THE CONTEMPORARY COMPANION

KEVIN KLING

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BY KEVIN KLING WITH MUSIC BY ROB WITMER

DIRECTED BY STEVEN DIETZ

A WORLD PREMIERE PRODUCED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

SPONSORED BY MARELLEN J. AHERNE

THE CONTEMPORARY COMPANION

for Kevin Kling: Unraveled by Kevin Kling CREATED BY ALLISON BACKUS, DRAMATURG

THE CONTEMPORARY COMPANION is a dramaturgical component designed to enhance your **CATF** experience. We've designed Volumes to act as counterparts to the five BOLD, NEW PLAYS, in this year's Festival. You can sample, survey, or study these online offerings-with no fear of spoilers!

Each companion will give you-

- An introduction to the creative teams
- An exploration of the world of the plays
- A deep-dive into the themes and conversations surrounding the plays

Come and join us as we **thinktheater** and **talktheater** at CATF in 2025.



KEVIN KLING is very excited to premiere *Unraveled* at CATF, adding to over 40 years of collaborations with his friend Steven Dietz and, more recently, the brilliant Rob Witmer. In 2023, they premiered *Best Summer Ever* at the Merrimack Repertory Theatre. Kevin's plays have been produced by the Guthrie Theatre, Seattle Rep, Cincinnati Playhouse, Sydney and Perth Arts Festivals, Spoleto USA, Actors Theater of Louisville, the Goodman, Children's Theatre Company, Denver Center Theater Company, off-Broadway at Westside Arts and Second Stage Theater, and many others.

Commissions include the Minnesota Orchestra, the Zeitgeist Ensemble, and the Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra.

Kevin has been awarded an NEA Grant, Whiting Award, a McKnight Fellowship, a Bush Fellowship, and two Upper Midwest Regional Emmy Awards.

As a storyteller, Kevin has toured the US, Europe, Australia, and Thailand. He is a frequent performer at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, TN. Kevin has written five books, produced seven CDs, and has performed often on PBS and NPR's *All Things Considered*. He is the Minneapolis Storyteller Laureate.

INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT KEVIN KLING

Conducted and edited by Sharon J. Anderson

CATF: In your play you observe, "I do know that sometimes life gives you answers before the questions."

KK: A lot of that has to do with the world of disability. One of the answers is that underneath, we are all more alike. A way that a lot of people treat disability is through fear-fear of it happening to themselves. Once you get past that fear, I generally find that there is compassion. That's an answer I carried even as a kid. When other kids were bullying or treating me as "another" when I was a kid, I let it shed off my back. In doing that, I created a more appealing world than the one they were living in. When you present a better world, people jump aboard. That's not something that comes from the outside, but from something that we all carry.

You call yourself "a weaver of stories, constantly looking for patterns, connections, and unexpected intersections that connect us to one another and to the world" that you unravel. What have you had to unravel in your own life?

It's pretty typical stuff-family stuff especially, including the family stuff that was passed down: biases and different "isms" that we carry with us, even DNA strands. How do we unravel DNA strands that subject us to different kinds of behavior so we recognize them when they happen and are not predisposed to those behaviors? There's a lot of unraveling that happens way before being born. That's why I am so drawn to mythology and the pantheon of stories. Freud said, "Wherever I've been, a poet has been there first." Our poets have broken so much ground before any science. NASA started to hire storytellers because, according to a NASA official, "We keep shooting scientists into space and poets come back."

In your play, you share that Thomas Merton could not worship a god he could understand: "If you're a poet and a Christian, be a poet first because if you aren't any good no one will want to be a Christian."

I am pretty sure that I am paraphrasing, but I found that really powerful. We don't expect monks to say things like that Martin Luther said, "I wish I could pray like the dog looks at meat." If we could be like that, we would be fine.

Do you read poetry? Do you have a favorite poet?

Yes, I read it, and my favorite poet is Michael Brindley who is in a theater company here in Minnesota called Interact. Michael has Down's Syndrome and writes poems that have questions within them that are beyond my grasp. One of the beauties of being an artist is bringing people into a perspective that they don't expect, and opening the world in a way they don't expect.

Wisdom isn't discovered, it's recognized. We compile all this knowledge through our lives, but wisdom is when there is a recognition of a truth that runs both through us and through the source. Truth needs to catch us by surprise before our walls can go up.

"Paradox is this ability to hold two opposing thoughts at the same time . . . we need paradox to figure things out," you share in your play. What is an example of paradox in your life?

