

# STAGING AMERICA

Twenty-First Century Dramatists

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY



# STAGING AMERICA

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TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY DRAMATISTS

*Christopher Bigsby*

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# CONTENTS

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Introduction	1
<b>1 Ayad Akhtar</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2 David Auburn</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>3 Stephen Adly Guirgis</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>4 Quiara Alegría Hudes</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>5 Young Jean Lee</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>6 Bruce Norris</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>7 J. T. Rogers</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>8 Christopher Shinn</b>	<b>189</b>
Notes	217
Index	235



# INTRODUCTION

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In this book I discuss eight American playwrights, all of whose careers began in this century. They include five Pulitzer Prize winners (Ayad Akhtar, David Auburn, Stephen Adly Guirgis, Quiara Alegria Hudes, Bruce Norris), one shortlisted for that award (Christopher Shinn), as well as two writers who share a plethora of awards including, in the case of J. T. Rogers, a Tony and an Obie, while Young Jean Lee has two Obies. Among their number are a Pakistani-American, a Puerto Rican-American, and a Korean-American, writers who are Catholic, Jewish, Muslim. There is a gay writer, for whom details of his own life provide the motor force of his play, as there are those who reach out into a wider world or insist on the connection between the private and the public. The American theatre is changing, as is the society it reflects and with which it engages.

Where possible, I have included the playwrights' own comments on their lives and works, as I have contemporary reviews, though my primary concern is to enter into a dialogue with plays which are as various as the individuals and culture which generated them.

It is now just over a hundred years since, in July 1915, a group of people, none of them professional playwrights, gathered at the tip of Massachusetts Bay and formed the Provincetown Players, thus marking the beginnings of modern American drama. They performed, at first, to sparse audiences, in a rickety warehouse which stretched out over the water. Among their number, and a prime mover, was a woman from Iowa, Susan Glaspell, persuaded to turn aside from writing novels; while a young man who liked a drink, had suffered from tuberculosis, attempted suicide and abandoned his wife and child, became the foundation stone of a new American theatre. His name, of course, was Eugene O'Neill – like his fellow writers in revolt against the kind of nineteenth-century theatre represented by his own father, James O'Neill, whose performances in *The Count of Monte Cristo* kept the dollars rolling in but did little to address American realities. They quickly established a base in New York, where they were not the only ones to distrust Broadway's ability to foster change and open doors to new writers, happy, as they were, to experiment, lay claim to a freedom outside the mainstream.

A century later, there are still writers who gather together, create their own companies, stage their plays in small venues, develop their skills, and build their careers on the basis of productions outside of New York's theatre district – often, indeed, outside New York, and in some cases even outside the country. This book is a celebration of the American playwright in the twenty-first century, but the role of aspiring writer can be a difficult one – more difficult, according to David Hare, than that of his or her British counterpart. He has said that life is 'better for a British playwright than for an American playwright, self-evidently. It must be simply because in this country you feel that theatre can access society at large. That essential illusion, that people are listening, does buck you up and keep you writing. I think that if you are an American playwright the sense that you are working in a very disempowered and impoverished form . . . makes it tough.'<sup>1</sup>

For the British director Richard Eyre, formerly of the Royal National Theatre, 'There's no continuity [in the American theatre] and no sense of a continuing tradition. Hence actors, directors, designers – and writers – don't get the chance to develop their work. Every show is a



## Staging America

new start . . . The NT provides continuity and a sense of being part of a continuum: a past, a present and a future.<sup>2</sup>

While it is worth noting Hare's confession that his conviction may be an 'essential illusion', several of the playwrights discussed in what follows would agree with him, sensing a different cultural environment, different attitudes towards plays which engage with the public world, and to emerging talent, though in truth if new plays no longer get much of a look-in on Broadway (in 2018 the only new play scheduled was *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, itself a British import), they do elsewhere across the country. Without the British system of public subsidies, however, they are always under pressure, not that theatre anywhere is immune to that.

The plight of the playwright is as precarious as ever, even as the lure of a public art, able to address audiences directly, collaborative, visceral, the imagination made physical, words sounding in space, remains compelling. For the ancient Greeks, theatre was where a society celebrated its myths, engaged with its values, staged its history. Not only did they bring their gods down to earth but they saw in the tensions of private lives a connection with conflicts of a broader kind. This has been no less true of American playwrights, even as it is debatable how central theatre is to American society today. Several of the playwrights in this book have expressed their doubts. Nonetheless, they have surely played their role in the unending business of defining a society always in flux, ever provisional, while confidently asserting a supposedly self-evident national identity.

At the same time, it remains true that the theatre can represent a challenge for those who contemplate a career in which their fate is determined by the financial exigencies of embattled companies, the interest of artistic directors overseen by executive boards, the willingness of audiences to engage with what they have to say and the way in which they choose to present it. Novelists have to contend with editors and, these days, the influence of sales departments, but once their work is accepted it continues to exist in print or online, readers not being tied to a particular place or time, not required to brave sudden snowstorms, car park charges, the time of last buses, a battle for toilets. The theatre is a high wire act in which balance is not assured.

A character in *Tender*, a novel by the British writer Mark Illis, remarks, 'there's a fine line between artistic activity and a complete waste of time.' It is true that another character replies, 'There's a thin line . . . between almost anything and a complete waste of time,'<sup>3</sup> but somehow time given to writing that comes to nothing seems more profoundly wasted, so many words on a page smartly dressed for a blind date only to discover they have nowhere to go and no one to speak to. Christopher Shinn (like fellow playwright Will Eno) made the decision to fly to England, a place which unaccountably proved more receptive to mendicant authors than his own country.

Shinn's *Four* was produced by the Royal Court, which also staged Bruce Norris's picaresque *The Low Road* (as well as David Adjmi's first play, *Elective Affinities*), while J.T. Rogers thought a play set in Rwanda, *The Overwhelming*, and one set in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Washington, *Blood and Gifts*, would fare better in England, at the National Theatre, than in his own country.

The list of contemporary American playwrights whose careers began or were consolidated in Britain is surprising, depressing, encouraging, depending on your perspective. Nearly half of Shinn's plays have opened there while for Richard Nelson and Naomi Wallace, Britain was for long their base. For Tracy Letts it was only when his first play, *Killer Joe*, arrived in England that he felt himself a playwright while his second, *Bug*, had its premiere in London.

Later in this book, Shinn offers his own explanations for this situation, though it undoubtedly, as he suggests, has something to do with the existence, in Britain, of lower costs of production and cheaper ticket prices, while in America subscription series may encourage a certain conservatism, a hesitancy to embrace new work or, if not that, then the fact that subscription seasons require a limited run for any particular production, necessarily making way for the next play. In *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, published in 2009 by the Theatre Development Fund, some blame is placed on non-profit boards of directors, one writer suggesting that, “They say, “I don’t get it; why are you always in the red . . . let me look at the chart. Ah – new play, new play, new play, new play. Why do them?”<sup>4</sup> The same book quotes a Minneapolis-based playwright and literary manager as saying that ‘Every time we do a new play . . . the theatre loses money, and that’s just the way it is. Brand-new plays we play at fifty-percent capacity.’<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, with luck there are staged readings, offers of development, the odd grant, enough to keep hope alive and food on the table, while prizes can make plays suddenly shine brightly, but they are no guarantee of future productions. As David Hare, admittedly speaking in the context of the British theatre, remarked, ‘a playwright needs to live. Unfortunately, you may be extremely well known for your prestigious achievements in tiny studio theatres while also being stony broke.’<sup>6</sup>

The actor Matthew Paul Olmos has said of would-be playwrights in America,

If they only knew how many of them would stick with it for several years, but ultimately wind up someplace entirely different. If they only knew the likelihood of them affording a house and a family was simply not possible on what a playwright actually gets paid for productions, commissions, etc.

That there is no money in the American theater should perhaps be something that is not just mentioned, but actually taught and studied and planned for . . . While there are amazing programs out there that select a few theater artists here and there to give them a taste of what it would be like to be paid for their art, I wonder what can be done at the root of all this and what systems could be put in place for it to not completely fall on the shoulders of theater artists to both work tirelessly on their art, and build up an entirely different financial support system at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

There were, however, other difficulties. Richard Nelson, in what became a famous address for the Laura Pels Foundation in 2007, at the Alliance of Resident Theatres annual meeting, lamented the attitude to plays and playwrights in America in particular, ‘the culture of readings and workshops . . . A culture of “development.”’ What was being said, it seemed to him, was that playwrights needed help to write their plays. ‘They can’t do their work themselves . . . the given now in the American theatre is that what a playwright writes, no matter how much he or she works on it, rewrites it at his or her desk, the play will ALWAYS not be right. Will ALWAYS need “help.” . . . And this mindset is devastating.’ Plays, it seemed, were always assumed to be broken and in need of fixing.<sup>8</sup>

For James Gittings, the Literary Associate of the New York-based The New Group (which describes itself as an artist-driven company), who receives at least ten unsolicited new plays a week as well as others from agents, ‘What a play really needs is a production, not endless readings.’<sup>9</sup> In response to this concern, in 2003 thirteen playwrights formed the group 13P (i.e.

## Staging America

thirteen playwrights), whose motto was ‘We don’t develop plays. We do them,’ which meant that once plays were completed they were regarded as not needing intervention, each writer serving as his or her own artistic director. The group lasted for nine years. One of the thirteen was Young Jean Lee, and another Sarah Ruhl whose play *Eurydice* had at the time, coincidentally, had thirteen readings and workshops but no production.<sup>10</sup> There would be other such ventures, playwrights collectives. *American Theatre* magazine<sup>11</sup> identified Minneapolis’s Workhaus Collective (eight playwrights), Washington D.C.’s The Welders (five) and Boston Public Works (seven). Philadelphia’s Orbiter 3 deliberately aimed at self-destructing within three years, the former opening in 2014 and duly closing in 2017, the latter opening in 2015 and closing in 2018. Writing, though, has to start *somewhere* and readings and development have their place so long as they are a path and not a destination though small theatres, as was evidenced by the Provincetown Players and others a century before, may have a disproportionate impact. Meanwhile, many of New York’s non-profit theatres have responded to the necessity for more productions by new writers, including Lincoln Center Theater’s LCT3 (whose slogan is New Artists, New Audiences), Second Stage Uptown (which produces plays exclusively by twenty-first-century American playwrights) and Roundabout Underground (dedicated to fostering new works by emerging playwrights).

If theatres are under pressure so, too, are those who spread the word. Writers and actors may have ambiguous feelings about reviewers who can impact on the success or otherwise of productions, especially when *The New York Times* still has a unique power not only to determine the fate of plays running on or Off Broadway but also the likelihood of regional theatre productions transferring to New York. It remains true, though, that they perform a vital function and that that function has been threatened.

Newspapers have closed, slimmed down, disappeared behind paywalls, column inches shrinking. In response to this, in 2018 five New York theatre critics (four men, one woman), putting in their own money, founded *New York Stage Review*. The number quickly expanded to eight, of which two are women. In the words of the publisher Steven Suskin, ‘With the continual changes in the media world, the number of outlets for theater criticism has dwindled to the point that even major New York daily newspapers have been forced to cut back on coverage. As an unofficial band of professional drama critics—long-time members of the New York Drama Critics Circle, each with former newspaper affiliations—we bemoan the diminishing coverage of the so-called legitimate theater.’<sup>12</sup> Initially, coverage was to focus on Broadway and Off Broadway but the intention was to broaden out beyond New York.

Unsurprisingly, it was a development welcomed by fellow practitioners including Adam Feldman, the theatre and dance editor at *Time Out* (New York), president of the New York Drama Critics Circle, who noted that, ‘It’s been a remarkable, and a remarkably fast, shift . . . Arts coverage, and especially opinionated arts coverage, looks like an easy cut if you’re a media outlet making budget adjustments under difficult circumstances. So unfortunately a lot of really valuable voices are being lost, and in some cases, decades of experience and perspective.’ For the producer Scott Rudin, ‘There’s a profound need for it . . . I think the enormous reduction in the number of critics makes it incredibly hard to sell shows, especially plays, where you really need them.’<sup>13</sup> For all the many challenges facing playwrights, companies and all those involved in contemporary theatre, however, American drama continues to thrive.

In a previous book<sup>14</sup> I discussed the work of seven women and two men. This one reverses the emphasis with six men and two woman, so, in sum, nine–eight in favour of women. This

should not, though, be seen as reflecting the state of the American theatre, at least historically, though things have changed and continue to do so. In its seventy-year history, the Tony Award has only been awarded to a woman once, one-and-a-half times counting Frances Goodrich's half share in the authorship of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and this despite the fact that the award is named for a woman – Antoinette Perry. The Obies, awarded for the best American play Off Broadway, are harder to calculate thanks to shifting categories and multiple awards in any one year, but since 1956 seventy-eight men have received awards and twenty women (María Irene Fornés twice, Lynn Nottage three times), though fourteen of those come from the period 1992 to 2017. When it comes to Pulitzer prizes, in the hundred years since 1917 women have won fifteen times, seven since 1990. Drama Desk Awards for outstanding play have gone to women six times since 1975. The New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play has gone to ten women (ten and a half with Frances Goodrich) since 1936, though, confusingly, there is a sub-category for Best American Play so that calculation is not straightforward.

An article by Rob Weinert-Kendt, in *American Theatre* magazine in September, 2018, noted that eight of the eleven most-produced plays in the then-forthcoming season (defined as work scheduled between 1 September 2018, and 31 August 2019), were written by women while eleven of the most-produced playwrights were women. Meanwhile, the overall percentage of plays written by women, based on 2,085 productions, had gone from 21 per cent in 2015 to 30 per cent in 2018–19.<sup>15</sup> Also increasing was the percentage of new plays at US theatres (somewhat curiously defined as plays which had their premiere between 2008 and 2018), which now stood at sixty-six, 40 per cent of which were by women, a rate of increase which suggested the possibility of parity by 2021.

New plays may be thin on the ground on Broadway and commercial Off Broadway companies, fighting for space amongst a full orchestra of musicals and British imports, but they were flourishing elsewhere even as it could sometimes take a long time for established playwrights to see their work on stage on the Great White Way. Paula Vogel was sixty-five, with fourteen plays and a Pulitzer Prize to her name, before, finally, in 2017, she opened *Indecent* on Broadway, moving from productions at Yale Rep, California's La Jolla and New York's Vineyard Theatre. As Garrett Eisler has pointed out,<sup>16</sup> Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Ruined* did not make it to Broadway, her *Sweat* finally making it, also in 2017, via the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Washington D.C.'s Arena Stage and the Public Theatre.

In trying to understand why, until recent years, women playwrights found it difficult to forge a career, perhaps it is worth looking at other aspects of the American theatre. Tony Awards for directing began in 1960. Of the fifty-eight awards just four have gone to American women directors, all in the current century. But barely a third of directors are women while over 70 per cent of stage managers and assistant stage managers are.<sup>17</sup> Of thirty new productions on Broadway in 2016–17, only six were directed by women even as 68 per cent of Broadway audiences are female.<sup>18</sup> In seventy-four Resident Theatres 80 per cent of artistic directors are white men, as are 74 per cent of executive directors.<sup>19</sup> As for women reviewers, they can seem an endangered species. Of the twenty-seven current and emeritus members of the New York Drama Critics' Circle, only eight are women.

Incidentally, or perhaps not, women represented just 4 per cent of directors of major Hollywood films over the last eleven years (3.3 per cent in 2018), to date 84 per cent of them never directing a second film.<sup>20</sup> They represent 24 per cent of producers and 13 per cent of writers.

## Staging America

This may seem a pathology of the American theatre (and, perhaps not incidentally, of the movie industry), but it is not offered as such; it is merely meant to note the challenges that have to be met by playwrights as the second decade of the twenty-first century ends, as well as the sheer number of new plays on offer and the extent to which those who existed in the wings have now moved centre stage. In fact, despite the many challenges, American drama remains vital and challenging, as ever a gauge of a society always in flux, a culture in which personal and national identities are constantly being negotiated.

Are there any overarching themes, directions, shared assumptions in these plays? Unsurprisingly, in an age of identity politics there is a concern by some playwrights to explore what distinguishes them from an assumed norm (sometimes in an ironic form as in Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*), even as that norm is contested in a society which proclaims its unique distinctiveness even while radically divided. 'One nation, indivisible' its children are required to recite, even as divisions along the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, ideological conviction, are clear. Perhaps, in a sense, those divisions are themselves definitional in an immigrant society concerned to celebrate its openness to others while urging assimilation as goal and virtue. America has always been torn between a desire to see its citizens as embracing shared dreams of material advancement, along with an assumed moral and social primacy, and a sense of unease, that last a familiar concern of America's playwrights, from O'Neill onwards. Financial collapse (Ayad Akhtar's *Junk*), involvement in suspect foreign wars (Bruce Norris's *Purple Heart*), revelations of sexual anxieties (Christopher Shinn's *Teddy Ferrara*), racial and religious tensions (Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park*, Ahkhtar's *Disgraced*, *The Invisible Hand*), have deepened that sense of unease and that surfaces in a number of twenty-first-century plays.

There is, though, a world elsewhere, a world of geopolitics (David Auburn's *The Journals of Mihail Sebastian*, J.T. Rogers' *Oslo*), of interest and concern not merely because America reaches out to it, as what happens overseas feeds back into the country's sense of itself, challenging notions of right action (Quiara Alegria Hudes' *Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue*, Bruce Norris's, *The Pain and the Itch*, *The Unmentionables*, J.T. Rogers' *The Overwhelming*, *Blood and Gifts*), but because fundamental human concerns, the very stuff of drama, are not bound by national concerns. So, the lights dim, the curtain parts, an actor walks on stage and as ever the lies of theatre prove a path to truth.

# CHAPTER 1

## AYAD AKHTAR

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The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

F. Scott Fitzgerald<sup>1</sup>

In any immigrant society the question of identity is likely to be central. Do individuals or groups look in or out – in at their own group, enforcing its values and rituals, or out at those in the wider society to which they are invited to conform as evidence of, and justification for, their acceptance? At the port of entry names are changed, by fiat or choice, old modes adapted to the new even as immigrants seek out their kind, speak the old language, visit familiar places of worship until time begins the process of moving them on, physically, emotionally, intellectually, even as there may be a price to pay, a sense of unfocussed guilt. In time, they make way for other more recent groups to be melted in the crucible, or to negotiate a new covenant, not quite a truce but a way of living which requires the least sacrifice, a compromise not seen as such.

They have travelled, after all, not to be what they were but what they could become. To abandon some elements of identity, however, can seem a step too far, a betrayal because they are of a faith which once shaped daily life, offered a path which gave that life a meaning. That is especially true of religion, particularly those whose severity imposes a heavy cost that is part of the route to redemption, nearly two-thirds of Muslims in America insisting on its importance to them. Yet, unforgiving cults aside, isolating their adherents, there remains a need and desire to be part of the society which had drawn them across ocean or borders so that identity becomes contested, a source of tension, exacerbated when elements of faith seem to clash directly with the tenets of other identity groups or appropriated by those intent on challenging the polity itself. However, despite 9/11, polls showed that Muslims were more confident about America than the general populace even as they faced increased hostility from some.

Interfaith marriage had been addressed in the theatre as early as 1922 in the hugely popular, and critically derided, comedy *Abie's Irish Rose* in which a Jew and a Catholic marry in the face of their fathers' wishes. Marrying out could seem a betrayal even as immigrants began to shape the world they were warned against assimilating into. It was, after all, Jews who went on to dominate the American musical (probably America's greatest contribution to world theatre). Even as they changed their Jewish names and for the most part avoided specifically Jewish subjects (*Fiddler on the Roof* being a notable exception – with its lyrics equally applicable to a Muslim house: 'And who has the right, as master of the house/ To have the final word at home? / The Papa, the Papa! Tradition' – along with *Cabaret* with its stress on anti-Semitism), not only did their music often echo Jewish rhythms and display a fondness for the minor key, but they would address the question of identity, of inclusion or exclusion, through an emphasis on other groups as in *Showboat*, *South Pacific*, *Porgy and Bess*, *West Side Story*, the last a version of *Romeo and Juliet* as Ayad Akhtar would turn to *The Taming of the Shrew* in his 2014 play *The*

## Staging America

*Who & the What*, a comedic treatment of what elsewhere in his work would take a different form.

In fact, for much of the second half of the twentieth century American culture, and, indeed, the interpretation of American culture, was in the hands of Jewish writers, critics, composers, intellectuals, to the extent that Jewish and American culture seemed in many ways coterminous. Akhtar came from a Muslim background, Muslims having less leverage on the cultural life of the nation. A Pew report in 2016 found that over 40 per cent thought them anti-American while Muslims are viewed less favourably than seven other major religions. What Jews once experienced, Muslims are liable to do today and with the same internal debates about potentially competing identities.

Heterogeneity is seen as evidence of liberal tolerance so long as the dominant discourse and narrative are not threatened. In a mass society, the local becomes more important, those things which differentiate from the generality more significant offering as they do a sense of community defined by place, religion, gender, sexuality even as there is a counter-pressure to embrace shared values, acknowledge a national identity. Ostensibly, society celebrates the centrifugal, the group the centripetal. Yet there is, of course, a negotiation, for some more fraught than for others. What is it to be a Muslim in a non-Muslim country? How do apparent prejudices enshrined in a holy book – not seen as prejudice because enshrined in that book – work out in the necessary debates which make up social life? What answers does literature offer? It is a character in Richard Flanagan's novel *First Person* who observes that literature 'asks questions that it can't answer. It astonishes people with themselves.'<sup>2</sup> The other becomes the self. That is the necessary legerdemain of fiction, of drama, as the particular becomes the general.

In 2017 the British-Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie published *Home Ground*. It featured a Muslim family whose father had been a jihadi who died on his way to Guantanamo while his son joined the media section of ISIS in Raqqa. At one stage a character turns to the internet being told that she might be guilty of GWM, Googling while Muslim. It was a thought which occurred to the author who, like one of her characters, has from time to time been stopped by British immigration officials. In Britain and America, being identified as a Muslim, particularly of a certain colour, can test the limits of a liberal tolerance more fragile than might have been supposed. In fact, she had little trouble and the book was long-listed for the Booker Prize, the country's leading literary award. Shamsie was born in Karachi, later taking British citizenship after living in the country for six years because travelling with a Pakistani passport could be difficult at times. It would be her seventh novel, though, before she set her work in her new country.

Pakistan has the sixth largest diaspora with seven million Pakistanis living outside the country. Among that number were the parents of Ayad Akhtar, both doctors, she a radiologist, he a cardiologist. They travelled to the United States in the late 1960s, settling in Milwaukee, though their son was born on Staten Island in 1970. Theirs was a Punjabi family, not overly religious, living in a part of the country in which they were liable to stand out. It was, he has recalled, a volatile family.

He himself grew up American, aware of a Muslim heritage to which he was not initially drawn, though teenage years, as is often the case, prompted an interest which would later fade. He taught himself to pray and at one time persuaded his parents to let him attend a local mosque explaining to Michael Sokolove, of *The New York Times*, that on hearing that on a given

day all creation bowed to Muhammad he had stayed up all night waiting to see the trees bend.<sup>3</sup> It was a faith that would fade as he became a militant agnostic at college before re-discovering not a formal religion but a sense of what he called his devotional nature, his ultimate fidelity being to the truth rather than the Quran, even as they were assumed to be coincident.

Ahead, though, lay a precise date which would change him as much as it would others: 9/11. Suddenly, any invisibility he might have sought, any sense of having blended into the commonality, ended in so far as he was made aware by others, and became aware himself, that his was a double inheritance. His work thereafter would be an inner dialogue offered to others as he explored his relationship to a Muslim faith whose tenets, practices and implications suddenly seemed of interest not simply to him, renegotiating the terms of his own relationship to family, beliefs, obligations, but to a wider society in which difference was suddenly less celebrated than feared. What resulted were works which staged private and public tensions, embodied debates about identity in figures whose certainties were exposed and doubts acknowledged. The curiosity is that the more he focussed on his own community the more the issues with which he engaged echoed those of a society apparently so confident in itself but never really assured, never quite clear why there might be others in the world who failed to recognize its self-evident virtues. Anxieties, insecurities, have ever prompted prescriptive responses, religion itself being one evidence for that, as the patrolling of the borders of a supposed freedom is another. In the plays, novel, film he would write he stood back, raising issues without resolving them, an objectivity which would lead him to stage dramatic confrontations but also move in the direction of comedy.

When he was growing up it was assumed that, like his parents, he would in turn become a doctor. In his play *The Who & the What* he would invent a father who was more flexible than his own agreeing to his daughter studying creative writing: 'You were the one who made me see that it's important we don't all become doctors . . . We need *our own kind* thinking about the bigger questions.'<sup>4</sup>

As it happened, at school he encountered a teacher who opened a door to the bigger questions and precisely through writing. In a world literature class, she introduced him to modernist literary texts. He recalls reading Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, Rainer Maria Rilke and Yukio Mishima, hardly standard works in a Midwestern school. It was an education which did, indeed, open doors, not least because she and the books provoked a sense of profound meanings to be explored, an exploration, however, which seems simultaneously to have closed others in that it moved him away from his cultural roots, even if, at fifteen, he decided that he wanted to be a writer. The kind of writer he thought himself as being, however, then and for many years, was a Central European modernist engaging with universal themes rather than his own experience, assuming that such would be too parochial.

It is the nature of the immigrant experience that it involves a tension between what is carried into the new country, the preservation of old traditions and values, and the urge to accommodate. America offers the promise of transformation and re-invention though sometimes at a price, a residue of culpability for abandoned ideas, faiths, assumptions. It is the more acute for the second generation, more deeply embedded in a culture itself intent on asserting its unique identity with an insistent pull towards an assumed centre, its myths regularly celebrated. With no necessary loyalty to a distant world, only refracted through parents themselves ambiguously located, the impetus is towards seeking inclusion



## Staging America

David Mamet has spoken of his own upbringing in Chicago, urged to substitute secular myths for religious ones only later to discover what was lost along the way, an aspect of his identity filtered out and which he subsequently set himself to rediscover, though less in his plays than in assertive polemic. Akhtar would have a similar realization in his thirties and when he did it would release a sudden burst of creativity which saw him write a novel and series of plays virtually simultaneously leading to a remarkable debut for which there are few, if any parallels, though he had been writing for a considerable time.

As he has explained,

I started to understand I was running from who I was. I had been inculcated in the literary values of European modernism. I was trying to be a kind of writer that I wasn't. I was trying to ignore the fact that my parents came from Pakistan and that I had a Muslim background. I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I wanted to be the 'great American guy,' a tabula rasa, not defined by anything. I was partaking of that great American paradigm of rupture from the old world and renewal of the self from the new world. Whether it's a rupture from the literal old world, or a rupture from one coast and moving to the other coast, or from one primary family, or one identity to another, we as Americans celebrate that rupture. We celebrate the renewal, but we do not mourn the rupture. I started to recognize that I had been running from all kinds of stuff in many ways. My identity ethnically and religiously was part of that. It was a slow process of coming to understand how much I wanted to be European, how much I wanted to be white, how much I wanted to be the things that I wasn't. When I started to understand that, I had enough presence of mind to not do anything about it, but just observe. And as I observed, I metaphorically looked over my shoulder at what I had been running from, and it led to an explosion of creativity.<sup>5</sup>

In his novel, *American Dervish* (2012), about a young Muslim boy growing up in Milwaukee, he described a moment experienced by his protagonist which mirrored that of Akhtar himself, differing only in its location. For the young college student in 1990 it took place at a college game while for him it was at an airport. Having been raised to avoid pork in his school meals his protagonist now eats a Bratwurst and feels a sudden sense of liberation freed not just from a religious practice but from the religion itself, a rite of passage which removes a barrier between himself and those around him. The sky, it turns out, does not fall. When the instructor, in a course on Islam, casts doubt on the legitimacy of the Quran two fellow Muslims leave the lecture theatre in protest. He remains, taking pride in his newfound, if unexamined, secular confidence. He is also in love with a girl who reciprocates but while he is Muslim she is Jewish, and this sets the stage for the rest of the book which steps back in time to when the then young boy was growing up trying to discover who he was and how he related to the world around him, confusing and contradictory passions sweeping over him.

Growing up in Milwaukee, Akhtar was aware of difference, especially when it came to women, what clothes were appropriate, what was seemly for women to wear, Muslim or not. He recalled an incident in which the family had gone for a vacation on a lake and one summer a young girl, who liked him, turned up at the house in a bikini. His mother was confused. Growing up, and having relationships with girls, he wanted to fit in with American mores even as he was aware that they were not those of his own background. His work is

about remaining committed in some way to the world from which he came while not being defined by it.

Following high school, and after another college from which he dropped out after a year, Akhtar went to Brown University, insisting that he had had a dream in which it had featured. There he had a sense of freedom, not restrained by any particular required curriculum and not in pursuit of grades but discovering theatre as a theatre major and beginning to act and direct (he directed Genet's *The Maids*). He had grown up in a family in which theatre was not part of their experience, his father being somewhat baffled by the concept of people pretending to be what they were not, *Dallas* being the closest to drama that they came. So suspicious of his son's ambitions as a writer was he that he offered to pay his rent when he came out of college if he promised to take the *Wall Street Journal* every day (which he duly did, in the process learning about the financial world in a way which would eventually lead him to write a play on the subject), presumably in the hope that, by osmosis, it would turn him to the light side and to realize that life had more to do with a solid career and making money than making things up for a living. Brown, however, offered more than an introduction to theatre. Having grown up in Wisconsin where everyone was white he was also suddenly exposed to a more various student body and, thereby a different sense of the world and of possibility.

He has said that his involvement in theatre was in part therapeutic. He became interested in the Polish theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski, and later spent a year working with him in Italy in the early 1990s, impressed by his total commitment and his concern to ask rather than answer questions in his work. In 1999 he moved to New York where he worked with actors, on occasion along with the director Andre Gregory (born, in Paris, to Russian Jewish parents). Four years earlier he had married a French woman who he met on his junior year abroad, a marriage, though, which would fail by the time he was in his thirties.

At Columbia he did graduate work in film directing and has said that he regards film as the dominant narrative form, with its basic three-act structure, while moving with ease between the different modes, in a conversation with Gabriel Greene, at a Theatre Communications Group sponsored conference,<sup>6</sup> naming Scorsese as a major influence and in particular his film *Goodfellas* because of what he called the percussiveness of the story telling, its velocity. He had, he explained, taken more than three months watching six films a day as he explored film history in the process learning something of the story-telling form.

It was while he was at Columbia that he and fellow student Tom Glynn conceived the idea for what became the film *The War Within*. They were there at the moment planes flew into the Twin Towers. They had already been working on another film about identity when Joseph Costello, who would direct *The War Within*, read a story about a Palestinian suicide bomber. In the aftermath of 9/11 they decided to write about the world in the wake of that event, a time of renditions, torture, suspicion of those whose appearance made them likely suspects. They wanted to understand something of the mentality of someone who comes to feel that bombing civilians has its justification, that suicide bombing is a welcome fate. To their surprise they found it relatively easy to find a company that would make a film which would potentially be controversial.

Akhtar has said that 9/11 proved critical to his thinking, explaining that, 'I was myself psychologically not at home with my own identity . . . It became increasingly clear to me that there was a question of, "Why am I trying to do this? What am I ashamed of? What do I want to be?"'<sup>7</sup> The film switches between French, Punjabi and English, a reflection of its protagonist's

## Staging America

multiple identities. Even those who appear settled are liable to infiltrate Punjabi into their defence of their new American identities.

The film begins with Hassan, an engineering student, suddenly seized on a street in Paris. He is flown to Pakistan where he is tortured for information, his brother having been a terrorist killed, it seems, in Afghanistan. His cell mate is an Algerian called Khalid, himself a genuine terrorist and by the time Hassan is released he has become, what he was not before, a devout Muslim convinced that his duty is to join the fight, that all those of his faith are brothers. He is sent to New York where Khalid now runs a cell and where bombs are being prepared. Pretending to be in search of a job he looks up a former friend and becomes in effect a member of their family, as, unbeknown to them, he prepares to bomb his target, Grand Central Station.

It is his attachment to the family which introduces a momentary hesitation, even being attracted to their daughter, but it also offers him the opportunity to begin the process of indoctrinating their young son. Preparing to set off his bomb, he writes a note to his friends who have found a home and security in America: 'I have done what I will do, what I have to do. You are Americans now and America has been good to you. It has become your home, the country you love. But the life you live is born from the blood of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Your government takes actions of which its people are unaware but ignorance is not innocence.' 'What I am doing,' he says, 'I am doing for Allah. What I am about to do I am'<sup>8</sup> even though in the mosque an imam insists that jihad is the struggle of everyday life.

The plot is discovered, the cell broken up, but he and Khalid decide to go ahead, Hussain making a bomb in the basement of his friends' house until they discover him. He turns his back on them, and the woman he was drawn to. Though Khalid fails to go through with his part, Hussain goes to Grand Central and explodes his suicide bomb, in the process killing, among others, the woman who might have held him back from his action.

Akhtar not only co-wrote the script but played the role of Hassan, his understated performance creating a tension between the character's inner conflict and the momentum of a plot which is always on the verge of being a thriller while being effectively restrained. It was released in 2005, just four years after 9/11. It could have been seen as a provocation. At one stage, indeed, attention is drawn to the absence of the Towers as a way of orienting in the city as, in a sense, it is an unstated point of reference in the film.

