



Beyond Therapy

A Dramaturgical Look at
Christopher Durang's Absurdist Play

By Jenny Layton

Abstract

This dramaturgy notebook was created as a class project for an advanced Theatre History course. We were asked to choose one play to study throughout the semester with the ultimate goal of creating a dramaturgy notebook that would be usable for a production team were we to produce our show of choice. Having a great interest in Christopher Durang and his work, I chose to study *Beyond Therapy*. While the notebook as a whole serves to provide context for a production team, each section of the notebook has its own stand-alone function. In 2014, this research was presented at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (Region VII) in Boise, Idaho and was awarded first runner-up in the dramaturgy category.

Role of the Dramaturge

- Dramaturgy is a relatively new position in the theatre world and not all companies have a resident dramaturge
- A dramaturge's responsibilities vary from company to company
- Basic duties include but are not limited to:
 - Reading and critiquing plays submitted for season selection
 - Literary research
 - Function as a connection between playwright and director
 - Write program notes and create lobby displays

These responsibilities found in various job postings/internship responsibilities posted by professional theatre companies

Project Guidelines

- Read the script and create a basic plot and character breakdown
- Research and write essays on the following areas related to the play:
 - Playwright biography
 - Historical context
 - Themes and criticisms
 - Production history and response
 - Two other areas of choice

These guidelines from Professor Janet Gupton's Theatre History II assignment sheet

Project Goals

- Create an engaging research notebook to compliment Durang's style
- Create a notebook that could inform all production team members of the tone and context of the play
- Become an expert on the context surrounding Durang's play as well as the play itself

Beyond Therapy – Initial Notes

- Written by Christopher Durang
- First produced in 1981 at Phoenix Theatre
- Four characters
- Two acts with one intermission
- Themes
 - Homophobia
 - Sexism

Contents of the Notebook

- Christopher Durang – Biographical information
- Historical context of the play
- Themes present in the play
- Critical response to the play
- Mock press release of the play
- Interview with Durang
- Works cited

See notebook below

Christopher Durang

Q: Why, with your obvious grasp on tragedy, did you decide to write works of comedy?

A: A slightly pretentious answer might be to say I didn't choose comedy, comedy chose me. I'm not usually funny in person (unless I've gotten very, very relaxed with a person). I do think my parents and extended family all had a sense of humor.



christopherdurang.com

Christopher Durang

- Born in New Jersey in 1949
- Went to Catholic school for his whole life. Wrote plays as a young boy.
- Undergraduate at Harvard. Stopped writing and became depressed.
- Attended Yale with Meryl Streep, and Sigourney Weaver. Worked closely with Weaver.
- Now teaching playwriting at Julliard for several years.



Original cast of *Beyond Therapy*

From left to right: Kate McGregor-Stewart,
Stephan Collins, Sigourney Weaver, Jim Borelli

christopherdurang.com

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Beyond Therapy

by Christopher Durang

Dramaturgical Notebook



Jenny Layton

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Christopher Durang

In the Montclair Hospital in New Jersey on January 2, 1949, Christopher Durang was born. Although he states that he has memories of being in his mother's womb in 1948, he mentions that the day of his birth he has "repressed" (Durang ix). Durang's eccentric writing style is not only apparent in his plays but also in the writings about himself and his work. He seems to recall a lot about his youth, and childhood and early experiences appear to have shaped much of his work. On his official website, christopherdurang.com, in a section containing frequently asked interview questions, he states that his play *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* is semi-autobiographical and about his parents' marriage. According to Thomas Dukes in



Christopher Durang
christopherdurang.com

Contemporary Gay American Poets and Playwrights an A-to-Z Guide, the Catholic faith that he was raised on would also have great impact on his works (141). Many artists who suffered through a depressing upbringing choose to use their art as a way to escape from reality. Durang does not try to run away from his past, but rather uses his life experiences, and his position as a playwright, to create satirical, absurdist plays that point out societal prejudices and challenge controversial issues in the world.

Beyond Therapy is a play about two single adults living in the 1980s trying to find companionship. They put ads in the personal section of the newspaper and answered them in hopes of finding a person to spend their lives with. What happens over the course of the two acts is a mess of dating difficulties and outrageous therapy sessions. Durang wrote *Beyond Therapy* in his mid thirties when all of his friends were feeling the pressure to settle down and get married (Durang x). Consequently, they were also all attending therapy. He pulled from personal experience and the scenarios that his friends were involved in to write *Beyond Therapy* (Durang x).

Durang often drew from personal experience to inspire his writing. While his plays aren't based entirely in truth, they are often the darkened and exaggerated testimonies of his life. Durang grew up in a home with an alcoholic father and a devoutly Catholic mother (Durang x). He witnessed many fights between his parents and was aware, even at a young age, that they were not happily married. His mother had a series of miscarriages and stillbirths causing her to suffer from great depression in his early childhood. However, she always leaned on her

faith and made certain that Durang also was taught to abide by strict Catholic rules. Durang attended Catholic school for secondary education before attending college. In fact, during his junior and senior year of high school he thought that he might join the monastery that was home to his school after graduation; however, he was encouraged to wait and shortly thereafter abandoned his religion and went on to undergraduate school (Durang x).