It may just be me, but when I encounter something in my brain, I bring up its opposite and usually the truth is in between the two. It kind of happens every time I talk with my wife. We immediately bring up the other side. Part of our relationship is that we love living in this paradox. She told me once, "I don't know if we would be together if I could understand you." A lot of people need to be understood, to find their "soulmate," but my soulmate is somebody on the other side; somebody that I don't understand. "Stories weren't meant to explain the world," you write in your play, "they were meant to place us within the world, as part of the mystery because even better than to explain it is to belong. We are part of the mystery." What mystery?

Whatever the great mystery is. One of the biggest surprises of my life is the friendship I have developed with an explorer, Will Steger, who has done unprecedented things like crossing Antarctica the long way. One of the biggest surprises of his life is providence. He doesn't necessarily agree that something is taking care of us, but the more you discover that your life is at risk, the more you discover that something greater is going on that we are all a part of. Sometimes people think of providence as that which can save us. But he thinks of it as something that envelops and holds us. That is one of the truths that I can feel more than I can describe.

What distinguishes a great storyteller from a good one?

The moment in which the story is being told. The story lives in its moment. The storyteller is beholden to this moment. The best storytellers are either in their eighties or their nineties. It is undeniable that it takes many years to become a great storyteller. One of the greatest was Kathryn Windham who lived until she was 94. Nobody could hold a candle to her. She lived in Selma, Alabama across from her best friend, Harper Lee. She was the first woman journalist for the *Alabama Journal* and covered the march across The Edmund Pettus Bridge.

In your play, you admonish your audience to "Listen to the point of invisibility. Listen to the point of empathy." In the constant chatter of the modern world, where no one seems to have the time or even the desire to listen to anyone else, how can we listen better?

Find stillness, that place where you can be the sounding board, the reverberation of the sound. The world is in constant motion. There's a great saying in birdwatching, "We enter the field with two energiesdisturbance and awareness. The disturbance in time gives way to the awareness." A birdwatcher went to the same field for four years and finally heard a bird he had been looking for. He said, "That bird was there the whole time, but it took four years for me to get to the point where I could hear it."

Maya Angelou said that, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." Wow, that's a good one. It's like harboring a fugitive.

The director of your play is Steven Dietz ...

Yes, and we are best friends. I've known him for more than 40 years. There are so many layers to him in terms of playwriting and production. When you get Dietz, you get a dramaturg, an incredible director, an incredible playwright, and an empathetic listener. He will hear things that he will bring back to you. He brings stability to a production that makes for a wonderful sounding board. He's absolutely brilliant.

What's your secret for staying so ebullient and positive?

I don't know if I actually am. Some of the most pessimistic people I know are really happy on the inside. I wonder sometimes if I'm happy on the outside to convince my insides. I might be a pessimist in real life; it's just trying to convince myself otherwise. Again–another paradox.

What do you think of this line–a recurring theme– from Samuel Beckett's novel, *The Unnamable*, "Words are all we have."

That's not true for me. A friend of who is a third-year law student now has aphasia* so it is very difficult for thoughts to become words. She once said, "I used to believe, 'I think therefore I am," but after my aphasia, now I know "I am, therefore I think." That opened a door for her where she realized that she comes from a place that proceeds thought. Words are connected with thought. We do frame our world with words, and so much of how we view the world is through words. Words definitely color our thoughts, but I do think we come from a deeper place.

*Aphasia is a language disorder that results from brain damage, typically due to stroke, but also from head injury, brain tumor, or infection. It impairs a person's ability to communicate, affecting their ability to speak, understand, read, and write. Aphasia is not a disease itself, but a symptom of brain damage in areas responsible for language.



ROBERTSON WITMER

Rob previously appeared with Kevin Kling in *Best Summer Ever* at Seattle Children's Theater and Merrimack Repertory Theatre. His work with Steven Dietz includes *Go*, *Dog. Go! iVe Perro*, *Ve!* (Chicago Children's Theatre) and *Murder on the Links* (North Coast Repertory Theatre, Laguna Playhouse). Other credits include: *The Magic Flute*, *Tosca* (Seattle Opera); *The Lehman Trilogy* (ACT); *Twelfth Night* (Seattle Shakespeare Company); *and The Color Purple* (Village Theatre). His sound designs have also been heard at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Seattle Repertory Theatre, and Teatro ZinZanni. Rob is a member of United Scenic Artists, Local 829.

