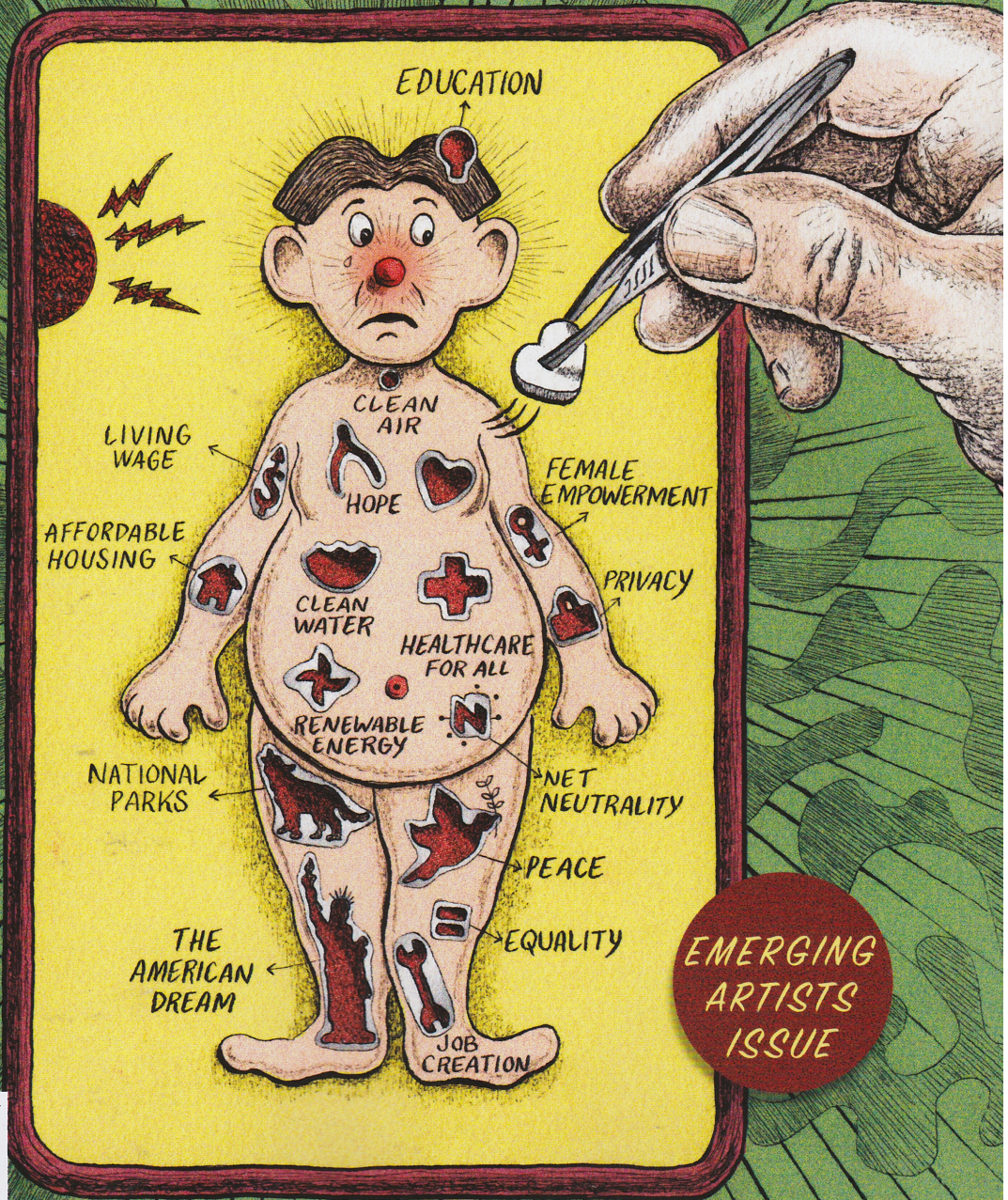


ART IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET ALEX AND WARD AT ALDRICH VIVIAN BEER

ART NEW ENGLAND

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE



MARCH/APRIL
18

95 US
00 Canada



JARED BOWEN

Giving Voice: Ken Urban, Playwright

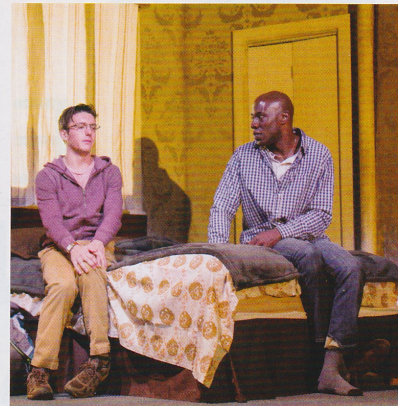
Over the last decade Ken Urban has emerged as a playwright of increasing urgency. Mixed in with comedies such as *A Future Perfect* which premiered at SpeakEasy Stage Company, he's written dramas such as *Sense of an Ending* about the Rwandan genocide and *The Awake*, hailed by the *Village Voice* for its "engaging tapestry of stories." It's been a steady rise for the playwright now in his early 40s. He's been awarded a host of writing fellowships and has seen his work developed at some of the most prominent theater incubators including the Williamstown Theatre Festival, Playwrights Horizons in New York and Donmar Warehouse in London. Add to that a television pilot optioned by the U.K.'s ITV and it seems Urban has become one of the most engrossing new voices on the theater landscape.

In Urban's most recent play, *A Guide for the Homesick*, which premiered at the Huntington Theatre Company last year and opens in London's West End this October, he explores a myriad of topical issues, including the searing persecution of gay men in Uganda. The play opens with two American strangers, one on vacation and the other fresh from working as an aid worker in East Africa, meeting in Amsterdam. Both are seeking solace in one another while also trying to mask their recent transgressions which include near-crushing remorse for abandoning the people who needed them most. To understand his characters, Urban interviewed workers with Doctors Without Borders. "The role of empathy is incredibly important right now," he says.

Urban grew up in a Republican military family outside Philadelphia with virtually no exposure to theater. It wasn't until college, when he studied in London for a semester, that he became transfixed by the art form. It was the British postmodern playwrights of the 1950s and beyond, such as Caryl Churchill and Joe Orton, who influenced him the most. "What I was drawn to in British writing was how it made ethical concerns front and center, but never in a way that felt didactic," he recalls. "These plays told compelling stories, were sometimes very shocking, but they coupled emotion and intellect." It's both a sensibility and a mission that Urban is now trying to cultivate at MIT—to foster theater that offers agency in these increasingly turbulent times.