Did Hassan become radicalized because his life was transformed by his arbitrary seizure, his being the victim of rendition and torture, or was he indoctrinated during his time in prison? Is he wrong in his assessment of America's role around the world, the ease with which his friends have accommodated, abandoned their faith and country? It is a film which established Akhtar's urge to confront rather than evade central questions about identity and the relationship between Muslim Americans and the culture to which they are drawn or against which they may be tempted to rebel. At this stage he saw himself as an actor rather than a writer and there is evidence enough in this film for his talent in that direction.

There came a moment, though, when he read the work of Philip Roth and realized that his own community could legitimately be seen as the basis of stories rooted in that community but whose meanings would extend beyond it even as he experienced something of the response that Roth had elicited from fellow Jews when they sought to impose a duty on him to represent Jews in a favourable light. Akhtar was the first American Muslim to write fiction and drama based in the Muslim community and perhaps as a result encountered those who felt he

therefore had a responsibility to offer a portrait that would correct the distorted view of Islam too often current, as if it was his duty to explicate and justify what to him was the material for art rather than polemic. It was the Australian writer Richard Flanagan who said, 'books don't tell us how to live. They teach us we are not alone' and that 'a novel is not an argument for anything.'<sup>9</sup> It may seem strange to suggest that this applies to a writer for whom the Muslim experience lies at the heart of his work but it is the essence of what he learned from reading Chaim Potok in his early teenage years who, he said, 'spoke to the religious dimensions of my experience, and also my immigrant experience, because those people in Brooklyn, those Hasidim, were so much like the people I knew,'<sup>10</sup> in a sense echoing his mother's conviction that Jews were models, successfully accommodating to the new country while sustaining a sense of themselves and their traditions.

From him, and from Philip Roth, he learned that the particular is a bridge and not an end. He might have learned the same from William Faulkner for whom the implications of his novels did not end at the boundary of Yoknapatawpha County. As soon as he realized that his own particular territory was a key, works suddenly tumbled out of him, though he had earlier spent six years writing what turned out to be an unpublishable novel. Now he wrote *American Dervish*, the first draft of *Disgraced*, *The Invisible Hand* and *The Who & the What* and began work on another novel, all this in the course of eight to ten months. It is hard to think of any other writer, other than David Adjmi, who has had such an epiphany. Looking for an explanation, he remarked that,

Kierkegaard says: 'Someday the circumstances of your life will tighten upon you like screws on a rack and force what's truly inside you to come out.' At that time, I was married and my marriage was falling apart; I was languishing, I'd been writing for so long and making no headway; I felt like my work wasn't fertile . . . I felt like I had the strength to maybe start looking at myself in a different way and maybe gave up on some of the fictions I was trying to concoct to make myself feel I was somebody other than who I was. I kind of gave up on wanting to be a great writer . . . What was standing in the wake of all this was greater access to me . . . I think also the end of my marriage, that was a big thing for me. We'd been married for ten years. And I think that forced me to ask a lot of questions about myself.<sup>11</sup>

As it happens he had been married to a Catholic, albeit not a practicing one, so that cultural identity was an intimate question.

He deliberately set *American Dervish*, which brought him \$850,000, before 9/11, an event which changed Muslims' attitudes towards Americans and Americans' towards Muslims. He stepped back to his own youth in what, he insisted, is an American story, an immigrant story, a dysfunctional familiar story, a conversion narrative, about the American religious experience but from a Muslim point of view.<sup>12</sup> It is also an account of the young protagonist's sexual and moral education as he tries to understand the world around him and his own feelings and convictions. Beyond that, it is a denunciation of bigotry disguised as religion, of a version of Islam which finds little space for enquiry or engagement with those who hold different beliefs.

The book is set in a suburb of Milwaukee and the narrator, Hayat Shah, is the son of a doctor, so to that degree it clearly reflects aspects of his upbringing. As Akhtar remarked, 'I wanted the book to have the feel of autobiography, I wanted it to feel non-fiction, rather than fiction – even

though it was a novel. I was drawing from my own life – I often paraphrase Wallace Stevens: I was building with wood out of my own forest, and stones from my own fields.<sup>13</sup> His is essentially a secular family, seldom entering a mosque, his mother (like Akhtar's own mother a lover of *Dallas*) lamenting her husband's womanizing and drinking while recalling her father's respect for the Jews who seemed to him open to debate, dedicated to genuine learning rather than 'the rote memorization and mindless regurgitation of tradition he saw as common to Muslims.'<sup>14</sup>

As survivors of the Nazis, they had every reason to retreat into the certainties of their faith, to avoid self-doubt and self-questioning, but refused to do so, remaining intellectually engaged even as they continued with their rituals in a way which contrasted with his own experience: 'it was not what he learned in his own religious upbringing at Punjabi mosques, where he, like so many good Sunnis, was taught that pursuing knowledge for its own sake was the sure sign one had fallen from the straight path leading to God' (119). Hayat's mother proved equally admiring of aspects of Jewish observances and practices, even as, at the age of nine, he himself had been inducted into the anti-Semitism of other Muslims one advocating the killing of Israelis, taking Hitler as a model. A Jewish boy is attacked at school.

The local imam seems something of a confidence trickster, lining his own pockets. When Nathan Wolfsohn, a Jew, considers converting to marry Mina Ali – best friend to Hayat's mother, having fled a painful marriage in Pakistan – and attends the mosque he is treated to a tirade against Israel and is called a dirty Jew, 'no matter who we become,' he laments, 'we're always Jews,' demanding that 'Somebody has to say something! . . . If nobody says anything, people will think these things are acceptable' (205–6). Yet the young protagonist moves in the other direction finding justification in the Quran for the prejudice he has witnessed, passing his newfound views on to Mina's young son.

Jealous of Mina's attraction to anyone else, but particularly a Jew, he sends a telegram to her former husband which precipitates a crisis he did not foresee as he threatens to reclaim the son he had abandoned. Beyond that, his father first demands that he should stop reading the Quran and then burns it in front of him. It was a scene which disturbed Akhtar's agent. He 'was very concerned because the time that the book was sold was right around the time when that pastor [Terry Jones, 2010] was burning those Korans in Florida, and one of my foreign editors wanted me to take out the Koran-burning scene . . . because she was concerned it might end up being like another "Satanic Verses" thing. So I sat with that for a week. And I realized I had written the book without one iota of fear, and I couldn't edit it with an iota of fear. And so I kept it as it was.' As it turned out, the Muslim community seemed to pay little attention. Nonetheless, he felt trapped between two audiences.<sup>15</sup>

The resonances of Hayat's action in informing on Mina reach out to all those around him. She can no longer marry the man she loves but instead, and against her better judgement, marries a Muslim man who can protect her son, except that he insists she should wear first a hijab and then a full-body chador, that she should not speak to other men or even look at them. He beats her for any infraction of his rules, as, we learn, he had his first wife, this justified by the fourth surah of the Quran which permits the beating of women by those 'in charge' of them. But it is not religion alone that takes him down this path. He increasingly loses all sense of control buying a gun with which to threaten her and himself, his business falling apart.

Watching this, Hayat abandons his faith for, he tells us, ten years. 'My soul was outgrowing the child-sized raiment with which my Islamic childhood had outfitted me,' he explains.

Eventually, after eight years of marriage, Mina dies of cancer but not before he has confessed to his role in destroying her happiness even as she accepts everything as the will of God.

In an epilogue, now working as an intern at the *Atlantic*, he encounters Nathan and learns that he had maintained contact with Mina throughout her marriage, their love for each other surviving. Now, himself living with his Jewish girlfriend, he takes the opportunity to apologize for his anti-Semitic attack years earlier, at peace, finally, relieved of a burden of his own making as of the doctrines of a faith which had constrained rather than liberated him. He has finally understood, what Mina had tried to teach him, that God, or whatever he chose to call him, inhered in the world and its particularity, feeling a sudden sense of gratitude though not quite understanding for what, beyond a sense of 'quiet wonder'.

His is a world of contradictions. Women are subordinate and the objects of desire, self-abnegation is praised but not practised, Islam attracts and repels, at one moment liberating at the next constraining. He watches an adult world of betrayal and confusion, enrolled by his mother against his father, desperate to find his way to some kind of truth, an adolescent adrift and looking for mooring. Islam offers assurance, certainty, the very thing he lacks as he is surprised by the sudden onrush of sexuality and a family which seems at odds with itself. If Akhtar's intention was, as he claimed, to show what it was like to grow up as a Muslim in America at a time when the seeds of contemporary life were being planted, to explore what it was like to be Muslim and Western at the same time, it was also to be a story about forbidden love and a family story.

Akhtar's had been the only Muslim family in his part of Milwaukee. Today he regards himself as a cultural Muslim in the way that Arthur Miller regarded himself as being culturally a Jew, an identification which David Mamet rejected as a wilful denial of the centrality of faith, aesthetics, an attitude towards history, modes of thought not being detachable from their origins. For Akhtar, they obviously are even as he meditates each day, something he learned from the Sufis, a sense of the spiritual remaining fundamental, as it would for Hayat who would, nonetheless, be left, at the end of the novel, where we entered it, in a relationship with a Jew about to confront him anew with issues he had once thought clear if not resolved.

For all that the focus is on Hayat as narrator, the transforming influence is Mina. She is also at the heart of a paradox. She is a believer and introduces Hayat to a sense of the spiritual but is herself the victim of the men to whom she is required by that same faith to subordinate herself. There is no doubting Akhtar's revulsion at the treatment of the women in *American Dervish* but equally no doubt that he acknowledges a sense of transcendence which is embodied in a woman who suffers and dies. The rote learning of the Quran is without meaning for those set to prove their ability to recite it. The imam lacks human understanding, but disregard for women is not restricted to those who seek justification for their actions. Hayat's father, resolutely opposed to Islam, is happy to conduct affairs with other women, offering a lesson to the son whose holy book he burns.

*American Dervish* was not the first novel Akhtar had written. There was an earlier one about a researcher at Goldman Sachs. Negative responses from friends persuaded him to abandon it. He was the more surprised, therefore, when, late in 2010, *American Dervish* was immediately accepted by Little Brown and sold to twenty-two countries. It was published in January, 2012, a year which was to prove remarkable as two of his plays received their premieres, one going on to win a Pulitzer Prize. The novel received almost universal praise except, ironically, in *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the city's main newspaper and the largest circulating in Wisconsin.

## Staging America

The reaction in the Muslim community, though, he has said, 'hurt my enthusiasm. It's like I'm writing for my people and they don't want to pay any attention . . . that's the real story . . . of my work: the way it's caught between two audiences . . . the tension in the way in which all of the works I'm involved in are servicing two audiences that are often not overlapping.'<sup>16</sup>

*Disgraced*, which opened at the American Theater Company in Chicago on 30 January 2012, engaged with many of the issues raised by his novel, the relationship between Jews and Muslims, the nature of Islam, its attitude to women, divided loyalties, this time set in the moneyed classes living on New York's Upper East Side. At the centre are Amir and Emily. She is an artist drawing inspiration in part from Islamic art ('Islam is a part of who we are, too,' she says, 'God forbid anyone should remind us of this' [92]) and, she hopes, about to be included in a major exhibition at the Whitney. He, who had once worked in the Public Defender's Office, is now a corporate lawyer in mergers and acquisitions angling to become a partner in a Jewish firm, a fact not without its irony since, when young, he had had a Jewish girlfriend until his mother had forbidden mention of her name, spitting in his face so that he would remember her injunction, leading him, in turn, to spit in the girl's face.

They live in a spacious apartment, he wearing shirts costing six hundred dollars, she used to international travel. He is of Pakistani origin, though this is not apparent from the fact that he speaks with a 'perfect American accent'. She is white 'lithe and lovely',<sup>17</sup> not so much a trophy as a means of entering the world to which he aspires. Akhtar has observed that, 'Franz Fanon said in *Black Skin, White Masks* [that] by possessing the white woman he possesses white culture; by holding her breasts he enters into the birth of the white world, right? Emily is a symbol for Amir; she is a key of access to that world, to membership in that civilization.'<sup>18</sup>

They seem confident in themselves and their situation, except that their equanimity is easily disturbed, as it had been by a waiter who had looked at them in a way that provoked Amir so that he responded, as Emily says, in such a way that 'You made him see that gap. Between what he was assuming about you, and what you really are' (4). The question of who he really is, though, is far from clear. Indeed, that lies at the heart of a play in which all the characters have secrets, are all capable of denial and betrayal, of prejudices which they conceal from others and even from themselves.

Emily, we learn, had previously had a black Spanish boyfriend before moving to Amir, perhaps evidence of what she feels is a liberal openness which parallels her desire to incorporate Islamic art into her own, though her husband prefers her landscapes because, she acidly suggests, 'they have nothing to do with Islam' (39). She has also had a brief affair with Isaac, the man she hopes to impress with her work and secure a place in the Whitney exhibition. Amir, meanwhile, who has abandoned his religious beliefs, has concealed his true identity from his employers, claiming to have been born in India rather than in a Pakistan whose citizens are 97 per cent Muslim. As a result, his employer sends him a bottle of scotch and a statue of the Hindu Shiva. He has also changed his name. It is not just pragmatism which drives him away from his faith. He describes his sister's fate. His parents had never made her a citizen and when of an age they regarded as ready sent her back to Pakistan to marry, only for her and her husband to come back to America and become adherents of the local mosque.

His nephew, meanwhile, who is described as being as 'American as American gets' (9), has, he thinks, successfully assimilated, changing his own name from Hussein to Abe while claiming the Quran's authority for doing so. Unlike Amir, he was not born in America and is not a citizen, merely aspiring to be such. He comes to his uncle to ask for help in the defence of an

imam charged under the Patriot Act with raising money for terrorists, the imam preferring a Muslim to represent him. While refusing, at his wife's insistence he does make a supportive statement which is picked up by *The New York Times*.

Things come to a head months later when Emily and Amir stage a dinner party for Isaac, curator at the Whitney, and Jory (Amir's colleague at work), at which Emily expects to be told that her work will be included in the exhibition. It is to be a celebratory evening except that Amir has been summoned by two of his firm's partners who question him about his real identity, his statement in *The Times* having associated a Jewish company with Islamic terrorism.

Small talk at the dinner quickly devolves into something more serious when Jory asks Amir where in India he had come from. It seems an innocent remark yet touches a nerve. Emily tries to deflect an incipient argument but the conversation has a momentum of its own. For all his wife's enthusiasm for Islamic art, and Isaac's embrace of its spirituality, Amir points out that in the Quran it says that angels do not enter a house where there are pictures or dogs. For him, Islam is harsh and unforgiving as opposed to Judaism which is enquiring. Islam is about submission. In a line which provoked some shock among audiences, he adds that the Quran is 'like one very-long hate-mail letter to humanity' (47).

When Amir refuses to be identified as a Muslim, having renounced his faith, and, in echo of *American Dervish*, reminds every one of the Quran's support for wife beating, Emily insists that the relevant passage of the Quran has been mistranslated. The temperature, though, is rising, Isaac accusing Amir of self-loathing. Having denounced the cruelties of a faith he insists he has abandoned, he nonetheless confesses that 'even if you're one of those lapsed Muslims sipping your after-dinner scotch alongside your beautiful white American wife – and watching the news and seeing folks in the Middle East dying for values you were taught were purer and stricter – and truer . . . you can't help but feel just a little bit of pride.' Asked how he felt when the Twin Towers fell he adds, 'That *we* were finally winning,' (54–5) the pronoun deliberately chosen even as it is rejected as an inheritance he has tried to expunge, an inheritance which also makes him respond, at some level, to calls for Israel to be wiped out.

Emily's boyfriend had been black. Amir has a white American wife. As Isaac remarks, 'The slave finally has the master's wife' (61). There is a sub-text to relationships in a society charged with racial and religious tensions, the display of liberal credentials. What is suppressed surfaces all too easily, compromises themselves compromised. And all the time there is something else going on at this dinner party as marriages prove no less fragile than political or spiritual convictions. They talk about one subject in order not to talk about others as things begin to fall apart.

Isaac and Jory know what Amir does not, that his company has decided to pass him over and make Jory a partner, regarding Amir as anti-Semitic for his support for the imprisoned imam and discovering his duplicity over his real identity. Emily and Isaac know what Jory does not, that they had had a brief affair, indeed Isaac insists that he still loves her trying to kiss her as Jory walks in. Betrayal operates at all levels. Amir betrays his faith and is betrayed by it. Emily betrays him as Jory does his wife. Beyond this there are other betrayals as religion and politics conspire to turn beliefs into destructive actions.

The party ends when Amir spits in Isaac's face, an echo of his action as a young man. But that is not the end of the evening. Shocked by his wife's infidelity, he attacks her viciously. The man who had complained at Islam's sanctioning of violence against women now beats her brutally. In a stage direction Akhtar indicates that, '*His first blow unleashes a torrent of rage . . .*



## Staging America

*He hits her twice more. Maybe a third time. In rapid succession. Uncontrolled violence as brutal as it needs to be in order to convey the discharge of a lifetime of building resentment'* (66). Resentment at what? Resentment at the necessity to masquerade as what he is not, to feel obligations others do not. Resentment that he has had to work harder than others, to play a game whose rules are not of his devising, accommodating to values at odds with his instincts. Resentment at having been raised in a faith whose strictures he rejects even as he grudgingly acknowledges its cultural force. Resentment at ever being on the defensive, at a wife whom he loves but whose symbolic significance to his own ambitions he senses. Resentment now that that wife has not only had an affair but with one who embraces a religion he had been taught to despise. Resentment that he might feel such. He stands between two worlds while not at home in either and not fully accepted by either. For a few seconds, Emily is a symbol for all these and his world disintegrates.

Six months later he is discovered packing what he will be taking away following his divorce. He has lost his job. His young nephew Abe has now abandoned his attempt to assimilate, changing his name back to its original, the bright colours of his clothes in the first scene replaced by more muted ones, while wearing a Muslim skullcap. He has been picked up and interrogated by the FBI following an altercation in a Starbucks sparked by a friend's remark that America had deserved what it got and was going to get. His immigration status is up for renewal. Amir telephones the attorney who had defended the imam telling Abe what he himself had learned: 'When you step out of your parents' house, you need to understand that it's not a neutral world out there' (71). It means nothing to Abe who now identifies wholly with Islam and what he sees as its destiny to rule the world. It is not that Akhtar associates with this view but he has insisted that 'I believe there's rarely been a play that's clearer about the meaning of its title to an audience than *Disgraced*,'<sup>19</sup> drawing attention to Abe's speech in which he says, 'For three hundred years they've been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to be like them. Look like them. Marry their women. They disgraced us. They disgraced us. And then they pretend they don't understand the rage we've got' (74). He has changed more than his name and clothes. He has changed his pronoun.

Amir is left alone, with nothing but the painting his wife made and which incorporated him as a figure, itself an ambiguous gesture since it was inspired by Velazquez' *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*, he being Velazquez's assistant but also a black slave. To what is Amir a slave? To his past or the future to which he believed he could lay claim?

Akhtar has offered his own explication of his play seeing in it an expression of the identity politics which colour and define individuals trying to locate themselves in a society itself uncertain of its supposed certainties. Authenticity may be proclaimed as an objective, confident views advanced, but public performance may conceal private doubts, social statements belie personal insecurities. A face presented to the world may be a mask adopted for reasons rooted both in individual psychology and social aspirations. Human lives seldom have neat contours, without contradictions, denials, loyalties shifting with circumstance. Betrayals exist both in intimate relations and in the very systems of thought and belief which seem to offer a coherent account of experience. So they prove in *Disgraced*. Religion, in particular, can simultaneously be seen as generative of consolation, rich in cultural expressions, or crudely destructive of the very human relationships which can be the source of meaning.

'*Disgraced*,' Akhtar confesses, 'would probably set most theaters on fire in the Muslim world, because the things that are said in the play are just unspeakable.' That, however, is 'by design.

Amir is a flawed truth teller. We can discredit the witness, but we can't necessarily discredit what he says. Dissonance around the truth value is exactly the trouble of the play, and sits untidily with Muslim audiences.<sup>20</sup> There are, he concedes, Muslim viewers who would see the play as a warning of the consequences of eating pork, drinking alcohol, marrying a white woman, but that he regards as expressive of the contradictions implicit in a cultural situation in which contending interpretations coexist, though it seemed to have become more polarized since he had begun writing. 'Even five years ago,' he observed in 2016,

I don't think identity politics were quite as central to the national conversation as they are now. Something about the culture of identity politics seems to foster or encourage the expression of one's outrage as the expression of one's authenticity . . . Ultimately what the play is suggesting is . . . whatever you take yourself to be is a lie. You take yourself to be a Muslim, that's a lie . . . You take yourself to be an Indian, that's a lie. What's so troubling to so many people about the final scene is that it's inconclusive. The play's not going to tell you what Amir's identity is. He has no idea. Do any of us? Or is that a fiction that we operate until we no longer can? Is it always a false self that advances our interests until it doesn't?<sup>21</sup>

The play is designed to disturb. It is not offered simply as an account of the struggle of a Muslim to locate himself in a society whose values are at odds with those he has learned. It is a reminder of the tribalism which is a factor in America and beyond, of the struggle to become something more than a product of external pressures and internal desires. Here, Muslims and Jews look after their own, circle the wagons against external threats even as the centre cannot hold. The accoutrements of wealth, expressions of an unexamined dream, devolve into little more than fashion, itself arbitrary. The dinner menu, as carefully contrived as Emily's art, is beside the point when it comes to issues which live on the pulse. Expensive clothes, exquisite décor, become baroque accompaniments to relationships which fracture, commitments which dissolve, social relationships which defer to other urgencies. Glasses raised in celebration give way to one shattered on the apartment floor. Akhtar began *Disgraced* inspired by the central figure, writing a monologue which led into the dinner party, explaining that it took him two years to understand what it was about, even changing it from its initial production as he learned.

Charles Isherwood, in *The New York Times*, greeted *Disgraced* as, 'a continuously engaging, vitally engaged play' with dialogue which 'bristles with wit and intelligence'.<sup>22</sup> In 2013, it was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, along with an Obie. Transferred to the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway, it was greeted by Alexis Soloski, in *The Guardian*, who described it as being as carefully crafted as a Swiss watch, adding that, 'it's tough to imagine anyone emerging from the Lyceum unstirred, unprovoked'.<sup>23</sup>

*Disgraced* had its first performance on 30 January 2012. Five weeks later, *The Invisible Hand*, then a one-act play, opened at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. Two years later, in September, 2014, it opened at ACT Theatre in Seattle before a New York production at Off Broadway's New York Theatre Workshop. When it opened in London it was, predictably, at the Tricycle Theatre with its commitment to the political.

Following a film in which a Muslim is kidnapped, this was a play in which the Muslims are the kidnapers. It was a play, he confessed, which justified his father's insistence that he should

## Staging America

read the *Wall Street Journal* in that money, the trading of shares, would be seen as at the heart of a work in which both would play a central role. As he commented, 'As somebody who wishes to understand the world better, I think that, in our day and age, not to understand how deeply finance has informed and defined our relationships – not only to each other but to ourselves – is to miss an important part of what it means to be alive right now, in this civilisation . . . Power, money, cheating. American obsessions.'<sup>24</sup>

Money is a form of communication, relating people to one another and to the world they inhabit. Its value is that ascribed to it in the multiple exchanges in which we are all involved. Insurance companies place a precise value on human lives. So do kidnappers. Wallace Stevens was Vice-President of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and it was he who referred to money as a kind of poetry, a comment quoted by Akhtar in his introduction to *The Invisible Hand*. It has a language of its own, especially to those who trade it. It is a medium and a message. It has a way of shaping the world even as there are those who have the power to shape it. Is money not, Akhtar asked, 'the site par excellence of our recurring quotidian terrors and soaring fantasies, and, above all, the everyday test of our character? And in America, money is something else as well: the metonymic complement of personal will itself, its acquisition standing in for the supreme American expression of individual vitality. In many ways, money is our central story.'<sup>25</sup>

He invokes Alexis de Tocqueville who, in an 1843 letter, had confessed that he knew of no country where the love of money had such a strong hold on the affections of men while in *Democracy in America* suggesting that the American Republic would endure until Congress discovered that it could bribe the people with their own money. It was the same de Tocqueville, though, who having read the Quran, came to the conclusion that there were few religions as deadly as Islam but that what he saw as its decadence would lead to it fading away.

No wonder the published version has an epigraph from Adam Smith, patron saint of financiers, albeit with a stress on altruism which Ayn Rand, who they probably preferred, would happily strip away. In *The Invisible Hand*, self-interest and altruism dance uneasily around each other. Money fuels the establishment and revolutionary alike, a fascination with its processes and alchemical power common to both. What Akhtar set out to do, he explained, was to give form 'to an American tale, but one unfolding on a global stage, an encounter of our national ethos with the world beyond its borders' (xv).

The play opens in a holding room in Pakistan. An American, Nick Bright, an employee of Citibank, has been kidnapped in error (his immediate boss being the intended target), and is being held against a ransom demand of ten million dollars. His immediate captor, Bashir, is British, from Hounslow, under the flight path to Heathrow, one of the poorer districts of London, who boasts that he has passed GCSE (General Certificate of Education), a base level qualification whose grades he does not offer. This is his naive offer of evidence for his intellectual capacity. In fact, it quickly emerges that he has something to learn from the captive Nick who, given his bank's unwillingness (bolstered by a new American law) to pay the ransom, proposes that he should use his skills to raise money on the market, even as, in secret, he is trying to find a way out of his captivity by burrowing through the wall. Sometimes the apparent threat of violence is illusory. Thus the play begins with Dar, charged with guarding him, applying an implement to Nick's hands, not, it quickly turns out, an instrument of torture but nail clippers. Later, though, the same man is required to put a gun to their captive's head and pull the trigger,

a test both of his loyalty and a reminder to Nick that his life is in their hands. The gun has no bullets. More ominous is the sound of circling drones.

The threat is that if he fails to secure the money he will be handed over to the organization which decapitated the American Daniel Pearl in February, 2002, though in fact the imam in charge is only seeking funds to alleviate the suffering of the poor. Money is the key to Nick's release, to the funding of the organization which captured him, to those in need of help. Beyond that, the imam suggests, it is the key to Pakistan and its government, suggesting that it had deliberately sheltered Bin Laden ensuring that American money poured into the country, a source which dried up with his capture. Finally, though, it is the key to the death of the Imam Saleem as Bashir is convinced that he has used money for his personal purposes. He is killed even as Bashir, now dressed in robes reminiscent of Saleem, himself arranges for the assassination of Pakistan's central bankers in order to profit from a fall in the value of the currency having learned a lesson from Nick. He makes thirty-five million dollars which he says he intends to spend on those in need. Nick is now free to go but stands paralysed, the logic of his own lessons having been carried out.

Manipulations of the stock market and currency in Pakistan echo those on Wall Street. Money is not only an agent of power; it is power. Its uses and abuses are the substance of history. In Pakistan, corruption is clear. It filters down through the system. It is no less true in America where democracy itself is in thrall to it, money sustaining those in power and funding a military whose reach extends throughout the world, hence the circling drones. Was the imam corrupt? Was Bashir? Is Nick, who has accounts in the Cayman Islands? Is America? Certainly Pakistan is. In the enclosed world of the various rooms in which the action takes place the only real relationship between the characters is defined by money. It is the reason for Nick's capture, the agency of his release. He inducts them into the processes of the free market to secure his own freedom, but those lessons are to do with how it is possible to take advantage of others.

Personal worth, as Marx and Engels insisted, has become exchange value (though Marx bought and sold shares, borrowing money from Friedrich Engels), here subordinating religion, the only freedom being free trade, free, apart from anything else, of a sense of morality and transcendence, simply a system available for co-option. Religion and politics, they suggested, are no more than veils for exploitation, in the end exploitation of the self as of others. It is not that Akhtar is staging a polemic against capitalism merely that he is presenting an allegory, offering a metaphor, for relationships which have a monetary base. The characters exchange pleasantries about one another's families, acknowledge familial ties, but these, perhaps necessarily in the circumstances, are subordinated to the need to realize liquid assets.

Meanwhile, outside and throughout, drones have been circling. The play ends with gunfire and explosions. It was Tennyson who underscored the connection between money and war: 'Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;/Ring out the thousand wars of old,'<sup>26</sup> this recalled by the historian Niall Ferguson in his book *The Cash Nexus*, the word nexus suggesting that which binds together.

Power has been shifting throughout *The Invisible Hand*, the only constant being money with its ability to break or mend bodies, to determine where advantage resides and how it is used. It is the invisible hand, neutral in itself, stem cells which can morph into different forms. Nick is left free only in that he is no longer a captive. In other respects, as he has demonstrated, like everyone he is in thrall to finance in its various forms. Is he paralysed because stunned at his sudden release or because he can no longer live as he has? Are Nick's futile efforts to escape his

## Staging America

prison to be reflected in a future in which he has been offered a lesson in the need to escape a way of living, a way of thinking? Was the imam corrupt having, when young, himself revealed corruption, a revelation which had led to his own father's death in a country in which corruption is endemic? Will Bashir, who shows enthusiasm for playing the market himself, becoming an accomplished trader, use the money he has raised to follow in the footsteps of his imam, shot by the man who earlier had been willing to shoot Nick at his instructions? And what of the American drones, as America reaches out beyond its borders, its pursuit of Bin Laden having poured money into the country to seek him out?

Bin Laden himself, incidentally, in documents discovered in his hideout in Pakistan, while criticizing the role of money in America, and the financial power of lobbyists, offered an astute analysis of the impact of currency markets, even as he left twenty-nine million dollars in his will with the request that it should be spent on jihad. He was also very conscious of the existence of drones.

*The Invisible Hand*, Akhtar acknowledged, was 'rich with contradiction, short on resolution,'<sup>27</sup> an American story reaching out into the world, the ethos of money embraced even by those who hold it in contempt, a mechanism to ensure stability, yet also a means of corroding it.

The play is not without its humour, even given the circumstances. There is a human connection between captors and captive. Of course they have a mutual interest. In the end, though, the murder of the imam underscores the fact that the personal exists within a context, that the price at the heart of the play is not simply that of the ransom demand. It is that paid by all those concerned and by the societies which they represent. When the Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan reported on the plight of the Syrian refugees, who he had followed from the Lebanon to Serbia, he remarked that they are not like us, they are us. Much the same could be said of those in *The Invisible Hand*. It is not that there is an equivalence between an American banker and those who threaten him with death but that they are equally faced with questions about the purposes they serve and the means by which they serve them. The accomplishment of the play lies in the fact that he presents their lives as intersecting not only in the chance circumstances of their meeting but in the moral equivocations which are slowly exposed.

The play was positively received by critics. Besides an award from the St. Louis Critics Circle for its first production, it won an Outer Critics Circle Award for Akhtar along with an Obie, an Obie also going to Usman Ally who played Bashir.

In 2014, Akhtar changed direction with *The Who & the What*. The treatment of women remained an issue, the relationship between fathers and daughters, the nature and force of faith, but now it was presented in a comic form. Inspired, he explained, by an advertisement for *Kiss Me Kate*, itself based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, it occurred to him that while it might seem at odds with contemporary notions of the relations between the sexes, and the role of a father in determining who might be suitable partners for their daughters, it was not at all irrelevant to Muslim families. Beyond that, he had long been interested in the idea of the Prophet as a literary figure, dangerous territory, he and others had learned, from the reaction to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

The two came together in *The Who & the What* in the form of Zarina, described as 'of South Asian origin', the eldest daughter to Afzal who is determined to marry her off to a suitable man before her younger sister can contemplate marriage (the play carries as an epigraph a quotation from *The Taming of the Shrew* as Baptista Minola, a nobleman in Padua, explains that he will

not permit his younger daughter to marry until her older sister finds a husband). Unbeknownst to her father, a practicing Muslim, Zarina is struggling to write a novel about an incident in the Prophet's life involving the wearing of the veil, a gesture which is doubly rebellious in that she conceals what she is doing from him and challenges religious orthodoxy, seeking independence on two levels. The requirement to wear a veil, she insists, is a result of a misinterpretation, even as the suppression of women is a metaphorical equivalent.

Akhtar himself described the play as 'Neil Simon with a PhD in comp lit.'<sup>28</sup> The title, he explained, came from his reading of Jacques Derrida who speaks of the who and the what of love, the qualities the object of that love possesses being the what, while the who is the person independent of those qualities. In her novel, Zarina is trying to get at the who of the Prophet beyond the what.

The reference to Derrida is a key to the play which is not only concerned with the situation of Muslims in a country in which they only represent 1 per cent of the population and are faced with the tension between two identities, though that is one dimension (a confusion of identities in a wholly different sense lying at the heart of *The Taming of the Shrew*). Beyond that, and essentially, it is a play about love in its different manifestations (father for daughter, daughter for father, husband for wife, wife for husband, men and women for God). It is a play about who we think we are, what constitutes our sense of self. In that context it is worth quoting Derrida at length. Pressed in an interview to speak of love, its nature, its philosophical implications, at first he refused. He had, he said, nothing to say except that the nothing then turned out to be something:

Do I love someone for the absolute singularity of who they are? I love you because you are you? Or do I love your qualities, your beauty, your intelligence? Does one love someone, or does one love something about someone? The difference between the who and the what at the heart of love, separate the heart. It is often said that love is the movement of the heart. Does my heart move because I love someone who is an absolute singularity, or because I love the way someone is? Often love starts with some type of seduction. One is attracted because the other is like this or like that. Inversely, love is disappointed and dies when one comes to realize that the person doesn't merit our love. The person isn't like this or that. So at the death of love, it appears that one stops loving another not because of who they are, but because they are such and such. That is to say, the history of love, the heart of love, is divided between the who and the what . . . The question of Being is itself already divided between who and what. Is 'Being' someone or some thing? I speak of it abstractly, but I think that whoever starts to love, is in love, or stops loving, is caught between the division of the who and the what. One wants to be true to someone, singularly, irreplaceably, and one perceives that this someone isn't x or y. They didn't have the qualities, properties, the images, that I thought I'd loved. So fidelity is threatened by the difference between the who and the what.<sup>29</sup>

In terms of *The Who & the What* these observations are played out not only as marriages are contracted and come under strain, as parental love comes into conflict with abstract principles, and religious love and practices are examined, but as the nature of being, identity, a sense of the boundaries of the self, are explored. The who and the what are, as Derrida proposes, not only relevant to personal relationships supposedly at their most intense, but also to an understanding

## Staging America

of what constitutes our sense of identity, of being in the world. Neil Simon may be a point of reference in the flashes of comedy, but the PhD in comp lit seems more telling.

