

Climate Storytelling at Theatre Northwest, Indiana University

Interview by IUN Theatre Student Mia Godfrey, November 2021

Indiana University Northwest in Gary is in the midst of a yearlong Climate Season project, which is described as “combining the arts, climate change awareness, and campus-community outreach and engagement.” Jeff Biggers, whom Indiana University Northwest School of the Arts invited to serve as Climate Narrative Playwright-in-Residence, was commissioned to write the play *Kaminski’s Lot*. Here is an interview that Jeff Biggers participated in for the show program.

Q. Mr. Biggers, as an author, journalist, historian and playwright, how would you characterize your career path and explain how you choose projects to devote yourself to?

A. A Chicago journalist once referred to me as an “itinerant storyteller” in her book, which is probably a fair look at my writing career over the past 25 years. Stories have a way of finding their form in different genres—trained as an oral historian, in the tradition of my exemplar Studs Terkel, I’ve turned to journalism, cultural history, biography, memoir, and now theatre in the last decade to discover and tell stories in the U.S., with my Mare Nostrum Theatre troupe in Italy, and from around the world.

Q. Could you describe your work on the Climate Narrative Project. How did you become interested in the topic of climate change?

A. In 2013 I founded the Climate Narrative Project, seeking to bring together science, arts and the humanities to find ways to tell a better climate story; to use all of our narrative forms, from theatre to film, music, dance, visual arts, creative writing and spoken word, to astonish, entertain and ultimately galvanize action on the climate. I’ve worked with scores of universities, schools and communities around the country, with the hopes of training a new generation of climate storytellers. I established the Climate Narrative Project out of a sense of urgency, to be honest. Living among the Indigenous Raramuri in Mexico in the 1990s, which I chronicled in my book, *In the Sierra Madre*, I saw, firsthand, how long-term drought resulted in ruin and forced migration. In that same period, my family’s 150-year-old farm was strip mined for coal in southern Illinois, pushing me to chronicle the impact of coal mining and burning on our devastated and abandoned communities, our water, air and climate. While I’ve written extensively about other topics, including immigration, civil rights, and culture, I’ve been focused on climate and environmental justice for the past two decades.

Q. How did you become connected with Gary and Indiana University Northwest? What interests you about this community or region in particular?

A. While members of my family worked in the steel mills here in the 1950s and 60s, I first began to research Gary's history and environs five or six years ago, as part of a Calumet Artist Residency. A few years ago, I collaborated with various community, arts and environmental groups on a theatre project called Ecopolis, which used storytelling, poetry, and music to envision a regenerative city in Gary in the future. I've spent a lot of time over the past years learning about Gary, the Dunes, and Northwest Indiana—it's an incredible place for me.

Q. What can you share about the process of creating *Kaminski's Lot*? Are the characters based on real people that you interviewed?

A. I once attended a theatre workshop with the great playwright, August Wilson, that has always informed a lot of my work. "I believe in the American theatre. I believe in its power to inform us about the human condition," Wilson wrote. "Its power to uncover the truths we wrestle from uncertain and sometimes unyielding realities." *Kaminski's Lot* is a work of fiction, of course, but it draws from a broad range of interviews, oral histories and field research with IUN students, faculty and community members in Gary—from this spring and summer, and earlier trips. A lot of archival research, too. The characters are a composite of many different people, stories, and ideas.

Q. Is there anything else you would like to share about your collaboration on the Theatre Northwest Climate Season?

A. The Climate Season initiative places Indiana University Northwest in the forefront of climate arts, theatre and education among universities in the 'country. The range of activities is impressive, and the campus to community outreach is extraordinary, including the many field trips, tours, and ways of bringing the climate story home. I think it's amazing to see how Kathy Arfken's set design for *Kaminski's Lot* follows low carbon principles. I'm also blown away by the commitment of director Mark Baer and this wonderful cast to show how theatre in "all of its richness and fullness," as August Wilson reminded us, has the "ability to sustain us" in these changing times.



Mia Godfrey (left) and Denina White are among the cast members for Theatre Northwest's "Kaminski's Lot" from Nov. 4-13 at Indiana University Northwest's Arts & Sciences Building in Gary. The play is part of a yearlong Climate Season project at the school. (Indiana University Northwest)