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From the Los Angeles Times

Itamar Moses is just looking to make sense of it all

The inquisitive 31-year-old playwright has pieces headed to stages across the U.S. -- giving him plenty of places to work things out.

By Rob Weinert-Kendt
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NEW YORK — WRITING plays is occasionally a profession, arguably an art form, unmistakably a craft (hence the odd spelling of "playwright," distant cousin of the wheelwright).

But might writing plays also be a mode of thinking -- a way to make sense of the world?

"I'm uncertain about a lot of things -- I disagree with myself a lot," says Itamar Moses, 31, a Brooklyn-based playwright represented this fall by no fewer than six productions across the U.S., with more to come in the winter.

"I like the process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, and then doing that over and over again. Maybe it is my way of approaching truth: to state something I think is true, then figure out why it's wrong, then try to find something more nuanced and figure out why that's wrong -- and then to keep burrowing deeper into that. Playwriting is a form in which that's just kind of how it works."

That's how it works, at least, in Moses' precocious -- and prolific -- hands. In "Bach at Leipzig," which recently closed at [Shakespeare Santa Cruz](#), six 18th century German organists, vying strenuously for a vacant post, invoke and embody debates over Protestant theology and the fugue form. In "[Back Back Back](#)," which opens Sept. 25 at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre (where Moses is this season's playwright-in-residence), three pro baseball players square off over the use of steroids in their sport.

In the sprawling "[Yellowjackets](#)," which opened this weekend at Berkeley Rep, students at Berkeley High School wrangle over a backdrop of race, class and progressive politics in an interlaced structure Moses jokingly confesses he "stole from 'The Wire.'" And at the opposite end of the spectrum, the spare, two-character play "[The Four of Us](#)," which opens Friday at the Elephant Theatre Lab in Hollywood, takes a shred of autobiography -- Moses was a pal of Jonathan Safran Foer when the young novelist nabbed a jaw-dropping advance for his first book, "Everything Is Illuminated" -- and turns it into an alternately rueful and playful meditation on envy, aspiration and memory.

Add an upcoming Chicago production of his terrorism-themed play "[Celebrity Row](#)" and October's Manhattan Theatre Club production of "[Back Back Back](#)," and one might reasonably conclude that this is Itamar Moses' moment -- the time for this ambitious young playwright-as-thinker, already beloved of theater insiders, to break through to a wider audience. That may be true, though in fact Moses has already weathered at least one brief, Icarus-like moment as the Next Big Thing.

'He's a tough kid'

IT WAS in fall 2005 when Moses' whirling, Stoppardesque farce "Bach at Leipzig" bowed in a glittering off-Broadway production, bearing an admiring introductory note by no less than Tom Stoppard himself. The New York press, never fond of being scooped, smelled a rat. In notices that seemed to review the hype as much as the show, the [New York Times](#) declared it "hollow" and the Village Voice called it "time-wasting nonsense." Many critics acknowledged Moses' promise but dismissed the play as too clever for its own good.

"You can either discover a play or take its pants off," says Jerry Patch, director of artistic development at the Manhattan Theatre Club, who has championed Moses' work, both at MTC and in his previous post as co-artistic director at the Old Globe. "If Tom Stoppard has already discovered you -- well, that really worked to Itamar's disadvantage. The critical reception severely damaged him, but he's a tough kid, and he came back from it. I told him, 'Now they've had their dinner on you, you'll be all right.'"

Indeed, though he and his friends attest to the difficulty of that post-"Bach" period, the play has garnered raves in subsequent regional runs, and Moses never stopped getting commissioned and hired.

In person now, Moses is affable, upbeat, even sunny, and it's tempting to see this as a California thing -- Moses, a Berkeley native, now lives in Brooklyn's crunchy-preppy mecca, Park Slope, and seems preternaturally at home in a light surface beard, T-shirt, shorts and sandals.

But what seems to have saved him, above all, is not the chill factor but a certain rigor of mind, a habit of using the raw material of life as timber for intricately designed theatrical structures with a formal beauty and coherence of their own.

"Because you have control over your writing, because you are making all the choices about what to write, when to stop, what to put in, what to change -- writing has been one of my major salvations from feeling that the bottom is falling out," Moses says.

When Moses was a senior at Berkeley High, seeing the American Conservatory Theater's production of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" inspired him to become a playwright. The relatively happy child of Israeli immigrants, he felt the dramatic calling but conspicuously lacked dramatic grist. He now laughingly describes his first playwriting effort as "'Dawson's Creek' via 'Angels in America' -- a bunch of teenagers being all angsty and hanging out in high school, saying, 'We're going to graduate and never see each other!' Those were the stakes, because that was all that had happened to me."

