

Neurotic, narcissistic... and so New York

Carey Lovelace's humorous play *Couples Counseling*, about a love triangle, is couched in her city's love of psychobabble



Rachel Devine

With more than a hint of pride in her voice, Carey Lovelace confesses: "I've been in therapy on and off for 35 years." The playwright might have penned a dark comedy that satirises fellow New Yorkers' obsession with self-help and psychoanalysis, but she's not ready to relinquish her place on the couch just yet.

In fact, while she was writing *Couples Counseling*, about a love triangle between a therapist and a couple whose marriage is unravelling, she returned to therapy after a break of several years, partly for research and partly because writing a play about therapy brought on the kind of existential crisis that has kept Woody Allen in work for nearly 40 years. New Yorkers might be able to laugh about their obsession, but some of them simply can't live without it.

"In the play, the male character says, 'therapy is an illusion but we need illusions,' and I truly believe that," says Lovelace. "Therapy works in some ways but is mysterious about how it works. It doesn't really work in the way it's advertised to work. It's not really a science; it's more of an art."

It's impossible not to form the impression that Lovelace is conflicted. She likes therapy — she just doesn't know what it is about it that she likes.

When she sat down to write *Couples Counseling*, much of the dialogue came to her in short, sharp, almost musical bursts. On stage, what isn't said is just as important as what is, and when the cast collapse in fits of coughing, they don't so much need a drink of water as an outlet for their repressed sexual desires.

Lovelace has used many of her therapist's Freudian methods — and the clichés, platitudes and psychobabble. How does that make her feel?

"Of all the plays I've written, this is the one that, funnily enough, is closest to my own voice," she says. "There are a lot of clichés that come up in therapy that have always made me laugh, a lot of bullshit, and it was fun to poke fun at that. But sometimes you find yourself coming back to them and thinking, 'Oh yeah, I get that now'."

As the story took shape, she found herself sympathising with the character of the psychiatrist. "He's a tortured soul who is facing an ethical dilemma and is trying to do the right thing by his male patient but is torn by his desires," she says. "I often feel an ethical dilemma myself. Sometimes I feel like my desire to please everybody comes into conflict with the right thing to do."

Lovelace's compulsion to share is disarming and refreshing in equal measure. It is, she says, the way that New York natives are programmed. "It has to be said that Santa Barbara has the highest per capita of therapists in the world but I think New Yorkers are narcissistic and self-absorbed in the most colourful and wonderful way and that's perfect for therapy," she says.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Couples Counseling*, which is directed by Judith Stevens-Ly, an award-winning Australian theatre director, played to sell-out audiences in New York.

For its Edinburgh run, the psychiatrist is played by Jack Gilpin, a Broadway veteran and television actor, whom British audiences will recognise from *Law & Order*. James B Kennedy and Anna Margaret Hollyman play the couple.

Lovelace is keen to see how a British audience responds to a play that deals with a subject most of us still regard with a level of healthy scepticism.

“Some nights people are laughing but some nights they are quiet and attentive and you can tell it’s a troublesome topic for them,” she says. “I think in 10 years this play will resonate well. I lived in Paris for a while, and at that time people would laugh when they saw people jogging. Then I went back 10 years later and everybody was jogging up and down the Champs-Élysées.”

Couples Counseling, Venue 13, until August 22, 07074 201 313

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