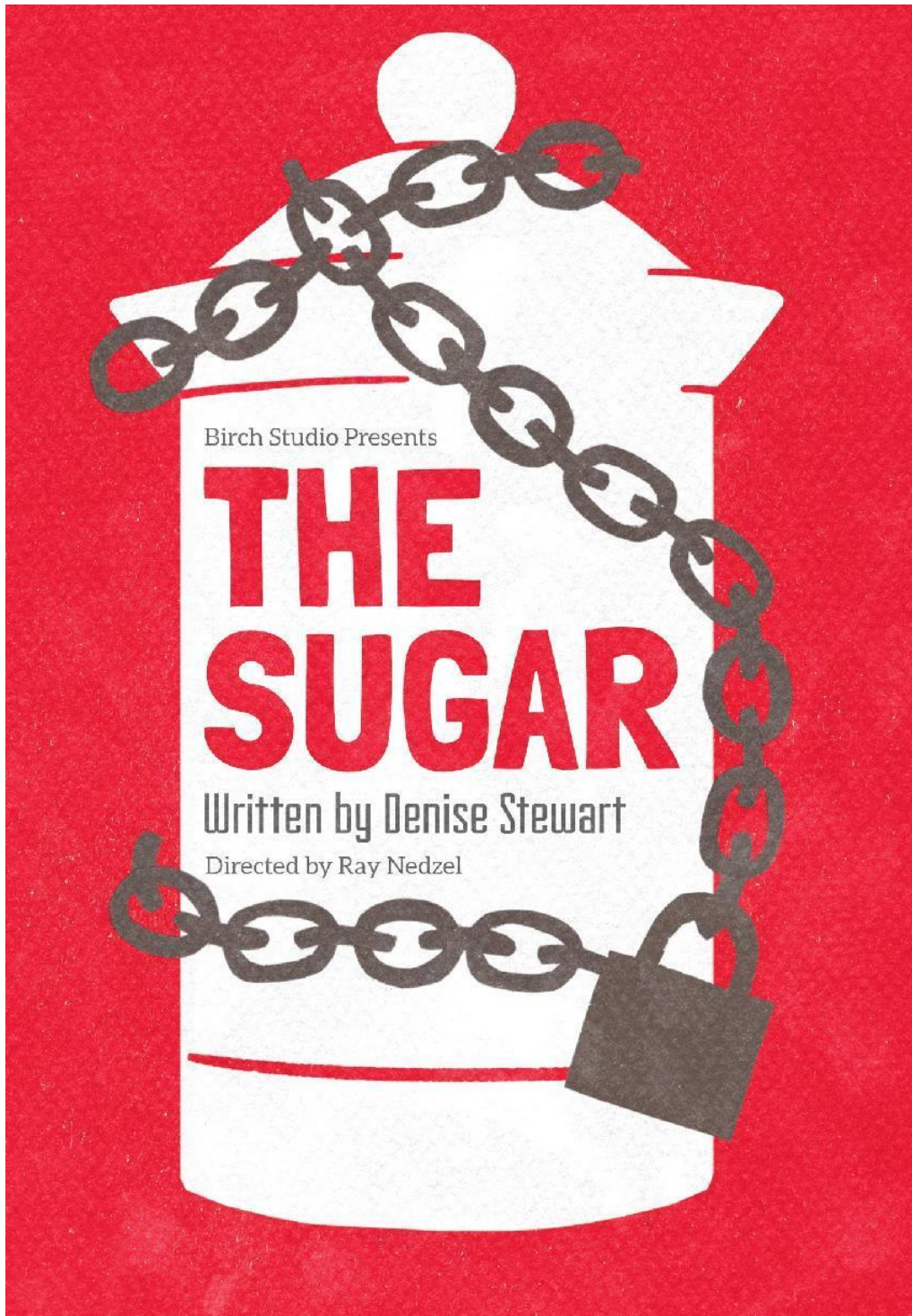


The Sugar Study Guide



Interview with the Playwright



In your own words, what is *The Sugar* about?

DS: I think *The Sugar* is more of a play than a comedy or a tragedy. It's a mix of those things. I think of it as a modern drama. It's a play about a woman on a sugar fast for 30 days and then all hell breaks loose. There are problems caused by her trying to be absolute about any one thing, like sugar, or moving to Baldwin from Richmond. It's a show about making plans, and I went through all the

characters and the plans they have and the plans they have for other people. Sally has a plan, Sally has a plan for Ed, and Ed has a plan already. Gracie's mom has a plan for her, but things aren't going according to plan so Gracie's in these sessions. So it's about finding a new plan.