The two daughters, Zarina and Mahwish, are both American-born and speak with an America accent, while their father, Afzal, who has lost his wife to cancer, has what is described as a very noticeable Indo-Pakistani accent and that difference dramatizes their different perspectives. They are shaped by America while he is still trying to mediate between two different worlds, unwilling to see his family as having moved away from old ways of doing things. He is not strict in his faith, and is motivated by love, but still wishes to see them continue the tradition that shaped him. He himself had had an arranged marriage, taking three years thereafter to discover love. As a result, he has broken up a relationship which Zarina had with a Christian man, although he had promised not to raise any children in that faith while himself refusing to convert. Plainly, loyalty to her father had triumphed over her own wishes.

His strategy to secure a Muslim husband for Zarina, perhaps in compensation, is to sign her up for a Muslim dating site – Muslimlove.com (a real site of that name announced for 2018) – without her knowledge and then meeting those who respond. His mastery of the technology suggests that he is not entirely detached from the America to which he has an ambiguous relationship. In one sense he has achieved the American dream. He is the owner of a successful taxi company, named for his daughters, in thirty-five years having gone from being a driver to owning nearly a third of all the city's taxis. In another sense he remains committed to old values.

The latest to respond to his entry on the website is Eli. He is white, son of a blueblood from New England and a Southern evangelical. He is a convert to Islam, socially conscious perhaps as a result of his family's unlikely adherence to Karl Marx. His father is an even more unlikely enthusiast for black culture living in an all-black neighbourhood, hence Eli's exposure to Islam and to the Malcolm X who had returned from Mecca with the realization that Islam was a religion for all races and colours. It turns out that he had already met Zarina, albeit briefly and disturbingly, at a lecture in which a black woman called for all Muslims to become Christian.

When they meet again, in the present, Zarina, intelligent, questioning, a Harvard graduate with an MFA, explains the subject of her stalled novel. The Prophet, she explains, had seen Zaynab, his son's wife, naked and, following her divorce, married her. When, on his marriage night, one of the guests follows him to the bedroom he says, '*If you ask the Prophet's wives for anything, speak to them from behind a curtain.*'<sup>30</sup> In other words a request for privacy had subsequently been turned into a requirement for women to cover their faces. What she wishes to do is to humanize the Prophet. As she says, 'all the stories we hear, that have gotten told for hundreds of years, don't point to a real person. It's like this monument to *what* we have made of him. But *who* really was he? We don't know. That's what I'm calling it. *The Who & the What*' (39). For others, she realizes, this is potentially blasphemy. It is also, though, a description of the process of a play in which Akhtar explores characters who by degrees expose who as well as what they are. Zarina's father assumes that because she has fifteen biographies of the Prophet on her shelves this shows the measure of her commitment to Islam when in reality it is an expression of her doubt about the version of Islam to which so many are committed. The who and the what of her are different.

The first act ends as Afzal lays out his prayer mat beginning to pray as in her bedroom Zarina has a breakthrough with her novel, as she writes reading out loud an incendiary passage which casts doubt on the Prophet's status as a conduit to a God who could be a woman. Her

emerging portrait is of a man capable of doubt and filled with sexual desire, an unnecessary obstruction to immediate access to a deity.

The second act is set a year later. Zarina and Eli are married, her book complete and dedicated to him. As a convert, voted Young Muslim Leader of the Year (while suspecting it is because he is a white convert), indeed now the new imam, he is alarmed at the portrait she has drawn detecting what seems to him to be a hatred for the person central to his faith. For her part, what she hates is 'what the faith does to women,' stories of his goodness 'an excuse to hide us. Erase us' (50). Ominously, he replies, 'I don't want anything to happen to you' (51). When her father gets hold of her manuscript, indeed, he says that, 'In Pakistan? She would be killed for this. Killed.' (75)

A tension has entered her marriage to be resolved, Afzal believes, by Eli becoming more dominant. He must 'break' her, as Shakespeare's Petruchio had set out to 'tame' Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, except that this is not part of a comic plot. Meanwhile, her sister, now married to Haroun (with whom she had had anal sex before marriage in order to appear a virgin at the time of her marriage), more for the what of him than the who, confesses to being unhappy, attracted to another man, Manuel whose name is clearly not Muslim. Things, it seems, are falling apart, except that Eli now defends his wife when her father demands she destroy her book insisting that humanizing the Prophet should not be an offence, a gesture which makes Zarina realize that his love for her is real. They leave as Afzal insists that his daughter is now dead to him, her name not to be mentioned. He throws her photograph into the sink and tells Mahwish she should leave her husband and return home.

In an epilogue, set two years later, Afzal and Mahwish are together in the park, she having indeed left her husband but for a relationship with Manuel which her father evidently accepts. The meeting, though, is not accidental, Mahwish having arranged it so that her sister can say goodbye to her father, she and her husband having to move because her book has, as anticipated, caused offence to his congregation and incidentally ruined Afzal's business, his drivers having deserted him, smashing the windows of his house. He remains baffled by the book and her need to write it, even as she insists that Muslims around the world had thanked her for allowing them to ask questions of their faith.

Mahwish explains that she is pregnant by, of course, a non-Muslim. Her father embraces her but is unable to do the same with Zarina. He is left alone to pray: 'Please, please, please. I love her. I love her too much. Please understand. Please forgive me.' Zarina, unnoticed, returns overhearing the rest of his prayer directed at the new child, 'Whatever anger you have with Zarina, *ya Allah*, please don't make that child suffer for what she did. If you can't forgive her, just don't take it out on him. *Inshallah*, please let it be a boy.' Zarina, (*With sass, defiance*) steps forward and says, 'It's a girl' (92-3).

Misunderstandings persist to the end, a father guilty for loving his daughter, a daughter needing to assert her independence. If Zarina's novel is inflammatory so, too, potentially is Akhtar's play for all its flashes of humour, but, as he has said, 'I'm not an apologist. I'm not involved in PR about correcting some impression that people have of Islam. My position is that, as an artist, I have to have the freedom to wrestle with my demons and my raptures and those of my community, and to celebrate and criticise in equal measure. And the best way to tell a good story about the world I come from is not to worry about the politics of representation, except in so far as it's relevant to the characters I'm representing.'<sup>31</sup> What interested him, as here and in his other works, was how 'we imagine our worlds mythically.'<sup>32</sup> It was not only the



## Staging America

Muslim world, however, which offered a prescriptive model. Capitalism did much the same and with the same capacity for good or ill.

This led him to his next play, *Junk: The Golden Age of Debt*, which opened at the La Jolla Playhouse, California in August, 2016. It is set on Wall Street in 1985 with not a Muslim to be seen, though several Jews. Faith remains a subject except that now the object of that faith is money worshipped with as much fervour as religion. As he told Michael Sokolove, 'If the human stakes are understandable, if we understand the action of any given scene – somebody is lying; somebody is trying to steal; there is a vendetta – those basic human interactions will be understood. That was my gambit.'<sup>33</sup> This is a world, in the words of one of his characters, in which a man is what he has, not the who but the what. *Junk* is a highly adept made-for-the-movies play, fast-paced, intercutting between scenes, combining, as it does, elements of crime, an embattled States Attorney, corporate moles, the drama of high-stakes players.

A play with seventeen characters, it runs for two-and-a-half hours, not something he would have contemplated earlier in his career. Explaining his intention, he said, 'I really want to make sure that I fully bring home the important reversals that unfold over the course of the play . . . the structural conceit is that we want to see a man escape. At the end of the first act he escapes but his escape is ineffective. At the end of the second act he escapes, but by the most unusual means, which is that he is released in accordance with the very agreement that we were led to believe would not be honored in the very beginning . . . Money is the thing that moves all these changes.'<sup>34</sup> The engine of the new world order is debt.

It is Judy Chen, a business journalist, who opens the play and provides one of the threads in a work with several unfolding stories. She is writing a book and is fascinated by what has happened as money has invaded all aspects of experience, becoming a value in itself as much as for what it can buy. It is she who sets the stage, briefly addressing the audience. This, she declares, 'is a story of kings – or what passes for kings these days. Kings, then, bedecked in Brooks Brothers and Brioni . . . embroiled in a battle over, well, what else, money. When did money become the thing? I mean the *only* thing? Upgrade your position in line, or your prison cell, for a fee. Rent out your womb to carry someone else's child. Buy a stranger's life insurance policy – pay the premiums until they die – then collect the benefits.'<sup>35</sup>

For Akhtar, 'What she's suggesting is that the entire compass of human existence is now defined by the imperative to monetize every possible interaction. This is what the system has created; it's created this aberration where everyone is looking to benefit in a financial way off of every transaction they are having with everyone else. This is the ideal. And then people wonder why don't we have a society anymore. Why is there no sense of mutual well-being? Because we are pitted against each other like merchants.' Yet Chen is sleeping with one of those she will be writing about, proving as corruptible as those she observes. As Akhtar has remarked, 'In a country where that's all that's left, you're an idiot if you don't do that.'<sup>36</sup>

At the heart of the play is Robert Merkin (an echo of the actual Michael Milkin, known as the junk bond king, indicted for racketeering and securities fraud in 1989), an investment banker, king of the new financial world, with a reputation for turning debt into cash and who plans a hostile takeover of a family-owned steel manufacturer. He aims to use the company's own assets as collateral on a loan while manipulating the market through insider trading. He is resisted by the owner of the company, Thomas Everson, and by a private equity investor, Leo Tresler, who despises the new breed, though since both he and Everson are anti-Semitic the ethical lines are not always clear since Merkin is himself Jewish. They are like two armies

preparing for the battle and perhaps it is no surprise that Akhtar should invoke *Henry V* in an introduction to the published edition, even if he does so to suggest that his play is no more constrained by a literal truth than was Shakespeare's.

For Merkin, the world has changed and those who fail to realize this an irrelevance. In one sense, though, he is presented as being less a man with a substantial character than someone on whom others project their feelings. Not for nothing is he known by the name Moby Dick when he practices his insider trading. Meanwhile, public deceptions are mirrored in private life, Merkin deceiving his wife as though there were no barrier between the private and the public, even as she has been an active partner in his deals, even drawing his attention to the money to be made from the new for-profit prisons, schools, hospitals. There are, it seems, no no-go areas for those for whom all human interactions provide occasions for financial gain. These are characters who acquire one another as well as portfolios.

Nor does Merkin lack a certain plausibility. His analysis, delivered to a conference of private investors, which identifies the simultaneous insistence that Americans should buy American even as demand declines in the face of superior products from abroad, is accurate enough. The steel company he sets out to acquire, intending to strip it of its assets before closing it down, is genuinely in a hopeless situation and is, in fact, we learn, being defended by manipulating its balance sheet so that corruption is not restricted to one side, old money itself being familiar enough with fraud.

His speech is the more effective not only because it offers an apparently clear-eyed account but because it assumes a certain ethical stance, albeit by a man for whom morality in business is an impediment. It could as easily be a liberal speaking as a neo-liberal. Thus he attacks the 'self-serving belief that we, Americans, are somehow *better* than others' which marries,

all this Norman Rockwell sentimentality to the racist tirades about slink-eyed Asians copying our stuff, and the dirty spics taking our jobs ... what do we hear in this country? 'We're Americans. We invented the automobile. We built the greatest steel mills the world has ever known. God bless America.' Let's set aside the revolting assumption that God doesn't bless other nations, or that somehow an American's job is more important to his family than a Chinese father's one is to his ... Let's stick to the facts. Fact: They are winning. Fact: We need to understand why. Fact: We need to change ... When you can't change, you die. And that is what is happening in this country right now. (80-1)

The marketplace speaks truth if not to power then, he implies, to those making rational rather than emotional choices. The new robber barons have learned the language of concern just as they have adopted the pragmatism of William James. And Merkin is aware of the line of descent recalling the practices of J.P. Morgan, Rockefeller and Carnegie. His is the American way, the American dream, or at least a version of it.

Meanwhile, those they target are forced into compromises of their own. 'Is this the future?' asks Everson. The play may be set in 1985 but it turned out that it was, indeed, the future. Michael Milken, the junk bond king, who worked at the firm of Drexel Burnham Lambert, was convicted, in 1990, of fraud involving securities trading, partly on the basis of the evidence of Ivan Boesky, an arbitrager on which, it would seem, Akhtar based the figure of Boris Pronsky, the arbitrager in *Junk*, just as Giuseppe Adesso, the US Attorney of New York, Southern

## Staging America

District, in the play, was surely based on Rudy Giuliani, US Attorney of New York, Southern District, who was in charge of a probe into Milken and, like Addesso, had his eyes on becoming Mayor. Addesso goes after Merkin, invoking RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act), as Giuliani did after Drexel. Beyond that, as Akhtar observed, 'Donald Trump rose to power on untold amounts of debt. And the great awakening is exactly what it was. It was the great awakening and the construction of a new church, and we are now living in the world that church created,'<sup>37</sup> the church of finance.

The point is that corruption beginning in one place spreads out. As Maximilien Cizik, an investment manager trying to help rescue Everson Steel, points out, 'city councils and state governments will follow. Then consumers. And then what?' 'Then,' replies Tresler, 'we won't have a country anymore' (104). Junk is not only the designation of a bond, it seems, but a description of a country dazzled by wealth, in thrall to debt, and blind to a logic which would lead to 2008 when the financial world collapsed.

The battle between Merkin and Everson comes to a head at a board meeting at which the former raises his bid persuading the shareholders to accept his takeover, except by then the US Attorney has closed in, recording a conversation in which Merkin exposes himself as an insider trader. As the second act ends, he is arrested as, elsewhere, Everson shoots himself leaving his shares to the workers.

Six months later, Merkin discusses his options with his Counsel. He settles for a plea which will see him only serve two years (Milken received ten but it was subsequently reduced to two and he was released after twenty-two months), reminding Addesso that if he has political ambitions it will require money, that he will effectively have to worship at the same altar. He agrees to a fine of seven hundred and fifty million dollars, as Milkin did for six hundred million. In both cases, fictional and actual, there was no sequestration of funds.

Both sides of the battle now join. The 'New Everson', a stage direction informs us, is '*a multiracial, multicultural synthesis with single-minded devotion to the bottom line.*' The pharmaceutical division is about to be sold off, nine hundred people losing their jobs, while there are bidders for the steel division. The object is to make money rather than products. Assets are being stripped even as they debate which company they will target next.

As to Tresler, he remains secure in his racist assumption resentful of those who lack his pedigree, his racial purity. He now employs a ghost writer as Chen finishes her own book, carefully scrutinized by Merkin's lawyer until he offers her three million dollars not to publish. Addressing the audience, she confesses that she took the money investing it in high yield junk bonds: 'At the close of the third quarter of 2017, I was worth nineteen million. I never wrote another word' (145).

The final scene is set in the low security prison where Merkin is seen offering financial advice to a pliable guard advising him that the financial system is designed to be opaque. If he wants a mortgage, he suggests, put 'No money down. Sell the mortgage debt. Use the proceeds to secure insurance against default. Right. Right. Like junk. Now just sell it to the American people,' admitting that he had made fools out of people but only, he insists, those 'in charge' (149). In this play, though, nobody is really in charge except those busy selling America back to itself. Junk bonds, and sub-prime mortgages, would later bring America, and much of the world, to its knees yet they survive, an innovation in finance still eagerly embraced though not, one presumes, their illegality. Milkin is still admired on Wall Street and many of those who worked with him have reaped their rewards.

He plainly learned from the robber barons who polished their reputations by establishing philanthropic foundations. On his release from prison he founded the Prostate Cancer Foundation (he, himself, being diagnosed with the condition). With his brother he established The Milkin Family Foundation and then a think tank called Faster Cures. He became a leading benefactor. F. Scott Fitzgerald was wrong. Americans lives do have second acts.

At the end of the play it is clear who has won. As Akhtar observed, 'Wall Street's won. Money's won. The system . . . And there's a reason they won. They won because they defined the world. They won philosophically and they prevailed. And what they have to offer is technology and cash. They've created a society in which those two things are really all that matters . . . I couldn't put a positive spin on this. I spent so long thinking about it and I didn't see the silver lining. Finance is not only conditioning and defining what we think of as human, but it's tearing the fabric of collective well-being into shreds.'<sup>38</sup>

In reviewing the play, Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, described it as 'numbingly safe', with unconvincing characters, while acknowledging that it proceeded 'with remarkable briskness, efficiency and accessibility', as though describing arrangements for disabled access.<sup>39</sup> In doing so he recalled the failure, on Broadway, of two British imports, Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* and Lucy Prebble's *Enron*, the latter the focus of a trans-Atlantic spat between himself and *The Guardian's* Michael Billington. Brantley had dismissed it as a 'flashy but labored economics lesson', amounting to not 'much more than smoke and mirrors'.<sup>40</sup>

For his part, Michael Billington called *The Times* review 'obtuse and hostile', evidence of 'the aesthetic conservatism of a theatre culture that likes plays to be rooted in the realist tradition.' Because of the power of that newspaper, 'which carries the force of a papal indictment', the play could not succeed (it closed after twelve days and fifteen performances). He noted that the same newspaper had dismissed David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* and concluded by saying that, 'If *Enron's* melancholy saga proves anything, it is Broadway's irrelevance to serious theatre.' There might, he concluded, 'be room for one, decent, straight new play . . . But at heart Broadway is a big, gaudy, commercial shop-window, where fortunes are won and lost.'<sup>41</sup> The one play he referred to, in this 2010 article, was John Logan's *Red*, but that, as it happens, had opened at the Donmar Theatre in London. The beating heart of American theatre, he declared, was no longer to be found in New York but Chicago.

Akhtar's *Junk* did, of course, begin life far from New York subsequently making its way to Lincoln Center (a Broadway theatre, though distant from the theatre district). Interestingly, Chris Jones, in the *Chicago Tribune*, also invoked British imports. He described *Junk* as 'an epic, strutting, restless, sexually charged, slam-bam-wham piece of work, something akin to the huge socio-political dramas by the likes of David Hare, produced at the National Theatre in London but far less common on this, less reflective side of the Atlantic,'<sup>42</sup> while finding it fascinating how his approach differed from what Jones called that of the socialist Anglo progressives like Caryl Churchill (who wrote *Serious Money*). What struck him was that Akhtar did not ascribe blame to white male privilege or capitalism, instead seeing the crisis as cutting across gender and race. It was, he declared, an exciting play.

When it was reviewed by *The Guardian* it was not by Billington but Alexis Soloski for whom, despite its two-and-a-half-hour length, it zipped by quickly, being smart, speedy and adroit even as it failed fully to explore the psychology of its central character. Soloski is an American. Cultural differences can be more complex than they sometimes seem.

## Staging America

In a sense the writer who began fascinated by the contradictions of faith, the confusions embedded in a sense of identity, returns to these concerns with this play. The new God is money, and to a degree always has been. In *Junk* it has the same power to disrupt relationships, provide the language within which his characters and, beyond them, society exist. Identity is defined by one's position in the marketplace, a hierarchy of need becoming a hierarchy of desire. Loss becomes a word for financial failure rather than a sense of human desolation. Ends and means lose any ethical connection. Pragmatism rules, America's gift to philosophy. Akhtar is a writer who began wondering whether he was an outsider staring in, set apart by faith and origin, or whether he was fully engaged with an America in which allegiances were ever questioned. It is an equivocal stance which in the end gifted him his drama whose energies derive precisely from that contended sense of what might constitute reality, his own and that of the society he inhabits.

## CHAPTER 2

### DAVID AUBURN

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There is a freedom with knowing that you can write a play and that that play will have a home [the Manhattan Theatre Club]. Maybe not for production, but at least a place where you can get a reading and eager listeners and people that take it seriously. And that's very freeing. It's unusual for a playwright in the 20th century – anything you try, anything you want to try to tackle – you know you can at least get a very receptive hearing for it. It's a very reassuring feeling to know one has that in the theatre.

David Auburn<sup>1</sup>

David Auburn is interested in power – the power which comes from secrets withheld or exposed, for reasons good and bad, as in *Proof* and *Amateurs* – in the contradictions which define characters negotiating their identities and their relationship with others. Some are damaged in ways that disturb (*Proof*, *Lost Lake*) while, beyond them, as in *The Journals of Mihail Sebastian* and *The Columnist*, is a world whose interpretation prompts recoil or assurance. In these last cases there are real-life counterparts to his characters, conflicts internalized as well as a product of the world beyond.

Auburn was born in Chicago in 1969, leaving with his family at the age of two to be raised, first, in Ohio, where his father worked at Ohio State University. When he was thirteen they moved again, this time to Arkansas where his mother, Sandy, worked in the Division of Aging and Adult Services and his father, Mark, an expert on Richard Brinsley Sheridan (*Sheridan's Comedies: Their Contexts and Achievements*, 1977), was a professor of literature and subsequently Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his father's interests, the first play David saw was *The School for Scandal*.<sup>2</sup> Later, his father would become Dean of the University of Akron's College of Fine and Applied Arts back in Ohio.

During his high school days, according to *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, Auburn 'worked for local professional companies in such jobs as stage hand and assistant to the lighting designer.'<sup>3</sup> On leaving school, in 1987, he moved to the University of Chicago where he was a political science major with the vague intention of working in international aid. Certainly, he had no thoughts of becoming a playwright. That changed, though, when he began to write and perform in sketches for a comedy group called Off-Off Campus, then in its second year. As he has said, the transition from sketch comedy to full plays was a gradual one: 'I kept writing and the sketches kept getting longer . . . If I hadn't been exposed to that great Chicago sketch-comedy tradition, I probably never would have started.'<sup>4</sup>

In his second year they took a show to the Edinburgh Fringe, he turning down an offer to work for Senator Paul Simon, which, given his major in political science, might have seemed an opportunity not to be missed. As he has said, 'I remember being on the plane waiting to take off and thinking: This is what I want to do. I want to try and write for the theatre. In retrospect a lot of what I know about playwriting comes from writing those revue sketches. You develop a rough toolbox of techniques that apply very nicely when you try to write longer things.'

## Staging America

Writing and performing gave him a sense of the pleasure to be had from working in theatre: 'I . . . remember the first time I wrote and performed in a sketch that got a big laugh. I don't even remember the sketch, but I do recall the distinct feeling of sitting up on stage in one of those bent-wood chairs and saying a line and feeling a wave of laughter rolling at me and the headiness of that – it was something of a different order than just saying a funny line in a play that somebody else had written.'<sup>5</sup>

He became a theatre reviewer for the *Chicago Maroon*, the student newspaper, which gave him free access to theatres, including the Goodman, Remains (staging innovative and experimental works), Theatre Ooblek (which presented plays without a director), and Steppenwolf. Coming from Little Rock, he explained, he felt like a kid in a candy store.

When he left, in 1991, by now majoring in English, he won a one-year fellowship from Universal Studios and Amblin Entertainment, travelling to Los Angeles to write screenplays. They came to nothing and he decided to go to New York saying, 'I figured if I'm going to go broke trying to be a writer, I'd rather do it trying to be a playwright than a screenwriter,'<sup>6</sup> though he would, in time, become a screenwriter as well as a playwright.

Once in New York he took up various part-time jobs including working as a copy editor at Lincoln Center. Hearing that the Juilliard playwriting programme, a residency rather than a degree programme, had just started, he applied, submitting two one-act plays. When he was accepted, in 1992, he was one of only three writers, joined by four more in his second year. He studied under Marsha Norman and Christopher Durang and among the work he produced was a one-act play, *Fifth Planet*, along with *Skyscraper*. Halfway through his time at the Juilliard the latter had a reading at the Berkshire Theatre Festival and then, at the initiative of the director, Michael Rego, a production at the Greenwich House Theatre, forming a company, the Areca Group, to do so. Meanwhile, *Fifth Planet* was given a workshop at New York Stage and Film. As a result of *Skyscraper*, he was approached by the Manhattan Theatre Club who expressed an interest in whatever he might write next.

Asked how you establish a career as a playwright, he explained that, 'the key for me was finding ways to get together with groups of like-minded friends, and self-producing, in whatever grubby conditions we could. The knowledge and relationships that came out of that were ultimately what led to professional productions . . . Basically, we all went to ATM machines and hoped we could take out enough cash to finance the bar or the basement or whatever it was that night. These were very bare-bones productions.'<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, he wrote material for publishers and a documentary film company before travelling to England where he joined Frances Rosenfeld, who would later become his wife and who was spending a year at Pembroke College, Cambridge, working on her PhD for Columbia University (she would eventually become Director of Public Programs for the Museum of the City of New York). It was while he was in London that he began work on what would become *Proof*. He sent it to the Manhattan Theatre Club and there was a reading with Mary-Louise Parker. Before that, and before *Skyscraper*, though, he had a number of one-act plays staged in somewhat unlikely places, beginning with *Damage Control*, produced at One Dream Theater, New York, in August 1994.

A comic set piece, this involves two men, dressed in suits, who discuss which tie would be appropriate for the older man to wear and whether or not he should display a handkerchief. He is about to appear before television cameras warned by his communications director that 'the handkerchief denotes a whole patrician world of privilege . . . chauffeurs, Andover. Custom

tailoring' though a Kleenex would suggest that he was 'sloppy, potentially unprepared,'<sup>8</sup> Kleenex, anyway, being a registered trademark and hence not be mentioned. Only gradually, as the relationship between the two men deteriorates, in an ever more bizarre conversation, does it become apparent that the reason for the television appearance is that he is about to confess to an affair, discussing whether he should refer to the person concerned as a minor, a pre-pubescent, an adolescent vixen, a pre-teen temptress or a statutory rapee, though he has a preference for the conventional, and all too familiar, 'mistakes were made,' that his had been a 'regrettable and profound error of judgement' that 'in no way impedes my ability to carry out my duties and responsibilities' (59). The prepared speech, it turns out, had been partly drafted by his wife: 'She hates you,' he is told, 'She kept us in there drafting that thing for days. She loved it' (60). Given the astonishing list of public officials, from a President of the United States to Presidential candidates, Senators, Congressmen, who found themselves in just such a situation *Damage Control* is hardly a satire. Anthony Weiner, a former congressman, sentenced to twenty-one months for sending obscene material to a minor, was merely one of many. Incidentally, his campaign chief resigned while his wife divorced him.

He followed it with *Fifth Planet*, a two-hander in forty-four brief scenes, staged at the New York Stage and Film Festival in Poughkeepsie, and two comedies, *We Had a Very Good Time* and *Miss You*, the latter only five pages long as were two other plays, *Are You Ready* (staged by the West Bank Theatre in New York City) and *What Do You Believe About the Future?* (1998). *Three Monologues*, produced at Middlebury College in Vermont, were even briefer, each running to a single page.

The play which first drew attention, though, was *Skyscraper* which had a brief run at the small Greenwich House Theater on Barrow Street in Greenwich Village (it later became the Barrow Street Theatre) where it was staged by the newly-formed Araca Group, named for the grandfather of one of its founders. *Skyscraper* was its first production and Auburn's first professional one. It is partly a comedy, partly a contemplation of time, relationships and loss. It is set, for the most part, on the roof of a skyscraper on the eve of its demolition. Once the tallest building in Chicago, it is now seemingly insignificant beside the Sear's Tower with its 110 floors. It was designed, we learn, by Dankmar Adler, who did, in fact, design the Auditorium Building in 1889, the year the building in *Skyscraper* was supposedly constructed and which, at the time, was indeed the tallest building in Chicago (far from being demolished, it was declared a National Historic Building).

The principal character, Louis, is himself 110 years old and claims not only to have known Adler but to be the nephew of Adler's actual partner, Louis Sullivan. But then he also claims to be the man who flew a B-25 into the Empire State Building in 1945 killing eleven people (in fact fourteen) because it was blacked out (in fact there was thick fog) while making love to his wife and drinking beer (it was flown by William Franklyn Smith). Fact and fantasy interweave in his mind even as his short-term memory proves equally fallible, though one distant memory takes concrete form.

The play opens with a brief street scene in which all six characters encounter one another in the rain. Vivian is a suicidal young woman who will climb to the roof to end her life. Jessica wants to stop the demolition and manages to break her arm while trying to photograph its artistic glories. Her lawyer, Jane, is a nymphomaniac whose love life is so complicated that it requires a virtual Venn diagram to chart. She even manages a tryst, on the roof of the skyscraper, with Raymond, owner of the demolition company whose brother, Joseph, a one-time



## Staging America

submariner, unbeknown to him, has been restoring elements of the building which he is about to demolish. Clearly there are more than a few elements of farce about *Skyscraper* though after the prologue it opens with a scene in which Louis fights to stop Vivian committing suicide, assuring her that everything will be all right, failing, finally, when she steps off the edge as police sirens are heard. It turns out, though, that Vivian had died a century earlier, a memory so vivid, and an event so traumatic, that it had stayed with him every day thereafter and had drawn him back to the place where it occurred.

The police sirens had not been for Vivian, then, but for him since it was assumed he was about to jump. This brings all the characters together in a final scene in which farce merges with more serious concerns to do with the necessity of memory, the need to preserve the past, and the problems of allowing it to haunt the present. There are, in a sense, two plays here, interlaced but different in tone. For all the humour of Louis' wild inventions, his relationship with the fantasy Vivian – who reappears, briefly, to him as the play edges towards its conclusion – has tragic elements while the other characters are sketched more lightly. Vivian tells him to forget about her but that is impossible. There are moments when he forgets her name but never the moment she stepped into space, at the end he himself swaying at the edge held back by Jessica because 'we need what you can remember,'<sup>9</sup> though what that is, is far from clear since memory has proved a construction as liable to demolition as the building. What remains from that distant past is a photograph, that and a ghost, the embodiment of figures everyone holds in their minds of those they once knew and who stay with them if not, as here, physically manifest then as memories whose vividness survives time, figures who in some way shape those who retain them as more than nostalgic gestures. These are mental photographs of those lost but never quite abandoned because a part of a present ever linked to the past, which is why the demolition of buildings threatens a link between now and then, why the death of others removes witnesses to our own lives and our sense of ourselves.

The interactions in the prologue seem arbitrary. People on a street run into one another. There seems no logic to it. Human relations, it appears, are a matter of pure chance with no meaning beyond that generated by contingency, in a way a parallel to the playwright's own summoning of characters into existence. As Joseph remarks, 'I'm at work and I watch people . . . I am up very high: the top of a skyscraper. I can look out over the whole city. Someone is coming down the block . . . Someone is coming toward him. They can't see each other. They can't see what's going to happen. I can: I'm up so high I can see the pattern. They move on. What happened? This is the part I can't know. Was it a collision? They smack into each other, get mad. They yell. They apologize and move on' (41). This is, in effect, a description of the prologue.

Interestingly, given the play which would follow, Joseph, the former submariner, turns to mathematics in explaining relationships between any arbitrary conjunction of people: 'I know math. You have to, on a nuclear sub . . . How many possible relationships are there in the group? . . . There's a formula . . . The formula is  $N \times (N-1) / 2$  . . . So, my submarine with 36 men. Let's plug it in.  $N=36$ .  $N \times (N-1) / 2$  . . . It's 1,260 . . . Divided by two is 630 possible relationships . . . Do Chicago: three million people. The answer is unreal: 400 trillion. So high that what happened to us is a lot like randomness' (41).

Jane's multiple sexual partners, turning on chance encounters, Louis' presence at Vivian's suicide, the gathering of these characters occasioned by a decision about the fate of a particular building, may be reducible to a mathematical formula but that is the stuff of human interactions, chance reinvented as fate. Neither Jane nor Joseph have ever known love. Now they come

together. 'What are the odds that this is love?' (42) she asks, but we have just been offered the calculation. On the other hand, it is a series of chances which led to the creation of the skyscraper, requiring, we are told, a number of necessary inventions, the bringing together of those who would create the beautiful art work it contains in the form of a mosaic, the collaboration of strangers, to bring it into being. Contingency can lead to form as to its dissolution. The building was 'invented', an 'idea' which took form, with 'its own aesthetic,' (15) just as a play comes into being, with its component parts, moving from inspiration through craft to realization. The play, Auburn has remarked, was part of his learning experience.

A playwright is a crafter of plays, like a wheelwright, like an architect, combining the aesthetic with the functional. The three dimensional is imminent in the two, words or drawings inscribed in the knowledge that they would be physically embodied in space. Arthur Miller was a carpenter as well as a playwright and the two professions are congruent. I once saw him use a hot wire to sign a newly-completed garden bench he had shaped, doing so, he told me, with the same pleasure that he signed a play. There is surely a sense in which *Skyscraper* is, in part, concerned with the power to give form to the imagined as memory can give substance to the ephemeral.

