What's your writing process like?

It's a constant alternation of what I call “architecture” and “archaeology” – that is, conceptualization and planning alternating with digging and discovery. I'm constantly moving between these modes, bouncing between high-level thematic or structural ideas and on-the-ground dialogue writing. Too much planning can make a play overly orderly and lose its organic quality – the sense that these people are actually behaving this way, rather than some playwright making them do things. On the other hand, digging in the dirt can turn up wonderful treasures, but if you don't bring order and design to the process, you don't distinguish between a rock and a precious artifact.

Generally, I begin by “making messy” – short scribbles in a notebook, with snatches of dialogue, images, etc. Characters don’t even have names yet, so I call them “Old Guy” or “Detective” or “Kid.” I write my first drafts entirely by hand, in an effort to prolong messiness as long as possible; my notebooks are virtually unreadable by anyone else. Then I “make tidy” by typing it all up into a first clean draft. Every time I have a play reading, or do a new draft, I make the typed draft messy through handwritten changes, then type these up into a new clean draft. Every play I write goes through 10-15 (or more) drafts, perhaps over the course of a number of productions, before it is published and I stop revising.

Do you write everyday? I know some playwrights sit down to write a page a day and then give themselves a reward. How do you structure your time?

Most of the time, I'm writing on deadlines – a draft due date for a theatre I'm working with, a revision for an upcoming reading, a lyric for a scheduled meeting with my composer. As a professor and father, my life is often constrained by immovable responsibilities, so writing takes place wherever and whenever I can get it done, sometimes at odd hours of the day. In the summertime, I'm often
able to work a few weeks at a stretch, at which point I can write for several hours every day.

**What inspired you to write Under the Skin?**

This play began with a title.

**How unusual is that for you?**

Very unusual. For some plays, the titles come early and easily; for others they arrive late in the game. (I should note that Under the Skin had the previous working titles of Rock Paper Scissors; Flesh and Blood; Flesh; The Kidney Play; and The One About the Kidney.)

**So the play began with a title – when, how?**

Putting my four year-old daughter to bed one night, the title “Rock Paper Scissors” popped into my head. I had no idea what it might pertain to, but I thought it was a great title, so I wrote it down and started a play file with nothing in it but the title. (I start a file folder for every play idea I get, though most of them never turn into plays. It’s an agricultural principle: plant many seeds, tend fewer plants, harvest only the hardy.) One day, months later, I read an article about two adult children, both of whom wanted to be the kidney donor for their father, and didn’t know how to resolve this dispute; the journalist jokingly suggested a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors. I began to wonder whether my play title might deal with kidney transplantation. (Yeah, this is how my brain works.)

In the coming months, articles and information about kidney transplantation started to show up in my world, so they went into the play file, and soon after I began wondering who the characters in my play might be. I scribbled notes, asked and answered questions, wrote snatches of dialogue, and thought deeply about story and possible plot events: Who needs a kidney? By when? Or else what? Who doesn’t want to give him one? (Since plays need conflict to move forward.) I also did a lot of research on the world of kidney disease, donation, and transplantation, both online and through personal interviews with donors, recipients, and medical personnel.

**When I first read the play I thought, wow, Michael must have experienced a family member going through this. It feels raw. Do you draw from your own, private experiences – how personal does your writing get?**

Every play I write draws on both fiction (imagination) and fact (personal experience, observed experience, and research). Although the medical aspect of this play was unfamiliar territory for me when I began writing, I soon realized that the family issues – relations between parents and children, betrayals, secrets, addiction, affairs, estrangements, etc. – were what I was really exploring, through
the high-stakes lens of organ transplantation. These issues are very close to home, in my own family and my wife’s, which is why they probably feel raw.

You’re a father. What is it like writing a play where the central relationship is father/child?

My daughter was four, the same age as Raina’s daughter in the play, when I began writing Under the Skin, so I was experiencing all of the contradictory things parents of young children experience – including utter adoration of your child alternating with the occasional desire to kill them (usually around difficult bedtimes). There have been significant estrangements between parents and adult children within my family, and the thought that my daughter might someday want to have nothing to do with me was a heartbreaking thing to consider. However, I have also seen moving examples of family walls coming down, testifying to people’s ability to change and soften over time.

Today was first rehearsal. The first time we heard the play aloud. Can you describe what it feels like to hear your play for the first time with actors? What are you listening for specifically? Or is it more of letting the story wash over you?

The characters who talk in my head are hypothetical people until they are embodied by actors’ bodies and voices. When I hear the play aloud, the actors alternately validate the authenticity of these characters and reveal their moments of inauthenticity – usually when the playwright’s trying to make a point instead of letting his characters say what they want to say. You would think that a vividly-realized production of one of my plays would make me compare subsequent actors to their predecessors, but in fact, every cast quickly inhabits the play and makes it their own, erasing earlier incarnations in my mind.

Everyman’s production is the second production of UNDER THE SKIN. And there have been some changes made since the show opened last year (at Arden Theatre Company in Philadelphia). Are you acutely focused on listening to the new pages and changes? Or does it always feel new and fresh since the company of actors is new?

I’m always most acutely focused on new material, to determine whether it is, in fact, an improvement over previous versions. My ultimate goal is to wind up with the best possible “blueprint” for productions, so the more times I hear the play with different actors, the better I understand its characters and the experience it generates.

Do you rewrite during the rehearsal process? Do the actors get fresh pages as they work?
I always revise during rehearsals, though these changes are biggest and most wide-ranging in the first production, and in the first days and weeks. There are always things you don’t learn until you put a play in front of an audience, so changes typically continue into previews, though these are rarely drastic, as actors need to get their footing, and last-minute script changes can hamper their confidence in performance. I made a number of small changes to *Under the Skin* on the first rehearsal day at Everyman, and may make others, though none, I’m sure, will be as drastic as some of the changes I made during the original production process.

You’ve said that you hope this play makes you laugh, feel deeply, and opens your heart. I find I always want a play to do this to some degree. I want to be changed by seeing characters change. You really do this here. Can you talk about how you get specific characters to evolve? And is that different than crafting an entire piece?

I think that many of the best dramatic works have both exterior and interior journeys. For example, Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* goes on a big exterior journey to Oz, undergoes many trials in order to return to Kansas, and eventually succeeds in going home. But she also takes a spiritual journey, from a girl who is disenchanted with her life and family to one who finally recognizes what is precious about home. Certain types of Hollywood movies – particularly the blow-em-up Action-Adventure variety – have virtually no interior journeys whatsoever: they’re about killing the guy before he kills again, or diverting the meteor before it wipes out all life. And these have their satisfactions, but they rarely move us deeply.

For me, I seek to discover where a character’s spiritual blockage is – where they’re short-sighted, small-minded, or hard-hearted – and put them through a hard time so they are forced to reconsider their previous assumptions about themselves and the world.

**This is your third play with Everyman Theatre. What is it like to return?**

Wonderful! We playwrights spend a lot of time in isolation, so it’s a thrill whenever somebody asks us to dance. And to develop a relationship over the course of many years and productions, as I’ve done with Vinny and Everyman, is most rewarding of all – it’s a validation not just of a single play, but of one’s long-term artistic vision, and an affirmation that there are kindred souls out there.