A CONVERSATION WITH SOUND DESIGNER AND MUSICIAN ROB WITMER

CATF: You worked with Kevin Kling on his play, Best Summer Ever, at Merrimack Repertory Theatre. Was that your first time working together? How did you first become a collaborator? RW: It was my first time working with Kevin, but I knew about him from seeing him in some of his performances at Seattle Rep. Steven Dietz introduced us and initiated the collaboration that has led us here to CATF.

How did you come to be involved in *Unraveled*? Initially, how did Kevin Kling and Steven Dietz explain the concept of this play to you?

I knew that Kevin was working on a new piece, and we were invited to do a workshop reading at Merrimack Repertory Theater in January of this year. I knew that the idea was to take some of the stories Kevin has been telling over the years and combine them with some new ones in a theatrical way.

Do you recall your initial thoughts on the play's concept?

I was really excited to learn more about Kevin's life and travel experiences. *Best Summer Ever* was very much about his childhood growing up. I think that this play will give us insight into his development as a performer and how he became a storyteller.

You've worked as a sound designer, a musician, and a composer. In *Unraveled*, you serve as all three. Is tackling all three roles for one production unusual for you? Did one role "come first," so to speak? In my work with Kevin and Steven, I think the decision to have a live musician came first. From there comes the question of what the music will be. There are often songs floating around in the conversation that might be incorporated, but I think there is always the need for original music to bring everything together. If I'm composing music for a show, I like to work as the sound designer as well, if possible. For me, the question of how to integrate a music cue is just as important as the cue itself, and that is something the designer does, working in relationship to the onstage action, scene changes, light cues, etc. Often, sound design elements





function musically. For example, the pitch of a bell ringing or the rumble of a clap of thunder. If you think of these things as musical gestures, then the music naturally wants to build a shape around them.

Unraveled differs a bit from typical, scripted plays because Kevin Kling is a professional oral storyteller, and he's used to working without a script. There's probably more variation and room for improvisation in Unraveled than in some of the other productions you've worked on. Are there challenges and joys to performing in this more untraditional format? How do you prepare for all the possibilities?

As a musician, I'm used to responding in the moment to what everyone else is doing. Working with Kevin is like following the lead singer in a band. They might change the set list or want to do a song a little differently from time to time. For me, this keeps things exciting and interesting. For the most part, though, we'll keep things pretty consistent from show to show. At least that's the plan!

You're also on stage with Kevin for the entirety of this play. Have you had other audience-facing roles?

I have done a fair amount of work as an onstage musician, usually playing the accordion. It's such an expressive instrument, and the fact that you can move around with it makes it very nice for stage work.

Can you share a bit about the dynamic between the two of you on stage in *Unraveled*?

I think of myself as sort of an invisible scene partner. I'm not really playing a character, but I feel that my job is to listen to Kevin and reflect a point of view through music and sound. Kevin is free to engage with me if he wants, but I'm also happy not to be noticed!

How has the music changed since earlier workshops? Has your role in the show changed at all?

We're still playing around with different ideas for songs that might be included in the show. I believe we have permission to include a favorite song of mine, but we'll have to wait and see!

You play a mix of instruments in *Unraveled*. What was the selection process like for deciding what to play and when to play it?

I had been playing the hammered dulcimer, which was a new instrument for me, and I realized that it has a sort of ancient and magical sound. It felt like it connected with the philosophical ideas of the show as well as Kevin's travels in Europe and Czechoslovakia. The accordion and penny whistle are able to represent Ireland and the influence of Celtic storytelling.

Do you have a favorite Kevin Kling story that is featured in this show? (spoiler-free version!)

I love his story about how "listening" can be a superpower. If you choose to listen, you, in a sense, become invisible for a moment around other people. This can lead to knowing and observing things that others may miss.

To your mind, what makes sound and music so integral to theatre and theatre-making? What makes it integral to the craft of storytelling?

I think that music, especially played by a live musician, helps triangulate the relationship between performers and the audience. Sound and music create a third element, which can help give the audience another way to experience the play. Often, this is more subtle and emotional, and people might not even realize it's happening! Music also gives the performers something to push off from; a strong musical gesture can invigorate an actor onstage, or a gentle sonic underscore can help create a comforting space that might help bring out more emotional performance.