*The New York Times* review was not without its scepticism. While granting that it 'fairly teems with intriguing notions,' Peter Marks thought that 'none of them, ultimately, amount to much' finding it '[as] rigorous – and emotionally arid – as a master's thesis.'<sup>10</sup> But, staged in a small Off Broadway theatre, it was reviewed in *The New York Times*, which was something in itself, while it received more positive responses from *Variety* and *Curtain Up*. The former praised its skill in capturing a sense of loss, thinking it a natural for film adaptation, the latter its mix of humour and poignancy, maintaining the Greenwich House's reputation for new drama.

More significantly, the production caught the eye of those at the Manhattan Theater Club who asked to see his next work. He worked on the play which became *Proof* during his time in England and had finished it by the end of 1998 offering it first to the Araca Group (later producers, at Auburn's urging, of the award-winning musical *Urinetown*), but it was picked up by the Manhattan Theatre Club and opened in May, 2000, following development work at the George Street Playhouse. Later that year it moved to Broadway where it ran for 917 performances. The following year, ten years after he left the Juilliard, it won a Drama Desk Award, a Lucille Lortel Award, a Tony Award and a Pulitzer Prize and, in 2002, opened at London's Donmar Warehouse with Gwyneth Paltrow in the part played by Mary-Louise Parker in New York. In 2005, adapted by Rebecca Miller (she and Auburn sharing the screenplay credit), it was made into a film with Paltrow and Anthony Hopkins. This all came as a total surprise in that, having only had one full-length play presented Off Broadway, Auburn had imagined he would see *Proof* produced, perhaps, by a group of friends, on a small, intimate stage with no future beyond that. A Broadway production seemed inconceivable, let alone productions across America and around the world together with a film, albeit one with which he was not entirely happy in his view not translating particularly well to that medium in that it was too much like a filmed version of the play.<sup>11</sup>

*Proof* retained two elements which had formed part of *Skyscraper*: mathematical proofs and a ghost haunting the central character. Where in the former the poignancy and melancholy had been subordinated to comic and even farcical elements, however, here they were embedded in characters who were substantial. In *Proof*, loss is wedded to anxiety. There is nothing 'emotionally

arid' about them nor, despite the mathematical elements, even the suggestion of a Master's thesis. The word proof, indeed, while applying to a mathematical formula also has other resonances having to do with the establishment of truth in human relationships, the true state of affairs, evidence, a test of, a defence against, feelings. The word itself derives from the Latin for 'test', and, indeed, this is a work in which people are tested.

At its heart are two sisters, one fragile, sharply intelligent but disturbed and vulnerable, the other controlled and controlling, logical, rational, each distrustful of the other, tested, in part, by how they respond to the needs of their father. They see the world, define reality, differently, both having evidence for their version but equally both being capable of self-deception. The rationality of mathematics co-exists with emotional needs. It is a play not without comedy, generated by those differing perspectives, even as it explores genuine human needs and dilemmas. Secrets are exposed, motives questioned. If a mathematical mystery is resolved, existing as it does, outside the messy world of human interactions, other mysteries remain deeply imbedded in the human.

As to the play's origins, Auburn explained them in a conversation with Charles Newell back at his alma mater, the University of Chicago, before an impending production of the play: 'I had been playing around with two ideas which just seemed interesting to me, dramatically. One was about two sisters who find something after the death of a parent and whatever conflict might come out of that. The other idea was about someone who was worried that they might inherit a parent's mental illness. Along with that I had an image in my mind of someone who was sitting alone on their birthday . . . I saw someone coming up behind her and saying, "can't sleep?"' The question was how to put those two ideas together. As he explained, 'I eventually came around to thinking that a mathematical proof might be very interesting to find.' He was struck by the fact that there have been a number of mathematicians who have suffered from mental illness: 'that gave me a bridge to my other idea and the play came out of that mix.'<sup>12</sup> The first draft came quickly. He knew the setting and the characters. It took a further nine months, though, before everything was in place. The figure at its centre was in part based on people he recalled from his days as an undergraduate at Chicago, where the play was set. These were eccentric figures, assumed to be brilliant, but whose career plainly lay behind them, melancholic characters, products of the intellectual environment of a university.

He explained that he had been reading books about mathematics, one in particular being G.H. Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology*. Hardy, a pure mathematician, had written the book conscious that his skills were declining, that his profession was a young man's so that his own achievements lay behind him. It seemed to him that writing about mathematics was itself a melancholy experience. He worked on number theory and found a beauty in equations, resisting a utilitarian approach. To him the patterns of mathematics are like those to be found in art or poetry, images or words fitting together. He took pride in never having done anything useful. His pleasure lay in creating something which he judged to be worthwhile. Perhaps it is no wonder that Auburn responded.

*Proof* opens in the early hours of the morning on the back porch of a house in Chicago, though his description of the play as in some ways a very conventional back-porch drama that happens to be located in a campus setting is surely deliberately disingenuous. Twenty-five-year-old Catherine sits alone, an air of exhaustion and the haphazard about her. She is plainly on edge and is surprised as suddenly her father, Robert, a former professor at the University of Chicago, appears behind her. He carries a bottle of champagne to mark what is seemingly her

impending birthday. He, we later learn, had been a major figure contributing to game theory, algebraic geometry and nonlinear operator theory, albeit while being psychologically fragile. It was the Nobel Prize-winning mathematician John F. Nash Jr., celebrated in *A Beautiful Mind*, whose achievements co-existed with mental illness. As he remarked, 'I would not dare to say that there is a direct relation between mathematics and madness, but there is no doubt that great mathematicians suffer from maniacal characteristics, delirium, and symptoms of schizophrenia.'<sup>13</sup>

Robert upbraids her for failing to use her own talent as a mathematician and for a moment they discuss prime numbers, clearly a point of contact between them even as she reminds him that she had been distracted by looking after him, dropping out of university to do so. He had, it transpires, been ill, an illness which had begun when he was twenty-three or twenty-four. She is, it seems, waiting for the genetic shoe to drop, he having completed his major work by that age and she fearing both that she has missed her chance (even as, secretly, she herself has an extraordinary talent) and that she may succumb to the same mental decline, evidence of which being his conversations with non-existent people. The problem is that her father is in fact dead and this conversation a product of her disordered state, perhaps proof that she is, indeed, in thrall to the same fate, his imminent funeral precipitating something more than anxiety.

Ironically, given that he is dead, this relationship lies at the heart of a play which moves backwards and forwards in time as she sees in the past seeds of what may be her future. Also ironically, what turns out to have been a painful experience was not without its advantages. Acting as a carer for a man of brilliance, rendered helpless and confused, she had been able to conceal her own ambition and achievement rather than suffer the exposure of standing alone, confronting her own fears, as now she will have to do. She had built a carapace around herself which is threatened by those who seek to intrude, even when they do so out of concern and even, to her surprise, out of love, suspecting that their motives might be tainted, as perhaps they are given that they, too, fail to inspect what it is that drives them.

Her reverie, though, is interrupted by Hal, one of her father's former students, whose own career seems stalled as he realizes that he is not likely to make a major contribution to his field. He is going through Robert's papers in hope of discovering something of significance even as they seem no more than the jottings of someone detached from reality. 'It's like a monkey with a typewriter,' Claire observes, 'A hundred and three notebooks full of bullshit.'<sup>14</sup> For his part, Hal is also a member of a band of mathematicians who play a piece called 'i', a mathematical joke since that stands for an imaginary number, the imagined being not without its significance given Claire and her father's conversation with figures with no substance. For three minutes they play nothing. The imaginary plainly plays a role, pure mathematics itself being abstract, in a play in which the mind creates its own reality. When she suspects that Hal may be stealing a notebook, however, Catherine calls the police only to insult and even assault them when they arrive, further evidence that she might be following her father along the path to dementia. Certainly, in the course of the play she shifts her perception of events, an instability which may be revealing of an inner confusion or of the trauma of losing the man who has been the focus of both her emotional life and professional aspirations.

Until this moment there was always someone further down the line, ahead of her, in his talent and its collapse. Now, she is head of the line. Having suppressed both her own talent and her fear of what it may mean, she is at a tipping point. Conflict, in this play, is not only that

between herself and others but within herself. The death of a parent may precipitate feelings of abandonment, vulnerability, exposure, but also a sudden, if unlooked for, liberation from the past. She becomes her own person even as she is unsure who that person might be.

When her sister arrives for the funeral she sets about taking control, tidying her up and suggesting that she should leave Chicago to join her and her husband in New York. What seems like concern, however, turns out to be self-interest since she has decided to sell the house, this woman who had sacrificed nothing for her father, though picking up the bills, but is now happy to displace her own sister from her home, suspecting that she is anyway unstable and may need residential care – what she learns of Catherine's behaviour reinforcing her sense that she might be succumbing to her father's mental illness, and we have, after all, seen her talking to a figment of her imagination and first summoning and then turning away the police.

The act ends, though, with a surprise foreshadowed by a conversation between Hal and Catherine in which she invokes the figure of Sophie Germain, an eighteenth-century woman who, for a while, under a man's name, had worked on Fermat's Last Theorem and prime numbers, quoting verbatim, and at some length, from a letter written to Germain by the German mathematician Carl Gauss (some of whose mathematical breakthroughs occurred while he was in his teens) in which, having learned that she is in fact a woman, he praises her genius. She has, she says, memorized the passage. Why? Because she has a secret of her own, giving Hal a key to a drawer in which he discovers a notebook which proves a theorem about prime numbers that 'mathematicians have been trying to prove since ... there were mathematicians' (47). He assumes that, even in his madness, and when he was beyond the age at which he was at his peak, Robert had revealed true genius. The theorem, though, Catherine confesses, was her own, the work of someone who had not even been to graduate school, dropping out of her undergraduate programme to look after her father.

She has kept it secret, it seems, because she is afraid that inheriting a mathematical ability she may also have inherited the thing she fears most, the mental problems which she has witnessed at first hand, that genius and madness may, indeed, be close allied as Dryden (in *Absalom and Achitophel*) had proposed. It is a moment of triumph but simultaneously of vulnerability, as others may now see the connection which she herself has sought to suppress. Auburn had originally intended that she would have solved Fermat's Last Theorem but that had finally, and inconveniently, been solved in 1994 and published in 1995 so that he settled for a less precise, more generic theory.

The second act begins four years earlier, when Robert was seven months into what would be a nine-month recovery from his condition. Paid for by her sister, Catherine has enrolled at Northwestern University, half an hour's drive away, a sign that she believes that their problems are now behind them, except that we have already witnessed the after to which this is the before. He forgets it is her birthday, a fact which would seem no more than forgetfulness except that it may equally be a sign that all is not well.

With the second scene we are back to the present, picking up where the first act ended as Claire refuses to accept Catherine's authorship of the theorem seeing it as further evidence of her sister's following along the path of their father's illness, making a claim for which there is no evidence. The handwriting, she declares, is her father's and not her sister's. She demands proof. Catherine turns to Hal for support, a man who is not only a mathematician but someone with whom she has slept. He is equally sceptical suggesting that even if it is Catherine's handwriting this may mean nothing more than that her father had explained it to her. Suddenly,

trust is an issue, as is betrayal. As she points out, if she has indeed solved the problem herself that immediately casts a shadow over his career, a man bested by a woman whose abilities were either inherited or learned in a house in which mathematics was a language.

The action then switches back in time again. It is three and a half years earlier. Robert feels inspired, in touch with insights he thought abandoned years before but anxious to share the work with Catherine. It seems that he might, after all, have been responsible for the formula she would later claim except that when she reads it out it is not evidence of his recovery but of its end. 'Let X equal the quantity of all quantities of X,' it begins, 'Let X equal the cold. It is cold in December. The months of cold equal November through February . . . In February it snows. In March the lake is a lake of ice. In September the students come back and the bookstores are full. Let X equal the month of full bookstores . . . The future of cold is infinite. The future of heat is the future of cold. The bookstores are infinite. . . (73-4). As she reads, so she realizes that he is disappearing once more into his own darkness. When he starts to shake uncontrollably she puts her arm around him, comforting him even as she herself is discomfited. A door had closed for him, a door opened for her and there is no certainty that on the other side might not be a darkness just as deep.

Back in the present, a week on from her claim to authorship of the proof, Claire has handed the notebook to Hal who had at first failed to support Catherine's claim. He is plainly attracted to her but also has ambitions of his own as if he were a figure from Henry James' *The Aspern Papers* in which a man is ready to trade intimacy for secret papers. Catherine now appears ready to accept her sister's offer to help her relocate in New York, and therefore, it would seem, abandon her own plans and her future as a mathematician, except that her enthusiasm for New York is patently ironic as she enumerates its attractions as if reading from a travel brochure before adding what is more likely to lie ahead: 'Restrains, lithium, electroshock' (77). When Claire suggests that her husband-to-be might find her a job, Catherine asks, 'Does he know anyone in the phone-sex industry' (77). She will, she says, 'sit quietly on the plane to New York. And live quietly in a cute apartment. And answer Dr. Von Heimlich's questions very politely . . . I would like to see a doctor called Dr. Von Heimlich: please find one . . . while I'm blaming everything on you' (77). Irony edges towards hysteria. She has, it turns out, been asleep for a week. Claire now says, 'Don't come,' leaving even as Hal arrives, finally convinced that Catherine had developed the theorem and determined to convince her to stay. She hands the book to him saying, 'Here,' seemingly an offer of collaboration, an acceptance, for the moment at least, that she will continue with her work, that she is her father's daughter in terms of her talent but not her fate.

Is that, then, an indication that her fears were groundless, that everything is now resolved, that the proof once accepted her life will have the solidity, elegance, logic, balance of an equation, that in Hal she has found more than a collaborator? Surely not. The house has been sold, a familiar environment exchanged for the unknown and were her sister's fears entirely misplaced?

Auburn has said that productions work best when they play against the potential for sentimentality, though that potential is clearly there in terms of the relationship between a damaged father and his daughter, a relationship which survives his death. It is there in that we watch a man's decline and a daughter's evident care, her willingness to sacrifice herself and her ambitions for his comfort and security. It is there, too, in that daughter's struggle to find grace, finally to take a chance, quite possibly against the odds, on her own talent and a man who had

## Staging America

proved fallible. What resists that sentimentality is a series of human equations as he balances the motives and perceptions of two sisters, as he does the intellectual confidence and emotional fragility of Catherine.

Whatever the elegance of its methods, even its beauty, a mathematical proof is finally either right or wrong. The same is not true of human relationships. There are no uncontested answers, no ultimate proofs, no ciphers which, when broken, render up a clear truth. The theorem once solved leaves no residue, even though it may open new paths. This is pure mathematics. It may be applied by others but in itself is an intellectual exercise. G.H. Hardy (who, incidentally, had an early interest in genetics and hence the passing of characteristics from generation to generation) revelled in the in-utility of his work, regarding applied mathematics as not 'real', as repulsively ugly and intolerably dull. Lives, by contrast, while real enough, can be both ugly and dull. They lack the clarity of outline, the assurance of mathematics, not being resolvable, reduced to an exact formulation, but the power of *Proof* lies in the fact that the metaphor at its centre is finally inadequate to the characters it presents. Are Catherine's care for her father and her sister's concern for her equal evidence for, proof of, compassion? If they see the world differently is one correct and the other not? Is Hal's change of mind proof of his ambition or his love for Catherine? They sit on a bench, in different combinations, at different times, and debate what may be true while the ghost of a mathematician is hardly consonant with the profession which defined him but which also deserted him, entropy being a fundamental principle of all existence.

Why does Catherine stay with, and care for, her father? Is it duty, affinity, love? Certainly, there is greater intimacy between them than with either Claire or the man with whom, for a single night, she shared her bed. Claire supports her father and sister financially but seems not to be tempted by a more intimate engagement. Is it lack of duty, affinity, love? She seems not to have her sister's emotional commitment but is about to marry, albeit to a man we never see, while Catherine is surprised by a relationship with Hal not least because she knows herself his intellectual superior. Her commitment is to her father, now gone, his funeral disturbing her apparently more than it does Claire, the sister from whom she differs so markedly and yet to whom she is linked. She is the rational one in so far as the profession to which she is drawn depends upon logic, yet her sister is rational in a different sense, not only registering the value of her father's house but also genuinely seeking to provide for Catherine even if she fails to understand that her needs are not those she assumes.

And why has Catherine kept her secret, knowing its importance, unless she sees it as diminishing her father's significance while aligning herself with his fate, his early achievements ineluctably associated in her mind with his subsequent decline? And why does she summon him to mind beyond a troubling suggestion that her own hold on the real is beginning to slip, except that, beyond that, it is a way of keeping alive the person she has lost. She has proved an impossible theorem. Something is completed. The same is not true of her life. The play ends with possibility, perhaps even acceptance, but not certainty. The proof of their lives is not completed.

On 29 May 1945, three weeks after the end of the war, the Romanian lawyer, novelist, playwright and diarist Mihail Sebastian, born Iosif Mendel Hechter, was crossing the road to give a lecture on Balzac at the university in Bucharest when he was hit and killed by an army truck. At the time he was a press officer at the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At thirty-seven, he was Jewish and had survived a war in which many of his fellow Jews in Romania had

been killed. For nine years he kept a diary, ending in 1944. It was smuggled out of Romania to Israel and finally published in Bucharest in 1996, appearing in English in 2000.

On reading it, Arthur Miller was disturbed by yet another reminder of the depth of anti-Semitism. It was in his novel, *For Two Thousand Years*, that Sebastian had commented on the Jew's seemingly metaphysical obligation to be detested. That was his curse, his fate, and that role was played out once again in Sebastian's Romania. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum published the response of various writers to his *Journal*, including Miller for whom it was 'Unforgettable . . . I read,' he said, 'with a gripped attentiveness.' It was 'compelling.' Mihail Sebastian's 'hell,' he concluded, 'is unique, even among European Jewish intellectuals because danger comes to him first . . . from his closest friends and colleagues . . . It is precisely his capacity to remain in touch with men and women who should have been his enemies that makes Sebastian an unparalleled diarist. [His] is a profoundly intelligent literary voice in the midst of political disempowerment, corruption, and carnage.' For Philip Roth, it deserved to 'be on the same shelf as Anne Frank's *Diary*' portraying 'the cruelty, cowardice, and stupidity of his worldly Gentile friends . . . as they voluntarily transform themselves into intellectual criminals and, allied with the Nazis, participate with fanatical conviction in an anti-Semitic delirium that nothing can stop.'<sup>15</sup> Sebastian and his fellow Jews survived when the Romanian government suspected they might not win the war and therefore abandoned their enthusiasm for murdering them. The diary, though, describes in detail the deportation and murder of tens of thousands of Romanian Jews.

During the war, Sebastian was not allowed to use his own name when writing, a name never mentioned in newspapers. It was impossible to buy copies of his books. He was fired from his job with a publisher where he was working as a clerk. A play was banned while another was written under a pseudonym. When he asked Nae Ionescu, a professor of philosophy at the University of Bucharest, to write a preface for his novel *For Two Thousand Years* he produced an anti-Semitic diatribe denying that Sebastian, as a Jew, could be a Romanian. Sebastian published it thinking it would be self-condemnatory. Bizarrely, a number of his friends were fascists, including Mircea Eliade who, after the war, established himself as a professor of religion at Auburn's alma mater, the University of Chicago.

David Auburn is Jewish by virtue of his mother, though he was brought up a Unitarian. In 2004, with the Keen Company (read 'fervent') in New York, then in its fourth season, he presented an adaptation of the *Journal*, in the form of a monologue, in the 99-seat Theatre at 45th Street (ticket price \$19). The play includes elements from Sebastian's essay 'How I Became a Hooligan', while the *Journal* (pluralized in Auburn's play) runs to 628 pages so that it was a challenge to reshape it for two acts. Explaining why he should take on such a venture he said, 'It was just the next thing that came along that grabbed me,' though it is hard to believe that given the fact that having read the book once he read it again immediately and went to Romania to research its background. He was struck by the fact that, 'It was a perspective on the war and the Holocaust I had never encountered . . . But much more than that, I was captivated by his personality on the page, his humor, his incredibly incisive intelligence and his self-deprecation . . . As with anybody's life, things happen and expectations build up, then dissipate . . . Having some of those things I thought would be true to life's experience, but you can't afford too many of those in a play.'<sup>16</sup> It was not, he declared, 'a dramatic work,' while one-person shows had never particularly appealed to him but, 'I hope we found a way to do it that'll feel different to people, even if you've seen a lot of one-actor shows.'<sup>17</sup>



## Staging America

But it is, of course, a dramatic work, a tragedy, indeed, as a man journeys towards his fate, struggles against forces he cannot control, nonetheless accusing himself of a failure to act. We enter into the mind of a man, aware of his faults, charting the state of his disordered society, his writing an act of resistance, at times the only source of resistance. Sebastian was, after all, a playwright and as such alert to the unfolding drama of which he was the protagonist. What use is theatre, he asks himself, in the face of events which make it seem an irrelevance, except that Auburn's play is in itself an intervention as he lays before his audience inconvenient truths through the person of a man long dead but whose testimony suddenly speaks from a past whose relevance has not been erased by time.

Auburn's suggestion that this was just 'the next thing that came along' implies almost a minor status, as do his remarks about the lack of appeal of one-man shows. It is not so. It emerges as a study of a man's existential plight ('I wait as I would for a train. My whole life is one long wait' [49]), as it does as a reminder of how fragile is the divide between a civilized existence and barbarism. A decade before Auburn's play, 800,000 Tutsis were killed by Hutus in Rwanda. The year after that over 8,000 men were slaughtered at Srebrenica. The year before he staged *The Journals of Mihail Sebastian* 400,000 died in Darfur. Ahead, in 2017, lay the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar. This is not a play about one man, a writer, who died in 1945. It is about a recurring nightmare in human affairs as it is about a man's struggle to define himself, to understand what he has been and who he is in times which can seem inimical to man.

The part of Sebastian was played by Stephen Kunken, a fellow student from his days at the Juilliard and who had played Hal in the Broadway production of *Proof*. As a monologue, it was a demanding part, running to fifty-three pages in the published version. A note by Auburn explains that the bulk of the text is derived from the original, though he has written a number of brief passages where clarifications of historical events or situations seem to necessitate this and, indeed, the first sentence echoes that of the book. But then there is a curious, if insignificant change. In the original, Sebastian has been listening to a Bach concerto in G for trumpet, oboe, harpsichord and orchestra. In Auburn's version he listens to a Bach sonata in G minor for harpsichord and cello. Why the change? It is not clear, though it is an indication that this is not a mere cut and paste from the original diary. The process of selection effectively involves the creation of a character based, to be sure, on an existing text but an interpretation in the same way that documentary or tribunal theatre abstracts drama from transcripts of interviews or publicly available material only to reshape them. Of course, Sebastian himself, in his *Journal*, was about the same business, offering a version of himself, the events and conversations he chooses to record reflecting his sense of himself through what he chooses to prioritize. And the music? So important when his *Journal* begins, it inspires guilt later when everything, including the music, a pleasure and resource, feels trivial in the face of a world in freefall.

What emerges is a Sebastian at first happy to record commitments made and swiftly ended, love declared only to fade. That equivocation, though, extends to his politics, to those he admires and who in turn profess an admiration for his work. It is apparent that Nae Ionescu, a professor, and Camil Petrescu, in particular, are deeply anti-Semitic, adherents of the Iron Guard whose anti-Semitism co-existed with extreme nationalism and anti-communism. Sebastian seems to have the ability to separate their views from them as individuals. 'I refuse to believe in the professor's anti-Semitism,'<sup>18</sup> he declared, in the face of evidence to the contrary. While alarmed at Mircea Eliade's right-wing views – 'All great creators are on the right' – he

insisted that, 'I shan't allow such discussions to cast the slightest shadow over my affection for [him]' (11–12). Why not? How is it possible to hold two antithetical worlds apart in this way, to make distinctions which in truth lack the subtlety to which they lay claim? 'To be disinterested and natural, never indignant or approbatory' he tells himself, 'that is the best of attitudes. I am old enough to have learned that at least' (12). It is as though he abstracts himself from his own life, becoming a mere observer, claiming the same indifference as Albert Camus's Meursault in *The Stranger*.

'All I want from life,' Sebastian says, 'is a little peace and quiet, a woman, some books, and a clean house' (8). Indeed, he accused himself of being too 'supple,' longing to express more 'intransigence, more rigidity' (13). He was happy to send an article to Ionescu for publication. He was nineteen and his real enthusiasm was for the theatre, for the idea that actors would speak his lines, his love of theatre, like Auburn's own, focussing on its collaborative nature. Yet at the same time he was watching Jews abused even as Camil Petrescu, who he regarded as having one of the finest minds in Romania, declared that 'the Jews provoke things' (14).

The play now jumps ten years. Mircea is more rabidly right wing than ever, supporting Franco in Spain, Italy in Abyssinia (another playwright, Luigi Pirandello, incidentally, melting down his Nobel Prize medal to donate gold to the Italian efforts). Still Sebastian tries to separate the man's politics from their relationship, even as events on the street suggest the danger of such views when translated into Romanian politics and the actions of the Iron Guard. How, though, he asks himself, can he forget his 'generosity, his humanity, his affectionate disposition,' (15) no matter the contradiction implied in his response.

The action moves to 1937, he still asking himself whether friendship is compatible with the beliefs and actions of those he seems to wish to regard as his friends even as they defend beatings in the Iron Guard headquarters, even as his play is withdrawn from production as a result, he is sure, of his being Jewish, even as he himself describes the woman he had loved for two years, and confesses still to do so, as 'ugly' with a 'Jewish nose,' (18) his ability to reconcile opposites, to equivocate, contain contradictions not being restricted to the public realm. When the Iron Guard succeed in the elections he declares, 'I am sufficiently unserious to look at events with a kind of amused curiosity,' (19) continuing to hold his tongue. He takes refuge in skiing even as a new vocabulary becomes respectable: yid, Judah's domination. Jews are forbidden to work as journalists. The world begins to close in, despite a brief political respite as a new government begins to arrest Iron Guardists and his play is reinstated.

For a while his diary is about a love affair and the success of his play, except that on the radio Hitler's speeches are to be heard. 'On such a day,' he asks himself, 'am I supposed to take a mere play seriously?' (26) At the same time, he insists, 'What a strong impact the theatre makes,' (27) even as it manifestly has no power to deflect a gathering storm. Why should Auburn have been drawn to Sebastian? In part, no doubt, for what his diary has to say about anti-Semitism, once again at large in the world, but perhaps also because he raises the question of theatre's social utility or irrelevance. Beyond that lie questions to do with loyalty, the ability to allow contradictions to persist in the face of evidence. Meanwhile, there is the paradox of Sebastian himself, whose moral paralysis, seeming indifference, lack of agency, belief in an immunity at odds with events, make him almost an absurd hero offering a metaphysical shrug in the face of an unfolding fate.

Munich comes. The theatres empty, a reminder that they do, indeed, exist in a social and political context. It is, he fears, the end of his career. Never again, he suspects, will people

## Staging America

respond to his words. Jews are stopped from returning. The war breaks out. Now he thinks of the Jews elsewhere, in a Poland already crushed. He asks himself how he would behave in a concentration camp or facing a firing squad. When Nae Ionescu dies, however, he finds himself sobbing, the man who had written an anti-Semitic preface for *For Two Thousand Years*, Sebastian equivocating to the very graveside.

He watches as country after country is defeated. The first act ends with the capitulation of France. He had shed tears for the death of an anti-Semite; for the collapse of civilization he has none. For half a year he lays his journal aside and is assigned to an agricultural detachment, even as he lives under a fascist government and there are battles on the street as the Iron Guard tries to take power, battles which mark the beginnings of a pogrom. The tone of detachment is now harder to sustain, the writer who observed and reserved judgement, hesitant to confront those whose rhetoric was menacing but which he had felt neutralized in some way by personal relationships. As he says, 'The stunning thing about the Bucharest bloodbath is the utter bestial ferocity of it. It is now considered absolutely certain that a group of Jews were butchered at Străulesti abattoir and hanged by the necks on hooks usually used for beef carcasses.' A sheet of paper was stuck to each corpse: "Kosher Meat." Many more were killed in Jilava forest. They were first undressed . . . then shot and thrown on top of one another' (37–8).

For Sebastian, this was chilling news. Why, though, would Auburn choose to return to events now surely well known, if not in the context of Romania then elsewhere in wartime Europe? In 1994 I sat in on rehearsals for *Broken Glass*, Arthur Miller's play set at the time of Kristallnacht. There came a moment when he addressed the Jewish cast and told them of similar hangings from meat hooks in Germany. In the last decade of the twentieth century even his Jewish cast were shocked by what he said, unaware, nearly sixty years on, of details of the Holocaust, the Holocaust Museum in Washington only opening a year earlier. In 2004, when Auburn adapted Sebastian's diary, incidents of anti-Semitism in America were rising as they were in Europe.

The diary continues as his world shrinks. Jewish property is now expropriated. Previously, he notes, anti-Semitism had been 'bestial but outside the law' (38); now it was officially sanctioned. There is, though, still something of Kafka's Joseph K about him as he accepts the various blows he suffers as if there were some justification. He loses his apartment only to say, 'it is no misfortune to lose one's comfortable dwelling for another less comfortable.' When radio sets are confiscated he notes, 'It does not come as a surprise; it was even to be expected' (39). But with Germany's war on the Soviet Union Romania becomes a German ally. Five hundred Jews are executed, Jews and Bolsheviks seen as synonymous. Even then he writes, 'I seem to have accepted in advance whatever may come' (40). When he records the transportation and murder of his fellow Jews, and he and others are ordered to report, anticipating a similar transportation, he writes, 'Then came my old sense of futility, of submission in the face of adversity,' (41) while the mocking and persecution of Jews has become a public entertainment. Tennessee Williams, when asked the secret to happiness, replied, insensitivity. Harden your heart to stone while there is still time, advised Camus's character in *Cross Purpose*, it being what God had done for his own happiness. There is a sense that Sebastian has done much the same, echoing what the world offers him.

Suggestions that he should convert to Catholicism he rejects, his Jewish identity, towards which he could envisage being indifferent at other times, being now personally as well as publicly unavoidable, the wearing of a yellow star becoming compulsory, an order suddenly

and inexplicably reversed, the sheer arbitrariness being part of the oppression. There are, he notes, 'no brakes, no rhyme or reason.' It is an absurd world in which there is neither goal nor purpose, in which 'absolutely anything is possible,' a promise become a curse, irony no longer functional with one hundred thousand dead.

It was Sartre who quoted Dostoevsky as remarking that, 'If God did not exist everything would be permitted,' adding 'Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself . . . Nor . . . if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimise our behaviour. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. — We are left alone, without excuse.'<sup>19</sup>

This would seem to be Sebastian's state. He had reached a point where he confessed, 'I am frightened of myself, I run away from myself. I avoid myself' (45). His books, along with those by other Jewish writers, are banned, even the projected self represented by literature expunged. Unable even to write he recalls Jane Austen who did so on her knees surrounded by a family ignorant of what she was doing, but concludes that he is no Jane Austen. Indeed not, she, after all, being fine-tuned to moral distinctions, confident in a world reassuringly secure, even as the Napoleonic Wars were being waged.

The Russians enter Bucharest. It seems a victory until soldiers begin raping women and looting, though to him it seems right that Romania should be punished and he is curiously understanding of their actions since the Russians themselves had suffered so much, an ambivalence about people and events which had been evident throughout his journal. The play ends as Sebastian declares, 'One day I'll write a book. That's still the best thing for me to do,' even as he laments 'I can't say or write anything; words do not help me,' (53–4) two statements here brought together which in the original journal are separated by four months. He never wrote the book, his death as arbitrary as anything in his life. Plainly, though, words did help him, in that they were his resource through those years, and, when the journal was finally published, provided a path if not to understanding then to documenting something of the pathology of anti-Semitism and, beyond that, of all ethnic, racial, religious animosities.

In the original journal, Sebastian had begun to write for the theatre again and to earn from translations (*Anna Christie*, *The Taming of the Shrew*), though he still lamented that life was passing him by. He felt, he said, provisional and always alone, in the original journal though not in Auburn's play, remarking that, 'As soon as you give up being alone, everything is lost.'<sup>20</sup> The last entry in the original journal is on the final day of 1944. Five months later he was killed. From the *Journal*, Auburn shaped a play which while it does justice to the original presents Sebastian as an existential figure, accusing himself of inaction, even embracing it, aware of his contradictions, a playwright conscious of the limitations of theatre in the face of seemingly implacable forces, a Jew for whom in other circumstances that identity would have been irrelevant but who accepts that it is finally who he is.

It was, on the face of it, an unlikely play for Auburn to write but it has an undeniable force, a compelling truth beyond its historical and contemporary relevance. What clearly fascinates him, beyond summoning the past into the present, is the idea of a man inventing himself from the contradictory elements of private commitments and a public presence, a man riven by profound doubts about himself, existing in a world without a moral spine, a writer unsure about the power of the word even as it is his final resort. Sebastian was a playwright dubious of theatre's power, except his silencing might have suggested otherwise, so that in a sense Auburn

## Staging America

is engaging not simply with a man who survived by chance, only to be killed likewise, with the contradictions which shape personal and social life alike, but with the problematic nature of the craft to which he is committed. A man, alone on a stage, speaks of a distant time, in a distant place, trusting that something crosses the membrane between that world and our own, between the actor and those disparate people, with stories of their own, who have assembled not knowing where they will be taken or what relevance they will see before the lights return and they step out onto the street which may or may not seem as familiar as it had before. In the end, a monologue is reminder of the fundamental requirements of theatre, that it exists the moment an actor steps onto a stage in front of an audience.

