

Collecting Stories

BY KELLY L. MILLER

Ruth Steiner doesn't believe writing can be taught. "I'm not going to tell you *how* to write because *I can't*," she tells graduate student Lisa Morrison in their first tutorial at her Greenwich Village apartment. "I don't pretend to know myself. ...As far as I'm concerned, the university is taking your money under false pretenses. *Talent* can't be learned; it's innate. People who tell you otherwise are not to be trusted; they're snake oil salesmen, all of them."

The fierce protagonist of Donald Margulies' *Collected Stories*, Ruth Steiner is a quintessential New York writer, mentor and Margulies character – shrewd, brilliant, and brutally honest. She recognizes Lisa's innate talent immediately and eventually takes her on as an assistant and protégé – a decision which will irrevocably change both women's lives.

Ruth began writing when she moved to New York City from Detroit at the age of 22. Influenced by the great New York writers of the late 1950s (the likes of Mailer, Ginsberg and Heller), she lived in a tiny Village apartment around the corner from The White Horse Tavern. Ruth found early success writing short stories and her fiction quickly became part of the modern American canon. Committed to her writing career above all else, she has remained single, turning to teaching to avoid the isolation of a writer's life.

Lisa Morrison has read every story Ruth Steiner ever wrote, even the uncollected ones. Nervous and adulatory in their first meeting, Lisa explains to Ruth: "Being here?, studying with you...? It's like a religious experience for me... your voice has been inside my head for so long... since high school... I was hooked, you had me. I knew what I wanted to do, I knew what I wanted to be."

Lisa's work is raw but promising, insightful and imaginative. With Ruth's guidance, she comes into her own quickly as a writer and person, publishing her first collection of short stories to critical acclaim.

In *Collected Stories*, Margulies explores how the mentor/protégé relationship evolves over time, both personally and professionally. He questions the nature of lit-



"We must never be arbitrary. There is so much goddamn arbitrariness in the world, we mustn't let it seep into our stories, God, not our stories. They're just too damn important."

**- Ruth Steiner,
*Collected Stories***

erary inspiration and genius and deals with the pitfalls of literary success and failure, and the primary question of the ownership of stories.

Collected Stories was commissioned by South Coast Repertory and had its World Premiere here in 1996. That critically-acclaimed production was directed by Lisa Peterson and starred beloved SCR actress Kandis Chappell as Ruth, a role she reprises in this production. The show was hailed by *Variety* as "bracingly smart and marked by [Chappell's] uncompromising, fiercely good performance." The play received the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award and was a finalist for the 1997 Pulitzer Prize, after receiving a lauded Manhattan Theatre Club production in New York, starring Maria Tucci and Debra Messing.

SCR Artistic Director Martin Benson – who directs the play's first major revival – relishes this Segerstrom production "as a chance to work with long-time friend and collaborator Kandis Chappell and to share Donald's gorgeously crafted play with a wider audience." Benson and Chappell have collaborated on numerous SCR shows including *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1994), *Shadowlands* (1993) and *The Crucible* (1988). Actress Melanie Lora will play Lisa Morrison. Lora made her SCR debut in *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* in 2004.

Donald Margulies has had a long, celebrated history with SCR. He's written multiple commissions for the theatre, resulting in World Premiere productions of his plays *Sight Unseen* (1991), *Collected Stories* (1996), *Brooklyn Boy* (2004) and *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment* (2007). His play *Dinner with Friends* received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000, following its West Coast Premiere at SCR in 1998.

What happens when a student's success threatens to eclipse that of her teacher? When does the line between protégé and mentor, colleague and friend blur? Join SCR as we revisit Margulies' brilliant, complex exploration of literary mentorship, friendship and competition between two women – a riveting dramatic outing for two phenomenal actresses and one very lucky audience.

Above, Kandis Chappell, Melanie Lora and Martin Benson. Left, Kandis Chappell and Suzanne Cryer in the 1996 World Premiere production of *Collected Stories*.