In the late 1960s, Durang enrolled in Harvard College as an English major (christopherdurang.com). He abandoned theatre and playwriting which he had dabbled in in elementary and secondary school (Durang xi). He quickly fell into a deep depression while in school and as a sophomore sought therapy from Harvard's counseling center. In working with two therapists throughout his college career, he overcame his depression and began writing again. During his senior year at Harvard, he produced his first full-length play: *The Greatest Musical Ever Sung*. This musical was inspired by his Catholic faith and caused quite a stir with conservative faculty members at the college. He discovered his love for the dark humor and satire that he used in writing this play which inspired the rest of his work (Durang xi).

See ya later, sonny!
Good luck at
Harvard!



Durang's play *Beyond Therapy*, produced for the first time in 1981, touches on issues of sexual orientation. Durang himself is gay and therefore understands the great prejudice against homosexuals. In the first scene of *Beyond Therapy*, after male protagonist Bruce tells female protagonist Prudence that he is bisexual, she responds by stating, "I hate gay people" (Durang 5). Durang's dark humor allows him to write dialogue into his plays that is abrasive and potentially offensive. Durang certainly does not hate gay people, but inserting this kind of subject and language into his plays, he allows people to observe just how petty this kind of hatred is.

Some of Durang's best and most successful plays are his most absurd. Additionally, these more successful plays tend to be the ones that most directly relate to his life. According to Dukes, Durang's most successful plays are *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, a one act expressing his disappointment with the shortcomings of the Catholic church, and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, a full length play inspired by his parents' dysfunctional marriage (142). Unfortunately, *Beyond Therapy* received only mediocre reviews by the time it reached its Broadway debut. However, it still remains one of Durang's most performed plays (Dukes 144). Durang appears to succeed the most when his plays are closely related to his personal life and he is able to draw on the absurdities of reality. Furthermore, he does not appear to care

what the critics think of his plays. While he reads reviews and considers what his respondents have to say, he also states, "if the critics won't come along, well then, as Andrew in *Beyond Therapy* would say, fuck 'em" (Durang xix).

Durang's absurdist works are often unforgettable and there is no limit to what his characters will say or do. He is one of a kind: he can inspire laughter and present serious issues in a light that few others can. The world needs more playwrights like Durang to question the status quo and inspire change in the intolerance that stimulates today's ever-flawed society.

Christopher Durang's Beyond Therapy, Conservative America, and the AIDS Crisis

The Phoenix Theater first produced Christopher Durang's *Beyond Therapy* in 1981 (Durang 216). This play, involving bisexuality, homophobia, and conservative gender stereotypes, was introduced to the theatre world at a time when the AIDS crisis in America was at a peak and the conservative Reagan administration gained leadership. The terrifying HIV/AIDS pandemic was a taboo subject (Burkett 1). It was an unmentionable dark cloud over society. Simultaneously, as AIDS was on the rise, feminism was challenged by the rise of conservatism. Whether or not Durang was encouraged by these events to create the bisexual character of Bruce, or the sexist characters of Prudence and Stuart in *Beyond Therapy* is not clear. However, the increasingly threatening illness and political pressures would have effected how audiences of the 1980s received Durang's absurdist play.

As Elinor Burkett states in her book *The Gravest Show on Earth: America in the Age of AIDS*, "Nobody talked about AIDS, but that was hardly surprising" (1). By the mid 1980s, Burkett was living in Miami where AIDS was beginning to spread. She herself was a victim of the devastating disease and she witnessed the vibrant city become silently transformed by plague. Douglas A. Feldman and Julia Wang Miller state in their book *The AIDS Crisis* that no one knows exactly where the AIDS or HIV virus first began (1). While many theories have been investigated regarding the origin of the virus, the hushed nature of the issue hindered beneficial research. This lack of discussion led to lack of research, which ultimately hindered people from understanding the virus when it was first discovered. For example, in the early years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, it was unclear whether or not the virus could infect women. With more research by the late 1990s, it was discovered that "More men than women are HIV-positive... but...not only will most women with the virus fall ill with AIDS, but many will pass the virus to their newborn children". (Panos/Zed viii).

With all of the varying illnesses that plagued society in the past, what made HIV/AIDS

different? Part of the fear surrounding the disease was its unknown origin. There is great debate over where and how the disease began. There are rumors tracing the virus back to Haiti in the 1970s, but this is a theory that is no longer accepted (Feldman, Miller 1). Some more outrageous speculations claim that AIDS originated in Africa because the locals contracted the disease through sexual intercourse with monkeys (Feldman, Miller 4). Feldman and Miller make a point that if AIDS did begin in Africa, it likely spread due to the subtropical climate (5). They also make the point that, "if it did begin in Africa, Africans cannot be held responsible for its spread. There is no reason to believe that the average African is any more sexually active than the average American, and Africans certainly did not have sex with monkeys"(5).

The next, and bigger social concern was the transmission of the disease primarily among homosexual men. At this time, homosexuality in the US was still not widely accepted. When AIDS first came to the attention of US residents, the connection of the disease to homosexuals was upsetting to the public. In 1981 when the first medical report was made in the US about AIDS, it was deemed a "Gay Plague" and thought only to infect gay or bisexual men and their partners (Feldman, Miller 18). Furthermore, as the disease worsened and society was forced to acknowledge its existence, people thought to be at high risk for contracting the disease, gay men and Haitian-Americans, were severely discriminated against (Feldman, Miller 22). For instance, neighborhoods considered to be predominately gay districts were avoided, and gay and Haitian-American men lost their jobs. Religious groups used the disease as an excuse to condemn homosexuality, and the extremists wanted to pass ballot propositions to lock HIV positive people into quarantine camps for life (Feldman, Miller 22).