From left: Ken Urban, playwright, MIT head of playwriting, and musician. Photograph by Nile Hawver. Samuel H. Levine and McKinley Belcher III in *A Guide for the Homesick* (2017), Huntington Theatre Company. Photograph by T. Charles Erickson.



Last August, Urban was named a senior lecturer in theater arts at MIT, a position that includes leading the school's playwriting program—a role previously filled by theater luminaries such as A.R. Gurney. It was a position Urban had his sights on, having taught playwriting virtually since he was a student himself. "It's more than a day job. It feeds my playwriting," he says. "Being able to put into words why I do the things I do in my writing forces me to be a better writer." Even though Urban entered college as a chemical engineering major, he wound up with a Ph.D. in English literature and concedes he's a right-brained guy working in a left-brained world.

One of the assignments Urban gives his students is to read *The New York Times* article about a female steelworker who, about to be laid off, is assigned to train the very workers who will ultimately assume her job in Mexico City. He asks his students to identify with her story and to think of ways her circumstances might overlap with their lives. Their reactions range from empathy to those fixated on how many cigarettes she smokes. Urban teaches them the same lessons he's learned from relating to his own family of Trump supporters, which he is not. "We're not shutting those people out, but challenging them and engaging them," he says. "You just tell stories that are personal and meaningful." Not that it's easy.

"If you can do something else, do something else because it's a really brutal and hard life most of the time," he says. Except he can't quit it. "It's just something I need to do. It's a burning thing." In an exception to Urban's persistent modesty, he'll allow that he has an exceptional ear for dialogue. His plays generally begin with conversations he's heard walking around the city or riding public transportation. "I spend a lot of time listening to people and to how people speak," he says. "I hear my plays before I see them." And as his recent prolific playwriting would attest, his fellow Americans have a lot to say.

Jared Bowen is the host of the weekly television series, *Open Studio* with Jared Bowen and WGBH's Emmy Award-winning executive arts editor.

**MTA Playwrights Lab:
MIT's New Play Festival**
(a collaboration between MIT students
from Ken Urban's class and professional
theater artists)
Cambridge, MA
mta.mit.edu/events/mta-playwrights-lab
April 5-7, 2018