

# IN PROCESS: 3 NEW VOICES

## From Summer Job to Staged Reading: Talking *Custodians* with Playwright Shelby Solla

by Beck Farris



**Shelby Solla graduated from Marymount Manhattan College in 2018 with dual BAs in Writing for the Stage and Communications.** This semester, she is one of three writers producing a new work in collaboration with In Process, a series of new play readings written by alumni. Her show, *Custodians*, follows a group of young adults working a summer job cleaning an underfunded highschool in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania, a borough in the western part of the state with less than 5,000 residents. As the characters navigate their relationships with each other and their boss, uncomfortable truths come to light, and characters must decide what to do with what they know as the summer heat sets in. I sat down with Shelby to discuss the play, her process, and her time at Marymount.

"It flowed out in a way that almost nothing has ever come out of me—so easily." She said of the script. "The process for it was really different from other plays that I've written." Shelby went on to describe how the first half of the play was written in a couple of hours before she had to work that day. Reflecting on the process of writing the piece, she says, "It was there, and I didn't know it had been there all along."

Shelby's natural sense of humor surfaced multiple times throughout the interview. She shared how the basis of the play had come from her own experience working a summer janitor job. "I really didn't know what I even had to say about the experience, I just thought the concept was funny, and I was like—I could write a silly play about this!

And then it came out so much bigger than I had anticipated, and with thematic ideas that I hadn't thought were going to be at the crux of the play."

I went on to ask about some of her other work, confessing that I looked over her New Play Exchange profile while preparing for the interview. "Finally, someone did!" She replied with a laugh. "*Custodians* is different from anything I've ever written. [...] [There are other] plays that I spent literal years trying to crack open and trying to figure out, to then [...] write this true realism play so fast and so honestly and [it became] something that I'm so happy with now— it just is so different."

As our time together drew to a close, I asked if she had anything else to say about the process of *Custodians*. "I'm feeling really good! [...] I didn't

know what to expect, because I think I forgot how smart everyone is. I didn't feel like I was as smart or intuitive when I was in school so maybe I just expected everyone to be self conscious, but [...] everyone in my cast is giving me feedback that I couldn't have dreamed of from "adults," [...] I've taken writing classes with people 20 years older than me who aren't that thoughtful or insightful." Commenting on her time after graduating from Marymount, Shelby said, "It looks very different when you're writing and working full time and have to keep yourself and two cats alive. It's not all fun and games anymore! I don't mean that in a downer way, like, 'enjoy your youth while you can,' [...] but it is really special to be reminded of how influential [my time at Marymount] was for me."

***Custodians* will be presented at New York Live Arts on March 31st, and April 1st and 2nd.** Stay tuned for information about tickets. You can find more about Shelby's career and other works on her website, [shelbysolla.com](http://shelbysolla.com), or on her New Play Exchange Profile.