Durang approaches the issue of homophobia and HIV/AIDS differently than many of his contemporaries. Unlike Tony Kushner, who would debut *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* in 1991 (Jacobus) ten years after *Beyond Therapy*, Durang does not blatantly discuss issues of homophobia. Instead of writing a play about homosexuality during the AIDS crisis, like Kushner, Durang writes a play about dating troubles and wacky therapists, and includes characters that happen to be gay. This can be an effective strategy. It tends to be less intrusive than a play like *Angels in America*, by getting the audience thinking about issues of prejudice without realizing that they're doing it.

If homophobia did not already thrive in the US, the HIV/AIDS plague only helped it flourish. It then fell on the few brave individuals willing to speak against this deep-rooted prejudice to make a difference. Had Durang written and produced *Beyond Therapy* today, few people would think twice about Bruce being a bisexual character. However, in light of the prevalence of AIDS when *Beyond Therapy* debuted, it is likely that this character turned a few heads.

Not only did the 1980s mark the height of HIV/AIDS in America, but it also meant the

election of the conservative President Ronald Reagan. In 1980 when Reagan took 50.7% of the American vote (Busch 195) a return to conservative values seemed inevitable. He often talked of the value he placed on a relationship with God, and his firm belief in Christianity. He was openly and passionately pro-life, and fought to mandate prayer in schools (Jenkins 186). The debate on abortion aside, American feminists of the 1980s felt threatened by the newly elected President. He created a political environment where conservative values could thrive and forward thinking liberals were challenged.

Sheila Tobias writes in her book *Faces of Feminism*, "with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, feminism had to move quickly and gallantly from the offense to the defense" (226). She notes that any progress made on feminist issues, namely abortion, pre-Reagan were "eroding" (227) and that "the outlook for feminism looked grim indeed" (226). Reagan spoke openly about his pro-life opinion writing to the *Human Life Review*, "Abortion concerns not just the unborn child, it concerns every one of us...We cannot diminish the value of one category of human life—the unborn—without diminishing the value of all human life" (Regan 1,2). The President speaking so strongly on this controversial issue made it a tough one to combat.

Some believed that Reagan maliciously fought against feminism. In a collection of essays edited by Van Gosse and Richard Moser, Sara M. Evans writes in her article, *Beyond Declension* that "Reagan sought to systematically eliminate the large number of feminists

I've noticed that everyone who is for abortion has already been born.



Some believed that Reagan maliciously fought against feminism. In a collection of essays edited by Van Gosse and Richard Moser, Sara M. Evans writes in her article, *Beyond Declension* that "Reagan sought to systematically eliminate the large number of feminists working within government agencies and to starve the programs focused on education, childcare, the poor, and race or gender equality in any form" (Gosse 63). However, at the time of his election, Reagan had a lot on his plate with the hostage situation in Iran and an economy that had been experiencing great inflation since The Great Depression; fighting feminist movements was not the primary task on his agenda. In fact, according to Phillip Jenkins in his book *Decade of Nightmares*, during Reagan's presidency, "moral and religious conservatives lost most of their battles" (185). Nevertheless, regardless of who won or who lost, the Reagan administration stressed the importance of conservative values that once dominated American culture.

Durang, not being a conservative American, used the theatre as a medium to make fun of those on the far right.

In his unique and outlandish way, Durang creates two characters that hold blatantly sexist attitudes. Prudence is prone to blurt out her opinions of what makes a man "a man" without apology, and Stuart believes that his masculinity gives him power to exert over Prudence. In Bruce and Prudence's first date, Bruce confesses to Prudence that he might cry. She responds to his statement by saying, "I don't think men should cry unless something falls on them" (Durang 6). Prudence demonstrates her sexist beliefs previously held by the majority of American society. With the encouragement of the return to conservatism by Reagan and his colleagues, sexist attitudes were once again acceptable opinions. As women's liberties became threatened, so did their place in society.

Durang approached these issues of sexism in the same way that he approached issues of homophobia. The more outrageously the character can present their prejudice, the more absurd it seems. In his second session with Prudence, Stuart angrily confronts Prudence about her relationship with the bisexual Bruce, exclaiming, "You're obviously afraid of a real man, and so you want to cuddle with some eunuch who isn't a threat to you...I GOT BALLS, BABY" (Durang 22). In this outrageous outburst Stuart is trying to exert his masculinity over Bruce, and to do that he insults Bruce's worth as a man proclaiming him a eunuch because he doesn't fit the male normative profile of the 1980s. With this astoundingly comedic and beligerent claim, the audience can laugh at the irrationality of extreme sexism.

With many different playwrights taking different approaches to raising awareness about social issues, American theatre did its role in trying to make a difference and fighting prejudice. The theatre has always been a great place to invoke and inspire change. Hopefully, it is a medium of entertainment that can continue to fight intolerance and discrimination, and one day, with enough time, the idea of homophobia and sexism expressed in *Beyond Therapy* will be as foreign to viewers as references to the "personals" section of the newspaper.

