



The Lifespan of a **FACT**

a play by Jeremy Kareken, David Murrell and Gordon Farrell  
based on the book by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal

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**BEHIND / BEYOND**  
THE SCENES / THE STAGE

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AUDIENCE ENLIGHTENMENT GUIDE

# Director's Notes by Paul Sapp



"If a mirror were a sufficient means of handling human experience, I doubt that our species would have invented literature."

So writes author John D'Agata in his email correspondence with Jim Fingal, a fact-checker assigned to D'Agata's essay "What Happens There"

by The Believer magazine. The essay— informed by the story of sixteen-year old Levi Presley, who leapt to his death from the 1,149-foot observation tower of the Stratosphere hotel-casino in Las Vegas—had previously been rejected by Harper's magazine due to concerns about accuracy. For D'Agata and Fingal, the journey to publication would stretch out over seven years, and feature many sharply worded exchanges about factual truth and creative license. That correspondence, published in 2012 as the book *The Lifespan of a Fact*, inspired the 2018 Broadway stage adaptation that opens at Hickory Community Theatre this November.

As voluminous as their exchanges were, the contention between them is very straightforward. For D'Agata, the essay is an art form akin to poetry—lyrical, experimental, even provocative. If a writer wants to alter a quote or embellish a detail for narrative effect—for a greater creative "truth"—they should be free to do so. For Fingal, such creative shades of grey have no place in the world of non-fiction writing. As Mark Twain once quipped: "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." A fact can only be what it is. So when D'Agata scolds Fingal's obsessive dedication to the details as "stupid", Fingal is resolute in his reply: "Unfortunately, I don't get to decide which facts are stupid. I have to check all of them."

It is understandable to sympathize with

Fingal. In a world where information can be verified at lightning speed, but is increasingly being challenged through a lens of subjective intentions, a fact must stand as "a final measure of the truth." For Fingal, to knowingly present a non-fiction narrative with factual misrepresentations is to purposely undermine the bonds of trust a society needs to function. If trust matters, then "truth" has to matter. If truth matters, then facts have to matter.

And yet...who of us is not prone to some sort of creative license in telling the narrative of our own lives? Who has not rounded up a percentage to emphasize a point? Altered someone's voice to cast that person in an unflattering light (and ourselves in a flattering one)? How often do we choose not to challenge another person's narrative embellishments in service to "good storytelling"? (Let us pause briefly to appreciate Twain's quip about truth given his stature as a spinner of narrative yarns.) And, how open are we to such embellishments about actual people and events, because they can infuse a well-told story with things we seek as human beings: perspective, insight, meaning.

"Sometimes we misplace knowledge in pursuit of information," writes D'Agata. "Sometimes our wisdom, too, in pursuit of what's called knowledge."

"Touché," responds Fingal.

All of which is to say: If you find yourself picking a side during the show, wait. There are three characters in this play: John D'Agata and Jim Fingal (two actual living people), and a magazine publisher named Emily Penrose (a real historical figure, but in a different context). It's Penrose who must thread the needle between Fingal's "facts for facts' sake" certainty and D'Agata's "art for art's sake" philosophy—between a "true story" and a "good story". It's Penrose who must ask the question, "Are those our only choices?"

How will you answer?

# The Tension Between Facts and Truth

## by Dr. Jeffrey Delbert, Ph.D



There is a challenge in authoring an essay for a playbill wherein the central tension of the play concerns published essays. *THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT* explores the dilemma of how facts work with or against the understanding of a deeper Truth. In recent years, discussions

about facts distorting reality via junk news or disinformation campaigns have become overwhelming. Online publics have become obsessed with making sure no detail is out of place on a host of a social media platforms.

The debate is not new. As far back as Ancient Greece, philosophers like Socrates and his student Plato tried to illustrate how exchanging logical arguments (dialectic) could unearth Truth. By questioning and testing, they believed philosophers could gain wisdom by illustrating what was not yet fully known to the community. Part of this pursuit toward Truth led Plato to battle Sophists like Gorgias. In short, Plato believed the Sophists' goal to teach others how to argue toward specific ends was trickery. To Plato, developing argument as a skill or knack was simply a way for such teachers to gain acclaim and patrons, which avoided the noble pursuit of using dialectic to uncover the Truth.

Although Socrates' and Plato's attacks against the Sophists may have been partially valid, they were also unfair. The Sophists wanted to generate political discourse that could yield consensus among divergent groups that held competing beliefs. Teachers like Gorgias aspired to teach people how to argue better.

