

## Interview with *Gallows Humor* Playwright, Fin Davis

By Dramaturg Evvaleen Robinson

**Evvaleen Robinson (ER):** First, let me just ask you a big overarching question. How does just being a teen playwright make you feel, just having that title?

**Fin Davis (FD):** It honestly feels quite insane, I guess it's just something that I never really thought I would be doing. It feels insane because, even just with playwriting in general, if I told myself two years ago "hey you're the teen playwright for TPC [the Teen Performance Company]," I think my past self would probably say I was lying or that it was insane. But otherwise, I feel really happy about it. Playwriting in itself is the first time in a while where I felt like I have something concrete that I'm really proud of, and now that there's a title with it, that's even more confidence boosting.

**ER:** Next question I have for you is a little bit similar, but it's more about you being an up-and-coming teen playwright. What would you say your origin as a teen playwright was like?

**FD:** I guess I can say that I've always been a writer; I've always been a storyteller. I think what really got me, like what the spark for playwriting happened was when I had my first playwrighting masterclass with [2023 TPC production *Girlhood* playwright] Dani Stoller, and because of that masterclass I think I found a way to tell stories that was different than anything I'd ever been introduced to before. Because, you know, there's what I'd always done, which is either just writing stories on my own or performing stories, but playwriting was something that was completely different—like completely—a whole art form of itself. So, I think that really took me in a new direction, not only in my art and passions, but just in my life in general.

Regarding *Gallows Humor*, I could have written any other play, really. When I went to Danisha [Crosby, Round House Director of Education,] and told her that I could potentially, write a play for TPC, I initially had three main ideas that I could work with. It was teens running away from home, teens in a hospital, or a lockdown in school. Those were my three top ideas. What really pushed me as a playwright, and pushed the show in general was when I had a lockdown at my school. It was so... It was serious to the point that in order to cope with it, I was literally thinking "oh, what could I put in a play to capture this feeling that I have right now? What could I write? Could I literally put what I'm saying and whispering to my friends right now? How could I capture that in a stage production?" And I think that was like one of the first times where I realized, "oh, I'm thinking like a playwright. I'm not just thinking like, like a storyteller, an actor, I'm thinking like a playwright." And that was just like a totally different feeling of discovery.

**ER:** Inspiring. With *Gallows Humor* being such a hard topic to deal with, and potentially traumatizing, how did you take care of yourself while writing this play and what was that like?

**FD:** As an actor, a lot of what I've learned is to separate yourself from the character, separate yourself from the story. As a playwright, you kind of have to do the same thing, even though

you're not on stage performing it, because when you're writing it, you're basically living through what you're writing. You're in that mental space, because you have to be in order to actually get it down on paper, and what I do is whenever I was in that space in writing, specifically the traumatizing scenes, I would make sure that I said everything I need to say, and then once I knew that I was done for the day, I would just do the opposite of whatever I was feeling: it could be watching a comedy show or eating ice cream. Just doing things that make me feel good and making sure that I'm not holding myself in that terrible space.

**ER:** You had a certain reaction to the ending of the play. All of our actors probably had different reactions. What are you hoping happens when the audience leaves this play?

**FD:** Originally, when I wasn't thinking too much about it, when I first wrote the play, I wanted adults to know they messed up. I want them to leave with a feeling of guilt. I want them to think "why have we let this happen?"

This has changed, but originally, I wanted students who see it, or just kids in general who go through this to feel seen, and, if that also makes them really emotional, I would hope that they have people who can be there for them. I do think that it's important to go to that emotional space. Most of the time in these situations we joke – like, students joke about it all the time. We treat it like a joke as a way to cope with it. I feel like the ending I wrote specifically to put people in that emotional space, because I want kids and students to think for a second and know that this is serious, because we already know it's serious, and I want them to remember that it's not something that we can emotionally push off all the time.

**ER:** What is the conversation that you hope is running among these adults at the end of the play? What do you hope for them to talk about right after they leave the theatre?

**FD:** Well, the idea is that everything is a gray area, but I think a lot of people are very strongly on either side of the issue. I hope that anyone who comes, no matter what their view is, either realizes or gains an even deeper understanding of what it is to feel how we do on a daily basis in a school. And I want them to at least have empathy with it and maybe use that empathy to actually speak out against it, because it does feel like there's not much that people can do a lot of the time, so I think now more than ever, we need the adults to actually take responsibility.

**ER:** How did you really engage with the outside world and draw what you know from your understanding of other things surrounding the topic of school shootings? Did you pull from incidents that may have happened in history? If not that, how did you pull from your own lockdown experience to really engage with the topic?

**FD:** I like that question. There were times where I thought maybe I should go back and read more on Columbine and other situations like that in order to get more of the facts, get more information. But, if I went in and had Gina, the smartest nerdy character just start listing off facts about things like school shootings, that would be a little like, "we get it". It wouldn't hit as much as the ending of when they're all thinking they're about to die. So I took pretty much everything

from my own personal experiences. I didn't leave anything out, because to make it real, you kind of have to put in all of the not so necessary parts to do so, which is why I included a moment from the time where I was in a lockdown and my friends were in a prayer circle and spent five minutes saying prayers, even though I'm Buddhist and I didn't know what that meant.

There were also people talking about trying to go on their phones and not having any Wi-Fi or any cellular data to be able to see on the local Facebook page what was going on. We couldn't see anything. In the play itself, there's no contact to the outside world and that's for a reason because normally in a lockdown, people are trying to call their parents and can't. When I was in a lockdown, that was really terrifying for me. I didn't even have my phone with me. I had left my phone in the classroom, and I was finishing a musical at my school.

Me and my friends were going to the bathroom to change out of our costumes, and the speaker went off saying that there was a lockdown, and we had to immediately go into the weight room because that was the closest room to the bathroom. Literally only one person in our group of friends had a phone. So, all of us were simultaneously passing the phone around trying to get our parents to answer a random number contact and trying to explain to our parents, "hey, I'm texting from my friend's phone and I need you to come pick me up like right now." It was terrifying because later on we found out that it was quite literally a real shooting with high schoolers because it was senior skip day.

I want the adults watching in the audience to know that students are feeling alone, and that is *their* fault. Not that it's their fault entirely, but I want them to know that they need to be doing more as adults because there's so much disconnect between teens and their safety net: the people who are supposed to be taking care of them. They should be feeling more responsible about what they should be doing.

I think adults need to really learn to listen.