Beyond Therapy: An Absurd Look at Homophobia and Sexism

The theatre functions as an ideal medium to comment on social issues and prejudices. Playwrights often create plays that revolve around issues prevalent in society at their time. With their work they point out societal prejudices in an attempt to inspire change, or at least

create awareness. Some playwrights take different approaches to this type of work. Christopher Durang uses dark and outlandish humor to reach out to his audience. With his play *Beyond Therapy*, Durang uses his characters to point out the absurdities of homophobia and sexism in 1980s America.

Durang's female protagonist, Prudence, becomes romantically involved with the male protagonist, Bruce, who mentions that he is bisexual. Prudence's negative feelings toward homosexual and bisexual individuals quickly become apparent, and homophobia rapidly emerges as a theme of the play. However, Durang approaches these prejudices in an outlandish and unexpected way. Prudence is vocal about her intolerance toward the gay community, and her harsh words are shocking. For example, having known Prudence for no more than five minutes, Bruce tells her that he has a boyfriend named Bob and he is, in fact, bisexual. Prudence's response to this confession is, "No, it's nothing really. It's just that I hate gay people." (Durang 5). For someone to make that statement so blatantly is surprising, and in the context of the play it is comical. Even more outlandish is when Bruce's therapist, Charlotte, is told that he is gay and she responds with, "But he doesn't seem homosexual. He doesn't lisp." (Durang 75). Durang allows the audience to laugh at this outlandish remark because it sounds



Prudence and Bruce on their first date
Westport Country Playhouse 2011

outrageous when put so candidly. People do not say that sort of thing to others in real life. However, as absurd as it may sound, statements such as that one are in fact said aloud on a regular basis. Homophobia is a very real issue. This is just as true now as it was in the 1980s as Durang was creating this play. The second theme presented to the audience in *Beyond Therapy* is sexism and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. This theme becomes particularly

apparent through the characters of Prudence and her therapist, Stuart. Through their therapy sessions, it is revealed that Stuart and Prudence had a sexual relationship in the past. His constant sexual harassment toward Prudence reveals him as quite the chauvinist, and when Prudence tells him about her relationship with Bruce, he becomes exceptionally jealous. When Prudence tells Stuart that Bruce is cooking her dinner he responds by saying, "He's making dinner?" (Durang 48). This pointed response reveals Stuart's preconception that as a man, Bruce should not be cooking dinner, as it is a woman's job to do; and by cooking dinner Bruce has emasculated himself. Prudence also proves herself to be sexist, informing Bruce that she doesn't think

men should cry unless something falls on them" (Durang 6).

Using such bold language and bizarre situations, Durang asks audiences to look at the absurdities of these two prejudices. He uses the theatrical medium to push boundaries and inspire thought and change. This is important for any theatre artist, but even more so for one who can personally relate to such discrimination. Being a homosexual playwright, Durang has a lot of personal experience to inspire his work. By creating characters that are so extreme, audiences can easily see the faults that lie within these prejudices.

Few literary critics write about a single piece of Durang's work. Instead, people like to write about Durang's collection of plays, or about his distinct dark humor. His two greatest successes were his one act, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, both of which related to two fundamental pieces of his upbringing: his Catholic faith and his parents' dysfunctional marriage (Dukes 142). Unfortunately for Durang, he began having to compete with himself. Few could find a show that they liked better than his previous sensations. That being said, little exists by way of literary critique of *Beyond Therapy*.

What is published about *Beyond Therapy* exists in one or two sentence references in papers about his other works. For example, in the book *Contemporary Gay American Poets and Playwrights an A-to-Z Guide*, Thomas Dukes mentions in his biography about Durang that sometimes he "has had some plain bad luck" (144). He writes about reviews of Durang's performances testifying that some of the "sparkle" of his plays gets lost somewhere between regional theatre debuts and Broadway openings. Finally, he states, "*Beyond Therapy*...[was] reviewed too early by newspaper critics in its off-Broadway run"(144). With this sentence, Dukes implies that had Durang's play not gotten such rave reviews with its off-Broadway premiere, expectations would not have been exceptionally high and he might have had a better chance for success.

In Robert Spivak's thesis *Christopher Durang: Satire and Beyond*, he writes about many of Durang's plays. While he does not have a section focused specifically on *Beyond Therapy*, does include mentions of it throughout the article. He references the more successful reviews of *Beyond Therapy* in which critics refer to Durang as "original" and "one of the funniest playwrights alive" (7). He also talks about Durang's works as a whole, agreeing with critics that he is original and, as the title of his thesis would imply, that Durang goes "beyond satire" in creating a style that is all his own (9).

The final mention of *Beyond Therapy* easily accessible online was brief but telling. In an article titled *-Com Again*, Barbara Hunt Lazerson writes about the sitcom and how "com" has been added to the ends of several words creating new pop culture references to television shows and other performance mediums. She mentions the "smutcom", focused on "scantily

clad females", and the "sweetcom...that featured adorable children" (1). Finally, she mentions the term coined for *Beyond Therapy*: the "scatcom...given to *Beyond Therapy* because it was screwball and scatty" (1). This one sentence reference highlights what Durang is often remembered for: his bizarre "screwball" comedy.