KEVIN KLING: UNRAVELED DRAMATURG'S NOTE

RHAPSODIC WEAVING

In Ancient Greece, the word for an epic storyteller was *rhapsōidós*, meaning "he who sews/weaves together songs." These ancient storytellers who performed through verse and song often merged stories and characters to create complex, unified narratives. In the words of American classicist Gregory Nagy, the word rhapsoidós suggests a paradox: "the many and the various become the single and the uniform-and yet there is supposedly no loss in the multiplicity and variety of the constituent parts." The fabrics woven and sewn together are complete in of themselves; however, through oratorical craft, they are "re-made into a unity, a single new continuous fabric, by being sewn together."¹Drawing on his decades of experience as a professional storyteller, Kevin Kling presents audiences with an array of fabrics and threads, crossed and interwoven at often unexpected places of thematic juncture. In the finished tapestry of



Unraveled, one thread pulls on numerous others, drawing audiences to Australia, Ireland, Czechoslovakia, and suburban Minnesota, through childhood memories, first loves, personal reflections, and different cultural histories.

The most famous Greek *rhapso idós* was Homer who is credited for writing the *lliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Bust of Homer by unknown artist/ Encyclopedia Britannica

For the Ancient Greeks, the metaphor of threads and fabrics depicted not only the art of storytelling but also the intricacies of individual life. In

Greek mythology, the three Fates, or *Moirai*, were three sisters responsible for the threads of each human life. Clotho spun the thread of a person's destiny, Lachesis measured the thread to determine the length of a person's life, and Atropos cut the thread, determining how and when that life would end. The myth of the *Moirai*, however, did not deny the existence of free will. The Greeks believed that while some life occurrences were beyond our control, the choices we made that led us to these predestined events, and how we ultimately navigated them, were decisions that could only be made by a given individual. This tension between destiny and volition has driven the plots of countless stories for centuries, reminding us that while there is fear in the unknown and the uncontrollable, there is also freedom, power, and joy in personal agency.



The three Moirai, or the Triumph of death, Flemish tapestry, c. 1520

Photo credit Victoria and Albert Museum, London

While the *rhapsoidós* of Ancient Greece often performed solo, they also performed in *paradosis*, or relay, where one storyteller would pick up where another had left off, taking the offered thread of a narrative or song and continuing it in their own way.

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

The nature of Kling's Unraveled encourages paradosis, allowing listeners and audiences to pluck any number of offered threads and reflect on their own lives and the stories within them. What do our own tapestries look like? What threads have been woven for us, and what threads will we weave ourselves?

STORYTELLING, ADAPTATION, AND ENDURANCE

The craft of oral storytelling is nearly as old as human speech. With an estimated history of 500,000 to 1,000,000 years, the art of using song and speech to share history, memory, anecdotes, and imagined narratives is one of humanity's most ancient traditions. From the Griot of West Africa to the Seanchaí of Ireland, oral storytellers have enraptured their listeners for thousands of generations, fostering connection and sustaining personal, cultural, and collective histories. As noted by anthropologist Daniel Smith, scientists have long hypothesized that "the universal presence and antiquity of storytelling indicates that it may be an important human adaptation."² In 2017, Smith and his colleagues published a study that suggested this may very well be the case. While examining the storytelling practices among the Agta people, a hunter-gatherer community indigenous to the north-east Luzon Islands, Smith's team found that the Agta people viewed storytelling talent as one of the



Storytellers are highly regarded in the Agta tradition, and often tell stories sitting around fires.

Photo credit Atlantic Magazine

most valued characteristics. When asked who in their community they would most like to share a camp with, community members were twice as likely to choose storytellers over non-storytellers, even those with more practical skills, such as hunting and fishing.

By analyzing the content and themes of traditional Agta stories, along with those of other remaining hunter-gatherer communities, Smith's team discovered that most of these stories coordinated the community's behavior by imparting crucial knowledge about social norms, taboos, personal relationships, and the importance of sharing resources. These stories emphasized equality, communication, and "coordination over competition," indicating that, beyond its obvious powers of entertainment, the ancient and universal practice of oral storytelling works to impart values that ensure our survival.³



Kevin Kling with his Emmy Award. Photo credit Kling website

For those of us who have ventured beyond the hunting and gathering traditions of our ancestors, considering storytelling as a means of survival may seem an absurd notion. However, the neurological process by which we share and comprehend stories indicates that the coordination, connection, and communitas provided by oral storytelling remain crucial to human interdependence and our subsequent understanding of one another and the world around us.