Could you explain the difference between a wellness coach and a life coach?

DS: I'm personally a wellness coach, and I work with people on how they're taking care of themselves. It's about how people manage stress, how they eat and exercise, how they create what they create. I feel like life coaching is more about people going through major life shifts and wanting some guidance in that, and I don't come from that; I try to solidify ritual and wellness practices and shifts may come. Wellness is studying habit, and life coaching seems more mystical.

What initially did you hope to gain out of a second production of *The Sugar*?

DS: Livelihood! (Laughs.) A lot of people want to do the first production of a show – they love it. A lot of places don't want to do a second production of a show. *Dirty Barbie*'s had many productions because I was there to do it so it was easy to book. It's hard to get the second production going, so as a playwright it's a breakthrough moment. I knew for *Dirty Barbie* that I got the third and fourth productions because of the second production. The second production for *The Sugar* gave me another deadline and chance to do rewrites. I'm glad to have it done locally.

You made a lot of rewrites. Can you talk about the process and how much is due to working with the director and dramaturg, working with a specific cast, and/or your own continuing exploration of the story?

DS: I made some changes after seeing the first production. I met with Ray [the director], he came down to the first production in North Carolina and we talked. Then we started doing read-throughs here early and I made changes from the read-throughs.

Then this other layer has been happening at rehearsal with me saying, "There's a line change!" right on the spot. I've really enjoyed doing that because I feel like those changes

are to clarify the plots, manage transitions, make something funnier – those are the three main things.

And this cast has not been resistant at all. There hasn't been one change where they say, "Oh that doesn't work." Everyone's been great about the changes and I really appreciate it.

Live Arts showcased your autobiographical one-woman show, *Dirty Barbie and Other Girlhood Tales*, a few years ago before it went on to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. How does *The Sugar*, which is also semi-autobiographical, relate to *Dirty Barbie*? Does *The Sugar* feel like a continuation of your story?

DS: Yes, it does feel like a continuation. It feels like part of a cycle for me, a part of a larger cycle of plays. One thing that kept coming out of *Dirty Barbie* was people's interest in my brother Jeff – people always wanted to know more about Jeff. I was actually trying to write a different show when I started *The Sugar*. I was trying to write Jeff's show, which is going to be this southern-rock tragedy; but I'm not a musical person so that's going to be a big endeavor and I needed to table it. So I started writing this office comedy between a woman and a man who wants a work wife.

But it's like this brother kept knocking on the door, like, "I think I need to be in this play." And so I was like, "Okay...you can come in." So that's how the brother came in, and I loved Ed. And *The Sugar* has come out of that.

When you're writing a new play, how do you know you're done?

DS: You're done when you make a change and someone tries to beat you up because you made that change. (Laughs.) I had that a little bit with *Dirty Barbie*; people saying, "Don't cut that part! That part is awesome!" And, I knew *Dirty Barbie* was done when people weren't asking questions about gaps in the story, or saying, "I didn't understand blah blah blah." That was a good sign. So, when there weren't a lot of identifiable weak links, and people would fight back if I cut stuff. I will just keep working on this one until I get the same feelings, and I'm starting to get that. Anyone who read the show six months ago would be dramatically surprised; anyone that saw it in April would be dramatically surprised.

What is the most difficult part about writing a new play and watching that new play get rehearsed?

DS: Control issues. You want to butt in all the time, especially when you come from a directing and an acting place. It's not hard for me to listen to what other people have to say, it's just hard for me to not want to butt in.

How is it different to work with Ray Nedzel, who's been a frequent collaborator of yours, than it was with the director (Jim Epperson) in North Carolina?

DS: Well, Jim Epperson had also been a frequent collaborator. He was my mentor in college, he's the person that pushed me into playwriting – he knows my very earliest pieces. So he was very supportive and very honest about the script, and he was always very enthusiastic from the beginning. That's a piece that he and Ray had in common – supporting me even when the play wasn't done – and that's very encouraging for a playwright. They believe in you even if they're not saying, "It's awesome." Every director has a different process. It's also been a different experience because I couldn't be in North Carolina all the time, and I could be here all the time.