To make an impact and become easily recognizable, playwrights must set a tone all their own. Durang has certainly accomplished this. His blatantly absurd style has become a trademark of his work and sets him up to comment on social biases and prejudices. While Durang's goal may not be to end homophobia or sexism with his plays, they can certainly get people thinking about the issues. Creating a memorable piece of work that contains these topics plants a seed in the audiences' minds. Whether or not a critic, or any other theatre patron, enjoys Durang's play, they will certainly remember it. Some plays are written specifically to inspire social change, while other plays, like Durang's, are written simply to entertain. It is the combination of these two types of theatre that ultimately come together to address controversial themes and make a difference in an ever-changing and imperfect world.

Beyond Therapy: Response to Christopher Durang's Absurd Play

Bold playwrights are often subject to varied reviews. Christopher Durang and his collection of plays are no exception. In 1981 Durang's play, *Beyond Therapy*, was produced off-Broadway at the Phoenix Theatre in New York City (christopherdurang.com). By 1982 it made its way to Broadway at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre. With this incredible opportunity for success came many mixed reviews. Some critics praised him for his bold and uncomfortable moments. Others wrote that his humor was lost in this production. Since its Broadway debut, *Beyond Therapy* has been reproduced at countless theatres, but the reviews are still diverse. No doubt, Durang's daring and absurdist style creates conflict among critics. One thing is certain: regardless of what critics say, Durang accepts their comments and never stops making bold choices.

According to christopherdurang.com, when *Beyond Therapy* premiered the production was directed by Jerry Zaks (who later went on to direct the film *Shakespeare in Love*), scenery was designed by Karen Schultz, costumes were designed by Jennifer von Mayrhauser, lights were designed by Richard Nelson, and the sound was designed by David Rapkin. This debut cast included Stephen Collins as "Bruce", Sigourney Weaver as "Prudence", Jim Borelli as "Stuart", Kate McGregor Stewart as "Charlotte", Jack Gilpin played "Bob", Conan McCarty

played Andrew, and Nick Stannard played Paul (who was taken out of subsequent scripts). This original production was well-received, but Mel Gussow of *The New York Times* did not fail to point out the play's shortcomings. He states that it was well directed, but Zaks was "unable to smooth out the seams in the script" (Gussow). He admires Durang's work and praises previous scripts such as *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*. The review certainly is not negative, but it is honest. He complains that Weaver is "given too little opportunity to display her nuttiness" (Gussow). He praises the development of the characters of Stuart and Charlotte, stating that when they are on stage, "Mr. Durang's comedy ricochets with ripostes and bumbling delusions" (Gussow). In fact, many critics had the same reaction to the play as time progressed. Most agree that while the play is not a complete disaster, it is certainly not his best script.

When Frank Rich attended the Broadway debut, he was not a fan of Durang's show and wrote that the show "wilted of its own volition" (Rich). Rich praises Durang at first assuring readers that he has faith in the "explosive comic brilliance of Christopher Durang" (Rich) but goes on to say that his brilliance does not shine in this work. He criticizes Durang for underdeveloped leads that the audience has no compassion for. He



Charlotte in a session with Bruce
Westport Country Playhouse 2011

states that at the end of the night "[w]e still don't care whether Bruce...or Prudence...ever get married or not" (Rich). He praises the previous Off Broadway premiere writing that it contained "hilarious jokes" and that these were lost as the show was "tightened and revised" (Rich). Rich praises the development of both therapists and Bruce's lover Bob but cannot come to terms with his lack of empathy for Bruce and Prudence. He states that "[p]erhaps we should take the playwright's exaggeration in good fun – a merciless satire, as stylization" (Rich). In looking at Durang's other works, this is exactly what he intended. The characterizations of Bruce and Prudence were intentional, stylistic choices that set Durang apart from other playwrights. He likes to balance his outlandish characters with drier, more level-headed characters.

While these bold and stylistic choices often come with harsh reviews, they are also equally applauded. *Time Magazine's* Gerald Clarke gives high praise to Durang for *Beyond Therapy*. He writes, "Beyond Therapy offers the best therapy of all: guaranteed laughter" (Clarke). He goes on to praise the play, stating that it is "two hours of hilarious surprises" (Clarke). Ironically, according to the cast information they provide, both Rich and Clarke are

talking about the same production. Perhaps this goes to show that Durang's stylistic choices, especially those made in this play, are not for everyone.

Durang's website indicates that *Beyond Therapy* is one of his most performed and produced plays to date. While the website does not indicate what type of theatres produce Durang's plays, online video searches yield several recordings of college groups performing his work. Durang mentions on his website that concern has been expressed about the pop culture references in *Beyond Therapy*. As time has progressed, these references have become dated. Requests have been made for an updated script to fit into today's pop culture, but Durang has refused this appeal, instead requesting that *Beyond Therapy* be performed as a 1980s period piece. Most productions seem to stay true to the original script without straying from the time period and location.

Even though *Beyond Therapy* received many mixed reviews, it continues to be produced, thirty-one years later. In May of 2011, *The New York Times* published a review by Anita Gate about a Connecticut production of the play produced at the Westport Country Playhouse. Gate describes the play as being "enjoyably wacky" (Gate) going on to say that it "isn't limited to its era" (Gate), and that it is "consistently funny in universal ways that don't age" (Gate). Gate mentions that this play was written at a time before online dating and while it is obvious that it is not a modern piece, its humor is still easily relatable. She compliments Durang's characters and his absurdist stylistic choices.