The Sophists' goal was to motivate citizens toward noble ends in attempt to create understanding among people. They believed everyone should have access to this practical skill that could sustain and cohere contentious democratic communities. At times, this may have involved overlooking absolute perfection in their discourse.

The tension between facts and truth persists today among those who rally behind fact checking, such as Jim Fingal, the fact-checker in *THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT*. Those who yearn to set the record straight, those who wish for the Truth, argue that public rhetoric distorts facts by the network of narratives and terms in which they are uttered. They argue that gatekeepers over- or under-emphasize various issues while distorting others. Consequently, calls to rid our discourse of such rhetoric and simply stick to the facts is a common call.

Over time, the public's trust in traditional media sources has declined. Independent organizations have responded to this reality and are attempting to create a better information environment. One of the larger fact-checkers, PolitiFact, began in 2007 as an independent agency to check political statements for accuracy. On PolitiFact's website, next to their call for monetary support, they exclaim, "Stand up for the facts!" This call encourages citizens to put their financial might behind the desire for accurate facts. In recent years, PolitiFact has expanded its assessments to examine a variety of claims circulating on social media and less traditional news sources. To illustrate their findings, they post clever graphics of a meter that rates statements on a scale from "Pants on fire" to "True."



Examples of “pants on fire” facts seem easy to dismiss. For instance, a recent Instagram post claimed: “Walrus seen on Florida streets after Hurricane Ian hits land.”

Such statements of facts are debunked easily. In this case, PolitiFact was able to document the image was from 2020 and was an elephant seal stranded in Chile. Other claims like Elizabeth Warren’s statement that “40% of the folks who have student loans do not have a college diploma, four-year diploma” are validated easily by checking primary sources.



Statements receiving a “half True” or “Mostly false” rating require more complex analyses. As with the play, to determine if a statement is true, a fact checker should first consider if the fact is verifiable empirically. Do we have evidence that something happened or existed? If we do not, the waters become murky. Before getting outraged, we should ask ourselves:



Does the statement’s use of a questionable fact intend to mislead? Does the factual error significantly modify the statement’s intent or is it just a minor “gotcha”? How likely is it that the statement will circulate or go viral? Are citizens searching for an answer about the veracity of a statement or the given fact?

A recent example of a “half true” rating from PolitiFact was an investigation into the claim, “The Earth spun a little faster recently and scientists are gravely concerned.” It turns out the Earth did complete a rotation 1.59 milliseconds faster than the 24-hour standard, but scientists are not gravely concerned. The Truth of the matter is that human society has imposed a

24-hour standard on a natural phenomenon. Variations do occur outside of our imposed structure. To adjust for such natural variations, society has options. We can offer corrections to a day by removing a second. We could ignore that our days will be uncoordinated with the expected 24-hour clock. Despite what we may say or do to account for these variations, the Earth will continue to rotate according to the laws of physics regardless of our imposed organization of time. This is important to remember. Attention to a particular fact by experts dedicated to understanding specific phenomena is not always cause for alarm.

Arguments about the importance of the Earth’s rotational speed are the types of arguments the Sophists wanted to prepare society to work out. Our news cycles can make a significant difference as to what becomes a salient fact or argument. Our framing of an issue can change how we understand an issue. If you remember a few years ago, a debate raged on the Internet about whether a dress was blue or gold . The true color of this dress became a salient issue because so many people were discussing its importance. Framed as a zero-sum debate, arguing that the dress could only



be one color, participants ignored that humans observe colors differently on a regular basis. However, as we exist in an “visually focused” period wherein images capture Truth to verify the world we live in, such images make us question the nature of facts in general. They introduce a question in our minds about how much we interpret to make each fact True.

Without our ability to grapple with factoids in

a rational manner, facts scattered to the wind undermine our ability to trust institutions. Salience of issues changes what we understand as important. Framing shapes the issues upon which we focus our senses. Societal norms will shape how we code those issues. Interpretation exists, not only in how we understand the facts presented in front of us, but also in what we choose to share with those around us.

Society shapes the types of information it wishes to be in circulation. Junk news exists because we have created platforms designed to pique our interests and leave us wanting more. People engage with clickbait headlines because they want useful information. Our information systems know how to rouse your emotional capacity to be outraged at a particular business practice. Our media know the ways to get you smiling at an artist who has covered his house in doodles. Such content is entertaining. However, these stories do not get us any closer to seeing the Truth, nor do they help us cooperate as a society. Divisive ads simply want your attention on their content. However, ads presenting factoids about a person or product are not helping us be better citizens.

