



OREN SAFDIE.
PHOTO ALEXEI TYLEVICH

CAUSING A SCENE

PLAYWRIGHT OREN SAFDIE
MAKES ACTORS IMITATE
ARCHITECTS AND VICE VERSA.

Text **Katya Tylevich**

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: ANN HU (MITSUMI YOSHIDA, PROSECUTING ATTORNEY), MARC CARVER (BILL WATERTSAND, JUDGE) AND JOEL VAN LIEW (ALEXANDRE NUSINOVITSKI, ARCHITECTURE CRITIC).

The Bilbao Effect

2010

Photos Carol Rosegg

Erhardt Shlaminger is a world-famous architect who faces censure by the American Institute of Architects, following accusations that his urban-redevelopment project for Staten Island has led to a woman's suicide. The play tackles controversial urban-design issues that New Yorkers have recently encountered in Brooklyn as a result of hotly debated plans to convert the Atlantic Yards into an architecture-star mega-development.

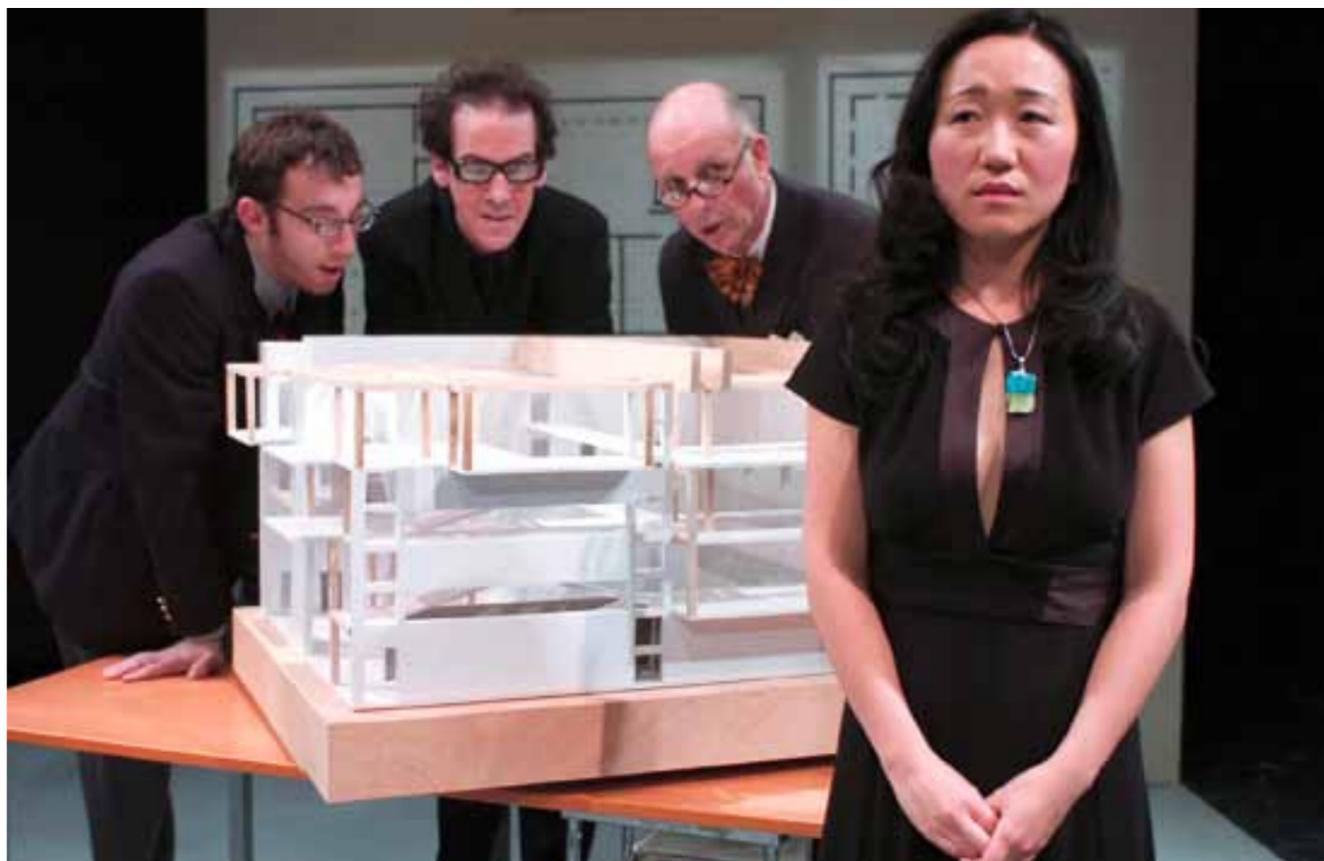


FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JORIS STUYCK (ERHARDT SHLAMINGER, STARCHITECT), JOHN BOLTON (ALLEN KAUFMAN, DEFENSE ATTORNEY) AND ANN HU (MITSUMI YOSHIDA, PROSECUTING ATTORNEY).