Durang is well aware of the variety of criticisms surrounding this piece of work. He writes in *Christopher Durang Explains it All for You*, "my present belief after watching audiences enjoy [this] production is that some critics are unwilling to accept the stylization of some of the comedy" (Durang xix). While he understands that not all audience members can go along with him, "heightened comedy" is a style that interests him and one that he does not cease to explore after *Beyond Therapy*.

Playwrights must take an occasional risk. Sometimes that stylistic risk pays off and creates a knockout performance, other times it results in a flop. Occasionally, as is the case with *Beyond Therapy*, stylistic choices made by the playwright come with an acquired taste. Not everyone can enjoy Durang's dark, twisted humor. The important thing is that playwrights stand strong to their style and their selected themes. Durang does not apologize for his absurdist approach to playwriting. Plays such as *Beyond Therapy* speak to an audience in a way that scripts based in realism cannot. Whether or not all audience members can respond to such a style, these kinds of plays that make bold statements about society are the ones that make a great impact on the theatre world.

Mcminnville Theatre To Present *Absurdist Comedy*

MCMINNVILLE — Linfield College Theatre students will perform Christopher Durang's absurdist comedy *Beyond Therapy*. This bizarre play takes audiences on an awkward adventure as blind dating reaches its worst. Obie award winning, and Tony nominated, Christopher Durang, does not disappoint in this laugh-out-loud comedy.

Performances of the play will take place November 7-10 and 14-16 in the Marshall Theatre in Ford Hall, located on the Linfield campus in McMinnville, Oregon.

Beyond Therapy, directed by Kanon Havens, follows the characters of Bruce and Prudence in their search for love and companionship. Set in the 1980s, the characters meet for the first time through an ad published in the personal section of the newspaper. These characters, with no verbal filter, struggle to connect and agree on fundamental personal values. Their first date does not go as hoped, and both parties leave thoroughly offended. What follows is a look at sessions with both characters' outrageous therapists, and subsequent dinner dates that hardly go better than the first. However, in the strange world of Durang's play, Bruce and Prudence's paths continue to cross and their disdain for one another lessens.

Havens says, "I love working with Durang's plays because you never know what to expect. You can go into the process with one idea in mind, but as you and your production team begin to work through rehearsals, greater levels of absurdity are discovered". She states, "working with my cast has been an absolute blast. They've really gone above and beyond to commit to the wacky text and irrational characters. Not one person will leave this theatre without a couple of good laughs."

The playwright, Christopher Durang, is a gay ex-Catholic currently teaching playwriting at the Julliard School. Growing up in a household with a devout Catholic mother and an alcoholic father inspired many of Durang's works. In his youth, his mother exposed him to a great deal of local theatre, sparking his interest in playwriting. It was his mother that helped him produce his first play in his backyard at the age of seven. Attending Catholic school his whole life, he thought that he might join the monastery that functioned as his high school. When

encouraged to wait before joining the monastery as a priest. He left his hometown, attended undergraduate school, and subsequently stopped believing in the Catholic religion. As an undergraduate he attended Harvard University. It wasn't until his senior year at Harvard that he began writing plays again. After rediscovering his passion for playwriting, he applied to the Yale School of Drama playwriting program as a graduate student. He continued to write and produce plays at Yale and eventually went on to write plays produced on and off Broadway. Winner of multiple Obie awards, Durang continues to write and teach playwriting today.

Beyond Therapy features a cast of six students including Jacob Priester as Bruce, Kristie Castanera as Prudence, Nicholas Granato as Stuart, Sammi Palmer as Charlotte, Jeremy Odden as Bob, and Daniel Bradley as Andrew the waiter. Director Havens states, "this ensemble has an interesting challenge to find the truth behind these characters. With text that is as senseless and foolish as Durang's, it is easy to dig for laughs and ignore the inner truth of the characters. But the reality of it is that to these characters, their problems are real. I think these actors have risen to the challenge, and the final product is unbelievable".

The show will be performed in an arena setting with the audience surrounding all four sides of the stage. Scenic Designer Paige Keith designed the set for the show. It is a somewhat abstract setting that allows for the audience to create and imagine with the actors.

"This play in many ways becomes about the vulnerability of each of these characters, including the professional health experts. Setting this play in an arena configuration allows the audience to better understand and connect to that vulnerability. It also helps remind the actors that they need to strive for the truth in these characters. Not only are the characters in Durang's script put in a more vulnerable place in an arena theatre, but so are the actors," states Havens.

This performance runs approximately 2 hours with one intermission. This show contains some mature language and may not be appropriate for all audiences.

Tickets for *Beyond Therapy* go on sale October 29th and are \$7 for full price and \$5 for students and seniors (60+). Tickets can be purchased online at linfield.edu/culture with a small processing fee. Tickets may also be purchased at the Linfield Theatre box office or ordered over the phone with a credit or debit card. Located in the lobby of Linfield Theatre, the box office hours are 2 to 5 p.m., and until 7:15 p.m. on performance days. For more information

regarding tickets or the production call 503-883-2292.

To reach Ford Hall from Highway 99W, turn east on Keck Drive at the McMinnville Market Center in south McMinnville. Turn right on Lever Street and right again on Ford Drive. Ford Hall is located at the west end of the parking lot.