One of the themes of *The Sugar* is communication and how difficult it can be between family members, friends, and co-workers; in particular communication in light of dysfunction. Can you speak to the importance of this theme to your work as an actor, playwright, wellness coach, etc.?

DS: I like working with transparency. I really believe in playwriting, when you're saying things, you want to look at your dialogue and say, "Is that a line an actor would kill for? Are you saying something that people have said over and over again? Is that a transparent line?" I made a list at rehearsal of all the questions that the characters ask, and asked myself, "Does that character really want to know the answer to that question?" In every case, yes. Before you bring sarcasm, attitude, or anything else to a question onstage, you should ask, "Does my character really need to know that information?"

My characters ask questions they really want answers to. That's comic, that's where the comedy is, that's where the vulnerability is. That's the theme of communication – do they really want to know that thing? Yes.

I do think I'm more naturalistic than realistic. And I think these characters do very dysfunctional things. Like Ed is very manipulative, but his questions are still true. The question he's asking he still wants an answer to. But there may be something manipulative about it.

What advice would you give to aspiring playwrights?

DS: I would say, "Are you keeping a daily notebook of what you've heard and seen?" You know, images, dialogue scenarios, that kind of stuff – because it will really benefit your work in so many ways. The daily habit of that work, that's the advice I would give. Because if you write like that and you have the material, you'll be creating stuff that people say, "That's what really happens."

In my class at UVa, I asked the students to write down a conversation from their day. One of them wrote about a little back-and-forth between a guy and his roommate about the garbage disposal. I told my husband about it and he said, "That would be a really good scene." This slice-of-life moment was really believable, accessible, funny, and identifiable.

There's a lot of slice-of-life stuff in *The Sugar* and real dialogue that I pulled from all over the place that I believe in and stand by. When my ears are really on I can catch what really happens. I've gotten better at that over time.

You're saying that playwrights should live, they should pay attention.

DS: I'm teaching this in my theatre history class – all the professions of all these playwrights, and no one really talks about that. They don't talk about what Sophocles, what all of his professions were, how many of the playwrights dabbled in the priesthood, or started there and came back; how many of them were scholars or soldiers, and how many of them were lovers or screw-ups. You know – a lot of things you'd identify with playwriting. Living is a big part. There's this whole phase in Asian playwriting where a new government came in and fired everybody, so all these government officials had nothing to do but had a lot to say. They lived, they had people to tell secrets on, and they were a little bit burned, so they wrote. It became this flourishing period in the arts because all these educated, experienced people weren't trying to please audiences; they were actually writing what was true. And I find that work really interesting.

Set Design

The original production of *The Sugar* was a main stage show with a very elaborate set design. Live Art's production takes a more intimate approach by putting the show in the black box theatre. Here's a draft of the Live Arts scenic design of *The Sugar*, created by Rush Otis. Do you see that all of the major furniture pieces are placed at angles, rather than perpendicular to the audience? Why do you think this is? How does it make you feel about the office space? As you watch the show, you'll note how the set enhances the story, and how the actors use the set to show their relationships. It's also interesting to note the changes between these draft images and the finished set. How are they different?



Wellness Coach vs. Life Coach

The protagonist of *The Sugar* is a Wellness Coach. Here's a little information about the differences between Wellness and Life Coaching.

Life Coach – guides the client to improve careers, relationships and lives by helping the client realize skills and dreams. A Life Coach also helps the client focus on life's goals and move beyond challenges and obstacles in the way.

Wellness Coach – helps clients reach physical and emotional health goals by finding motivation and tools. Goals could include quitting certain habits, eat consistently healthier, and lose weight. These are to help the client make better choices in general to improve their lifestyle. The approach is strength-based, not about fixing what's wrong. Thus, in this process approaches involve engagement (building trusting relationship between coach and client), exploration (identifying values and desires), envisioning (creating a vision to achieve wellness), experimentation (using strategies to transform oneself to turn desires into action), and evolving (making it a lasting change).

Depending on what the client needs and the kind of coach they hire, sessions could last up to an hour discussing what the client wants to accomplish and working to realize goals and challenges. This process involves assignments between sessions and the coach offers support and guidance along the way, holding the client accountable to achieve goals.

