When Tragedy Turns a Journalist Professor into a Playwright

By Jo Kallieck

Anne Nelson had never written a play as a veteran reporter and former war correspondent in El Salvador in the early 1980s, she viewed words and sentences as tools for addressing the issues of her time in hard news and features. For Nelson—who is the director of the International Programs for the School of Journalism—journalism was as familiar as city landmarks.

Sept. 11 changed all that. Though Nelson had appreciated theater since her undergraduate days performing in musical theater at Yale, she never expected that the tragedy of the attacks would redirect her writing career, let alone introduce her to a real-life cast of characters that included a New York City fire captain, two movie stars and the director of an off-Broadway theater.

But Nelson came across a story so personal she could only tell it by turning to another genre altogether: playwrighting. The result is the workshop production of "The Guys," a 90-minute play that opened Dec. 4 to sold-out audiences at Tribeca’s Flea Theater and runs through Dec. 20.

Based on Nelson’s own interactions with a fire captain, "The Guys" is directed by Jim Simpson, and stars his wife, actress Sigourney Weaver. Two movie stars and the director of an off-Broadway theater...