Christopher Durang: Questions and Answers from the Absurdist Himself

The following is a compilation of questions asked of Christopher Durang and his answers to them. While this document does not reference questions specifically related to *Beyond Therapy*, it is meant to provide insight into Durang's character and disposition. This is intended to offer a better understanding of his style of playwriting. Unless otherwise noted, these questions, and their answers, were obtained from Durang's website at: <http://www.christopherdurang.com/Students.htm>

Q: What was your motivation for pursuing a career in acting/playwrighting?

A: I felt early on this sense that I wanted to be a playwright (more than, say, just be an actor). Starting from age 8 when I "wrote" my first page (2 pages long, but in dialogue; it was based on *I Love Lucy*, the Lucy has a baby episode). So for whatever reason I had this little spark that said "I want to be a playwright."

My high school putting on plays I wrote (which went well) certainly fanned the flames of my theatrical interest. Then when I applied to colleges, in my application I stressed my theatrical activities. I had been a good student, and got into several colleges including Harvard, which is where I chose to attend (on scholarship; we didn't have the money to send me). Harvard didn't have a theatre major, which I knew in advance; and I decided a well rounded education was better for someone who wanted to be a writer than an education that specialized right away in theatre.

Harvard was a wonderful, valuable experience — but it was also a time when I grew up a lot, went through a pretty bad depression, found out I didn't like academic work anymore, didn't do well in my classes my middle two years, but pulled myself out of the slump my final year.

Harvard did offer psychological counseling, and for free! And I took advantage of it, and eventually lucked out with a very helpful psychologist who over two years ended up helping me get out of my depression.

Early in my senior year I suddenly returned to playwriting, and in a burst of fever-ish energy I wrote *The Nature and the Purpose of the Universe* my senior year. (It was written very quickly, in two sittings, sort of poured out of me as if I had bottled up energy inside me.)

That's a long answer to your question – but I guess my motivation to be a playwright was sort of intuitive during my young years; then I lost that drive and questioned myself during college; then it came back suddenly my final year in college, and with extremely good fortune, I managed to get into Yale School of Drama which was an excellent next step for me.

Q: Is there a significant point in your career where you knew that you were successful? Where and why?

A: Don't mean to sound like Bill Clinton, but it depends on how I define success. (By the way – in most regards, I like Bill Clinton.)

I had a childhood dream/assumption – based on the Broadway musicals I grew up seeing and having heard of – that success was to have a number of Broadway "hits." Rodgers and Hammerstein, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, etc. etc.

depends what the meaning of "is" is



By the time I finished school (1974), even then Broadway didn't do many non-musical plays, but off-Broadway did. And I easily adjusted my hopes to having various off-Broadway hits. The success barometer for me was having plays that ran a while in NYC.

I have only had one play that had a successful, open-ended run in New York City – *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You*, which ran 2 and a half years in NYC, and had long runs other places in the country. But that was in 1981-83; and it's now 2003!

I have had many other plays done in NYC; but they've been limited runs of 4 to 5 weeks at a non-profit theatre like Playwrights Horizons or Manhattan Theatre Club – terrific, but not the same thing as having something run so audiences can see your work over a long period. And I had two commercial Broadway runs, both of which closed quickly – *A History of the American Film* in 1978 (when I was 29 or so), and *Beyond Therapy* in 1982.

So looked at that way, I don't feel successful. It's a childhood dream/assumption in my head that hasn't been fulfilled.

So here's where I do feel successful. I make a living as a writer. And when I get acting work or teaching work, I sort of throw that in as well, it's all theatre/performing income. And I wouldn't have my particular teaching job if I weren't "known" in theatre.

And as for my dream/assumption – well the Broadway I grew up around (as an 8 year old, I saw the tail end of it, I feel) just doesn't exist anymore. So I consider myself successful because I make a living primarily with my playwriting.

Q: Why, with your obvious grasp on tragedy, did you decide to write works of comedy?

A: A slightly pretentious answer might be to say I didn't choose comedy, comedy chose me. I'm not usually funny in person (unless I've gotten very, very relaxed with a person). I do think my parents and extended family all had senses of humor.

There was a lot of sadness in my family so theoretically I could also have written sad, sad dramas...but I just wasn't drawn to it. I like to laugh. And even though shy, I have a very pronounced loud laugh. (I have a friend, a funny writer, whose mother would always shush him when he laughed at a play or movie and would say disapprovingly, "Hey, you can enjoy something without being silly about it." I recently read that Jay Leno had just such a mother. I didn't though. My mother had a bubbling sense of humor and liked to laugh and make people laugh.

Q: Are you a naturally funny person or did your sense of humor evolve with time?

A: In person I'm not naturally funny. I'm actually kind of shy. When I wrote my early plays (in junior high school), I was surprised at how many lines got laughs.

I wasn't aware the lines were even that funny initially...sometimes it would be a character saying something true in a blunt fashion – and the bluntness would be funny. Or sometimes it would be an eccentric thought, and that would get a laugh. (By the way, the choice of words and rhythm is also part of what's funny in some humor – certainly in Noel Coward plays, for example. And in my plays, there are often times a line will get a laugh if said exactly as written; while if the actor paraphrases the line or changes it slightly, it won't get a laugh.)

There's kind of the cliché of funny people sometimes being very serious; and I think in some ways I fit that. Though most of the time I'm not tortured, and I don't try to be tortured.

Q: Where do the ideas for your plays come from? Are they based on events you have experienced?