When we hear a story, our brains release various neurotransmitters, including cortisol, which increases our interest and focus, and dopamine, which helps us feel a pleasurable sense of reward. Perhaps most crucially, storytelling causes the release of oxytocin, a chemical responsible for increased emotional empathy and a sense of connection. In a process called "speaker-listener neuro-coupling," the brainwave activity of the teller and the listener align, forming what neuroscientist Liz Neely describes as "echoes of each other."⁴ In this neuro-coupling process, humans naturally make connections between the story they're hearing and their own lives. As thoughts and memories bubble to the surface, the stories of others cannot help but become our own.

This convergence between teller and listener promotes affinity, emotional resiliency, and personal growth. As social work scholar Nieli Langer asserts, storytelling is a mutually beneficial practice. Just as humans regularly seek out stories and their tellers, a storyteller's purpose is defeated without an audience "to find meaning in their experiences." Indeed, "the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person," writes Langer, "is to listen."⁵



Popular storyteller Dael Orlandersmith performs at CATF in 2023. Photo credit CATF

ENDNOTES

- Gregory Nagy, "On weaving and sewing as metaphors for ancient Greek verbal arts," *Classical Inquiries*, The Center for Hellenic Studies, January 19, 2017, <u>https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/on-weaving-and-sewing-as-metaphors-for-ancient-greek-verbal-arts/</u>.
- 2 Daniel Smith, Philip Schlaepfer, Katie Major et al., "Cooperation and the evolution of hunter-gatherer storytelling," *Nature Communications* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1853, https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-017-02036-8.
- 3 Smith et al., "Cooperation and the evolution of hunter-gatherer storytelling."
- 4 Liz Neely, interview by Maddie Sofia, "Your Brain on Storytelling," NPR, January 14, 2020, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/795977814.
- 5 Nieli Langer, "The power of storytelling and the preservation of memories," Educational Gerontology 42, no. 11 (2016): 739, <u>https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03601277.2016.1231515</u>.

THE PRODUCTION TEAM

SCENIC DESIGN DAVID M. BARBER

COSTUME DESIGN PEGGY MCKOWEN

LIGHTING DESIGN HAROLD F. BURGESS II

SOUND DESIGN ROBERTSON WITMNER

STAGE MANAGER DEB ACQUAVELLA

DRAMATURG ALLISON BACKUS

KEVIN KLING: UNRAVELED KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

ON KEVIN KLING

• Episode "Kevin Kling: The Losses We Grow Into" on the On Being with Krista Tippett



Podcast, hosted by Krista Tippett

- Kevin Kling, interviewed by Molly Joyce for the project *Perspective*
- Season 5, Episode 8 "Kevin Kling" of Minnesota Original on PBS
- Listen to more stories by Kevin Kling on National Public Radio

ON DISABILITY STUDIES, ART & CULTURE

- Models of Disability: A Brief
 Overview by Marno Retief and
 Rantoa Letšosa
- <u>"What is Disability Culture?" by</u> Steven E. Brown
- <u>"Access Intimacy: the Missing Link"</u> by Mia Mingus
- <u>"The Dramaturgy of Disability" by</u> Victoria Ann Lewis
- Perspectives, an ongoing project by Molly Joyce (and featuring Kevin Kling)
- Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability, edited by Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black, and Michael Northen
- Disability Arts Online



MORE THREADS TO UNRAVEL

(to avoid spoilers, check out these resources after seeing the play!)

- <u>"The Fates in Greek Mythology:</u> Hanging by a Thread," by Bethany Williams
- "Shriners Hospital for Children Past, Present and Future," by Peter F. Armstrong and George H. Thompson
- <u>"Lightning Strike Data" provided</u> by the CDC
- <u>"Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon Carnival</u> Kit" by WeirdPaul on YouTube
- "Jerry Lewis and 'The Crippler'" by Stephen Kuusisto
- <u>"The Wanderings of Oisin" in</u> <u>Selected Poems by William Butler</u> Yeats



William Butler Yeats Photo credit Chicago History Museum

- "Czechoslovakia was one of the most rigid and conservative countries in the Eastern Bloc," an Interview with Peter Havlik
- <u>"A World in Color: Czechia, the Dawn</u> of a New Era" by Magnum Photos
- <u>"Hephaestus" by John K. Manos</u>
- "Cripping the Crip Is It Time to Reclaim Richard III?" by Kaite O'Reilly
- <u>"The Story Behind the Song: How</u> David Bowie Created the Awe-Inspiring 'Heroes'" by Jay Taysom
- "Heroes" by David Bowie