Denise Stewart, the playwright of *The Sugar*, is a real-life Wellness Coach who provides individual coaching, corporate coaching and motivational speaking. Read more in her interview or on her website: <http://wellnesscharlottesville.com/>

(<http://www.webmd.com/balance/guide/life-and-wellness-coaches>)

(<http://www.mayo.edu/mshs/careers/wellness-coach>)

Ambien

Ambien plays an important part in the plot mechanisms of *The Sugar*. Ambien is a medicine prescribed for patients who are victim of insomnia and is a short-term treatment that can work very fast (often between 15 and 20 minutes) on its users. Excessive consumption, as with any other medicine or drug, would be very dangerous to a user's health. Some side effects from using Ambien can include nausea, amnesia, and feelings of euphoria. Users may become impulsive in his or her actions and reactions, lose ability to reason, and become more extroverted and delusional.



Another side effect, sleepwalking, is discussed more frequently as a topic because of numerous cases involving a patient's use of Ambien which resulted in blackouts during nights of escapades. In 2009 Robert Stewart [no relation to Denise Stewart] was charged with several accounts of first-degree murder when he went into Pinelake Health and Rehab nursing home in Carthage, North Carolina allegedly with his wife as a target. However, his defense team argued that since Stewart was under the influence of Ambien at the time of the shooting, he was not in control of his actions and face a long sentence in prison as opposed to the death penalty – evidence suggested premeditated murder although after his legal defense he was convicted on eight counts of second-degree murder.

Other cases involve situations of “sleep driving” or “sleep eating” during Ambien blackouts, originally seen as rare side-effects or attributed to mixing the medication with alcohol. However, Patrick Kennedy's 2006 usage and resulting car accident at night was claimed to be a result of taking the sleep aid, as he had no recollection of the events. In later incidents people began experiencing strange sleep-eating behaviors, which attorney Susan Lask explained included eating buttered cigarettes and eggs with the shells while under the influence of Ambien.

After an incident in which an Ambien user took the medication and woke up in custody hours later with no recollection of the events, her lawyer argued that her experience was the result of a medication warning, “After taking AMBIEN, you may get up out of bed while not being fully awake and do an activity that you do not know you are doing. The next morning, you may not remember that you did anything during the night... Reported activities include: driving a car (“sleep-driving”), making and eating food, talking on the phone” and more. But there are some cases in which users avoid legal trouble and simply experience a “high.” Although still dangerous and releasing inhibitions, the euphoria from usage provides relaxation or in a “dreamlike state.”

Homelessness

In this play Sally's brother, Ed, is homeless when he arrives at Sally's home. He makes a comment to Sally about how he loves the area she lives in because of the relatively good treatment of the homeless.

National Hunger & Homeless Awareness Week is held each year in the United States the week before Thanksgiving. This year it will take place from November 15 – 23, 2014. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, in 2014 the economy continues to grow and unemployment rates are still dropping, homelessness, which is sometimes described as a lagging indicator of the economy, is still a real issue for more than 600,000 Americans. (<http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/the-state-of-homelessness-2014>)

To learn more on this topic and find out ways in which you can help, please visit www.nationalhomeless.org for more information.

Podcasts... Interested in starting one? Here's how!

Part 1: Pick a theme or topic that is distinct and one that you would be passionate about. Just about any topic will work, but nothing so specific that you'll run out of things to say.

Part 2: Think about how you want to structure the podcast – will it have a certain format? Will it be scripted? Plan out the discussion so it flows and introduce the direction you plan to go to your audience. Frequency of podcast? Think about when you want to air new podcast episodes. A consistent length? Most podcasts don't last more than an hour, which takes into account any introductions, songs you might use, etc. Additionally, if you plan to use songs or videos during the podcast, artist consent will be necessary because there may be copyright issues.

Part 3: Start enlisting help from friends and making sure you have necessary equipment, including a microphone and recording software, as well as other devices to improve sound quality.



PodCast

Part 4: Once you have all this set you can record your audio file! After recording you should work on editing during post-production to make sure it's exactly what you want. Then it's time to upload your work to a host site! A podcast is meant to be shared, so search for one or more of the various websites that host audio files.

Part 5: After all the work of sharing your podcast, start expanding your audience! Connect with others on social media, connect audience members to the songs you may have featured to give the artists exposure, and maintain your presence!

(<http://www.digitaltrends.com/how-to/how-to-make-a-podcast/>)