In his next play, in some ways with echoes of his earlier *Damage Control*, he would move from a monologue to a two-hander, betrayal still at stake, the psychological and the political again braided together in a context in which there is no secure moral ground on which to stand. In 2010 the Ensemble Studio Theatre, on West 52nd Street, New York City, staged its Short Play Marathon. This included David Auburn's *Amateurs*, a play which would prove politically relevant at the time and still more so later, especially in 2017 when accusations of sexual molestations would metastasize. In 2015 he would direct it for radio. It features a conversation between a political figure, currently writing his memoirs for three million dollars, and a young woman who has come to see him ostensibly to request money for her father's foundation, he having suffered a stroke. It seems an amiable enough conversation, he regarding that father as a friend. She had been an athlete, taking part in the Olympics at Sydney, coming eighth in a final. They share memories. He offers advice about fundraising, praising her father as one of the most decent men he has known. Not all, however, is as it seems. Her liberal enthusiasm conceals her real intent as the play takes the first of several twists. She suddenly asks why he had run a political advertisement showing her father kissing a black man, having cropped the other people present out of the picture. She wanted, she says, to hear what he would say, accusing him of being hypocritical, his values at odds with those of his society, poisoning the political process. Nonetheless, she keeps the cheque he writes.

For his part, he derides her politics, her desire to identify him as racist, homophobic, even as she hands him an affidavit which attests to the fact that at a political debate he had touched her twelve-year-old sister 'inappropriately', and made obscene comments to her trying to persuade her to perform a sexual act, an affidavit which would go to his wife and the head of his company and then to the press. She wants to destroy his career, marriage, reputation, his life. It turns out, though, that she has not told her sister of her plans as she has not considered the impact on his family. He now reveals to her that in 1961 her father had had homosexual encounters in a bus station and many other places throughout the country, even being arrested for lewd behaviour. He had kept a 'special apartment'. He shows her a list of men willing to go on record as having had sex with him, including a video. Rather than use it all, he and his team had settled for a single photograph which might have been cropped but nonetheless told a truth, if not the truth. He castigates her for being an amateur. No wonder, he says, she came in eighth in the Olympics, a remark which strikes home, a truth which can be deployed to distract from a more fundamental truth his having previously tried a series of different strategies to disable her attacks. She came to win but once again ends a loser.

Talking of the play, Auburn pointed out that it was written at a particular moment, pre-Obama. The impulse, he said, came out of the feeling that the people he supported could not do anything right while the other side were shrewd, effective, ruthless and confident. In 2010,

he explained, a year after Obama's election, the production had seemed cathartic. After the election of 2016, with revelations about sexual scandals, ruthless manipulations, cynical strategies, it seemed anything but cathartic being more relevant than ever, once more his side having been defeated by those far more ruthless than his own.

In *Proof* Auburn explored the tension between two sisters who see the world differently, feeling for one another but at odds, as he did about the relationship between a father and a daughter. In *The Journals of Mikhail Sebastian*, he wrote of a man whose life was lived against the background of a developing history, of a war and his response to it. In April 2012, at the Manhattan Theatre Club, he opened a play which explores the relationship between two brothers and in part that between a father and his daughter, played out against a war. *The Columnist* places at its centre a man who, as a journalist, once commanded considerable authority, and his brother with whom, for a while, he had shared a newspaper column but between whom there was considerable tension. Once again, he reached back into history not because it was insulated from the present but because it bore upon it.

Joseph Alsop was a syndicated columnist whose column appeared three times a week in three hundred newspapers. He was a man with direct access to those in power, but whose name quickly faded from view. He was related to the Roosevelt family and had patrician tastes, later becoming an avid art collector. He even designed his own Georgetown house with a bright yellow cinderblock exterior deliberately out of place amidst Georgian and Federalist homes, a fact which led to a law forbidding such in future. He revelled in rubbing shoulders with the powerful, believing he influenced their decisions and policies, being part of what came to be known as the Georgetown set, which included Katherine Graham, of *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*, as well as Frank Wisner of the CIA (whose anti-communism was fired by the behaviour of the Russian troops when they liberated Romania, he being in Bucharest at the same time as Sebastian), along with Robert Joyce also of the CIA. He attended Groton school and Harvard, where he graduated magna cum laude, and, at the age of twenty-seven, moved to the *New York Herald Tribune* (his grandmother, Teddy Roosevelt's sister, knowing the owners) and was a regular contributor to the *Saturday Evening Post*.

What attracted Auburn, though, was not initially the man, about whom he initially knew nothing, but his dissatisfaction with media coverage of the Iraq war of 2003, which in turn led him to wonder how journalists had responded to the Vietnam War. Interviewed on PBS in 2012, he explained that,

It partially began about eight or ten years ago when I realized I didn't know anything about the Vietnam War and set about the process of trying to learn about it. I read a number of histories. And the Alsop name kept popping up in footnotes. On the theory that sometimes the minor characters in the quarters of history are the most interesting characters, I read how influential they (Joe and his brother, Stewart) were at the time to the world of journalism and foreign affairs – especially Joe. And it interested me how forgotten he was now ... I wanted to get at what a magnetic and flamboyant and complicated person he was, how mercurial he was, how polarizing he was as an individual.<sup>21</sup>

At a time when newspaper columnists have lost much of their power with the closure of many papers, the loss of staff and the spread of social media, it is hard to exaggerate the power

## Staging America

they once had though, in the midst of the Cold War, Vietnam, like all wars, would pose a challenge. The national imperative seemed clear, action on the ground less so, especially as American forces were built up and troops began to die in ever-increasing numbers. *The Columnist*, though, which, apart from a single scene, takes place between 1961 and 1968, is less concerned with charting a drift towards disaster than with exploring the nature of a man admired for his bravura style but whose opinions seemed ever more divorced not only from those of fellow reporters, with whom he developed a mutual hostility, but from reality. This was a man who could be personable and offensive in equal measure and who regarded his wife as no more than a hostess ('She's everything I want . . . sparkling and bright . . . she'll fit in here').<sup>22</sup> His relationship with his brother could be affectionate and contemptuous in equal measure. His artistic taste co-existed with socially distasteful attitudes. In short, he was a natural study for a playwright interested in conflicted characters, the connection between the private and the public, a man who would drift from national consciousness but was, for a crucial period, at the very heart of affairs, helping to shape public policy and opinion alike. Auburn moves him out from the shadows, a man whose opinions were public but whose private life was deliberately opaque.

The play, however, does not start in the 1960s but in a hotel room in Moscow in 1954 in which Joe has a sexual tryst with a young Russian who is initially given the designation 'Young Man' (until he offers his name, at which point the designation changes as if he is no longer to be objectified). The casual encounter turns out to be a trap. As the scene ends, there is a knock on the door. Later we learn that there are photographs, as indeed there were of the actual Joseph Alsop, though to avoid blackmail he immediately informed the American authorities while believing he could conceal his homosexuality from others. This, it seems, was in part the reason for his intensified hatred for communism and thereby his attitude to the war in Vietnam. Certainly, that is suggested in Auburn's play. Interestingly, though not in the play, Joe later had a relationship with Frank Merlo, Tennessee Williams's lover.

In *The Journals of Mihail Sebastian* he had staged the life of a real person, using his own words, albeit shaping them into dramatic form. In *The Columnist* he remains true to the facts of Alsop's life and attitudes while adjusting certain timescales for dramatic effect. As he acknowledged, 'Navigating the line between being true to broad historical facts and working on a character was one of the challenges,' insisting that 'I think people can come away from this play with a pretty accurate portrayal of the situation at the time.' The greatest licence he claimed was in his treatment of the relationship with the Russian man who, though there was such a figure, was 'a fictional character.'<sup>23</sup> He also moved the collapse of Joe's marriage back from the 1970s while the figure of his daughter was a composite of a number of his stepchildren.

Though the play opens with a scene of sexual intimacy, in fact there is little intimacy in the figure who emerges. When he marries, he confesses his homosexuality to his wife and there is no physical relationship between them. She was, as here, convinced that she could change him. He was not changeable. He draws people to him but, in his life and here, in the play, there is always a space between him and them. They exist to be used.

The man who emerges from *The Columnist* revels in what he takes to be his power. He is antagonistic to those he sees as challenging his authority, his interpretation of the world. He is inflexible, having no doubts about his views. His confidence, even arrogance, is in part a product of his background, a sense of entitlement which he shares with those who command the political realm. He writes 'for the people who matter' (19). His house in Georgetown seems

less a home than a location for parties, a way of keeping his fingers on the pulse of those who shape national policy. Indeed, in the second scene, at two in the morning, and with Susan Mary (her own daughter the result of her affair with the British politician and diplomat Duff Cooper), not yet his wife, he has placed champagne on ice expecting the arrival of guests coming on from inauguration balls, this being 1961, with John F. Kennedy the incoming President. 'He's *our man*,' Joe says, not least because he and his brother had promoted the ideas of a missile gap between the US and the Soviet Union which had played its role in the election: 'Don't think he won't remember that debt either . . . We're in an extraordinary position . . . this is *our moment*' (17–18). He 'understands the Soviets' but if he slips 'we'll let the White House know, *I'll let them know* . . . if he doesn't know what needs to be done, I'll tell him' (27–8). He was, as claimed here, the originator of the domino theory which held that failure in Vietnam would lead to communism sweeping through other countries.

He exists in the Washington bubble, friends with the rich and privileged. Susan Mary wears Chanel suits as do neighbouring children who are themselves attending parties. With little surprise to Joe, the scene ends with the imminent arrival of Kennedy who in his column he had praised as a re-awakening America from a period which he had characterized as ruled over by the equivalent of King Theoden of Rohan in *The Lord of the Rings*, self-indulgent and timid.

The action now moves on two years, to September 1963, as Joe's brother, Stewart, meets David Halberstam in a Saigon bar. Halberstam, twenty-four years younger than Joe, and working for *The New York Times*, shared his Harvard background but little else, especially when it came to the war in Vietnam. He complains to Stewart about a column written by his brother attacking his fellow reporters, in doing so reading from a genuine Alsop piece. In his book *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, Neil Sheehan, another Harvard graduate who worked alongside Halberstam, wrote that, 'The claim that young reporters on the scene were inventing bad news had become more ludicrous than ever by the late summer of 1963, because by now the majority of the established correspondents in Asia who regularly visited Vietnam saw the war in essentially the same terms that we did.'<sup>24</sup> This included reporters from CBS, NBC, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report*. He singled out Alsop and Marguerite Higgins of the *New York Herald Tribune* as those who in his view peddled the government line.

Joe Alsop, as Auburn presents him, is a man whose fixed ideas ultimately determine what he sees, inspired by his bitterness towards communism, intensified by Soviet attempts to compromise him, along with his ready access to those in power. He sees himself as the hub at the centre of a wheel of influence, his words on a page designed to shift people's perception of the real and consolidate him as the legitimate analyst of events speaking less truth to power than his truth as an expression of power.

Halberstam's indignation, however, is compromised when he invokes Joe's homosexuality, photographs of his Soviet tryst apparently now being circulated (in fact they were not circulated until 1970 at which time the CIA's Richard Helms managed to arrange for their suppression). Meanwhile, Halberstam was in trouble with his own newspaper, his reports being so at odds with government briefings. As Auburn has him say, while Joe has a privileged treatment, 'the rest of us are killing ourselves here, worked to death, living in hovels, eating crap, and taking literally *endless* shit back home for trying to tell a sliver of the truth about this fucked up place' (34).

Camelot, however, was about to come to an end, the following scene being set in November, 1963, even as Joe tries to get Halberstam and Sheehan fired from the *Times*, calling James



## Staging America

'Scotty' Reston (though described as editor by Auburn's Joe, in fact he was not editor until the following year, so another case of an adjustment to serve dramatic purpose). What follows is the assassination of Kennedy. Stewart is stunned, unable at first to write a column. Joe's wife is in tears. Joe, though, writes, rising to the occasion, handing his wife a handkerchief without looking up, a gesture by Auburn which effectively sums up his protagonist and his relationship to his wife. It is his brother who consoles Susan Mary, both of them leaving to join the grieving crowds while Joe continues typing, except that when they leave he lets out a single sob, a rare moment of feeling before he continues to type. According to Robert W. Merry's biography of the two Alsops, in fact Joe's secretary heard Joe sobbing uncontrollably, she observing, 'I didn't think he had that much emotion in him.'<sup>25</sup> Reportedly he spent the next days in a state of shock even as he did manage to write his column, accurately quoted by Auburn who, while forbearing to show him sobbing perhaps takes his cue from his seeming lack of emotion when it came to anything but politics and his fellow journalists.

Yet the assassination meant more to him than he was prepared to admit, something detected by his wife and fellow columnists. Two years on, Auburn has him confesses that, 'I feel like my life has been broken in half. I don't enjoy anything anymore. Not the town. Not the work' (67). His cruelty, as presented in the play, seems in part a product of a hope betrayed. Yet when Susan Mary advises Stewart that he should tell his brother about what turns out to be his leukaemia because, 'He can be very understanding,' they both laugh. The death of a President disturbs him, the possibility of the death of a brother evidently less so.

Joseph Alsop seems to believe that he is defined by what he does, rather as Willy Loman thinks that his real significance lies in his role as a salesman, blind to those closest to him who offer him what he cannot accept because his validation and vindication lie in the opinion of others. Joe does not, like Willy, need to be 'well liked', indeed is likely to be suspicious of such a desire, but he does need to feel that his identity is linked to his function as authorized narrator of an unfolding history.

The second act begins in 1965, as Stewart confronts Halberstam who (ahistorically – they being circulated years later) he accuses of sending the Moscow photographs to him. Then we are in 1967. Stewart is dead and Joe in process of divorcing (ahistorically, the divorce being in 1978). He is, suddenly, alone, his daughter dropping out of university to protest the war as, in fact, though not mentioned here, did the children of Secretary of State Robert McNamara, Assistant Secretary Paul Nitze and Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms.

Writing weeks after Alsop's memorial service in 1989, *Washington Post* journalist Robert Kaiser, recalling his time in Vietnam, wrote of him, 'One of my most vivid memories is of him getting drunk twice a day. Too much before and at lunch, then a nap, then too much before, at and after dinner. At those meals – as at so many in his own houses in Washington – he was often a cruel bully, attacking all who disagreed with him, particularly reporters who wrote stories he didn't like.'<sup>26</sup> It was a view endorsed by Isaiah Berlin who recalled Art Buchwald's play *Sheep on the Runway* (1970), which featured a character called Joe Mayflower, a deeply prejudiced, pretentious syndicated columnist. Buchwald was one of those who had received copies of the compromising photographs in the post, tearing them up. Buchwald denied any connection between his character and Joe, though the latter consulted his lawyers who demanded that the character's name be changed. It came to nothing and Joe's brother reviewed the play, denouncing the Mayflower figure as a caricature which, of course, in a wild comedy, he is. The audience included leading political and media figures.

The point of this, beyond underlining Alsop's centrality, the humour depending on people being familiar with his work, is that Auburn could have written a very different play about him, not a comedy to be sure but a darker version. His Vietnam scenes feature not Joe but his brother and focus on his politics and feud with fellow journalists rather than his drinking. He does, to be sure, come across as arrogant and a bully. What is evidently hard for Auburn to capture, and in some sense the paradox of Joseph Alsop, is his evident charm, calculated no doubt but frequently attested to. His bullying manner, no less toward his wife than others, is captured, along with his arrogance and hubris but aside from the brief excerpt from the column he wrote following the assassination we do not, of course, get a sense of his style or quite why he was such a dominant figure at the time which in fact turned, in large part, on his ability to produce an endless stream of scoops by virtue of leaks from those in positions of power. Here, the brothers, who came, after all, from the same background, with the same privileges, and who for many years shared a famous column, 'Matters of Fact', are frequently at odds. Joe's condescension towards his younger brother is in a sense as disturbing as his similar attitude towards his wife. As Auburn presents him he is as callous to those around him as he is towards those whose opinions do not match his own. He is plainly not a likeable character but, to Auburn, that was part of the fascination, part of the challenge.

Joe emerges from Auburn's play and, indeed, from history, not so much a tragic figure, though there are elements of that as he sows the seeds of his own destruction, as an irrelevance which, for him, is the same thing. He is a man blind to the fact that his virtues and vices are closely aligned. The strength of his views gave a tensile quality to his prose but also isolated him from others. Like Gatsby, he tended to see life through a single window and also like Gatsby threw parties, in his case not to capture Daisy Buchan but those with influence who might have utility and who anyway shared his elitist tastes and presumptions. He, too, had a secret to hide and was finally impenetrable, in the play and in life, in his case, though not in Gatsby's, his emotions carefully guarded, people kept at a distant even if he had passions to be contained, vulnerabilities not to be explored.

Auburn created a character who was himself seemingly not conflicted, who left damage behind him in so far as the policies he urged proved disastrous and those closest to him alienated, but who found himself stranded as the tide of opinion retreated, as those who should have mattered to him, and perhaps did, disappeared.

The play ends in the summer of 1968, a critical year, that of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy (the latter still lying ahead), the first evidence of how wrong Joe had been and the final death of a liberal dream. None are invoked, perhaps because there is no need, that year being so indelibly imprinted in history. There is, though, a demonstration on the Washington Mall, evidence of the changes which played their part in his growing irrelevance. Joe sits alone on a bench until he is joined by a man, Andrei, who years before had entrapped him in a Moscow hotel and is now an attaché at the Embassy, more in touch with popular culture than Joe is, or would ever wish to be. Andrei (only now identified by name) offers his apology but also thanks since in an indirect way it had led to his joining the diplomatic service. Joe's response, however, is to say that he will write about him in his column at whatever cost that may be to a man whose thanks are without meaning to him.

In a final scene, though, he abandons the story, tearing it from his typewriter. '*He stares at it,*' Auburn indicates in a stage direction, '*He doesn't move,*' brought to a halt by guilt, a sense of futility, a sudden conscience? It is not clear except that this is a man who had typed a story

## Staging America

following his friend's assassination even as his wife sobbed beside him. 'I have other ideas,' he says on the telephone, explaining why, for the first time in his life, his column will be late. Something has happened, something has changed, even as what it may be is not clear either to him or the audience. The ground previously so securely beneath his feet has begun to move. Is it possible that someone has finally penetrated his armour, that he has a sense of how alone he has become, that he is placing the need of another person ahead of his own, or was there something more in that encounter in a Moscow hotel than he can bring himself to accept?

In 2004, Louis Menand, writing in *The New Yorker*, quoted McGeorge Bundy as saying of Joe that, 'I have never known him to go to any area where blood could be spilled that he didn't come back and say more blood . . . That is his posture toward the universe,' while Kenneth Galbraith called him, 'the leading non-combatant casualty of Vietnam' after Lyndon Johnson, where once Henry Kissinger had remarked that, 'The hand that mixes the Georgetown martini is time and again the hand that guides the destiny of the Western world.'<sup>27</sup>

Of course, today's audiences bring to bear the knowledge that however right he had been about Joseph McCarthy, whose anti-communist views might have been seen to coincide with his own but who he nonetheless despised and attacked seeing him as a populist chasing down the liberal elite and old New Dealers, he was wrong about Vietnam, one of the challenges in writing about a man decades after his death being not to import judgements from the present.

Joseph Alsop would be left behind by changing times. He became a defender of Richard Nixon and dismissed the importance of Watergate. What Auburn has done, though, is to reach back and reinstate him at the centre of a drama, to present him in his contradictions. Today, with many turning to social media for their news, opinions are cheap, evidence not required. Those in power feel free to attack any whose views they dislike, dismissing reporters and columnists as purveyors of fake news. Authority has shifted. Once respected figures are distrusted. What was previously tolerated in terms of personal behaviour is no longer, published for the delectation of readers.

There are still those who take pride in their links to power, as hawkish as ever Joe Alsop was, but there was a certain integrity to him which Auburn grants. He was never himself a populist, pandering to what he perceived to be a disaffected readership. He was a believer, if primarily in himself, guilty of an overweening pride, to be sure, of a disturbing coldness, of a myopia when it came to those who offered him a love with which he thought he could dispense. But he hewed to his craft, believed in the agenda he advanced, admittedly evidence to the contrary being ignored. He was loyal to his conception of the country and if he displayed a dismaying sense of entitlement nonetheless felt a sense of duty and in Auburn's play is granted a last moment of grace, ambiguous but in the context of what has preceded it, perhaps the beginning of redemption. History has passed him by. He stands as something of a curiosity but here, centre stage, he lives again.

Though not a political playwright, in the sense of arguing his corner, adopting a clearly identifiable position, Auburn is drawn to those whose private lives exist in a political context either being shaped by, or themselves shaping, the world they inhabit. He is fascinated by the ethical dilemma of seeking to preserve a private life in the face of forces which would seem to leave little room for such. Sebastian struggled to sustain relationships which were deeply politically compromised while Alsop was ready to sacrifice the personal to the public as are those politicians who he pictures ready to corrupt the system they serve or the relationships to which they are supposedly committed. Even in *Proof*, he is fascinated by ethical concerns at a point where private needs include ambition and public

reputation alongside the need for love. He has a tendency to root his work in actual lives, real events, carrying into his work an authenticating pressure even as he transforms the given, re-imagining it to forge something new.

With his next play, though, he would summon two characters into existence, detached from the outside world, struggling to get by, circling around one another and their own sense of a failure which they are resistant to admit and for which they cannot account. During a residency at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre's National Playwrights Conference in 2013, invited by Wendy Goldberg who had directed Arena Stage's production of *Proof*, he developed a two-character play, *Lost Lake* (not to be confused with his film, *Lake House*, a time-shift romance which he both wrote and directed). A year later it was produced at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign before being staged by the Manhattan Theatre Club.

Set in a dilapidated lakeside cabin, it features Veronica, a black woman in her thirties, and the man from whom she is renting, Hogan, almost as dilapidated. Negotiating a rental for the forthcoming summer when she will be accompanied by her children, she describes herself to him as a nurse practitioner, except that neither turn out to be what they seem. He promises improvements before she arrives, which are never made, insists that he is close to his daughter, now living in Florida and with a scholarship to Columbia University, except that we learn that she wants nothing to do with him. He is being required to vacate the property as a result of a dispute which he claims is with the homeowner's association even as he co-owns it with his brother with whom he is in contention not least because he has stolen money from him, having previously been imprisoned for writing bad cheques. Truth is hard to pin down.

As for her, she is not a nurse practitioner, having dropped out of college when her husband died in a hit-and-run accident outside their building, being fired when her deception was discovered. In other words, these are two desperate people, barely holding on, both lying to others and perhaps themselves. When one of the three children she is looking after, Mia, her daughter's friend, nearly drowns she has a tetchy exchange with the girl's father, Charles, claiming to have rescued her only for it later to be revealed that she was on her cell phone at the time, Hogan coming to the rescue. Charles, too, it will turn out, is perhaps something more than father to her daughters' friend.

For all the tension between them, there is a level at which they recognize one another's desperation. In the final scene, set months later, in January, Veronica returns. Hogan has sent her five thousand dollars which she has come to return, knowing this to be the money stolen from his brother even though her situation remains desperate. She has lost her job and is barely getting by while her children are 'getting a little help right now,'<sup>28</sup> an ominous remark except they are being cared for by Charles, who also works to find her a job and it seems may be her lover. Meanwhile, Hogan has attempted suicide prompting his sister-in-law, who he had previously castigated, to offer to take him into their home. He breaks down in tears.

The play ends with the two of them together in a lakeside cabin, damaged, knowing they must leave, that they have failed, that they have read themselves and others awry, even as there are hints of new possibilities if they can bring themselves to embrace them. And she did return, who need not have done. Nothing, though, is resolved, even as, at odds with one another for much of the play, they recognize a shared desperation, a mutual recognition that they have closed themselves off from those who might still redeem them.

In 2018, he presented *Gun Show*, a brief play at Playwrights Horizons, recorded as part of *Playing on Air*, a public radio programme.<sup>29</sup> Two couples meet for dinner at a restaurant in a

## Staging America

New York where buildings tend to close down and reopen in a different guise, usually as banks. They are interrupted by news, on the phone, of a shooting in Ann Arbor which has left six dead, unsure whether to discuss it, not least as it quickly turns into a debate between the genders even as a waitress interrupts spouting waiter-speak and the reductive language of wine appreciation. The result is a blend of humour and serious discussion, the conversation veering in the direction of the trivial. In a discussion of the Second Amendment it turns out that one of the men owns a gun, having bought it at a gun show to defend himself. The confession is almost as disturbing as the news, a betrayal of what they assume is their liberal principles.

Auburn chose the subject, he explained, because he was aware of how serious discussion can be intertwined with the trivial and the dynamics of relationships. The issue is real enough, a constant fact in American society, but the conversation jumps around uneasily, not least because it is not a subject that people wish to confront. How, then, can comedy circle around this moral vacuum? Inevitably, audience laughter is prompted not only by the sudden disjunctions but by a certain degree of nervousness. As it happened, both of the actresses involved had had guns put to their heads.

Speaking of the one-act play Auburn has said that when the play is over you know everything there is to know about these characters, everything you need to know about these people. You are never going to see a sequel, never going to see act two.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the strength of David Auburn's plays lies in part in the fact that his characters are ambiguous, their fates not assured, not least because they are unclear about themselves. They are frequently capable of denial, unsure of who they are or how they relate to those around them. That was no less true of his film *The Girl in the Park* (2007) in which, in the face of trauma, the central figure cuts herself off from others, resists their attempts to reach out to her.

He is as interested in what characters conceal, from others and from themselves, as in what they reveal, lives suffering reversals, sudden changes, whose effects are not predictable. We may not see the next act but that there is one, unknown, unknowable, is what leaves his characters fascinatingly poised. Of course, Mihail Sebastian had an appointment with a street accident which would terminate his life (even as in *Lake House* a similar accident would be avoided, time shifters having a special concession) but even he has a brief period in which he had begun his reinvention. The plays end with a lowering of the lights. The following evening the lights come up again as a different audience offer different interpretations, project different fates for those re-animated by the curtains' rise.

# CHAPTER 3

## STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS

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A play is not a cure for cancer. The best play in the world is not going to make peace. But it is going to create a community to perform it, and it's going to be performed for a community, and when those communities are spicy, when there's different ingredients in the pot, that to me is the most beautiful thing.

Stephen Adly Guirgis<sup>1</sup>

Faith, by definition, is unaccountable. Typically, it can overpower the young, inherited, like political loyalties, from parents, a sudden explanation for a world still strange, a grid to lay upon the flux of life's mysteries. Later, it may be clung to, not without a certain strain of nostalgia, a resort in the face of loss or calamity, a reassuring structure, a bolt hole, the source of an unexamined confidence, a steady heartbeat in the small hours. With the years, however, it can seem to some a betrayal of the youth when it first bloomed, a confidence trick requiring the naivety of youth. According to Voltaire, perhaps not the best of sources in the circumstances, it was Ignatius of Loyola who said, 'Give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man,'<sup>2</sup> surely a claim not without some truth even as there is a feeling of menace about it, as if a soul were thereby kidnapped, the ransom to be paid over a lifetime.

There are those, of course, who cling to that early faith even as they conduct a continuing dialogue with themselves – doubt, of course, being a rite of passage, in some sense a trial sent to test the true mettle of belief. Yet if religion's sheer antiquity is the essence of its appeal, as if the past carries its own sanction, it is embraced by those who inhabit a secular present, two languages dangerously co-existing. How, after all, does it function in a modern world? Is it not possible to interrogate its claims, locate it in the context of attenuated lives, consider how it might survive in the face not only of a cosmic irony but a debilitated social context? And what of prayer which, in a boundless universe, is assumed to open a private channel directly into the source of some ultimate power apparently open to the most prosaic of requests. A prayer answered is proof positive. A prayer unanswered, evidence of the superior wisdom of the Godhead. This is one coin toss that is never lost.

There are not many playwrights today for whom such issues have any relevance, despite faint echoes of theatre's emergence from religious ritual, but, then, religion has always been suspicious of the Dionysian aspects of the stage. In a country supposedly saturated with religion, particular sects even associated with political beliefs as if, the Constitution aside, one faith implied another, an open declaration of belief seen as a requirement for public office, dramatists seem for the most part uninterested in this kind of metaphysic. To be sure, David Mamet rediscovered his Jewish identity but that existed to one side of his work. An angel descends in *Angels in America*. There are Mormons, to be sure, but Tony Kushner describes himself as an agnostic Jew, happy to criticize the theocratic elements in Israel. Sarah Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy* concerned a reincarnated Tibetan lama while Ayad Akhtar, as we have seen, explored the relationship between religious and cultural identity in *Disgraced*, perhaps the most obvious

## Staging America

example of religion providing an animating force for a contemporary playwright. Of course, the theatre requires a different kind of faith, a willingness to accept the proposition that time, space, identity are what a writer and actors assert them to be. This is a faith, however, which prevails only for the duration of the ceremony where religion requires that it should invade the being of its adherents, penetrate into what it proposes is a soul, the ultimate repository of an animating belief.

Why this preamble to an examination of the work of a contemporary American playwright? The answer is because his work carries the imprint of a faith embraced early, as it does of aspects of his own life. It is certainly not that he writes religious plays in a narrow or specific sense but that the journey he has gone on, personally and professionally, retains elements of that enquiry which lies at the heart of belief. His language can seem at odds with the proprieties expected of those with such interests, as if he were testing the limits of the permissible. I doubt his work is required reading in the Vatican. Most of his characters are not God seekers. They are certainly not at the centre of anything beyond their own often attenuated lives. Yet he is a man who consults a priest, seeking dialogue not just with a man but with what he represents, and whose plays acknowledge the desperation of those whose lives seem to lack a sense of true purpose, even as grace, if not redemption, seems a possibility even to those seemingly adrift and acquainted with despair.

At the same time his humour suggests someone entirely capable of stepping back from those he summons into being, the playwright himself sharing a certain affinity with God in that regard, breathing life into his own creations, watching as words are made manifest, literally embodied. And surely if there be a God he or she must have a sense of humour or how account for human existence, a thought at the heart of *Waiting for Godot*. The British novelist Rose Tremain, in explaining the moment she realized what it was to be the author of a story, capturing a world, remarked that, 'I wouldn't tamely and passively submit to it, I would assert my divinity over it.'<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Adly Guirgis was born and raised in New York. His mother was an Irish Catholic who had grown up in Newark, daughter to a deaf alcoholic printer 'in a household,' he told Bruce Weber in *The New York Times*, 'terrified of intimacy and marriage.' At nearly forty, she was an advisor to foreign exchange students, one of whom said she should contact him if she happened to go to Egypt. She did and met his brother, an Egyptian Coptic Christian. They were engaged three days later and, in 1963, settled in New York.<sup>4</sup>

They lived in a rent-controlled three-room, fourth floor, walk-up on Riverside Drive with a panoramic view of the Hudson River, a property, Guirgis once suggested, acquired with the help of a case of whisky for the superintendent. They were not well off, though it was an affluent neighbourhood. His father ran the Oyster Bar at Grand Central Station. From the age of twelve, and for twenty years, Guirgis himself would work in restaurants, beginning at Grand Central. Later he was involved in AIDS education, along with violence prevention and conflict resolution conducting workshops in prisons which, given his plays, must have provided good training. He was still doing these jobs when he was writing *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*. Philip Seymour Hoffman, who was to direct, asked him how much money he would need to let him give up the jobs and finish the play. When he explained, Hoffman simply gave him the cash.

For her part, his mother was interested in theatre and film, though with little spare money theatre visits were rare. In 1974, she took him to see the commedia dell'arte play *Scaping*, starring the multi-award-winning British actor Jim Dale who, for a while, became his model.

As he told Guy Kelly, in the *Telegraph*, ‘Our building was full of artists, dancers and musicians when we were growing up in the 1970s.’<sup>5</sup>

He was taught to pray and go to mass, though would, he confessed to the Jesuit James Martin, whom he consulted when he was a playwright, sometimes use collection money given to him by his mother to play pinball, the source of some guilt, guilt always giving the Church house odds. He would add to that when he indulged in shoplifting. Even so, Catholicism, or the question of faith, would stay with him and feature in his work.

He attended Catholic schools, first at Corpus Christi, where he was taught by Dominican Sisters, at the age of eight or nine being disturbed when told the story of Judas which seemed to him incompatible with promises of forgiveness. Faith was to prove difficult but important and a subject to which he would turn as a writer if hardly in a theologically acceptable language. This, though, proved something that Father Martin had no difficulty in accepting but, then, he was himself liberal writing a book about the need for the Church to build bridges to the LGBT community, a work which led to a rebuke from Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Vatican’s chief liturgist, as well as leading to a number of institutions rescinding invitations for him to speak.

