



# LIGHT MOTIF

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**Tristine Skyler's** emotionally charged new work may be called *The Moonlight Room* but, ironically, the play hasn't a trace of moonlight in it and the room of the title is just an ideal, a fantasy that represents family and safety and home to one young character. Instead, the room in which the play does take place is inherently energized with high stakes, danger, and conflict. The setting is a hospital emergency room, and the quality of the light that fills Skyler's dramatic landscape is the harsh fluorescent lighting of the ER's waiting area.

Here Skyler examines the youth culture and family dynamics that have brought an apparently happy, well-adjusted teenager to overdose on drugs and caused his two friends to try to manage the situation themselves. When their parents find out what's going on and arrive, the importance of bridging the generation gap and finding common ground takes on a sense of life or death urgency.

For Skyler, 33, finding common ground with her teenage characters meant working with at-risk youth in a child advocacy center—it also meant reconnecting with her own youth, when she felt the need to experiment with risky lifestyle choices and watched some of her friends spin out of control.

Skyler chose to put her characters in a hospital waiting room because of a fascination that began when she adapted some stories by Joyce Carol Oates into a film that took place in a bus station waiting room. “I like writing about public space because I see it as a way to capture interweaving stories, the sense of different people’s lives intersecting.

There is a transitional quality to a waiting room, of people

at crossroads in their lives. In the case of *The Moonlight Room*, the characters lives are intersecting at a critical point.”

Skyler, who had acted but never written for the stage, began the play “as an exercise” to see if she could use her experience in the theatre “to teach myself how to write in that medium.” The result of this “exercise” was an outpouring of critical praise. *The New York Times* critic Bruce Weber called Skyler “a precocious talent,” pointing to the spoken rhythms of her characters as “pitch-perfect.”

Skyler’s dialogue is a unique fusion of realism, theatricality, and humor. Her young characters speak in a combination of articulate, educated verbiage and unnervingly accurate street slang that highlights the presence of both promise and peril in their lives. Characters use humor to protect themselves, but they all slip into moments of near-soliloquy where brief glimpses are gained into their most private selves. “I am fascinated by how people escape themselves....How do they reveal, or hide, their true feelings? And the trick of writing, to me, is to reveal the characters to the audience in a way that doesn’t betray them to themselves.”

In the end, *The Moonlight Room* is a wake-up call for both parents and children to take a look at their relationships. There is a pervading sense of mixed hope and dread—hope that these children will make it through these years of risk unscathed, and dread that they too will end up among the ranks of “the lost and the missing,” as one character calls post-9/11 New York. With a touch that is at once utterly specific, human, and humorous, Skyler expresses an urgent need to hold onto a sacred space of intergenerational connection like the moonlight room. “My most proud moments were when I saw parents leaving the theatre in New York, talking about it with their children.”

— Gabriel Davis, *Literary Assistant*