

# The Boston Globe

## Recalling the lucky young scholar

David Lindsay-Abaire grew up among the ‘Good People’ of his new play and remembers them amid today’s hard times



David Lindsay-Abaire at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre in New York, where his play “Good People” opened last week. He is coming off the success of his Pulitzer-winning “Rabbit Hole.” (Peter Foley for The Boston Globe)

By [Christopher Wallenberg](#)

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**NEW YORK** — It’s been more than two decades since he left South Boston, but David Lindsay-Abaire has come home again.

**GOOD PEOPLE** Sure, the Pulitzer Prize-winner — for his play “Rabbit Hole,” on which the critically acclaimed 2010 film was based — made frequent visits to his childhood home on West Fifth Street after he left for college. But Lindsay-Abaire, 41, who grew up in Southie in the 1970s and ’80s, was reluctant to write a play set in the proud, insular, working-class neighborhood that helped shape his identity.

Not that he was ambivalent about his roots. On the contrary, he says in an interview at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre on Broadway, where his new play, “Good People,” opened Thursday to enthusiastic reviews. “I’ve been wanting to write about Southie for a long time, but I felt like I had to be mature enough as a person and as a writer to write responsibly and respectfully about this place and these people I knew so well,” he says. “I wanted to make sure that I did right by them.”

The jumping-off point for the play came several years ago when he began thinking more deeply about social class, a frequent preoccupation of British dramatists but a subject that contemporary American playwrights have often bypassed, and a concept that some Americans seem to regard as not existing at all.

“I kept hearing: Where are the American plays about class? Why don’t American playwrights write about class? Maybe they do, and those plays just don’t get produced,” he says, perched in the upstairs lounge of the theater before a recent preview performance. “And with the economy being what it is, it seemed like there’s not a more relevant time to talk about the struggles of the working class.”

Indeed, as a brainy, creative child growing up near the Old Colony housing projects, Lindsay-Abaire says that class was something that infused his daily life. When he was 11, he earned a scholarship from the Boys & Girls Club to Milton Academy. There, he landed in a strange and unfamiliar world of wealth and privilege to which he had to adjust. “From a young age, I was rubbing elbows with a very different kind of person and social class,” he says, “and I felt a lot of tension and conflict in my identity because of that.”

Before long, a story began to form in his imagination, and the resulting play paints a portrait of people who live paycheck to paycheck, who struggle to put food on the table and catch up with unpaid bills — challenges familiar to many ordinary Americans. The action centers on a sharp-tongued single mother, Margie Walsh (played by Oscar winner Frances McDormand), who loses her job as a cashier at a Dollar Store and must figure out how to get back on her feet. Her friend, Jean (Becky Ann Baker), suggests that she get in touch with an old high school friend of theirs, Mikey (Tate Donovan), whom Margie once briefly dated, to see if he might have a job for her. Mikey, a doctor who lives in tony Chestnut Hill with his wife and infant daughter, has complex, ambivalent feelings about his roots in Southie. As the play unfolds and Margie faces possible eviction, she considers a desperate move to pull herself out of her impoverished existence.

While “Good People” is not autobiographical, Lindsay-Abaire says the characters were inspired by many people he knew in Southie in his youth, before gentrification intruded into the once largely Irish-Catholic neighborhood.

“I know *so* many women like the ones in this play. Margie’s best friend — that lady walked into my mother’s kitchen every morning to have coffee. She’s my mother’s friend from across the street; she’s the lady that works up at the nursing home. She was a combination of different women, with a brashness, honesty, and loyalty that is so part of the community. And my mother, of course, is in every one of these characters,” says the

son who was born David Abaire (he hyphenated his surname after marrying his wife, Chris Lindsay, in 1994).

In films such as “Good Will Hunting” and “The Departed” and the real-life exploits of Southie gangsters such as James “Whitey” Bulger, Southie has suffered from a reputation, fair or not, as a parochial, crime-ridden place, and many longtime residents resent that. While he acknowledges the neighborhood’s dark episodes, Lindsay-Abaire says he wanted to represent his own, less-sensational experience of Southie.

