

p joshua laskey
Interview by Sue Staats

Stories on Stage Sacramento's new directors are a most talented pair. They have both excelled in many areas of the arts, they've lived all over the world, and now they're settled back in Sacramento.

p joshua laskey, who goes by joshua, is the artistic director of Stories on Stage Sacramento, and among his many talents is writing. This month's event occurs on Friday the 13th, so naturally there's a horror theme. One of the stories featured is joshua's short piece "Unfathomable," a chilling story of unimaginable loss. I wanted to ask him about the inspiration for that story, but first, I wondered how somebody so accomplished in so many fields chooses what to focus on.

Edited for length and clarity.

Sue: joshua, your [website](#) identifies you as a writer, translator, editor, publisher, director, playwright and producer. Such a range of accomplishments, and I'm wondering, which of them do you love best? Your degrees are in translation, but maybe your favorite is something else?

joshua: Translation is the way I got through graduate school. And acting was the way I got through my BA. And in order to stay focused for the long periods of time it takes to earn degrees, one must find something one is willing to do day in and day out. But I am, at my core, and always will be, a writer. I was aware at a very early age that a writer is something you can be your whole life, and sometimes people will even celebrate you as you get better at it over time. Age isn't a factor as it with, say, a professional athlete, which many young people, especially young boys, dream of. I was no different in wanting this, but one of the things about that is that your career is over by the time you're 30 — well, now I guess 40 because of sports science. But a person can be a writer forever.

Sue: The story being read at Stories on Stage Sacramento, "Unfathomable," would certainly qualify as a horror story. It's bone-chilling. What is it that fascinates you about horror and why are you drawn to write it?

joshua: Well, actually, I only discovered I was a horror writer in the last few years. I had a colleague who is a horror expert. And he would explain what horror was, how it came out of the Gothic tradition. He's a brilliant guy and I'd be sitting there thinking, Oh, my — half of what I write is horror! I had no idea. I didn't focus on it on purpose, but I think I've always focused on drama. It's what made me into a playwright. And dramatic situations often arise from psychological discomfort, which naturally leads me to telling a story, and this psychological discomfort apparently makes much of what I write bleed into the genre of horror.

Sue: This story is particularly chilling in that it deals with a family, a woman and her young children. Can you tell me what inspired it?

joshua: The nut or kernel of the story is actually true. When I was living in the Caribbean, I knew a person who was a grief counselor. And at some point, she told me the story of a young French couple who had lost a baby in a boating accident. A tragedy, of course, and a highly dramatic situation. I've always been drawn to wondering what it would be like to be somebody else. And so, the idea of what that must have been like for those people just started me on the path of, what would it be like, this experience? And off I went.

Sue: Well, I won't say any more about the story because people attending the event will hear it. I'll just say it's an arresting story, beautifully told. So, you recently finished your Ph.D., and you and your wife, Jessica, moved back to Sacramento from Dallas. It sounds like you've lived all over the world. So, what's next for you? Are you planning to stay here?

joshua: Jessica will tell you that I have a tendency to get restless — well, that's not quite the right word, it's more like wanderlust. But the journey through the Ph.D. and through all the degrees in the last 10 years has been a lot of what's pulled us away from Sacramento. Our goal has never been to take our talents elsewhere, but to do things here in our hometown, in this environment that's both artistically rich and primed for more. There's room here to be an artist, and that was more difficult in other places we've lived. In the future, we see opportunity that, hopefully, will continue and will keep us grounded here. And when my wanderlust imagines us living in other places, I can just write about them.

Sue: That very neatly leads into my next question, which is: what are your plans for Stories on Stage Sacramento? Where do you see it in five or 10 years, and do you and Jessica see yourselves continuing to stay with it and evolve with it?

joshua: We have very much thought about how to return it to its roots, which is both local writers and short stories, while not losing the vitality that's been brought by you and other directors ahead of us in expanding some of the offerings and expanding some of the scope. And as we plan this, I have to say that although we're mostly "yes" people, it's also important to look for the "no." And by that, I mean being open to opportunity, but also being realistic.

When you look for the "no," (it's) often where you run up against something that seems unrealistic, something that you might put on the back burner because maybe, especially for an organization like Stories on Stage Sacramento, there could be a financial constraint. But you want take advantage of these opportunities. For example, last year, when we had the opportunity to present Literary Death Match, I just said yes. When I looked for the "no," it seemed out of reach, financially. But in talking with Adrian Zuniga, the founder and emcee for it, I found that he's also a go-getter kind of "yes" person, too. And the more we talked, the more he just wanted to figure out a way to do it. And that made it relatively easy, having a bunch of "yes" people in on the mission.