I meet Oren Safdie, playwright and (yes) son of Moshe Safdie, at the five-year-old Santa Monica Public Library. We sit in the courtyard, between books and LEED-certified concrete. Safdie chose the spot and in doing so set a most appropriate stage for our dialogue: a literal crossroads between text and recent architecture. Oh, he's good. A sentiment shared by the critics who lauded *Private Jokes, Public Places* (2003), Safdie's biting play about an architecture student dressed down by three professionals judging her thesis.

When I meet Safdie in March, he's writing *PJPP*'s threequel, *False Solution*, and about to go live with its sequel, *The Bilbao Effect*, which puts a Vienna-born celebrity-architect, Erhardt Shlaminger, 'on trial' for a deconstructivist Staten Island complex that allegedly drives a woman to suicide, overheats a neighbouring apartment (hey-yo, Gehry's Disney Hall), sends deadly icicles down its roof (yoo-hoo, Libeskind's Ground Zero plan) and puts too much 'art' back in architecture. The lines between defence and prosecution blur as both professional and armchair critics of architecture take the stand – among them Shlaminger's mother and a hyperbolic Belgian avant-garde furniture designer. »





Safdie himself is a graduate of Columbia University's architecture programme and the product of growing up architecturally quarantined (as implied in my opening sentence). He thought he'd parted with the A-word when he chose to become a writer. Ha. *PJPP* led him right back to it and, apparently, led more than a few architects into therapy. But it's no surprise that architects make for good drama in real life. As Safdie found out, however, it's harder to convince people that architects make for equally good drama on stage.

In their flattering reviews of *PJPP*, critics seemed utterly amazed that a play about architecture could be funny and devoid of pretentiousness. Is it really so hard to believe?

You know, when I was doing the play in New York, I wanted the actors to have a good feel for an architecture school like Columbia. So we walked into the university, up the stairs, through the offices – and automatically the actors felt intimidated. They felt pretentiousness just oozing from the walls. Lately, architecture has become something not understood by the general public. The language has become denser. In some ways, it's become a fashion show. So I make fun of that a bit and allow an audience of non-architects to enter this world as well. One of the things that propelled me to write *PJPP* was an alumni letter I got from Columbia – I couldn't understand a word of it!

When language is that dense, I feel it might be a smoke screen.

The character of the architecture critic in *Bilbao Effect* shares a similar 'conspiracy theory'.

Yes, he says all architecture critics are in on it. His character was actually inspired by a specific review I read of the Denver Art Museum addition by Libeskind. The last line said: 'But you know, it doesn't really work for the photography.' It occurred to me that in the last five or ten years architecture critics have been less concerned with how a building works than how it looks. Those kinds of ironies lead me to write. I want to expose them.

Of course, you also expose the ironies of architects, not just their critics.

Bilbao Effect raises questions about the kind of ethics architects have to deal with and addresses issues that I think are important in the field. I create a debate through the characters, but I don't think I draw a conclusion. I want people to make up their own minds.

I can only imagine the kind of feedback you get from architects.

After *PJPP*, I had a lot of architects in New York telling me they're going back into therapy. One very well-known architect told me: 'It's too close to the bone.' [Laughs.] Many architects felt embarrassed and uncomfortable.

We went to show the play at some universities – UCLA, University of Pennsylvania. Very interesting to see the professors squirming a bit. I guess they became aware of their babble, in some ways.

I just came back from a trip where I showed the film of the play in universities in Barcelona, Helsinki, Hong Kong and Japan. It was received differently everywhere, but everyone found humour in it. I think that comes from recognizing 'Oh, we take ourselves so seriously.' But I actually didn't know *PJPP* was a comedy until it was called one in the reviews.

The 'stereotype of the architect' gets a lot of laughs. What do you look for when casting the part of Shlaminger?

In fact, I want to stay away from the stereotypical, because then the architect does not feel real. And I don't necessarily get married to one image of how I see him. Still, in casting Erhardt I look for someone charming, with a little bit of a European accent. Someone with a big ego – but at the same time likable. I don't want him to be completely arrogant.

In *Bilbao Effect*, Shlaminger is literally on trial – an architect at his most vulnerable.