A: Early in my career – and my early plays were very dark, and very peculiar – I would meet audience members after who would say, "You're not what I expected! You're nothing like your plays."

I always knew they meant that some of my plays "felt" as if the author probably was a madman, hyper and nutty and overwhelming, sort of like Robin Williams on caffeine.

But my demeanor has always been quiet and usually polite, and I don't dominate a room in any way. I'm a bit withdrawn, and I listen a lot.

So I was personally relieved that people didn't think I "looked" like my plays. (This was especially true of my early plays, the more surreal ones, like *Nature and Purpose of the Universe*, *'dentity Crisis*, especially the very crazy *Titanic*. I would understand the assumption that the author of those plays would look and act like a madman.)

And as I got better known, and newspaper interviewers would ask where my plays came from, I had trouble answering.

As I got older, it got more and more clear to me that, as I indicated above, my plays came from a fairly dark world view; and that this world view was created, unsurprisingly, by the family dynamics I grew up in.

I was an only child; and had a very close relationship to my mother. I was less close to my father, since he and my mother fought so much about his drinking. Though I always thought him a nice man, actually; and I could tell that both of my parents cared for me and liked me, which is bottom line what you need. My father did have a drinking problem; but he also had a gentle spirit to him, and was the only one in the family who could ever be diplomatic. My mother had a fiery temper, though not with me; she was also very nurturing; and both my parents had senses of humor.

My mother sometimes ended up fighting with her siblings, and at different times that fighting upset and affected me as much as the fighting between my parents. And my mother's mother took sides in the fighting, which brought the sibling rivalry to constant boiling points. And the issues that got fought about never got resolved, they just got stirred up and served again, like some poisonous cocktail.

So the fighting that went on between my parents and sometimes in the extended family was very hard to be around. And people were often mean to one another, perhaps not realizing how mean, but when the "Irish temper was flaring" usually not caring how it landed. (I can feel it in myself when I get so angry I want to lash out, knowing full well it will only make the issue worse. When I'm feeling adult, I don't express the upset until the flush of anger has gone.)

Strangely, rarely was anyone mean to me. I was just this quiet bystander, watching other people be harsh with one another; or watch them address a problem by banging their heads against the wall, over and over and over.

My world view actually improved in my early 30s, when I experienced the adult freedom not to repeat the patterns I saw. For instance, an early director I worked with a few times was talented, but also illogical, unfair and prone to temper tantrums. And I realized – I don't have to keep working with him. I could move on to some other director, who's talented, but calm. And that's what I did.

Though I also have a tendency to give up on problems maybe too fast – I can't always tell if I'm running the other way to avoid conflict, or if I'm being wise. And that confusion comes from seeing my mother try and try and try to change my father. Tenacity's good; but it can also be crazy.

It wasn't just fighting. The people I grew up around were also complex and interesting, and I found the extended family – of many aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents – to be very intricate and interesting in how they interacted. And I find, in retrospect, that I took all this behavior in, lived with it, suffered through some of it when it would turn hurricane-like, forgot about it, and then suddenly it would come charging out of me in the form of a nutty comedy. And these comedies were not like my family in any clear ways, but were usually like them in psychologically disguised ways. And disguised by me unconsciously, I didn't know I was doing it.

Well, that's kind of a long answer. The short one is: I was very affected by the people I grew up around – good things, bad things, odd things. And I wrote from that.

Q: Out of all your works which is your favorite and why?

A: *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* because it's psychologically so close to me. I'm proud to have done something constructive with the unhappy parts of my childhood.

Q: If you could change any events in your past, would you?

A: Gosh, that question is almost Chekhovian. Regret is a very large emotion for many/most people. I had some mainstream career opportunities early in my career (in the film world) that I didn't pursue, making a decision I wanted to be known as a playwright first. I have some



Regret...Hm...
Curious...

"what if" feelings about that...on the other hand, I don't have regrets because I think that's a whole other road, and I probably wouldn't have written the same plays, etc. etc.

So I prefer not to have regrets, or to focus on them.

Oh dear, what a difficult question.

A kind of wrap-up:

I like the mixture of comedy and seriousness in a work. At college, I remember seeing Fey-deau farces and Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Both were fun, but both tended to go on for about 3 hours. And I'd find after about an hour and three-quarters, I would have had enough of both...they remained in the same tone, on and on; and the comic cartoonish of both started to fatigue me...I wanted some sort of real feeling somewhere.

Then I recall seeing on TV Maggie Smith and Robert Stephens in a stage version of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Maggie Smith is a verbal wizard, and so her Beatrice was funny, as expected. However, somewhere in the play she read a series of lines suddenly with great sadness (about life and suffering), and she did it with all psychological sincerity and depth of feeling, and I suddenly felt riveted. The comedy reverberated for me.

And in another Maggie Smith film, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, she was hilarious playing the teacher's pretensions and odd quirky thoughts...Yet two thirds through, upset with an argument with her ex-lover the art teacher, she shows her girl students slides from her trip abroad, and in the speech that accompanies it, she reveals this enormous "longing" for love and for personal connection that is very moving, very mysterious. The movie is mostly a comedy, but one with real elements of sadness in it too; and with repercussions – the nutty things Miss Brodie does have consequences, bad ones, for both herself and some of her students.

Well, that's all for now. I've exhausted myself.



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