Given the nature of Guirgis’s work, it is no wonder he would turn to Martin for advice, a man who regarded his plays as deeply theological. For him, they were ‘wildly profane, full of the kind of language not heard in church sacristies . . . but in locker rooms, bars, and traffic jams’ because, ‘that kind of in-your-face language not only reflected the milieu of the character but also prevented the presentation of religious themes from becoming either cosily conventional or piously sentimental, and probably helped open a window into theological questions for those normally put off by such topics.’<sup>6</sup>

Speaking in 2011, Guirgis explained that, ‘Whenever I perform, I pray to God and ask him for help. I pray to Mary, because I figure she’ll help me more because she’s a woman. And I pray to the Holy Spirit to move through me as I act.’ Speaking of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* he said, ‘I discovered that there was a reason I hadn’t written it before . . . The subject was terribly daunting for me, in almost every way. It not only touched on all my spiritual struggles, but it seemed too big a topic for someone like me to tackle . . . The last several years have been about trying to reconnect and get closer with whatever it is that God is. This play about Judas is part of that journey . . . It’s a manifestation of a general spiritual problem that I have . . . I knew I needed to talk to someone about all his theology.’ According to James Martin, ‘a visit to the pastor of Riverside Church, where Stephen had attended kindergarten, gave him courage to continue . . . His doubt had led him back to his kindergarten and childhood parishes.’<sup>7</sup>

Guirgis thinks of himself as a lapsed Catholic, albeit one who has never quite cut the link to a God who represents a sustenance he needs, therapy sessions never filling the gap. ‘When I was a kid and I’d be in trouble,’ he has said,

I’d ask God to help me, and then once the fire was out, I wouldn’t talk to Him anymore. When I got older, I began to feel I needed some help spiritually, just to function . . . But the thing is, when you get the help, you start to believe in the way of living that embraces that, and then here come . . . the responsibilities that go with it. To be a good person, to not steal, to be honourable in your relationships with women, with friends, to treat yourself lovingly. That’s a lot of responsibility. So, your options are to forget the whole thing and go back to the existence without any spiritual connection. Or embrace the



## Staging America

spiritual connection, but then you've got to deal with the burden of living up to the admission policy.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the trouble he refers to is that as a teenager he would drop acid, smoke weed and drink beer.

From Corpus Christi, where students were closer to his economic level but mostly black and Latino, he moved to Xavier High School, a Jesuit school in Manhattan until, as James Martin explained, he 'underwent back surgery to correct a childhood curvature of the spine, which put him in a full body cast and kept him out of school for six months,'<sup>9</sup> his problem with walking leading him to enrol in his third school, the Rhodes School on West 83rd Street, the model for the school in *Catcher in the Rye* and whose pupils included actors Robert De Niro, James Caan and Ana Ortiz (of *Angry Betty*). He remembers that in his first day there, 'I was smoking a cigarette somewhere outside, and someone opened a vial of blow and dipped both ends of the cigarette in it and said, "Here, man, it's better this way,"' the beginning he has said, of a lot of lost years.<sup>10</sup>

Following graduation, and time spent as a bike messenger, he applied to the State University of New York at Albany with no clear idea what he wanted to do, changing his major three times and taking seven years to complete his supposedly four-year degree. At school, at the age of eight or nine, he had played the role of the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and went to see *The Sting* with his mother, returning for a second viewing and buying the music. In the eleventh grade, he had appeared in a number of school plays playing Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* but though he wanted to be an actor did not think of majoring in theatre until his sister bought him a ticket to see John Malkovich in Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*. He immediately returned to Albany and changed his major, going on to work under the director and professor Langdon Brown, Jurka Burian, an expert on Czech theatre, fascinated with the connection between theatre and politics, and the director Al Asermely whose productions had included Mihail Sebastian's *The Star Without a Name*, staged at the Theatre of the Riverside Church.

He studied playwriting starting, but not finishing, a play, and also appeared on stage, taking the lead in Richard Greenberg's *Eastern Standard*, a comedy which nonetheless dealt with AIDS, insider trading, homelessness and gay relationships. Fellow graduate and roommate Glenn Fleshler would go on to appear in *True Detective* and *Hannibal*. Another graduate, John Ortiz, would join with Philip Seymour Hoffman to found Off-Broadway's The Latino Actors Base. This was in part a response to the failure of producers to employ Latinos even in plays in which the parts specified such. This became the LABYrinth Theater Company, a place where actors could work out. It was to be a multi-cultural group concerned with forging its own community through its work, study techniques and productions. No one was paid an annual salary, the company receiving a \$15,000 grant from the city, otherwise raising money from beer parties. Some of those involved had no professional background. One of those who would play a prison guard in *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* had been a New York policeman.

When he graduated, Guirgis founded a small theatre in the Bronx, leaving it to found another in Santa Fe before returning to New York where, after an audition, he joined LABYrinth, at the time one of the few non-Latinos to do so. Those involved were all encouraged to play different roles so, though he had joined as an actor, there came a moment when Ortiz, for whom he had written a paper back in Albany, asked him to write a one-act play in exchange for

a pair of sneakers. The result was *Francisco and Benny* (1994), a one-act play featuring David Zayas, who would appear in the television series *Dexter*. It's success with the company surprised him. There were other plays, *Moonlight Mile*, staged by LAByrinth (then spelt Labyrinth) in 1995, the first full-length play he had written and described as a working-class romantic comedy, and *Den of Thieves*, a wild comedy featuring a compulsive shoplifter and over-eater called Maggie, and Paul, her sponsor in a 12-step programme, who has been theft-free for 682 days but is now enrolled in a major crime having once been a member of 'the greatest non-violent Jewish crime organization of the twentieth century,'<sup>11</sup> with 'a family history of criminal philanthropy.'<sup>(24)</sup> Other works included *Race, Religion, Politics* (1997), featuring blue collar workers in a bar, and *Boom Boom Boom Boom* (1998), the latter set on an Egyptian cruise ship and performed at New York's Center Stage.

The plays he went on to write reflected the racial and cultural mix of the company as of the city which was his home and in some ways his subject. As he remarked to Bruce Weber, 'I've lived my entire life in New York, and it informs everything . . . Sept. 11 reinforced for me that whatever I was writing about, it better be something that really matters to me because we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. And for me it's stories about people in pain in New York.'<sup>12</sup>

Guirgis credits his education as a playwright as in part coming from studying acting with William Esper – who had himself studied with Sanford Meisner and taught his Stanislavski-derived technique at his own studio in West 37th Street – and with Maggie Flanigan who also ran a studio on West 27th Street. Guirgis has said that he has a preference for working with actors who have been Meisner trained.

Eugene O'Neill set the action of *The Iceman Cometh* in the Golden Swan, better known as the Hell Hole. Here, he gathered the flotsam of society, those who had stepped out of the social world deadening themselves with drink, the 'superfluous ones' of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* itself set in a gloomy cellar in Moscow, though, like O'Neill's play, infused with a dark humour. The Hell Hole was located in Hell's Kitchen, that area of New York between 34th Street and 59th Street, 8th Avenue and the Hudson. Here, he would recite by memory the words of Francis Thompson's poem 'Hound of Heaven'. In retreat from Catholicism he would intone a work, known to Catholic schoolboys, about God's pursuit of those seemingly lost. The poem ends with submission to God. Thompson himself was a man who did battle with addiction and depression and his poem apt enough to an O'Neill familiar with both.

At times O'Neill would be joined by Dorothy Day, a communist rediscovering Catholicism, who would sing to him: 'In the heart of the city/where there is no pity/the city which has no heart.' It was a time of lost souls running away and towards faith whether God or something else. Meanwhile, as in *The Iceman Cometh*, there was always the escape of drink and a fantasy of possibility.

Guirgis's *In Arabia, We'd All be Kings* (1999), a play of orchestrated voices, is also mostly set in a bar in Hell's Kitchen, though now in the mid-1990s at a time when the old bars have closed, as a movie theatre is making way for an underground shopping mall, and New York is being reshaped by Disney which is, apparently, spreading 'like the AIDS', except here, in this world of lost souls, where friends have also succumbed to entropy. When an ex-prisoner, who had, apparently, been raped in prison, enquires about his friends he is offered a roll-call of the dead. Wilfred has died and 'after he died, his mother, she got so depressed, she died. And then her husband and his brother, they went out one night, and they died – except they got

## Staging America

killed . . . Carlos . . . he dead too,<sup>13</sup> Carlos who had been 'working in a lavatory for science . . . 'cuz you know how he was always innerested in, like, the stars and mechanics' (226), logic, vocabulary and grammar not being prevailing modes. The final irony, apparently, is that he had died on his payday before he could cash his check. Outside, meanwhile, black men have been shot by the police – 'you know how they do' (228).

Like O'Neill, Guirgis gathers a cast of those on the fringe killing time as it is assuredly killing them. They are, besides the bar owner and bar tender, an ex-prisoner, a junkie, a drunk, a crackhead, a prostitute and a john. They are outsiders in another sense being Latino and Latina, African-American, Italian-American, Irish, the last a bar tender fired before he appears. If one man is in prison then prison seems a natural state. As Miss Reyes, a Latina in her thirties, remarks, 'My first man was a black, he got locked up. Then I had an Irish, they locked him up. Demaris's father was Italian, he's still locked up, for all I care' (224). Her relationship with Demaris, her 17-year-old daughter, on medication, already with an experience of prison and at risk of losing her baby, is hardly good as she asks, 'Can you believe she came out of my uterus . . .?' (223)

The bar is a kind of limbo in which communication can be frustrated. A conversation with Sammy, in his late sixties or seventies, and described as being 'almost dead', leads nowhere, his memory hazy and conversation barely functional. 'I ate a banana in 1969,' he observes, 'thought it was an avocado' (218). These are people as much trapped in their language as their circumstances. Words are a way of keeping their distance, mechanisms of power, except they have none. Language spills out of them but signifies nothing. The other America, in which people live ordinary lives, is closed to them. They have their own dreams but these are not the American dream of success rewarded. Theirs is a hermetic existence, prison an ever-present possibility, emotional needs deflected. Anger is a heartbeat away, reflecting, as it does, frustrations at lives not fully lived.

By contrast, Lenny, the ex-prisoner, has a way with words even if they have a tendency to slide away from coherence. Insinuate becomes 'instigate' while even his threats jump logical tracks. Objecting to Skank, the suitably-named junkie, taking peanuts he says, 'Please eat a peanut with those filthy hands so I could decapitate them right off your wrists like a lawnmower' (210). His language, though, conceals a vulnerability. For all his bravado, he lives with his mother and is easily threatened by his girlfriend, Daisy, who suggests she might call his probation officer, a girlfriend who is, in fact, mistress to Jake, the bar owner. Relationships here are temporary, often with a cash value. As Jake explains, 'I leave my wife now, whaddya think happens? She takes everything, I end up on a park bench wit' you and your pals. . . . If I wanted someone wit' feelings, I'd get one I could take out in public' (282).

Sammy's language never quite escapes its own circularities: 'What you doan tell'em,' he explains to the bar tender, 'ever if they know, they still doan know . . . 'cept if you doan want them to know. If you doan want them to know, then they know . . . they always know, 'cept if they doan know, which is why you got to tell 'em. Should shoulda' (250).

When Lenny applies for a job handing out flyers he undermines whatever chance he had, forfeiting his application fee if this is not itself a con. Meanwhile Charlie, a crackhead, has been regularly beaten but believes he has Jedi powers which he will one day use if necessity calls. For all of them there is a gap between what they are and what they believe themselves to be.

Beyond this place, though, are people finding God, attending AA, dieting, living a life so alien as to be unreal. Meanwhile, Jake tells Daisy, 'I seen thousands like you, thirty years in this sewer! You know what you are? You're garbage . . . loser garbage' (286).

At the end, the bar is changing, the old décor, the old ways, no longer acceptable. Demaris is arrested for soliciting. Sammy dies in the bar, placed in the street to avoid trouble with the police. Time is moving on leaving them in its wake. The rough edges of society are to be smoothed, gentrification to displace those at odds with the new dispensation, products, as they are, of the forces which now displace them. Nothing is resolved because nothing can be. Guirgis's mid-1990s seem very like O'Neill's 1912. New York might be disembarassed of those out of tune with the times, the new image being of a place safe for tourists and those going about the American business of business. Yet these characters still struggle to survive from moment to moment using what they can, including one another, knowing that defeat is a natural state for them yet getting by, survival being a kind of victory. As for Arabia, that is a place of fantasy where all things are possible, the pipe dreams of O'Neill's play transposed to another time, the farm of Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* where present problems will be resolved.

Speaking of *The Lower Depths*, Tolstoy doubted that theatre-goers would respond to characters so remote from themselves, unaware, as they were likely to be, of their own moral failings. Critics proved more receptive. So they did of Guirgis's play. *The New York Times* reviewer found it harrowing, pulling no punches but avoiding the merely sociological, while, reviewing a production at the Hampstead Theatre, London, in 2003, Paul Taylor in *The Independent*, observed that, 'You might call Guirgis's bleak, blackly funny play a kind of barbed elegy for a way of life that was on its way out, were it not for the stark, unsentimental clarity with which he presents the predicament of these denizens of the lower depths. What is impressive, though, about the punchy, street-smart writing . . . is the refusal to reduce the characters to sociological specimens. There's a humaneness of approach here.'<sup>14</sup>

His next play, *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*, is no less bleak. It is set largely in the yard of a special twenty-three-hour lock-down wing of protective custody on Riker's Island, New York's principal prison, with its ten thousand inmates, most not yet convicted of a crime, and ranked in the ten worst correctional facilities in America. It features, at its centre, Angel Cruz, an African-American in his forties, a former bicycle messenger, with a year of college, awaiting trial for the attempted murder of a cult leader, and Lucius Jenkins, an African-American in his forties, a serial killer. Since Lucius has discovered God and Angel has attacked a fake evangelist, faith is one of the issues addressed in a play which is coruscating in its language, at least at the beginning, a brutal introduction to debates over the morality of the justice system, the extent of personal responsibility, the existence or otherwise of God which follow.

The play opens, indeed, with a scene which makes David Mamet look restrained as Angel struggles to recite the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father, who art in heaven, Howard be thy name. Howard? How art? How? How-now? Fuck! Mothahfuckah . . . fuckin.' 'Our Father, who aren't in heaven' . . . who aren't? Fuck, fuckin', fuckin', shit!<sup>15</sup> It is a fractured prayer which precipitates a cascade of obscenities from the other inmates, all fluent in a denatured language, words a form of blunt force trauma. Valdez, a prisoner guard, is no less violent in his attitude for all his language lacks a scatological edge.

Lucius, meanwhile, splices words and ideas together, a convert whose expression of religious zeal is barely coherent, words triggering other words by association, a rambling aria as the fractured elements of his life are brought together and fly apart, his grasp on reality being tenuous.

When Angel is assigned a white woman lawyer, Mary Jane Hanrahan, it is not only language which comes between them, though there is a linguistic gulf. She begins by mistaking him for

## Staging America

someone else, as a Public Defender overloaded with work. Yet she is not without sympathy for him, as we learn in a monologue, herself coming from a poor background and attending a private school on financial aid, her father stabbing another father at a school event in response to a racist remark. Angel seeks to replace her with another lawyer called Langdon Brown (the name, of course, of one of Guirgis's teachers at Albany, a tip of the hat to one of those who had helped him on his way) but theirs is now a growing partnership.

Angel is charged with attempted murder having shot a man in his backside. Leader of a cult, the self-styled Reverend Kim, who claimed he was the Son of God, while driving a Lexus and with a million-dollar portfolio, who had been deported from his own country and convicted of tax evasion, had lured away a friend and this was, in fact, the inspiration for the play. As Guirgis explained: '... a really close friend of mine joined the Moonies, and there was a period of my life when I devoted a lot of time trying to get him kidnapped and deprogrammed, and I went on stakeouts... but it never ended up working. And then I went into therapy, and I learned that... people are going to do what they're going to do.'<sup>16</sup> What he learned in therapy, beyond that, was that this was in part connected to his own life and his need to move on. When the play was staged his friend came to a performance. He was still in the Moonies, having married in one of their mass ceremonies.

Angel had also attempted a kidnapping: 'Two years in the makin'! surveillance, kidnapers, fuckin' deprogrammer.' Like Guirgis's attempt, it failed. As Angel complains, 'what can you do about it? Nothin'!... scientologists sued the Cult Awareness Network, bankrupted them, and took over the damn Cult Awareness Network! Same office! Same phone number! But when you call the mothahfuckahs up, you speaking to one of them!' (138-9) The prison system seems to evidence a similar control.

Beneath the humour which, despite the brutality of the language, modified as the action unfolds, is laced through the play, there are serious discussions, in particular between Angel and Mary Jane. He insists that interventions are possible and necessary, even if they fail, while she believes that individuals are responsible for their actions and hence the consequences of those actions and that they will only change if they decide to do so: 'regardless of how close we may *think* we are to someone else, we have very little control over their choices and absolutely zero responsibility for the consequences those choices bring on them' (142). For Angel, this leaves no space for altruism, for friendship, indeed for responsibility. Why else, he asks, would Mary Jane be a Public Defender rather than making money working privately.

Such debates, however, seem beside the point when Angel is beaten and raped and, a month later, the Reverend Kim dies, precipitating a murder charge and Angel's attempted suicide. He faces a life sentence without parole, except that his lawyer now encourages him to lie on the stand, at risk to her own career.

Meanwhile, is Lucius, serial killer, for whom murder seems incidental, a charlatan, like the man Angel killed, or is he the source of a possible redemption? He certainly seems to help a guard who he urges to abandon his job in the prison, and to such good effect that he and his wife fly to Florida to be witnesses at Lucius's execution, reconciled to one another. Was he molested at the age of five and did he turn to drugs to block out the pain of that? Is he, as he claims, an undiagnosed manic-depressive paranoid schizophrenic and if so did he have free will when he killed, sadistically, mercilessly, or is he himself the result of other people's decisions?

Mary Jane ends up disbarred as Angel falls apart on the stand to be returned to prison, eligible for parole in 2038. Only Lucius, a child killer, and the guard he advises, seem to have

peace, except that Angel at the end finally takes responsibility for a murder he had not planned to commit. Is God no more than the desperate consolation he appears to be for one man or the sense of moral acceptance he seems to another? And where does Guirgis stand? Interestingly, in answering a question about his approach to writing, he said,

most of the time, I pray. And that's what gets me started. It's not so much that I'm a religious person, because I'm not – I don't even know if there is a God – but I think that writing is not a solo venture. I think that writing is a collaboration between you and something else. And I think that the act of prayer – whether you're praying literally to someone or something or not – that the act of prayer is a form of practicing humility. It's a sublimation of the ego. And once I'm able to do that, then it allows whatever's out there to come in. It gives me a release and gets me started.<sup>17</sup>

This seems curiously close to the mood of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* in which Angel makes his way towards humility, in which there is a need for something to fill an internal space. If Guirgis starts his works with a prayer the play itself begins similarly, albeit with a broken one, unfocused, desperate, subsequently giving way to a misleading fluency, misleading because these are characters aware that they inhabit a disordered world in which justice is little more than a word, a world charged with violence. At its heart, though, lies a debate about where responsibility begins and ends, and the nature of a faith which relieves or imposes that sense of responsibility, a faith which potentially breeds vulnerability and consolation alike.

Something, however, survives. Mary Jane sacrifices her career for a principle. Angel accepts responsibility even as his initial action, casually violent, had been in the name of moral affront. As he insists, in a final confused prayer, which begins with that same mixture of spiritual need and obscenity which marked his first speech ('Hail Mary, you're a lady, talk to your fuckin' Son.'). 'I just wanna be good . . . I wanna be a good man' (203). Even as he begins his sentence he recalls a petty theft from his youth and prays that good things should come to his victim even these years later: 'I *am* a man, God!' he cries, as he is handcuffed and led out of his cage, 'I am a man that is sorry,' (204) but not for himself. He is the equivalent of Gorky's 'good man' Luka, in *The Lower Depths*, who believed in the necessity for truth and pity on mankind.

It is not hard to see why the name of Joe Orton is sometimes invoked in relation to Guirgis. There is the same bizarre premise to his plots, the same celebration of those on the margin, the same caustic humour and disregard for authority. There is an almost manic energy to his work, a scatological imagination, a fascination with the sometimes opaque nature of language whose ambiguities generate what can seem like a series of vaudeville performances. Where Orton's anarchic spirit is born out of a contempt for those who held him, as a homosexual at a time when such was illegal, in contempt, and for a system which he delighted in subverting, Guirgis, like Tennessee Williams (who, he explained, became 'a subconscious model for emotional content'<sup>18</sup> for him), celebrates those who are bruised, searching for connection, even as they resist such, never quite grasping the logic of their situation. He creates an urban kaleidoscope of characters, a soundscape in which profanities, in-articulations, obscenities, somehow have a harmony, a rhythm, a lyricism which compels.

Orton was content to tear the temple down using ridicule and a humour designedly caustic. Caricature was a weapon since he was equally distrustful of the civilizing order of art. Guirgis constructs a parallel world to that just out of sight, the ordered existence represented by law

## Staging America

and order, daily civilities, production and consumption. His characters live on their emotions which always threaten to break surface. Sometimes they have difficulty comprehending their situation or the nature of the relationships they need but which they are equally liable to distrust. They may inhabit a familiar environment but these are not the figures of a realist play. Some dimension is missing from characters who are not there to play out a moral logic, discover truths, resolve issues. They perform themselves in what can seem a carnivalesque series of encounters, contradicting themselves as much as others, expressing an unfocused anger.

Reviewing the original production in *The New York Times*, in 2000, Ben Brantley welcomed a play 'which has so much intellectual vigor and sophistication on the one hand and so much anguished passion on the other . . . whenever it appears that "Jesus" is settling into neatly fenced, familiar territory, it slides right beneath expectations into another, fresher direction. It has the courage of its intellectual restlessness.'<sup>19</sup> It won a Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival and was nominated for an Olivier Award when it reached England in 2002, where it played first at the Donmar Warehouse before moving to the West End.

Fifteen years later, Jesse Green, reviewing a Steppenwolf production of the play in *The New York Times*, observed that, 'it achieves the doubleness of great art, burrowing deeper the higher it flies . . . In 2017 "Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train" seems to ask whether justice, and even God, is possible in an unjust society. No wonder it's so profane.'<sup>20</sup>

*Our Lady of 121st Street* (121st Street, incidentally, being the address of Corpus Christi School), which opened in September 2002, directed, as with his other early plays, by Philip Seymour Hoffman at the Centre Stage, brings together a cast of characters united only by the death of their one-time teacher, Sister Rose, whose body has, unfortunately, disappeared from the funeral parlour as have the pants of a man who had chosen to sleep there. Farce is obviously a breath away, except that there is another current flowing.

One man called Rooftop, because of his habit of having sex on the top of buildings, descending with pigeon feathers on his back, has flown in from Los Angeles where he has a radio programme. Here, though, he is at times barely coherent smoking marijuana as he struggles to total up his thirty years of sins, running to the thousands, as he confesses to a priest. Twelve years of Catholic education has apparently left him with little more than a mastery of Latin when it comes to peace of mind. Before leaving he had betrayed his wife Inez whose remarriage to a stolid reliable man had, we learn, been a compromise resigned, as she is, it seems, to settle for a life in which love is not the driving force.

Those gathering for the wake, absent a body, bicker among themselves in conversations which recall old sleights, fraught relationships, blending misunderstandings with aggression even as old friendships survive. Norca, a Latina in her late thirties, who had been treated kindly by Sister Rose, is seemingly unaware of her contradictions as she declares, 'Sister Rose could lick my ass, all I care . . . I ain't tryin' to say nothin' bad about the bitch – ain't tryin' ta disrespect her. I just don't wanna talk about that penguin bitch' (48). These are characters trapped in the circularities of language. Pinky, mentally disabled and in his late thirties, tries to make sense of the priest closing confession before noon: 'If it's not noon, then it's not noon. 'cuz if it wasn't noon, but it *was* noon, then it'd be noon. But I don't think it's noon,' (63) an echo of Sammy's speech in *In Arabia, We'd all Be Kings*.

Pinky is an easy victim for those after his money even as his relationship with the gay Edwin suggests that there are human connections, he having assumed responsibility for him on the

death of his mother, looking after him, anxious about his whereabouts. For his part, Edwin, a Latino, is sensitive about his sexuality. Asking Rose's sister, Marcia, if he seems gay he is told 'exceedingly'. If he were to have a complete make-over, he asks? 'Completely made-over gay,' she replies. (85)

The priest himself, a war veteran who has lost his legs, no longer believes in God, is not allowed to say mass, and is uncomfortable among black people while Sister Rose, it turns out, had been abused as a child and became an alcoholic, handing out punishment to her charges, even as she had worked with Pinky to keep him out of a special school. The one thing she seems to have done is care in a world dominated by gangs, drugs, violence.

Slowly, farce drains away, real pain acknowledged, language no longer street smart, aggressive or defensive. As they meet up again after many years so past wounds are opened, truths exposed. A child died, a marriage broke, friendships were strained, a damaged child became a vulnerable adult. Loyalties have been abandoned or affirmed. In a sense this is a high school reunion in which they face how far they have or have not travelled, what they have become. At moments it is as though they were back in school replaying old relationships, time momentarily reversed even as it is time that has made or unmade them. Some have evidently succeeded, or seem to have done, escaping from the world of 121st Street, drawn back, though, as if to pay a debt. Others have not strayed far.

When Sister Rose's body is found only half remains, the other half, it is assumed, thrown into the river. No reason is given or sought. It is simply something that has happened. The play ends with the return of day as a man, Balthazar, a cop, recalls his dead son. Earlier in the play he had told the story as though it had applied to someone else: 'I once knew a guy, a couple detectives went to his apartment to inform him that his son had been raped and murdered in the playground up on a hundred thirty-seventh . . . You know what his reaction was? And keep in mind this was a man who loved his son dearly, O.K.? His reaction was: He wouldn't leave the house to I.D. the body until after the Knicks game was over. . . . It was "the playoffs," he said. They watched the whole fourth quarter together in silence. He served them ham sandwiches and warm beer. And this is a man who lived . . . for his son' (8). Now, as the play ends, he confesses, 'I'm the guy with the ham sandwiches.' He had had a hangover and allowed his seven-year-old son to go out to play alone. He still carries that son's rosary. As another day dawns on 121st Street he remembers suddenly how, as a baby, that lost son had reached up to try and catch the wind, copying the gesture as he recalls it. Told that the memory must be a consolation, he replies, 'It hurts . . . hurts a lot' (105), lapsing into silence as the lights fade to black.

The achievement of the play lies in the ebb and flow of language, in a humour balanced with compassion, the former side-stepping the potential for sentimentality. It lies in Guirgis's creation of a community of souls from disparate individuals each with their own demons, disappointments, acts of sudden consideration, confessions of vulnerability. If it features a priest who has lost his faith in God, those broken by experience, concerned with who they are and how they are perceived to be, haunted by guilt or a sense of failure, it also expresses a sense of a shared humanity, those capable of acts of friendship and love even as its confession can be inhibited in a world in which intimacy carries its own dangers.

The *Washington Post* review aside, in which Peter Marks regretted a lack of authenticity in a 'middling script', as performed at the Kennedy Centre, Guirgis could hardly have hoped for better reviews of the original production. For Bruce Weber, in *The New York Times*, Guirgis was 'the poet laureate of the angry,' a writer with 'one of the finest imaginations for dialogue to come



along in years.<sup>21</sup> John Heilpern, in *The New York Observer*, declared, 'I've rarely loved a play as much as *Our Lady 121st Street*. The immensely gifted Stephen Adly Guirgis just fills me with hope, desperate though he is. His urban voice is startlingly fresh . . . Mr. Guirgis writes in infectious liberating fury and sadness,' while his 'ear for the vernacular is perfect . . . *Our Lady of 121st Street* is the best new play I've seen in a decade.'<sup>22</sup>

With his next play, *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (2005), he returned to a central theme, the nature of faith and the tension between individual freedom and the divine. As he explained in an introduction to the published version, it had its origin in a moment which occurred when he was nine or ten and decided that the story of Judas did not make sense given that God, as he was taught by the nuns, was all merciful. As George Steiner observes in *No Passion Spent*, 'We know nothing of Jesus' motives in electing Judas to never-ending damnation. Whom the God of Abraham and Moses had chosen for his followers he now chooses, in a counter-choice that is a sacrament of exclusion, for humiliation and chastisement. It is Judas's name, it is the imputation of venal betrayal and deicide which are howled by Christian mobs in the massacres of the Middle Ages, in the pogroms. . . . The scapegoat has been designated, the pariah thrust into the darkness. A strange prologue to a discourse on love.'<sup>23</sup>

The young Guirgis was hardly up to such analysis but from then on, he says, 'I was in no hurry to seek out God . . . I did believe that "God" existed – I still do – but that was about it.' The 'I still do' is obviously important, even as the word 'God' seems to be no more clearly definable than it had been for his younger self, another word seemingly just as good, and also written with a capital letter. As he has said, 'I do know that I am in continuous need of the Spiritual and that I usually go to great lengths to avoid it . . . I think a connection to the Spiritual is essential to us as individuals and to the world as a whole. I think our survival depends on it.' It follows that people who are spiritual 'have a responsibility to stand up, be counted, and gently encourage others to consider matters of faith and to define for themselves what their responsibilities are and what it means to try to be "good."' His play, he hoped, would provoke a consideration of 'What is it' in this context, 'that we need to overcome in order to truly be "Ourselves"?'<sup>24</sup>

It is hard to think of another playwright who would write in this way. All members of Congress may be happy to declare their faith (Krysten Sinema, Democratic Representative for Arizona aside), desperate not to offend the supposed sensitivities of their electorates, but American dramatists seldom nail their religious or spiritual convictions to the mast, even if their plays do often address the very question Guirgis identifies. Of course America scarcely lacks spiritual hucksters or those, at a price, offering short cuts to the Self, something psychiatrists also sell to those adrift but with cash to hand. Religions spring up like seedlings after a forest fire, reaching up to the light. Church, as in Lewis's *Babbitt*, can be an adjunct to the secular, a kind of club indicating social acceptance, much like those American societies, sometimes oddly named after animals – Lions, Elks – dedicated to doing, if not necessarily as individuals being, good while American presidents have a tendency, in State of the Union addresses, to tell American how good they are in a country blessed by God, a reassurance which is itself an indicator of doubt. In a capitalist country, with a national dream of material advancement, O'Neill suggested, there was a tendency to attempt to possess one's soul by possessing the world. For Willy Loman, meaning lay in being 'well liked'. What they had in common was a search for meaning, a sense of insufficiency which needed to be earthed in something no matter how hard that was to define. What was often missing was a sense of transcendence, an awareness that the happiness they were told it was their fate to pursue, if not

necessarily possess, could not be constituted only by home ownership, a two-car garage, or the accumulation of wealth.

George Steiner, in his book *Real Presences*, argues against the idea that God 'is a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational thought,'<sup>25</sup> at a time when the principal challenge may be to learn anew to be human. Rather He is a 'real presence' in the creative act and though I can't imagine Steiner in the audience to *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, there is something apt about his quotation from Wittgenstein: 'When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there.' Language and art exist because there is another, itself a reminder of what it is to be human, while 'No serious writer, composer, painter has ever doubted . . . that his work bears on good and evil, on the enhancement or diminution of the sum of humanity in man. . .' (144). The serious, of course, does not exclude the comic or there would be no Shakespeare, no Beckett. And where, then, is God except in the urge to engage in such issues as if they had an urgency beyond the moment. Nihilism is always in the wings, awaiting its cue. Art, Steiner has said, tends to be an argument for the existence or absence of God when it is not assuming His function of creating something from nothing. 'It may be the case,' he adds, that 'nothing more is available to us than the absence of God' while insisting that it is necessary to take the risk of embracing the opposite conviction if one is not to be 'left naked to unknowing.'<sup>26</sup>

This may all seem too much weight to be borne by a play which is at times riotous with invention, which deploys a language which might appear to resist seriousness, ludic, fanciful, with characters so many pop art gestures, though Steiner insists that in all 'art-acts there beats an angry gaiety,'<sup>27</sup> and reference is made in the play to Kierkegaard, Hegel and Thomas Merton, the American Catholic theologian. But Guirgis makes a bet on the existence of God and in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* engages with the idea of the Spirit directly, as he does with guilt, love and redemption, albeit scarcely in the language of theological disquisition. Beneath the humour, indeed, beyond the cast of characters summoned from death to offer witness, is a serious engagement with issues to do with justice, forgiveness, human autonomy. For him, the comic and the serious are not at opposite ends of the spectrum. He deals in the tragic-comic.

The first act carries a title: *Domine Adiuva Incredulitatem Meam*, Lord help me in my unbelief. It opens with a lament by Judas's mother having buried her son, poignant, lyrical, resistant: 'I loved my son every day of his life, and I will love him ferociously long after I have stopped breathing . . . on the day of my son's birth I was infused with a love beyond all measure and understanding . . . The world tells me that God is in Heaven and that my son is in Hell. I tell the world the one true thing I know: If my son is in Hell, then there is no Heaven – because if my son sits in Hell, *there is no God*.'<sup>28</sup>

Invisible to her, Jesus kisses her cheek as Judas had kissed his as a sign to those who awaited to arrest him. Then we are in a place called Hope where a judge, dead since 1864, presides over the appeal of Judas Iscariot, the prosecuting attorney being from Hell, the defence lawyer, the daughter of a Romanian gypsy from Harlem and, disturbingly, a parish priest, insisting that love versus justice must produce a synthesis of mercy and forgiveness. She carries a writ signed by God in whom she does not believe. To the sound of music and dancing camels, whatever that sound is like, Saint Monica, mother of St. Augustine, appears, black and speaking as it is doubtful saints ever did: 'Yo, Judas, you got change for thirty pieces of silver, mothahfuckah?!' (18) The action then switches back to the courtroom where Mother Teresa is called as a witness, accurately recalling, and quoting, Thomas Merton's observation, in *Seeds of Contemplation*,

that, 'Despair . . . is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves' (38). One must, she says, 'participate in one's own salvation' (39).