I think he feels beaten up, and he acts out. He does things to show how much this is tearing him up. He feels everyone ganging up on him.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: MAX GORDON MOORE (WILLIAM, MARGARET'S PROFESSOR), ROBERT PARSONS (ERHARDT, VISITING ARCHITECT), CHARLES DEAN (COLIN, VISITING ARCHITECT), M.J. KANG (MARGARET, ARCHITECTURE STUDENT).

'I DON'T REALLY HANG OUT WITH ARCHITECTS. ONLY WITH MY FATHER'

– Oren Safdie –

I wonder how those architects who enrolled in therapy after *PJPP* will react to this portrayal.

Well the only person who's read it so far is my father, and he's uncomfortable with it. [Laughs.]

Go on...

He's part of the field, and some of the architects I reference are his friends. He probably feels my views reflect on him. They don't. I mean, he was also uncertain when he read *PJPP*, which was more about academia. *Bilbao* is about the profession and architects at the pinnacle. I think some might feel a little threatened by it. It obviously hits a nerve.

That said, your father was very supportive of *PJPP*.

Oh, yeah. But when he first read it, I don't think he could make heads or tails of it. Then he saw it on stage, and it was a different experience entirely. It definitely takes a trained eye to read a script. When I first wrote *PJPP*, the theatres rejected it, saying, 'It's only for architects.' They couldn't see the humour in it. I had to do the first production with privately raised funds, and it was only after the play opened in New York to great reviews that producers came in and said, 'Let's do a commercial production.' I'm experiencing the same thing with *Bilbao Effect*. They're telling me: 'No. This is for architects.'

That's a strange criticism.

What they're saying is: what if people don't get it? I always feel I have to prove myself, in that respect. But I don't really hang out with architects. I'm not part of that world. The closest I get to it is when I'm with my father.

Do you purposely hold architects at bay?

When I left the field and started writing, I didn't go into an architect's office for a long time. I felt I had to make a break. Architecture was a constant part of growing up for me. I mean, my dad used to take me out of school so I could go to construction sites and board meetings with him. Any family trip centred on going to see buildings. There was nothing else, only architecture. Though I do have very fond memories, including those of all the people coming through our door, they seem almost of a different era.

That 'different era' is the subtext of your plays as well. Can you explain?

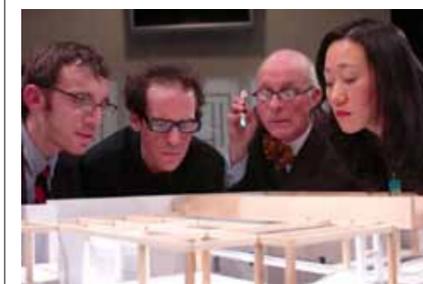
It's the era I grew out of. Low-key personalities, Expo 67 in Montreal, people like Arthur Erickson and Chris Alexander, with whom my father was friends, and David Rinehart, with whom my father worked. Louis Kahn. I'd spend time with them; they were like humanitarians. It was not what it is today. I was just reading an interview with Zaha Hadid in which she said: 'I don't make nice buildings.'

Private Jokes, Public Places

2003

Photos David Allen

Graduate students at a school for architects appear before a panel to present and defend their thesis projects. The focus is on Margaret, a Korean-American whose project is an indoor swimming pool. On the panel is her studio teacher, who's well-meaning but insecure, and two prominent visiting architects who are enamoured of themselves but not of each other. Instead of trying to understand the young woman's work, they question it with an eye peeled for any chance to jump in with a pompous lecture. Their insensitivity turns Margaret's presentation into an ordeal that leads to a confrontation.



That statement tells me everything about architecture now. My theory is that contemporary art has ceased to be meaningful in our society in some way. So architecture, in a sense, has replaced it and become public art. When a museum opens, critics rarely give two cents to the artwork inside, but they review the museum itself as a work of art.

Is that why one of the accused buildings in *Bilbao Effect* is 'The Museum of Contemporary Contemporary Arts'?

You'll see. In a few years, they'll open one. [Laughs.] Look, animals have it down pat. Their architecture is driven by need. But today's architects feel that need isn't enough. It's too boring for them, and I think that's the wrong way to go.

There's a point in *Bilbao Effect* when the critic says of Shlaminger: 'If he were hired by a spider to design its spider web, he would galvanize it in steel and tell the spider to open out. If he were hired by a snail to design its shell, he would smash it into a million pieces and tell the snail to put it back together using the star system as a guiding point.' So in some ways this play is my open letter to architects. I'm trying to say, 'Don't forget who you're designing for.' «