I do think that another part of growing Stories on Stage is finding new directions, finding out what's possible — both for the existing audience, the volunteers, the people who've been involved, and the people who show up to the events. So, we don't want to stray too far away from what's been working on a perfectly practical level, because it's the financial underpinning of everything. And it's important to respect your audience. And so, as we grow and change, we'll also be mindful of that old saying, that everything old is new again. Going back to short stories and highlighting local authors and finding new talent we're not aware of yet — we're planning on doing that.

Sue: Any specific ideas about some new programming, some new ideas you'd like to share?

joshua: I would love for Stories on Stage Sacramento and Stories on Stage Davis to come back together — not that there was a falling out, it's just that we've grown as separate entities. They're our sister organization, were inspired by us, and Jessica and I have worked with them quite a lot in the past, so we have a connection. The dream goal would be a synergy between the two organizations, to bring more visibility to the Northern California literary scene by pooling our resources and bringing in authors from farther afield who might have larger honoraria requests. The idea would be for that author to appear on Friday night at Stories on Stage Sacramento, on Saturday night in Davis, and teach a workshop during the day on Saturday. With this combination, we might be able to lure some big names here and be able to pay for it.

Sue: The Sacramento/Davis nexus might be seen as a destination for prominent writers. They're probably already going to San Francisco on their book tour, so why not?

joshua: Yes. When we were in Dallas, Jessica did some work with the Dallas Museum of Art, bringing in people with astronomical honoraria requests, first-class flights from Europe, all that. So, we know how it works at the highest level — and we can't afford that. But when you get the "yes" people, especially agents and PR people at publishing houses, they are gung-ho to get you on their docket for new work coming out. So, having two events so close to the Bay Area that might be attached on a promotional tour involving five or six events, there might be a way to get people here. And more importantly, it's a way that's not actually on our dime because the publishers pay for it.

Sue: That's such a great idea. Have you talked with the Davis people about it?

joshua: The Davis people are definitely interested. So, hopefully it will happen. Fingers crossed!

Sue: This is so exciting! Let's hope it could happen as early as next season. So, joshua, my last question is rather personal. I've been intrigued for a long time with your name. Well, not exactly your name, but the fact that you use lower case: p joshua laskey. So ... why?

joshua: Well, first of all, I'm a middle-namer. And middle-namers are a group of people who, like left-handed people, are not oppressed in some grand fashion, but the world isn't built for us. And especially not in the computerized age. But as a child, I went by Joshua, or Josh, but I would always be called by my first name, which is Patrick. And people would ask me why I called myself Joshua when Patrick was my real name. And I'd say, "Well, Joshua is my middle name and that's still real." And then they'd say, "Oh, do you hate Patrick? Is that the real reason you don't go by Patrick?" And I'd say, "No, Patrick's my father's name. I love the name Patrick, I'm happy to hold that name. It's just not the name I was called from birth. So it's strange to be called Patrick. That's my dad's name."

Also, I'd be corrected when I put the name (joshua) in lower case. But it just rankled me, because I liked the little J better than the big J, because of the dot — the tittle on top. I know that word, tittle, because I'm a J person, and that's what the dot on top of the lower-case J is called. I liked my name in lower case because I liked putting the dot on top of the J.

When I got to college and could do whatever I wanted with my name, I started using the lower case. And then the upper-case P for Patrick and the upper-case L for Laskey just looked weird. So, they had to get small. So basically, it's a five-year-old's rebellion against not getting to put the dot, the tittle, on top of the J in his name, which is not quite as artsy or grandiose as some other reason.

Sue: No, but it is way more complicated than I thought! Thanks for telling me, though. I can't be the first person to ask.

joshua: No, you're not. It actually almost cost me getting together with Jessica. The first time she saw it in print, she didn't know me. I had sent a script to her because I wanted her to be in a play I had written. When she saw the first page with my name in lower case, she's told me that she thought, "*This* guy — how full of himself is this guy, who does he think he is?" But she was flattered to be asked to read a script because it hadn't ever happened to her before. So, she started reading — and thank God for that, because she accepted the role and that's how we got to know each other. And here we are married. But that lower case almost cost me!

Sue: Well, lucky for us, you two are together and running Stories on Stage Sacramento, I hope for a long time. And I'm sure that the many things you want to have happen absolutely will!