“I wanted to write about the people that I knew. I didn’t know many criminals. I didn’t know many drug addicts. But I knew people who were just struggling to get by,” he says. “And I thought, you don’t see those people on a Broadway stage very often.”

During the interview, Lindsay-Abaire’s affable and generous spirit proves to be as abundant in person as it is in his plays. He’s a warm presence and flashes a frequent smile. And like the character of Mikey, he’s a local boy made good who escaped the neighborhood. But while Mikey believes he earned the spoils of his success because he worked hard, Lindsay-Abaire knows that luck played an enormous part in his rise from working-class origins to winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2007 for “Rabbit Hole,” which was turned into the film starring Nicole Kidman in an Oscar-nominated performance.

“There’s literally not a day that I don’t wake up and think, Oh my God, I’m *so* lucky. My life could have easily gone a different way,” he says. “If I hadn’t gotten lucky, I could certainly have ended up the manager at a Dollar Store — or maybe not even the manager, maybe the cashier. . . . A lot of people I grew up with are in jail, died of drug overdoses, or committed suicide. They weren’t bad people, they weren’t troublemakers. They just didn’t have the breaks and the opportunities that I did.”

Indeed, Lindsay-Abaire points out that the scholarship he earned from the Boys & Girls Club only came up every six years. “I had to be the exact right age at the exact right year in order to even be eligible for it,” he says.

In addition to parents who kept him on the right path, he also benefited from supportive mentors at the Boys & Girls Club, including Pattie McCormick and Anne Gordon, who advocated for him to earn that scholarship.

“I went back to visit the club a few weeks ago and see a couple of the ladies who worked there when I was a kid. We were talking, and one of them said, ‘Boy that was a really contentious staff meeting about the scholarship.’ And I said, ‘Why?’ And they said, ‘Well, you know, it’s generally an athletic scholarship. And you were this really artsy kid who did all this writing and all this art. Some people felt, no, it has to go to an athlete, that’s

what it's for. But other people really fought hard for you.' And up until two weeks ago, I had no idea that had happened," he says, his voice rising with emotion.

Lindsay-Abaire, who now lives in Brooklyn with his wife and two children, says lucky breaks like that forced him to look critically at the myth of the American dream. "I'm not saying people shouldn't apply themselves and work hard. You do have to try to make your own luck," he says. "But I know people firsthand who worked incredibly hard, who were really smart, who never got into trouble, and still didn't get a break."

That notion may be hard for some successful people to swallow, says "Good People" director Daniel Sullivan. "I bet there will be a lot of people sitting out there in the audience who won't feel that their success had anything to do with luck," he says. "Because somehow once you admit to yourself that it was luck, it forces you to look back on those who didn't have that kind of luck with some sense of obligation."

Despite Lindsay-Abaire's good fortune, his childhood friend Jennifer Gordon, who lives on the same street that she and David grew up on, insists that he always worked hard and stayed focused, so he was able to take advantage of any breaks that came his way.

"When you start way down on the bottom like a Margie Walsh, it's real hard to dig yourself out of that," Gordon says. "So when I look at someone like David, who was born in a hole, for him to achieve success compared to somebody else who was not born in that situation and didn't have to climb that far out, I'm just so proud of him."

In addition to plays (which he began writing in high school), Lindsay-Abaire has penned scripts for several Broadway musicals ("Shrek" and "High Fidelity") as well as his share of screenplays, including his adaptation of "Rabbit Hole," the 2005 animated film "Robots," and Sam Raimi's upcoming "Wizard of Oz" prequel, which will star James Franco. As for the stage, he's probably not yet done writing about his roots. He says he has two new plays beginning to stir in his head — one of them again set in South Boston.

"I do feel the pull to write more substantially about bigger ideas and bigger topics," he says. "And I certainly don't think I'm done writing about the neighborhood yet. I feel like there's still so many stories and people there that I want to give life to."