In *THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT* Jim Finigal becomes obsessed with the intricacies of all facts presented in John D'Agata's essay. The question we have wrestled with as a society since the days of Plato is, "Does it matter?" If we only ever see the shadows on the wall of society, should we be concerned? Do under-explained or underdeveloped facts in the service of bringing awareness to an issue get in the way of Truth?

The world itself is overly concerned with accuracy. The rise of digital culture, wherein we can easily replicate "things" or represent them with big data sets, allows everyone to become aware of the intricacies of facts. However, knowing the facts does not make

one knowledgeable. It does not make one an expert. Having facts put into a larger context is at the core of making good arguments. Good arguments in our media ensure we can trust those who provide information. Being able to measure the weight of a fact is important. For instance, when Jim questions the color of the brick at the "base" of the tower, the audience is asked to judge if this inaccuracy takes away from the reality of the truth John attempts to provide.

Media designed to promote attention to particular facts and encourage shallow engagement. When folks like or share without comment, they inadvertently undermine healthy democratic debate by withholding their line of thinking. Prolonged, deep discussions about the types of information we are sharing help us understand the purposes of our community. It also helps to increase participation in developing robust community standards. With clearer standards, citizens could trust an author's intentions to be good. John D'Agata change to the color of brick could be to stimulate deeper discussions. If we focused on building a society intent on gaining knowledge with the possibility that humans may err, then we could allow bad facts to die out after scrutiny without also having to bury the messengers with them.

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**Jeffrey Delbert** joined the faculty at Lenoir-Rhyne University in 2012. He is an associate professor and teaches courses in argument, digital storytelling and campaign communication. His research focuses on the intersection of media, politics and popular culture, exploring how rhetoric influences the public sphere. He has recently been published in *Speaker & Gavel*, *Relevant Rhetoric*, *the Praeger Handbook of Political Communication* and his co-authored book *Rhetoric and Governance Under Trump*.

In 2021, Delbert received the Lenoir-Rhyne Faculty Scholar Award, which is presented to the faculty member who has made the greatest contribution to his/her discipline during the academic year.

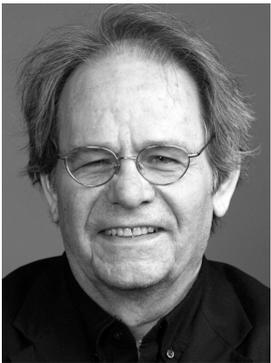
# About the Playwrights



JEREMY KAREKEN is a playwright living in New York and Baltimore. His short plays *HOT ROD*, *BIG TRAIN*, and *80 CARDS* have been performed around the country and internationally. He served as a speech writer and policy analyst for two presidential campaigns. His awards include the Sewanee Conference's Dakin Fellowship for *FARBLONDJET*, and Guthrie/Playwrights Center's Two-Headed Challenge for *THE SWEET SWEET MOTHERHOOD*. The Hamptons Film Festival Screenwriters Conference selected Kareken and David Murrell for their horror-comedy script about haunted breast implants—"THESE! Conquered the Earth!" In 2018, PlayPenn shortlisted Jeremy's new political satire about an illiterate king, *THE RED WOOL*. Born and raised in Rochester, New York, and a graduate of the University of Chicago, he has taught at NYU, NYIT, the Actors Studio Drama School, and currently teaches at the Acting Studio—New York. A lifetime member of The Actors Studio, Jeremy occasionally acts and for 18 years served as the researcher for Bravo TV's "Inside the Actors Studio."



DAVID MURRELL was born and raised in New York City. He graduated from Stuyvesant High School and the University of Chicago, currently lives in Queens, and has written a sea chest's worth of TV and film treatments and spec scripts. Access Theater (NYC) and the Cleveland Public Theatre each produced his play *DUCTWORK* and the Hamptons Film Festival Screenwriters Conference selected his and Jeremy Kareken's feature screenplay about haunted breast implants, "THESE! Conquered the Earth." In 2019, the Outer Critics Circle co-awarded David its John Gassner Playwriting Award for *THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT*.