Or rather, that was all he could perceive at the time. In "Yellowjackets," he revisits Berkeley High in the early 1990s, a time when the ultra-diverse, overflowing school was phasing out "tracking," a program of tiered advancement that shamed the school's progressive credentials by seeming to affirm a class- and race-based achievement gap.

Reflecting the school's multilayered system, Moses has structured the play along separate tracks. Form gestures here to content: "It's about how you can't actually separate different strata of society, because they're on top of each other. It's all interdependent."

Michelle Tattenbaum, a longtime friend and associate who's directing the L.A. production of "The Four of Us," notes that a confluence of form and content distinguishes all of Moses' work.

"If you're going to do the navel-gazing of drawing attention to a play's theatricality, then you'd better be saying something about the human condition," she says. "Itamar is so rigorous; he's not going to write a play that draws attention to itself as a play unless he's saying something about humanity or relationships or the power of storytelling."

Even so, in his studies at Yale and New York University and in his early plays, Moses displayed a blazing aptitude, and certainly a preference, for theatrical form and language, and the subjects of his early work are historical or real-life figures: organists in "Bach at Leipzig," Socrates and Brecht in "Outrage," domestic terrorists such as the Unabomber, Timothy McVeigh and Ramzi Yousef in "Celebrity Row."

"I think initially I was both more interested in and had a better understanding of structure than I did of inner life," Moses concedes. "'Bach' and 'Celebrity Row' aren't very historically accurate, but they gave me a place to start, a structure to work inside of -- real historical situations and real people. Either I wasn't sure that the things in my actual life could be that firm as structural boundaries, or I didn't trust my craft to take the messiness of what really happened and turn it into something that worked as a piece of storytelling."

It was this reluctance to do the obvious -- use his life as dramatic fodder -- that grabbed the attention of theatrical gatekeepers as much as his intellectual ambition, brilliant craftsmanship and tender age.

"He's your thinking man's writer," says Tony Taccone, artistic director of Berkeley Rep, who's directing "Yellowjackets." "That's not in fashion so much."

From the inside out

WITH "The Four of Us," Moses at last gave himself permission to tap his own life for material. Inspired by Moses' friendship with fellow Brooklynite Foer, the play tells the story of two close friends, one a wildly successful novelist named Benjamin and the other a struggling playwright named David, whose tight bond is tested by their varying fortunes.

It's as much a play about artistic rivalry and ambition as is "Bach at Leipzig," only this time it's personal.

"I don't think that 'Bach at Leipzig' is an unemotional play, but it was written from the outside in," Moses says. "'The Four of Us' is the first play of mine that was written from the inside out."

Moses may now be more comfortable mining his own life for drama, but he's using similar tools.

"The sort of heightened language that he uses for the historical scenes in 'Outrage' or 'Bach at Leipzig' is no more highly crafted than the ultra-casual, conversational language he uses in 'The Four of Us,'" says Tattenbaum. "This is just as specifically written out."

Moses is at pains to stress that, real-life parallels aside, "The Four of Us" is not autobiography, nor is it meant as a kiss-off

to a successful former friend (for the record, he and Foer are reportedly still friends). "I'm in both of those characters," Moses says. "I've been on both sides of that relationship many times."

Tattenbaum, who has directed several of Moses' short plays and headed workshops that later had full productions under other directors, can attest to that. "Itamar is my Benjamin," she says. "He probably has a number of Davids, but I'm certainly one of them."

Another Yale compatriot, Steven Klein, who is co-producing and starring in the L.A. production, doesn't say where he fits in this pecking order, but he does think the play embodies an "aspect of American life, that we are taught to compare ourselves to other people, to find metrics of our success. From my experience, it's a little harder or stranger for artists, because other than commercial success we're not given a metric, and that's difficult to deal with."

Perhaps toughened by the hype and backlash over "Bach at Leipzig," Moses remains agnostic on the ideal way to measure his own success.

"There doesn't seem to be a phase for playwrights in between emerging and either disappeared or being part of the establishment," Moses muses. "It's like, you're emerging until you're 39, and then you're part of the old guard: 'Get out of the way, old man!'"

Kushner, who's never met Moses but admires his writing, is heartened but not surprised that the younger writer bounced back from the "Bach" smackdown.

"I didn't know his work at all when I saw 'Bach at Leipzig,' and I was dazzled by it," says Kushner. "The way it was treated [by the critics] was depressing; that was a very ugly moment. But I don't think that any really interesting writer ever gets completely demolished by bad reviews, at least not the first time out. No one as good as he is at risk of being homeless."

"The Four of Us," Elephant Theatre's Lab Space, 1076 N. Lillian Way, Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. Ends Oct. 20. \$25. (800) 838-3006.

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