In a cross examination which becomes a dialectic (hence the reference to Hegel), she confesses to taking money from criminals and dictators, opposing abortion and the condemnation of anti-Semitism. She is, then, a suspect saint, believing that ends justify means, but does that invalidate her fundamental beliefs?

One by one, the disciples are summoned, offering historical details, exploring the paradoxes of faith. Simon, in particular, offers the defence of Judas that his action was not so much a betrayal as a necessity if Jesus was to 'realize his destiny and fulfil his mission,' (45) an interpretation considered by Steiner when he says that Judas had acted as he did, 'to fulfil Scripture and the will of God. So as to compel the Passion and Resurrection of his master who might otherwise . . . have flinched from unendurable agony.' For some, he points out, until the late fifth and sixth centuries, Judas was 'revered for his self-sacrifice, for the necessary holiness of his deed. It was he who had triggered the miracle of the Cross and, thus, of salvation for sinful humanity.'<sup>29</sup> And the one who colluded in this was Jesus, as Sigmund Freud, summoned to the stand in a second act titled *Sic Deus Dilexit Mundum*, God so loved the world, avers.

Among those also called forth is Pontius Pilate, who attempts to take the Fifth, responsibility broadening out beyond Judas, even as they wish to wash their hands of it as Pilate did literally, the Pilate who claims he was made a saint by the Ethiopian Church, which indeed he was. In the play he lives in Heaven. These are interrogations which lay genuine historical facts before the audience along with stories generated, perhaps, by the desperations of faith.

Christ appears to Judas to assure him of his love insisting that Satan is not real, being a mere construction. The play ends with an extensive speech by the chairman of the jury which has just found Judas guilty. He has, he says, played Tom, in *The Glass Menagerie*, as had Guirgis, and having done so met the girl who would become his wife, sitting in tears with her in a car outside the house of a friend who had died. Three years into their marriage he had slept with a student, an act of betrayal. 'Do you know who Auden was, Mister Iscariot?' he asks. He 'was a poet who once said: "God may reduce you on Judgement Day to tears of shame, reciting by heart the poems you should have written, had your life been good" . . . She was my poem, Mister Iscariot. Her and the kids. But mostly . . . her . . . You cashed in Silver, Mr. Iscariot, but me? Me, I threw away Gold . . . That's a fact. That's a natural fact' (110–11).

Jesus washes Judas's feet as the lights fade. A play about betrayal, responsibility and shame, about transcendent value and love, extends beyond an act of treachery by a man who may have acted out of personal motives or served a higher cause.

Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, found it 'a heavily footnoted position paper on a big, big subject.' Guirgis had, he suggested, 'overfilled his slate with historical references and characters, all ultimately making the same point.'<sup>30</sup> For Michael Billington, reviewing its 2008 production at the Almeida, it was reminiscent of *Angels in America* in its 'gloriously intoxicating brew', witty and exuberant, while, unusually, bringing religion into modern drama.<sup>31</sup> Charles Spencer, in England's *Telegraph*, confessed that it was an 'astonishing play that knocked me for six . . . often wildly comical as well as deadly serious.' It was a remarkable play and 'a sensational hit.'<sup>32</sup>

His next play, *The Little Flower of East Orange* (East Orange being a city in Essex County, New Jersey), carries an epigraph from Saint Thérèse of Lisieux which offers a gloss on a play

which features, and celebrates, a character who has lived her life out of the limelight: ‘The splendour of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not rob the little violet of its scent nor the daisy of its simple charm.’ In an introduction to the published edition Guirgis explained its origin. Attending a retreat, he had encountered a woman who had lost her mother to cancer and was ‘very angry and very sad and very inconsolable and alone.’<sup>33</sup> She had, though, opened up to him when he showed interest in her. Months later, he had found himself in a similar situation as his own mother lay dying of cancer and he realized not only why that woman had felt as she had but that his expression of concern had concealed his own fear of loss. He began the play when his mother was alive but she died before he completed it. He moved in with his father realizing that ‘his life had just gotten ripped out from under him,’(xi) leaving him alone.

He has often spoken of his difficulty in sitting down at his desk to write, finding reasons not to, like others embracing distractions. This time he had reason enough. With the death of his mother, ‘the whole world essentially stopped.’(xi) It took him several months to return to a play which dealt with family relationships, doing so not by addressing the fact which had brought him to a halt, but by writing a comic scene. The delay meant that the theatre which had originally commissioned it stepped aside and it was staged by the Public Theatre.

It was simultaneously a play with autobiographical roots and one which he was anxious should not be seen as such since this denied the role of the imagination, the function of the unconscious, the way in which memory, experience and emotions shape art. It was to be a family play in that it was to confront and stage experiences common to all, faced with relationships simultaneously simple and complex, with a sense of loss which art, perhaps, has the ability, and even the obligation, to address and to which it gives form if not consolation.

The play, like *The Glass Menagerie* (and like that work this is a memory play), has a narrator, Danny, who tells the story of his mother, Therese Marie (Marie being the original first name of St. Thérèse), in the hope that it will prove therapeutic, he being addicted to drugs and alcohol. Danny is a writer whose mother asks that he not write about her until she is dead, a writer in the family being a blessing and a curse.

It begins with Therese’s arrival in hospital. She is unconscious, an anonymous figure with no form of identification. She had disappeared when Danny, in rehab in Arizona for drink and drugs, was making out with the daughter of a Republican state senator. He is summoned back by his hysterical sister as a Jamaican nurse sits with his mother until she wakes, confused, carried back in time, memories sliding over one another, her father, Francis James, appearing as a ghost as she momentarily flatlines. The sounds of a carnival, a carousel, saloon singers, mix with the frantic activities of surgeons and nurses fighting to bring her back to life, Danny’s broken narrative blending with fragments of Therese’s memories and fantasies, the nurses seemingly privy to her thoughts. Sportsmen, film stars, politicians visit her, Bobby Kennedy upbraiding her for not voting for his brother suggesting that this was because her father was a Democrat and that he had been violent to her.

Slowly a portrait begins to cohere. If she has been damaged, that seems to have begun long ago. Her parents had both been deaf (Guirgis’s father-in-law, it is worth recalling, having been a deaf alcoholic), her father also a violent drunk who had beaten his wife and Therese when she was aged nine, her head being smashed against a boiler, a scene played out against the backlit impression of a tenement building. When she threatened to call the police if he hit her sister or mother, Danny tells us, he ceased to hit them but continued his assaults on her, this man who was respected in the community and had an acknowledgement from the Pope. This is a reason,

perhaps, for that same Pope entering Therese's consciousness as she hovers between life and death in a hospital ward, fragments of her life retrieved, some real, some fantasies which nonetheless unlock truths hidden away.

Slowly, her consciousness returns and she identifies herself, offering her address as 440 Riverside Drive (in fact one of New York's great apartment buildings, the Paterno). Danny arrives with his girlfriend from rehab, Nadine, who, still high on drugs, is the only person other than Therese who can see the ghost of Francis James, the grandfather who lives on in memory, a memory here made manifest. In describing Nadine, Danny invokes, without sourcing, D.H. Lawrence's poem "Self Pity", 'I never saw a wild thing sorry for itself' (490). and, despite the lithium, the clozapine and the dope, she lacks precisely that sense of self-pity. Back in the hospital, meanwhile, Justina, Danny's younger sister, plays the violin, crying as she says, 'I fuckin' hate you!' (50) to the woman she both loves and resents.

This is not, though, simply a play, echoing O'Neill, about family tensions, the collateral damage caused by an Irish patriarch cascading down the generations to those who subsist on denial or turn to drugs as an escape, though there has been pain enough beyond that literally suffered by a woman who still carries the scars of her upbringing. They seek something beyond the immediate, are aware of an insufficiency. There is anger in this family, in part a product of the very self-pity absent in Nadine. They are drawn together and thrust apart, much as O'Neill's characters had been in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, love and revulsion alternating or even existing in the same moment, but what they seek is a state of grace, consolation, redemption, what Mary Tyrone had lost along the way. As Danny explains, 'even during all the decisions and talks and thought and fights that led to my being where I am, and Mom being where she is, and Justina being left all alone – grace never left. And what is "grace"? . . . Grace, to me, is that thing that I constantly spit in the face of. If there's a God, he loves me. But I don't seem to love him back enough . . . Why? 'Cuz somehow I felt undeserving . . . and angry, and completely fuckin' powerless' (51).

The second act, which is where Guirgis re-entered his play when he began to write again following his mother's death, features a seemingly familiar dialogue between mother and son as she questions him about a girlfriend from whom he has long since separated and, as he insists, greatly to her advantage. It is a conversation, however, which quickly devolves into mutual accusations for if Danny had retreated to rehab in an attempt to save himself he is repeatedly summoned back as Therese ends up in hospital having, it seems, flirted with a death which the Church forbids her to claim. 'Why do you think I did what I did,' she asks, 'if it wasn't to let you and Justina be free? . . . the only reason I didn't commit suicide is because the Church forbids it – and if I took my own life I wouldn't be able to see the three of you in heaven!' (59)

Nor is she the only one in the family who has flirted with death, Therese's father, mother and sister all dying from smoking while she and her son are drinkers and Danny is a depressive barely able to look after himself let alone his mother. Justina is the practical one but she, too, lives on the edge. Finally, Danny prevails and his mother returns to her apartment where, slowly, truths begin to spill out. We learn that following an accident at school Therese had undergone back surgery only for it to be undone when she had to carry her drunken father upstairs, her mother herself being drunk. Rather than confess to the truth she had spent ten years in and out of hospital never telling her father who remained ignorant of his role, denying the significance of her injuries. Thereafter, it seemed to Danny, she had lived a life of abnegation, caring for her parents in decline, sacrificing herself for her children even to the point, it seems, of being prepared to take her own life if her faith had not prevented it.

For her part, she refuses such an interpretation. She had travelled the world, married the man she loved, carried her children, enjoyed the arts, lived a life which seemed full to her. She had not, she insists, been a victim and advises her son not to regard himself as such but to seize his life, which, of course, would be more convincing if she had not herself had suicidal feelings.

Meanwhile, Danny, having visited the Dublin House (a real Upper West Side bar), ends in prison having attacked the owner of a deli, a fact concealed from his mother by Justina who has returned to look after her, in time to be present when she died. Her children are thus seemingly free, except that it is clear they never really will be. The play ends with Danny staring at his life, aware that he has stood outside that life waiting not for absolution but to begin living, insisting nonetheless that, 'I firmly believe that grace does not remain invisible to anyone who's looking for it. And even those who aren't. My mom taught me that. Grace is like your next breath. Until you die, it's always there,' (103) except that he is now handcuffed to a detective and led off stage as the lights fade, the handcuffs which had been taken off in the opening scene. The play, it seems, was narrated by a man already confined, explaining his own path to this point even as his possibilities have been closed down.

Where, then, did grace reside except in a woman named for a saint, damaged in more than body and not unacquainted with despair? Her insights may be clouded at times by morphine, her relationship with her children difficult, but she has proved capable of charity, choosing to relieve her father of a guilt which might have destroyed him, never giving up on those children even as they carry the scars of their upbringing. Denial runs in this family, sometimes as evasion, sometimes as grace. In Albee's *The Zoo Story*, Jerry suggests that kindness and cruelty together are the teaching emotion. Here the combination is compassion and faith, a refusal finally to surrender to despair. Nor is she alone in this. The son of a patient in the hospital is talked out of suicide by an orderly, perhaps a moment of sentimentality in a play which otherwise resists it.

*The Little Flower of East Orange* received somewhat short shrift from Ben Brantley in *The New York Times* who, while recognizing that 'every now and then a scene erupts into original, explosive life,' objected to shifts of style and language, to the fact that it 'meanders into various side roads' and that its script evidenced a 'structural sagginess.'<sup>34</sup> Kerry Reid, writing of a later production in the *Chicago Tribune*, praised the 'sculpted threnody and rapprochement among Danny, Therese and Justina' but felt that the various parts failed to cohere, while the 'grasping for grace ultimately feels clumsy.'<sup>35</sup>

There is, perhaps, a sense in which this play, for all his anxiety that it should not be seen as primarily autobiographical, bears the marks of the loss which Guirgis suffered during its writing. Reconciliation, the search for an understanding of relationships, of sacrifices made, responsibilities accepted or refused, become suddenly central in such circumstances, and the way in which these can be integrated into drama a challenge. Perhaps the focus does soften at moments while earthing the concept of grace in character or action can be problematic, the secular and divine origin of such evading precise designation. Therese looks to God while it rests, perhaps, in her own selflessness, albeit compromised precisely because it is secular, not a gift from without but generated from the ambiguous motives and emotions of a human being whose flaws are an essential part of her. Who does Danny set out to forgive but himself, even as he acknowledges and acts upon his sense of duty, albeit one which fails because he succumbs at crucial moments to his addiction? Grace is elusive. If it were not it could be accessed and defined more easily.

## Staging America

The television drama *The Wire*, created and largely written by David Simon, offered a dystopian vision of those on the edge of society, their language and actions brutally direct, their fate, for the most part, determined. Power became the currency of a culture in which the vulnerable went to the wall. It simultaneously offered a naturalistic insight and a metaphor, the street a correlative, a model of capitalist society in which people consumed products as they did themselves. On the face of it in *The Motherfucker with the Hat*, which opened at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre on Broadway in April, 2011, Guirgis enters a similar world, as addicts come up against the limits of their possibilities, seeking their own advantage, deploying a denatured language, except that the mood is radically different, closer to Tennessee Williams's celebration of those potentially broken on the wheel of experience, outsiders not so much with their noses pressed against the store window of the desirable as content with their discontents.

Humour is their defence, sometimes calculated, sometimes inadvertent as they contradict themselves. Praise segues into insult, love is announced and denied, sometimes in the same sentence. The importance of trust is asserted even as it is betrayed. Some social or linguistic limiter is missing from their language and behaviour. Yet somewhere is a remembered past when there was a seemingly genuine harmony, even if the signs were already present of its loss, and loss is a central fact of his characters even as the sheer energy and pace of their unspooling lives prevents it pausing them, though it does for a second at the end of the play. Asked what had triggered the play, he replied,

I was responding to a lot of things that were going on in my life. I think the primary engine of the play is something that's probably recurring in my work: a main character past the age where they should already have grown up and matured emotionally [is] still trying to do that. I was experiencing how the world can be different as an adult than it was as a child. When we're young we form close friendships with people of the same sex ... and there's a sense of loyalty ... Then, when we get older, a million other things influence us and sometimes those values are lost.<sup>36</sup>

There is a sense in which these adults remain adolescents, always on the edge, ready for a fight, with ideas of relationships which amount to little more than desires to be immediately realized, though somewhere there is a memory of loyalties which once prevailed but which no longer hold. Guirgis does not write denunciations of American capitalism, laments over the lives of those in Hell's Kitchen, attending Alcoholics Anonymous, scrabbling around in the detritus of urban life, though that is where his characters live. He writes urban comedies with, implicitly, something to say about those who watch. If they condescend to those characters they miss the point in so far as the denial of real intimacy, the ironies of misdirected lives, are scarcely restricted to those for whom the meaning of their lives always seems to elude them, their best intentions subject to what seem the urgencies of the moment.

There is a scene in season one, episode 4, of *The Wire* in which the only words, bar one, spoken by the two detectives are variations of the word fuck, more than two dozen in all. It became one of the most celebrated episodes of a celebrated series. Apart from the different nuances of the word it is funny simply by virtue of relentless repetition. The second word uttered is 'Motherfucker'. In *The Motherf\*\*ker with the Hat* – the word Motherfucker being curiously changed in England, the home of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, to Motherf\*\*ker – much

the same is true. The sheer torrent of fast-paced vulgarity is the root of humour, each character trying to top the other.

Guirgis has said that he begins with dialogue, one character's speech inviting a reply, plot being generated out of language. If, as in *The Motherf\*\*ker with the Hat*, the language is scatological it is because it is a street language, immediate and direct, the humour generated by its exuberant supererogation, as by the fact that it co-exists with a different vocabulary, no less extreme for being fashionable cant. He had felt he was finished with plays about angry people but anger would be a driving force of his central character, a man, Jackie, recently out of prison, who suspects, not unreasonably it turns out, that his girlfriend has been having an affair on finding a stranger's hat in her apartment. Though on parole, and apparently dedicated to turning his life around, with a job and a sponsor to keep him on the moral rails, his first thought on discovering the hat of an unknown man is to acquire a gun to exact revenge. But these are all characters who live on their instincts.

Veronica is an addict who has been having an affair with Jackie's AA sponsor, Ralph D, while he was in prison, and whose own wife now has an affair with Jackie. Their relationships are as circular as Jackie's denial, summed up by his cousin Julio as, 'Except for the fact that it actually happened, it didn't really happen' (31). Jackie likes to believe he has a code, though it is hard to detect what it might be. As Guirgis has said, AA may be a genuine and helpful organization but its members are not, certainly as evidenced by Ralph whose relationship with Veronica she ends with a speech whose sudden change of direction is typical of Guirgis's comic method: 'It's over for real! So please don't give me no static about it, 'cuz I'll wrap a fuckin' bedsheet 'round my head and go straight up Bin Laden on you – I'll fuckin' destroy you! . . . And I'm being nice about this 'cuz it ain't like we had nothin' it was something.'<sup>37</sup>

Guirgis's is an aesthetic of excess. Character is pressed towards caricature, language beyond the bounds of normal discourse. Insults are piled on insults, obscenities on obscenities, until they collapse of their own absurdity. Linguistic redundancy becomes a virtue. There are no norms of behaviour to be breached except a certain nostalgia suggests that something has been abandoned along the way while beneath the accelerating dialogue, verbal jousting, farcical performances, there is a hint of genuine pain and vulnerability, of a love which somehow survives betrayal and anger. The play ends as Veronica throws Jackie out, the man she had apparently once loved, though when he leaves, as a cassette tape plays one of the songs they had once shared, she calls his name even as she stands alone, loneliness being what they all fear.

Commitment may be what on some level these characters yearn for but it is also what they evade, afraid of what it means. They take on roles, exist in a world of contradiction, deny themselves the very thing they need. There is, though, a world beyond this circus. At times they borrow its language, parrot the clichés of a fashionable world which they invoke without quite seeming to be part of, as though they are trying on roles for size.

*The Motherf\*\*ker with the Hat* is a wild comedy with a relentless drive, for good reason played without an intermission. The frenetic action and scattergun language conceal moments of emotional insight as genuine needs are buried in a moment-by-moment battle for advantage. The play, which was his first to open on Broadway, prompted enthusiastic reviews from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and the *New Yorker*. It ran for a hundred and twelve performances and was nominated for a number of awards, including a Tony, winning several for acting. In Britain it was staged by the National Theatre and again prompted positive reviews.



His next play seems to assemble a familiar cast of those spun off from the supposed centre of American society, grifters, thieves, prostitutes, those who have compromised themselves even as they reach out for something secure in relationships which nonetheless fracture easily as old fault lines open. Motives are suspect, the truth hard to discern, lies a natural response. Drink and drugs signal a trap from which they wish to escape, or a resort, a means to blunt the impact of their situation. Language can still slide easily into profanity and invective. Friendships are suspect, means to equally suspect ends. All seek advantage, practice deceptions. For the most part, these are characters on the make, trading on one another. The word 'love' is deployed to advantage. A young woman fakes pregnancy announcing that love makes her feel 'like I got chlamydia or something,'<sup>38</sup> even as she accuses her boyfriend of failing to reciprocate by invoking a past which is hardly likely to induce affection or indicate that the word love means anything beyond desperation: 'I been with drug dealers and murderers who treated me better than you! I been with crackhead-homeless in Van Courtlandt Park half naked in a blizzard who showed me more love!' (38) Despite her protestations to the contrary she is no more than she seems, a young woman who insists she is a student of accountancy while parading her ignorance and body, lying her way into a security she is not sure she wants.

But something is different about *Between Riverside and Crazy*, perhaps influenced by the fact that it is rooted in his own life, though in truth the autobiographical is never far away in his work. It is set in a Riverside apartment, with its view out onto the river, into which a tumble of people come, as they did when he himself moved into his family apartment, following his mother's death, to look after his father. These were not, as in the play, always people of the highest probity while also, as in the play, his landlord did his best to evict him in order to raise the rent. And while the play takes off from here there is something about that rootedness which gives a solidity to the central character, a retired black policeman who, for eight years, has been prolonging a compensation claim having been shot, multiple times, when out of uniform, by a white policeman. This, too, had its root in a real event when, in 1994, a black policeman, named Desmond Robinson, was shot, though the circumstances were different from those in Guirgis's play.

Walter 'Pops' Washington lives in the detritus of a once elegant apartment, an old Christmas tree still lit because no one has thought to turn it off, with dog shit on the floor. His life has evidently been on hold. He eats pie for breakfast, washed down with whisky. His son, Junior, uses the apartment to sell stolen goods even as he is enrolled in AA (which Guirgis knew well from personal experience and whose principles he endorses). Does he stay to look after his father or for the convenience of a place from which to trade? For his part, his father is concerned for his state of mind explaining that 'Hypertension run in our family – and he been hypertensifying liked a motherfucker from the moment he moved back here' (12). While himself capable of deceit and in a state of suspended animation, seemingly content to drift, oblivious of his decline, he is tolerant of others and not simply out of disinterest. Meanwhile, he clings on to his decaying apartment as he does to a version of the past, which is not quite what it seems, out of a sense of stubbornness rather than resilience.

Junior's girlfriend, Lulu, wanders around, skimpily dressed, casually exuding sexuality, even rubbing up against Pops as though this were her primary means of communication, and she comes close to caricature, though there are hints of self-awareness. A third person, Oswald, Junior's friend, extols the virtues of a healthy life, having learned this from *People* magazine, while recognizing as friends criminals who appear on the pages of the newspapers. He was

based, Guirgis explained, on a friend who had been in recovery but ordered drugs and a call girl to his apartment. When he could not pay, 'a gun-toting pimp came upstairs and threatened to kill everyone.'<sup>39</sup>

The imminent crisis is prompted by the arrival of yet another eviction notice but since he has had a legal rent-controlled lease from 1978 he is determined to stay simply waiting for his lawyers to secure the compensation, following his shooting, which he assumes will prove over a million dollars. Into this situation arrive two policemen, one a woman, a former partner. What appears to be a friendly reunion, however, turns out to be an attempt on their part to secure his agreement to settle his case, their own careers being on the line. Friendly jousting turns to threats as they point out not merely that he had been drunk when the shooting took place, and that they suspect the shooter never did utter the word 'nigger' (as, indeed, we later learn, he did not), but that they know of Junior's criminality and intend to arrest him if Pops does not comply. Beyond that, they point out that Pops has long since broken the terms of his lease and hence can be evicted with ease. He collapses only later to be attacked by Junior's drunken friend, Oswald, whose 12-step programme seems in temporary abeyance and who demands his credit card or, he bathetically adds, 'debit!' (41)

For the moment everything is unresolved until a supposed Church Lady from Brazil arrives who, with what appears to be voodoo magic, stirs Pops into sexual life for the first time since his shooting. She is, apparently, raising money for an orphanage, while having a surprising insight into his situation. His sexual exertions, however, precipitate a heart attack. When the detectives return, there is, they explain, no longer any money on the table but if he signs a non-disclosure form he will be secure in his apartment and his son's criminal record will be expunged. He agrees, but only if he is given \$15,000 from a discretionary fund, if his former partner hands over her \$30,000 engagement ring, and if her partner/fiancé, gives him his tie. He finally wins his battle but hands the ring to the Church Woman who, somewhat surprisingly, confesses that she is only a cleaner at the church, that she learned details of his life from the real Church Lady who she has persuaded to take her activities elsewhere, that there are no orphans, she having come to rob him.

The play ends, though, on a note of grace, that grace for which his characters often long. Pops, now smartly dressed, prepares to leave his apartment and as he does so gives the ersatz Church Lady the \$30,000 ring, knowing she is a fraudster but believing that she had helped gift him the freedom he now claims, convinced that she in turn can offer the same gift of belief to others. It is a note which echoes through Guirgis's work. It can seem a sentimentality, and perhaps it is, but the Catholic in him has never been entirely erased. Redemption always remains a possibility and how could it not in someone who had himself undergone the 12-step programme which calls for those who follow it to make a searching and fearless moral inventory of themselves and have a spiritual awakening.

Guirgis's characters seem trapped by circumstance, as by their own derelictions, and yet redemption of a sort remains a possibility. It is the Writer in Tennessee Williams's *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* who insists that "There are no lies but the lies that are stuffed in the mouth by the hard-knuckled hand of need, the cold iron fist of necessity."<sup>40</sup> Guirgis's characters give themselves the benefit of the doubt, deceive others and themselves, getting by from moment to moment by whatever means seem to hand. He has the same sympathy for them, though, as O'Neill does for those in *The Iceman Cometh* and for something of the same reason: he knew them and knew, too, what it is to be tempted by the dark. Pops, he has said, 'tells a big lie, but

## Staging America

why did he do it? Maybe I haven't told that lie, but what lies do I tell in my own life? The characters in the play hopefully have enough humor and intelligence to make us feel compassion.<sup>741</sup>

He has said that, 'I think that anything anyone writes that's any good is going to have a lot of autobiography . . . All these characters, at one time or another, I've lived or identified with in some way . . . The characters are working class and below, and that'll probably be the way [I continue to write] until I start hanging out with rich people.' He has known something of the experiences of those whose lives he stages saying, 'Let's say I'm a guy in his 40s who grew up in New York City . . . I was the type of person that wouldn't say no to much, so when you get to my age . . . you're either in a [12-step] program or been in and out of a program – or you're not here.'<sup>742</sup> 'I'm a huge fan and believe 100% in 12-step programs,' he has said, 'They save lives. They elevate existences. Miracles happen in those rooms.'<sup>743</sup>

Guirgis has forged a poetry out of the language and lives of those he stages, as he has humour in their exchanges, alongside a defensive aggression. They hesitate to allow the intimacy which nonetheless at times they evidently need. They have glimpses of a world elsewhere but for the most part live and have their being within limits which they allow to define them and their possibilities even if they never quite lose their sense of something of value which evades them, a meaning just beyond their reach. They have not given up nor he on them. He may have left behind the formalities of the Church but he stages ceremonies of his own in which transformation is possible and redemption a reality.

*Between Riverside and Crazy* had its premiere at the Atlantic Theatre Company in 2014 before transferring the following year to Second Stage Theatre. It won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Lucille Lortel Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding New Off-Broadway Play, the Off-Broadway Alliance Award and the Pulitzer Prize, one of the judges for which being fellow playwright Lynn Nottage.

The figure of Pops surely owes something to his own father of whom he has said, he 'had a very working-class existence. He worked on his feet, there was no pension. He didn't really have anything when he died, no money, no nothing. He didn't have anything to give his children other than his rent-controlled apartment.'<sup>744</sup> Like Pops, he had a dog bought for him when his wife died, a dog still owned by his playwright son who still lives in that same rent-controlled apartment.

## CHAPTER 4

### QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES

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I hear things. I hear rhythms and I hear the world and I hear the voices and I hear how loud and soft the voices are . . . Structure is a deeply emotional and musical thing. Repetition and variation is just a basic component of music that I think of all the time when I write a play.<sup>1</sup>

When Quiara Alegría Hudes turned on her cell phone after flying to Atlanta, Georgia, for previews of one of her plays, there was a series of messages informing her of the death of her aunt. In 2012, as she was teaching a class on playwriting at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, once again her phone filled up with multiple messages, the regular beeping sounding ominous. This time it was better news. She had won the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Water by the Spoonful*.

She was born and brought up in West Philadelphia in what she has described as a starter home for immigrants. Hers was the only Latino family on the block. Her father is Jewish and her mother Puerto Rican, while her stepfather is Catholic and her grandparents Lutherans. Identity, along with religion, was clearly fluid. Close neighbours were Ethiopian and Vietnamese, though the area was predominantly African-American. But, as she has explained, Puerto Rico is itself culturally diverse. She had family members in North and South Philadelphia as well as in Malvern, twenty-five miles west of Philadelphia, where she lived on a horse farm for three years, her mother reading her own poems to her, in Spanish, though she herself was not as yet fluent in the language. She has said that in some ways her family were always living in translation and she living between worlds, two different cultural points of view, simultaneously an outsider and an insider.

Her extended family was itself diverse including those who had made it and those who had not, those who became influential in their community as well as those struggling with addiction or spending time in prison. There was a division, too, between the Jewish and Puerto Rican sides of her family, the former seeming invisible to the latter; writing, she would come to believe, was one way to deal with that invisibility. Her parents separated when she was young so that she was largely raised by her mother. She herself used to attend Quaker meetings for ten years while her mother, an activist in the community, practiced Santería, an Afro-American religion influenced by Catholicism and popular in Puerto Rico, becoming a Santera, a priestess. As a result, there were often ceremonies conducted in the family home.

As she grew up, she learned aspects of Puerto Rican history and something rather broader. In high school her mother gave her *Doña Licha's Island*, Alfredo Lopez's study of colonialism in Puerto Rico, and Bartolomé de las Casals's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, he being a Spanish Dominican friar writing in 1552 about the atrocities committed against the indigenous people of the Americas, neither being normal high school reading, though they may account for her later consciousness of forces in her own society.

She has spoken of growing up at a 'combustible, pivotal moment in American history.' 'The War on Drugs was ravaging our neighbourhood – it was really a war on those already destroyed

## Staging America

by drugs. Then AIDS hit us unexpectedly . . . How,' she asked, 'can one community come back from these things?' The simultaneous withdrawal of funds from the arts worked to silence those who might have resisted. Nonetheless, 'The times and people of my life have defined my journey,'<sup>2</sup> and a journey into understanding would lie at the heart of her play *26 Miles*. Growing up she 'felt so much injustice went unsaid in our society' that later she was 'compelled to say things that were left unsaid. To shine a spotlight where it hadn't yet been shone.'<sup>3</sup> In doing so she turned to her family which would become the basis of the stories she would tell, stories that would be rooted in their experiences as Puerto Ricans but stories, too, about America. 'I am drawn to Latino life,' she has explained, 'because it's a vivid part of the American fabric. There are great American stories to tell from Latino life. I am also drawn to write diverse plays, because my lens is Latina but also reflects the diversity within my family and my city and my people . . . Putting Latino characters onstage, without apology, with drama, comedy, despair, love, and integrity, is my daily political act . . . This is the American story.'<sup>4</sup>

She did not read Latin American literature until later. Her real commitment was to music: 'I soaked up *musica jibara* – mountain music – and studied Afro-Cuban piano. I saw Cachao and could hear the Western European and African roots in his glorious music. I did my best to keep up dancing to Rubén Blades and Ray Barretto. I think this music continues to influence me, which is why I continue to include live musicians in my plays.'<sup>5</sup> *Musica jibara*, according to the Puerto Rican singer Karol Aurora De Jesús Reyes, is 'the music of my country, that which represents us and that which identifies us as a people.'<sup>6</sup> Cachao is the Cuban-born composer who popularized the mambo in America and was rediscovered in the 1990s having faded from view, while Ray Barretto was the son of Puerto Rican parents, a jazz percussionist elected to the International Latin Music Hall of Fame. In other words, there was no doubting the tradition to which she was laying claim, even as she was equally drawn to classical music and as a playwright to the major figures of American drama.

Music had, in a sense, been a background to her life. She has spoken of her mother playing recordings of Afro-Caribbean drumming, while her aunt was a composer and pianist with whom she took piano lessons, learning works by classical composers. The same aunt would take her to concerts including one by the blues, jazz and gospel singer Etta James and the reggae band Steel Pulse. She also saw the rock and roll band NRBQ and attended a ballet by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at Lincoln Center featuring Mikhail Baryshnikov. In other words, her musical education was eclectic. She studied with Elio Villafranca, the classically-trained jazz pianist, who taught her Afro-Caribbean piano, and the composer Don Rappaport at Settlement Music School (later invoked by Yazmin Ortiz, a music professor in her play *Water by the Spoonful*) from whom she learned composition. As she explained, 'I had absorbed all that by the time I reached ten years old. To me, music was an endless world of sound and possibility. There were no boundaries. I took my first formal piano lesson in the eighth grade and found my way to Settlement by the ninth grade,'<sup>7</sup> Settlement being a community music school with branches around Philadelphia. She would spend much of her childhood practising piano four or five hours a day.

She was also taken to see the South African musical *Sarafina*, which addressed the question of apartheid, something of which she knew nothing at the time though later she was to credit the experience with introducing her to the idea of theatre as a means of opening audiences to areas to which they had previously had no exposure.

At Central High School in Philadelphia, she had a play produced when she was in eighth grade. It was called *My Best Friend Died*, and was based on the actual death of a friend, a

foreshadowing of her later use of factual material, drawing on those closest to her. She also wrote *My Dreams About Girls* which won first place in the Philadelphia Young Playwrights Festival. In her sophomore year, she took a class on creative writing. She was supposed to go to college early but, as a result of what she called a disruption in her life, stayed on for her junior year, a decision which she has said changed everything. It marked the beginning of her taking writing seriously.

Unsurprisingly, though, when she went to Yale it was to study music, though she later regarded this as a good education in how to write plays, rhythm being a central concern, ‘music and literacy’, going ‘hand in hand’ with her musical studies teaching her ‘concentration, listening, and the practice of silence,’<sup>8</sup> skills important to writing. On the other hand, ‘Music had no meaning. It simply is. People don’t say, “The music didn’t have a full dramatic arc” or “I didn’t believe in that character.” They let the language of notes wash over them as a whole experience. I write from that place. Language is a profound instrument creating incredible sounds.’<sup>9</sup> While there she wrote two musicals and the score for a production of Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia* (in which the future playwright Amy Herzog appeared). Previously, she had written, partly, she suggested, as a hobby and partly as a therapy, a way of dealing with loneliness. Now, though, she turned to writing scores and lyrics and would go on to write the book for *In the Heights* (1999), with music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda, and *Miss You Like Hell* (2016), originally written as a brief play, with music and lyrics by Erin McKeon.