GORDON FARRELL Trained as a playwright at the Yale School of Drama, Gordon received an MFA in 1986 and went from there to work with major Hollywood studios, initially as a story analyst for Warner Brothers and Columbia Pictures, and eventually as a screenwriter. He has written for hire and sold screenplays to Universal Pictures, Warner Brothers, MGM, and ITC. Gordon's first independent screenplay, "Girls Who Smoke," premiered in 2011. It went on to be an official selection at over a dozen film festivals, ultimately winning the Audience Choice Award in Seattle at the Post Alley Film Festival. As a playwright, from 2009 to 2013, Gordon worked with dozens of women on New York's Lower East Side who wanted to tell their personal stories on stage. The series of monologue plays that grew out of it was called *IN THE RED ROOM/EVERY WOMAN DANCES FOR SOMEONE*. In May 2019 the fully dramatized version, *GIRLS WHO WALKED ON GLASS*, played to SRO houses and rave reviews in Buffalo. His other plays have been produced in San Francisco, at the Alleyway Theatre, at the Yale School of Drama, and at Primary Stages in New York. He is the author of "The Power of the Playwright's Vision," published by Heinemann Press in 2001. It has been translated internationally and become a standard playwriting text at colleges and universities in North America, Europe, and Asia.

# The Real Life Story's Central Characters

THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT is adapted from the book of the same title co-written by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal. The book's two authors are the real-life story's central characters. D'Agata is a writer who penned the piece "What Happens There," about a suicide in Las Vegas and the culture there that might have encouraged it. Jim Fingal is the fact checker for "The Believer" magazine that ultimately published D'Agata's essay, but not without years of dialogue and discussion between the two men on what could and should be printed. Here is some information about the two authors.



In addition to *The Lifespan of a Fact*, John D'Agata is the author of *Halls of Fame*, *About a Mountain*, and the editor of the 3-volume series *A New History of the Essay*, which includes the anthologies *The Next American Essay*, *The Making of the American Essay*, and *The Lost Origins of the Essay*. His work has been supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Howard Foundation Fellowship, an NEA Literature Fellowship, and a Lannan Foundation Fellowship. He holds a B.A. from Hobart College and two M.F.A.s from the University of Iowa, and recently his essays have appeared in *The Believer*, *Harper's*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Conjunctions*. John D'Agata lives in Iowa City where he teaches creative writing at the University of Iowa.



Jim Fingal's biography, from the "about" page on his personal website ([jimfingal.com](http://jimfingal.com)), is written in first person as follows:

*Hello, I'm Jim. I'm a cofounder of Logic Magazine. I co-wrote a strange book with lots of red text in it. So far it's been published in three languages. I am currently the CTO at Amino, whose mission is to create the clearest picture of the American healthcare system and connect everyone with the best care possible.*

*I enjoy programming, particularly on creative projects.*

*My partner and I have adopted retired racing greyhounds, and currently have a cute little Staffy mix named Piglet.*

*I co-wrote a book called *The Lifespan of a Fact*, which was published in 2012 by Norton. You can buy it at your local bookseller, or online at [Bookshop.org](http://Bookshop.org).*

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## The Essay

As stated above, "The Believer" magazine did eventually publish D'Agata's essay. Would you like to read it? This QR code will take you there.





The Lifespan of a

**FACT**

a play by Jeremy Kareken, David Murrell and Gordon Farrell  
based on the book by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal

November 4-19 in the Firemen's Kitchen  
Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30pm, Sundays at 2:30pm  
and Thursday, November 17th at 7:30pm

\$16 for adults and \$10 for youth and students.  
To purchase tickets visit [hickorytheatre.org](http://hickorytheatre.org)  
or call the box office at 828-328-2283.

ADVISORY: The LIFESPAN OF A FACT is suitable for adults and older teenage audiences. Characters lock horns in a debate of fact vs. fiction, and they drop some F-bombs in the process. Their encounters feature other mature themes, including discussions of suicide.

## MORE FUN THINGS TO LEARN

Between *The Lifespan of a Fact's* publication as a book in 2012 and its theatrical adaptation in 2018, D'Agata and Fingal provided their takes on the events in a variety of interviews and articles. Use the QR codes to check them out.



Guernica magazine: "John D'Agata: What We Owe History"



New City Lit: "Fact or Nonfiction? John D'Agata and the Truth Behind the Essay"

Kenyon Review: "Doubling Down: An Interview with John D'Agata and Jim Fingal"



Broadway.com: #LiveAtFive with Jim Fingal and John D'Agata