In her freshman year, though, she was assigned Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* finding inspiration in the choreopoem as later, in her senior year, she took a course on Native American fiction which introduced her to Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* which begins: ‘I will tell you something about stories/ [he said]/ They aren’t just entertainment. Don’t be fooled. / They are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off/ illness and death. / You don’t have anything/if you don’t have the stories.’<sup>10</sup> These two works she would claim as the north and south for her when it came to her writing. From the first she derived a sense of something that had been missing from her life, but which was to be discovered within herself, while from the other a sense of story as a ceremony of healing, a route to truth. And since Silko’s novel was about the return of a young Native American from war, having been a prisoner of the Japanese, it would have a special significance when she came to write *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, in some sense itself a choreopoem but also about soldiers in and after not war but wars, her cousin Elliot Ruiz being an Iraq war veteran who had enlisted immediately out of high school and been wounded in the leg in 2003, while his father had served in Vietnam. He, indeed, would be the inspiration for what became known as the Elliot trilogy.

For a time, after Yale, she was a member of a band and on graduating made her money through her music, but on her mother’s advice decided to concentrate on writing, though music would remain a point of reference in her plays. She enrolled in the Masters programme at Brown University where, like many other writers, she encountered Paula Vogel who, among other things, introduced her to German expressionism, something she regards as important to her. It was here that she began to write plays, *Yemaya’s Belly* and *The Adventures of Barrio Grrrl!* a children’s musical.

For Vogel, her work ‘has a musicality about it – an emotional honesty without sentimentality, and then effortless outbursts of heightened lyricism.’<sup>11</sup> That was already apparent in *Yemaya’s Belly*, inspired by a story her father had once told her and which had its premiere at the Portland

## Staging America

Stage Company in 2005, following an earlier version produced by Miracle Theatre in 2004. The characters are poor, a young boy longing to reach an America beyond his comprehension. ‘Though the text seems poetic,’ she instructed in a programme note, ‘and the rituals give a sense of magical realism, it is imperative that these characters and their situation be as real and as specific as possible . . . The moments of poetry should be surprises, should stand out against a starker, more impoverished landscape. These characters are hungry; they do not have a lot.’<sup>12</sup> It is a play with rituals, elements of fantasy, life reformulated as poetry and story. In truth, though, the poverty scarcely impacts being subordinate to the fantasy. Nonetheless there are elements here which foreshadow later plays in which ghosts would make their appearance and daily experience be counterpoised to myths, stories, and a lyricism in part a function of language and in part of a music seldom distant from the lives of her characters.

Even though she had been working on another piece which would later prove hugely successful, *In the Heights*, then making its way through readings and development, her immediate breakthrough came with *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, the first scene of which had been read by Paula Vogel who had encouraged her to continue. It was a challenging work, innovative in form. An early version was produced by Miracle Theatre in Portland, Oregon, in 2005, before, the following year, it was staged by the Culture Project, a 99-seat theatre on Delancey Street in New York dedicated to addressing human rights issues and, it claimed, amplifying marginalized voices. Despite the small venue, the production prompted reviews in *Variety* and *The New York Times* and went on to be shortlisted for a Pulitzer Prize. The first line of the *Times* review could hardly have been more encouraging for a new playwright, twenty-eight years old: “‘Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue’ is that rare and rewarding thing: a theatre work that succeeds on every level, while creating something new.”<sup>13</sup>

It was a play, which took her two years to write, rooted in her family. As she has said, ‘Family is the reason I picked up a pen . . . I had never heard stories like my family told. And they felt important to me. Our country’s culture is part of our history, and I thought, if I can add some of these stories to our country’s cultural landscape, then . . . I’ve added a slightly new sliver to history . . . My aunt Ginny was a huge inspiration to me. I named a character after her in *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*. Recently she passed away at the age of 59. I feel that her story lives on.’<sup>14</sup>

The Turkish writer Ahmet Altan has remarked that as a writer, ‘I am neither where I am nor where I am not.’<sup>15</sup> He spoke as a man, in prison, whose imagination nonetheless left him free. Much the same could be said in a different sense of Hudes not because she found herself in prison but because while she frequently earths her work in her own experiences, or that of those she knows intimately, her plays exist in their own imagined territory. She is both within and without her text as she exists both within the Puerto Rican community and aside from it, someone who escaped the barrio but finds in it a home. Fact and fiction engage in a conversation, fact elevated by the poetry of invention, the imagination grounded in real experience. For her, the experiences of others become so many found objects whose shapes and substance she senses even as she incorporates them into something new. She hears stories and retells them, preserving their truths but accommodating them to a meta-story. English and Spanish have their own dance, language itself expressing and embodying the double consciousness of those constructing a life in one culture while drawn back to another in a negotiation which nonetheless defines them.

*Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, Hudes explained, was prompted by conversations with her uncle, who had served in Vietnam, and her cousin, Elliot Ruiz, who had served in Iraq. She retained

both their first names and this would become her method in subsequent plays in what became a cycle. Elliot would become a central figure in her work, a man who had returned from war with an injured leg. As he explained,

On April 14, 2003, the Iraqis captured seven ‘prisoners of war’ and we were sent to rescue them. That was the day I got injured. An Iraqi ran my checkpoint and almost ripped off my leg. He was driving down the street towards us and I saw that he wasn’t going to stop, so I opened fire on the car. It lost control and the tyres got tangled up in the checkpoint’s barbed wire; the wire snapped and caught my legs, and when the car drove past it yanked my leg and dragged me down the street. I was awarded the Purple Heart for that.

I was flown to Spain and had emergency surgery on my leg. They told me I would never walk again – not without a cane. Basically, they were just telling me the worst. But I had just turned 18 and thought: ‘I’m walking. I’m telling you, I’m running again.’ I didn’t want to be told I wasn’t going to run again; nobody wants to hear that. I did everything the doctors told me not to do and recently I’ve started to be able to jog and run around.<sup>16</sup>

Though it was conversations which fed into the play its method was a result of her feeling the limitations of such in drama, aspects of experience being suppressed or not acknowledged, privacies being evaded. Hence this is a play in which characters address themselves, write or receive letters, describe experiences or interact through juxtaposition, an interleaving of events and perceptions. There are commonalities and divergencies as past and present are brought together. Free verse gives way to prose, voice to voice, generation to generation, rhythm to rhythm. There are, perhaps, echoes of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* which had mixed poetry, music and occasional lines in Spanish. Shange, though, had a clear ideology. She rejected identification as a playwright rather than a poet because she regarded American plays as shallow, stilted and imitative, based on ‘a truly European framework for European psychology’ which ‘cannot function efficiently for those of us from this hemisphere.’ What was needed was to abolish ‘straight theatre for a decade or so, refuse to allow playwrights to work without dancers & musicians.’<sup>17</sup> Hudes’ work is innovative, and certainly involves music, but it is not programmatic nor does she have any desire to reject her fellow American playwrights to whose influence she has attested even as she is committed to exploring new approaches.

A fugue is a contrapuntal composition in which a short phrase or melody is introduced and then taken up by others. But it is also a loss of awareness of identity, an altered state of consciousness, from the Latin for running away, flight. Both definitions apply in *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* which features Elliot, eighteen or nineteen years old, who had served in Iraq, his mother, who had been in the Army Nurse Corps in Vietnam, his father who had been in the 3rd Cavalry Division in Vietnam, and whose age, like his mother’s, varies, and his grandfather, a Korean war veteran from the 65th Infantry Regiment of Puerto Rico (this being a time, we learn, when Puerto Ricans were kept separate), again pictured at different ages. The play takes place in two spaces, one described as ‘stark, sad,’ such light as there is being ‘like light through a jailhouse window or through the dusty stained glass of a decrepit chapel,’ the other a “‘garden space,” . . . teeming with life . . . a verdant sanctuary, green speckled with magenta and gold.’ Both spaces ‘are holy in their own way.’<sup>18</sup> These constitute the contrapuntal context for the action in the play.



## Staging America

Her description of music for the play is equally a description of its rhythms. She identifies Bach, jazz, etudes, scales, hip hop and the flute. It is the grandfather who spells out the nature of a fugue: 'Of everything Bach wrote, it is the fugues. The fugue is like an argument. It starts in one voice. The voice is the melody, the single, solitary melodic line. The statement. Another voice creeps up on the first one. Voice two responds to voice one. They tangle together. They argue. They become messy. They create dissonance. Two, three, four lines clashing' (35). That is, in effect, a description of Hudes' method, the structural principal of the play, but the grandfather also points out its relevance to war claiming that his platoon in Korea had been in love with Bach, or at least to the principle of two contrasting moods, the howl of howitzers being balanced against his playing of a flute. He taught them, he recalls, the difference between major and minor keys, explaining it in terms of loving and losing a woman, sunrise and, implicitly, sunset. The other dimension of the fugue, however, is evident in the fact that later, 'I started losing words. Dates. Names of objects. Family names. Battles I had fought in' (37).

In the fugue scenes, Hudes explained, 'people narrate each other's actions and sometimes narrate their own,' (5) time being fluid and overlapping, characters stepping back into the time when their reality was that of war, different wars. Their experiences echo one another's even as they diverge. The play opens with a scene itself titled 'Fugue', as Ginny, Elliot's mother, Pop, his father, along with his grandfather, each describe beds in military facilities except that they exist in different times even as, moments later, they describe Elliot as he emerges from a shower, commenting on actions of which they are not a part. Thus, Grandpop observes that his grandson will board a ship to Iraq while he and Ginny describe his journey on board and he and Pop, speaking together, instruct in the military code.

As Elliot listens to hip hop on his headphones we are back in 1950s Korea with Grandpop who has been reading a letter from his son, Elliott's father, though we hear nothing of it. He assembles a flute and plays the melody of a Bach passacaglia while his son lies down singing himself to sleep to a marching song even as Elliot bobs his head in time to the hip hop music he hears until, for a moment, he sings the words of the song he is listening to as Pop sings his marching song and his grandfather plays his flute. Here, then, are the elements of fugue, voices sounding out in isolation but coming together, a three-part counterpoint as Hudes points out, a counterpoint consisting of voices which are harmonically interdependent and yet independent rhythmically. Their experiences differ, Elliot on his way to the desert, his grandfather freezing in Inchon, yet there is an assonance, an internal rhyme, in that their lives are contained by war.

The opening scene is followed by a Prelude, musically an introductory piece but equally an action leading to something more significant. Here, Elliot, back from Iraq, though only for a week, and with a Purple Heart signifying his injury, is to throw the first pitch at a Phillies baseball game. This, in turn, is only one of four preludes. The next is set in 1966, in the heat of Vietnam, except that Grandpop seems to be there alongside his son. This in turn gives way to another Prelude in which Ginny is seen in a garden which she has helped create from wasteland since her own return from Vietnam. This is a sanctuary, a relief from, an antidote to, war. She tends it as she had the bodies of those she had worked to heal in Vietnam, this place teeming with life as their deaths had stalked the wards, life in the garden being an act of resistance.

As she tends plants, tumbled together, bringing forth new life, in the next Prelude her husband, back in 1966, writes a letter describing his assignment picking up scattered body parts to be labelled and tossed together, lives disassembled, a letter not to be shared, a truth not to disturb those anxious only for his return. The fact is, though, that these worlds cannot be

kept apart. The counterpoint to the green world of the garden is the green 'from the night goggles. / Green Iraq. / Verdant Falluja. / Emerald Tikrit . . . being The green profile of a machine gun in the distance,' (26-7) Vietnam segueing to Iraq and both to America where Ginny dreams these images as her son has nightmares at the sight of the first man he has killed.

In the next Prelude Elliot is being interviewed on television, explaining the circumstances of his wounding at Tikrit, the producer more concerned at his swearing than capturing the truth of the moment, even rehearsing him, each a step further away from the reality of the moment, now packaged and processed for consumption. Later he is interviewed on a local radio station and we learn that his grandfather has Alzheimer's, his fluency throughout thus suspect or retrieved from another time. We learn, too, that his father 'doesn't bring up that stuff too much,' (50) despite the fact that within the play he does.

What appear to be conversations between the characters are juxtapositions, echoes, momentary assonances, intersecting stories, voices so many instruments sounding together. In their different times, Pop and Elliot perform the same gestures sorting through the wallet of a man they have killed. There comes a moment when Pop and Grandpop utter the same lines in unison. Wars have their different causes, are waged in different places with different enemies. They are occasions of destruction, death, but there is a similar language, a shared experience, a disturbing but undeniable dark harmony and it is that which Hudes orchestrates through her mixture of poetry and prose, her bending of time back on itself, not merely interweaving incidents but registering shared tones, anxieties, fears, melancholy. There are letters but these fall short of the experiences they set out to describe, language being inadequate, silence a preferred option for those who have no wish to recall what they would escape or sensitive to the sensibilities of those they would address.

The play was based not only on interviews with her family but also with other veterans. In that sense hers has some affinity with the work of Emily Mann whose plays were also based on interviews, *Still Life* setting out to explore violence in America largely through the memories of a Vietnam veteran, also, as it happens, looking for a musical sense of harmony, weaving together separate accounts. She, too, looked for a poetic rhythm through intercutting, setting her text out in verse. She looked for an improvisational feel which she found in the best jazz musicians while wishing the monologues in her play to sound like extended riffs. She, too, found or created meaning through juxtapositions, stressing both the continuities and discontinuities of experience.

The subjects of her play attended the final production, surely in a desire to be assured that confidences had not been betrayed. Hudes has confessed to nervousness as she, too, watched alongside those who had shared their memories with her and it is clearly dangerous territory mining the life experiences of others for dramatic purposes, raising moral issues. Even granted that she had their permission she still felt anxious that they should not feel she had violated their trust. She has recalled watching a scene at the beginning of the play in which the character Elliot pulls out a Bible containing family photographs, as the real Elliot had done in Iraq. For the rest of the play he was in tears but insisted that he was proud that elements of his story had been told. Nor was this the last time such a challenge would occur. Ahead lay *Water by the Spoonful*, a play which would deal with addiction and recovery, which, though fictional, would bear directly on the experiences of those in her family.

How does *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, then, differ from Mann's? She had relied on transcriptions of her interviews, literally cutting them up and rearranging them to form her text. The words

## Staging America

are those of her subjects even as she then manipulated them, generating meanings from that process of editing, as from the rhythms she imposed. Hudes' method differed. Unlike Mann, she was not concerned to create a documentary theatre whose authenticity relied on reproducing the actual words of those with whom she spoke. Hers is not a 'theatre of fact' in the way that Martin Duberman's *In White America* had been, using letters, journals, speeches and personal accounts, a weaving together of historical documents, to explore American race relations. Nor is it 'tribunal theatre' of the kind popular in Britain's Tricycle Theatre which presented public documents, spoken evidence, trial proceedings to explore such subjects as the Iraq war or Guantanamo.

Hers is also not a play with a thesis, not offered as an indictment. This is not theatre as a weapon, a political intervention, even as audiences are free to draw conclusions from what they experience as three generations go to war and are defined in part by what they experience. She is interested in exploring what has shaped her central character, displaced, wounded and returned, reflecting but also creating the community from which he comes, the family who bear the impress of his trauma. She does so by creating visual and linguistic images. There comes a moment when Grandpop, Ginny and Pop wrap Elliot's legs in barbed wire, trapping him, as his wounding is described not by him but them, their accounts mirroring the actual event, and mirroring is one of her strategies in a play in which she is interested in reflections in more than one sense, actions in one time reflecting those in another even as the text itself is a reflection on the impact of war. She works by tonal changes, a shifting of focus, a blending and separation of narratives, the text speeding up – 'Rapid shutter action,' says Ginny, 'frames with no sound,' (42) says Grandpop as Elliot lies, a spill of words rushing through his mind – or slowing down, as in the garden scenes in which monologue goes uninterrupted. Then it is Pop who becomes the person lying in bed with a wounded leg, a man with three purple hearts, as Ginny, his wife-to-be, tends to him, an acting out of the scene she had recounted earlier in her monologue in the garden, time again turning back on itself.

As the play ends so the various strands pull together. Eliot returns wounded from Iraq anxious to talk to his father, to see if their experiences of war were the same, but he can no more learn from him, it seems, than his grandfather. What he does do is read his father's letters from Vietnam. As he does so, now in the garden at night, his mother wraps his body in vines rather than the barbed wire which had injured him. What he learns from the letters is what we have experienced in the play. They had both suffered in the same way, trod the same path, had the same feelings. In spite of everything, Elliot decides to return to Iraq and we see him at the airport in 2003 about to leave, but his is only one of three duffel bags, packed with mementos of home. The others are his grandfather's as, in 1950, he prepares to board a ship to Korea, and his father's, in 1965, as, at Newark Airport, he begins his journey to Vietnam. All are off to war, different wars but essentially the same war, this in a scene designated a Fugue.

The Iraq war was far from over when Hudes wrote the play but it is not an indictment of it, its politics being of no more immediate concern than it is for those, in the play, who served in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and who shared feelings of fear, guilt, anger, camaraderie. Elliot, after all, chooses to return. What is of interest is not only how war impacts on the individual but the sense that it is a closed experience, shared only by those who were there and who themselves choose to contain it as if unconnected to the lives they resume. Yet in the play there are confessions, the unspoken is spoken, a motif established and then taken up by others. The very structure of the play, the shared images, the musical link through a flute handed down, is an

assertion of connection, between those who served disparate causes and between members of a family who carry memories which they hesitate to share but which have shaped who they are.

Some critics objected to what they felt was the coldness of the characters, finding them undeveloped. Perhaps they were expecting a different kind of play. They are seen, for the most part, only in terms of a particular set of experiences. They are seen, too, refracted through letters, memories, commenting on others, sometimes seemingly as others. They partly act as narrators. The very structure and strategy privilege connections over time, images, music, shifting moods themselves being foregrounded.

Her practice is to send drafts of her plays to those she interviews, ready to respond if they object. Sometimes they did, and she did, indeed, respond. She would return to her family in subsequent plays but meanwhile another project had been unfolding for her since 2005, a project which involved working with a fellow Puerto Rican who had grown up not in Philadelphia but first in Washington Heights and then the Inwood area of New York City, today 74 per cent Hispanic, north of Washington Heights. His name was Lin-Manuel Miranda, Lin-Manuel prompted by a poem about the Vietnam War by José Manuel Torres Santiago ('Nana roja para mi hijo Lin Manuel')<sup>19</sup>. His father had been born in Puerto Rico, arriving in America in his late teens, while his mother, also from Puerto Rico, had come to America as a child. 'We knew what the deal was,' he said, as immigrants 'we have to work three times as hard. I don't remember a time when my parents had less than three jobs each. That is just the immigrant story.'<sup>20</sup>

Like Hudes, he had learned to play the piano. He was a lover of hip hop, of the Beastie Boys and Broadway musicals. At school he performed in numerous student productions, including the lead in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*: 'I was a musical theatre nerd . . . our year did twenty-minute versions of six musicals, and by the time I was twelve I had been Captain Hook, Bernado, a son in *Fiddler*, a farmer in *Oklahoma!* A back up in *The Wiz* . . . So, I had this lethal dose of musical theatre [when] I was very young.'<sup>21</sup> He studied at Wesleyan University where he performed in musicals and wrote songs. It was in his sophomore year, in 1999, that he wrote a draft of *In the Heights*. It was staged by the student theatre company, he having added rap and salsa. He presented it at his parents' house on his twentieth birthday. What he wanted to see in the musical was 'Latinos, not wielding knives, but . . . being in love and having businesses and having families . . . It was originally more of a love story set in Washington Heights.'<sup>22</sup>

He graduated in 2002 and began to act but in 2003 there was a reading of *In the Heights* at the Drama Book Shop on West 40th Street presented by Back House Productions formed by four Wesleyan graduates, one of whom, Thomas Kail, was the director. It was attended by the Broadway producer Jill Furman. She expected nothing but, 'It was music I had never heard before in a musical and a method of storytelling that was fresh, unique, exciting, and had energy to burn. I knew immediately I was in the presence of a musical genius and had to be involved with this project.'<sup>23</sup> She signed up, along with two fellow producers, and began to look for someone who could write the book. They settled on Hudes, musically intelligent, from a similar Puerto Rican background. 'When I came on board,' she explained, 'it already had these amazing sounds and this amazing, vibrant life, and these great characters. And so it was just me taking all these beautiful things Lin had been creating and continuing to sculpt a more focused story out of it that was about the neighbourhood.'<sup>24</sup>

A reading of a revised first act was held in 2004, with another reading the following year and a workshop at the O'Neill Musical Theatre Conference. A full workshop followed in 2006

## Staging America

designed to impress possible backers. The musical went through numerous drafts, Furman counting at least twenty-four. In 2007, it opened Off-Broadway at the 136 seat 37 Arts named for its location on 37th Street. Finally, in 2008, it arrived at the Richard Rogers Theatre on Broadway. It ran for 1,184 performances and won Drama Desk, Tony and Grammy awards besides being shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize.

Miranda and Hudes had begun with the idea that the characters would be Puerto Rican, that being their mutual background, but discovered that Washington Heights was now more Dominican. As a result, they decided that the lead could not be Puerto Rican, though that led to casting difficulties there being a smaller number of Dominican actors.

With a show of this kind it is not always easy to disentangle the contribution of the writer of the book and the writer of the lyrics. Talking to Haley Gordon, of the Philadelphia Young Playwrights, of which she was an alumna, Hudes explained that she and Miranda had worked in the same room and that their collaboration was like cooking a soup with someone,

tampering with one another's recipes . . . He would steal from my scenes all the time. I would go and write what I thought was going to be the most brilliant scene in the show and then he would come back the next morning . . . and would say, 'yes, I turned that into a song, so you no longer get to keep that' . . . I would then exact my own revenge by taking his song and cannibalising it for a scene. We referred to ourselves as cannibals because we would eat from ourselves and from each other's work and what ends up happening over time is that there becomes a seamlessness between the book and the music and the lyrics . . . People have asked me . . . who came up with that idea? It might be an idea about the book, it might be a staging, it might be the lyrics and a lot of times I can remember and a lot of times I cannot.<sup>25</sup>

The wit of her book matches that of his lyrics, dialogue and songs alike having a driving pace and energy. What struck her was that 'it is a traditional piece. It has love stories, it has a comic number, it has a big dance number, it has all these traditional musical theatre elements . . . it's a traditional book musical . . . using [that] traditional book musical structure to bring in new sounds and a new lyrical voice . . . a story that is very traditional in some ways, but is also bringing together new colors and some new elements.'<sup>26</sup> It was to be 'a deliberately family-friendly piece and so there was a pleasantness about it that we decided was part of our aesthetic.'<sup>27</sup>

The central character of *In the Heights* is Usnavi, named for a misreading of the sign his parents saw on the side of a ship – US Navy. He is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, hanging the Dominican flag as a reminder of where all in his neighbourhood came from, their English slipping into Spanish as they stake their claim on a new country even as they cling to the old. He is owner of the De La Vega Bodega (convenience store), across from which is a taxi company owned by the Rosarios (Kevin and Camilla), in financial trouble, laying off half their drivers. Kevin is the son of a line of farmers back in the Dominican Republic who had come to America to change his life, to break a heritage of poverty, his hope now resting on his daughter, Nina, studying at Stanford University, not only the pride of their lives but of the community. She is the one who made it out, the first to go to college, the barrio's best. Meanwhile, Abuela Claudia, who, though not Usnavi's blood grandmother had nonetheless raised him, and who had arrived from Cuba in 1943, working as a maid on the Upper East Side, learning the

language, has heart problems, the cost of her medication a worry. The dreams of another place become the dreams of this one even as they encounter racism and a suspicion of immigrants.

The other small business in this one block on Washington Heights, Manhattan, is a hair salon owned by Daniela, itself in trouble because of a rising rent, her employee, Vanessa, dreaming of escape, while giving half of her money to her mother who drinks it away rather than paying her electricity bill. The action takes place from 3 July to 5 July, so that celebration should be in the air. But this is a place where money is tight, where dreams attach themselves to lottery tickets, where sacrifices are made for the next generation. The Rosarios' daughter has been far away on the west coast, except that she now returns, having lost her scholarship money because of poor grades, themselves a result of her working two jobs to raise the money necessary for books which she then had no time to read. A door, it seems, has been slammed shut unless she can be persuaded to return and they can raise money to support her.

Things take a turn for the worst, from their point of view, when she falls in love with one of the Rosarios' employees, Benny, a non-Latino with no Spanish. Nina herself had first learned Spanish only to go to Stanford, a place where even English has a different connotation, the word weekend not being a noun but a verb meaning to 'go skiing at your cabin on Lake Tahoe. "Cabin." Noun. A blasé word for mansion.'<sup>28</sup> It is alien to who she is but she is unsure of her identity, coming from people who had had to negotiate their own. Where is home, here on Independence Day? Where does her future lie?

A power cut suddenly casts everything into darkness, even as fireworks light the sky, while below someone trashes Usnavi's store. They are seemingly powerless in more ways than one, but a miracle has seemingly occurred Abuela (Grandmother) Claudia winning \$96,000 on the lottery, giving a third of it to Usnavi – whose first thought is to take a flight to the Dominican Republic – a third to his young cousin, Sonny, while keeping a third for herself, dreams suddenly realized. At the same time, though, Nina's father, unbeknown to his wife, has already arranged to sell his business to pay for Nina's tuition. It is a blow to everyone. Good news and bad alike seem to signal the breakup of the community, a fact underlined when Claudia suddenly dies leaving behind mementos of their lives, souvenirs of those she helped on their way, the past which made them what they are. Understanding that she has a debt to this woman who had believed in her, Nina decides to return to California as her parents agree to sell their business to make this possible. Meanwhile she has begun to teach Benny Spanish, while he is determined to create his own company.

Others, too, have new hope, Vanessa being helped to move by Daniela who is herself aided by Usnavi. Sonny passes money to a graffiti artist. People are sharing even as others are leaving, the corner changing, gentrification threatening. Finally, Usnavi decides to stay, this place having become home, a word sung by others in a community not so easily disassembled. Indeed, this is the last word of a show which has itself created a community through song, dance and a book which offers a celebration of those whose lives are interwoven, immigrants who speak more than one language, have more than one dream, who have created the environment in which they live, looking to escape even as they feel the gravitational pull of the place which has shaped them. Notoriously, the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, alarmed at the spread of Spanish speakers in America, declared that there could be no Americano dream. *In the Heights* suggests otherwise.

For both Miranda and Hudes, though, despite the specifics of the neighbourhood, for all its echo of their own experiences in New York and Philadelphia, its emphasis on an immigrant

## Staging America

community, it dealt with issues relevant to all those struggling to get by, to pay the rent, keep businesses going, fund the next generation's education. It dealt with love crossing racial lines, *West Side Story* without the violence or the tragedy, though Lin-Manuel Miranda would go on to write Spanish-language lyrics for a song from that show, 'Maria', to raise funds for hurricane relief in Puerto Rico. These are characters balancing loyalties, discovering themselves even as the community itself emerges as a character in itself, painted in primary colours, the rhythms of the music and dance, the rhymes, expressing a mutuality which is a resource to those dealing with the daily traffic of problems.

In 2010, a production of *In the Heights* was taken to Puerto Rico. For Lin-Manuel Miranda it was a moving experience: 'I find it hard to talk about it without tearing up . . . Growing up, I'd get sent to Puerto Rico for a month a year where I was the kid with a fucked-up Spanish accent who couldn't really speak it well enough to kids my age. I was like the weird exchange kid. I loved Puerto Rico, but I never felt at home with it. Then to have *In the Heights* embraced in English, the way I wrote it, it closed some hole in me that I didn't know was open.'<sup>29</sup> A film version was planned, ending up with the Weinstein Company. In 2017, when news of Weinstein's history of sexual harassment became known, both Hudes and Miranda tried to have it removed.

In 2011 she and Miranda were considering the possibility of working on another musical together, an adaptation of Chaim Potok's *My Name Is Asher Lev*, but for the moment she turned back to drama, her next play being radically different, though there are echoes of her own life, and music again plays a role. From a named cast of thirteen, with a dozen more unnamed, and with twenty-six musical numbers, she moved to a cast of four (though three of them double) in *26 Miles*. It is set in 1986, in part in two households, one in Philadelphia, the other in Paoli, a small suburb with fewer than 1 per cent Latino citizens, even as effectively this is a road play covering a journey of two thousand miles, focussing on a mother, Beatriz, and her fifteen-year-old daughter, Olivia. They have been separated for eight years by court order (Beatriz not at that time being a citizen), Olivia now living with Aaron, her Jewish father, and a step-mother with whom she has difficult relations perhaps because, wanting a child of her own, she has just experienced her sixth miscarriage. Olivia and her father are close, though he had walked out on her mother. He is a carpenter, and she is fluent in the details of his craft. They have also shared a fantasy of escaping to Wyoming and building a cabin in the woods but this is no more than a fantasy, except that, debilitated from a bout of vomiting, she calls her mother and just such an escape ensues, a journey, it turns out, away and towards, away from disintegrating relationships and complexity and towards understanding and acceptance.

In Olivia's mind it is an American adventure and, indeed, that is the heritage she is inclined to accept. As she writes in a primitive magazine/diary, whose entries are scattered through the play (readers appearing and disappearing along the way), she is setting out like 'Lewis and Clark, Jack Kerouac.'<sup>30</sup> She and her mother sit side by side in a car, an echo, perhaps, of the device from Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*.

In an antique shop she picks up a book about explorers over the century, and as they travel so there are discoveries to be made. Not for nothing has she been raised on the *National Geographic*. As they journey deep into America they encounter a Peruvian seller of tamales who has settled in South Dakota and who is equally lyrical about food and love. America is not entirely the land of log cabins and buffalos she had imagined. Nor is love quite what it seems. Beatriz professes love and concern for a daughter she has barely spoken to in three years even though, on their separation, she had attempted suicide in despair before returning to the barrio and speaking

Spanish again, rediscovering a self she had so nearly lost along with her daughter. It is this revelation which leads Olivia to confess that the reason for her vomiting was that she, too, had attempted suicide as a result of bullying at school where she had been called 'white trash', her pants being pulled down to reveal that she was having a period, pulled down, as it happens, by the boy to whom she had lost her virginity and this is a play in which betrayal weaves in and out of the text. It was her desire to live which had prompted the call to her mother.

Olivia's writing is a way of pulling experiences together. 'She makes chaos make sense,' (34) observes Beatriz, much as the play itself pulls threads together from lives which are themselves fragmented and relationships which ebb and flow. Liking her family to tectonic plates shifting under pressure, she writes: 'Plates shift one centimetre a year, they collide slowly. Mom and me and Dad and Deborah. We're all plates. Shifting, eliding, colliding, trying to fit together like jigsaw pieces, searching for compatible edges. Trying to lock in. But something in us, plates of rigid land. Pieces that don't interlock. Trying to come together but making mountains instead . . . until you're green and alive in places, covered in snow in others . . . what kind of a mountain will I be? . . . Mom's definitely volcanic. Dad, he's more underwater mountain' (36).

Arthur Miller once remarked that he did not write plays, he wrote metaphors and in a sense *26 Miles* is such doing what metaphors do, namely bringing together discrete elements thereby creating new meanings, even as the journey is itself a familiar trope.

Beatriz is married to Manuel, a Cuban-American contractor and, like Hudes' mother, into spiritualism, visiting a Santero on the loss of her daughter, while her husband is Catholic. More than one boundary is crossed in *26 Miles*, religious, cultural, linguistic, literal. Beatriz is dark-skinned, her daughter white, and as a result they prompt different responses, themselves have different identities. There is a space between them. How, Olivia asks, could she be Cuban when she cannot speak Spanish, lives in a place with few Latinos and 'don't even tan right', to which her mother replies, 'my skin is yours. Whether anyone else sees, you wear the skin of your mother. You got poor cousins in *el barrio* who buy milk with food stamps . . . you better NEVER apologize for it . . . I used to apologize for it' (42).

As they travel west, so Beatriz teaches her daughter Spanish as they both learn about each other. Her mother's choice of music is Cuban-born Gloria Estefan while Olivia has a preference for Chopin, underscoring the different trajectories they have travelled. It is on the journey that Olivia discovers that she is illegitimate, her father never having married her mother but immediately marrying the woman for whom he abandoned her. Meanwhile, Beatriz's husband is apparently having an affair with a white woman, but another secret is divulged: Beatriz is two months pregnant.

They finally close in on Yellowstone Park, noting a sign indicating that they have twenty-six miles to go until at last they arrive and watch the buffalo Olivia had fantasized seeing. As she says, 'You get an image in your head. It feeds you. It keeps you breathing. Keeps your heart motivated to beat the next beat. Then you see it . . . It just is' (50).

The play ends with Olivia returning to her father and Beatriz reconciled with Manuel. The tales of explorers she has been reading are essentially about surviving, which is what they all struggle to do, unsure what form it might take. They revel in Yellowstone and the buffalos not because they mean anything but because they simply are, celebrating their mere existence, (both Beatriz and Olivia having tried to end theirs). A key to existence, it seems, is not only acceptance but celebration. In one sense the play is a validation of the imagination, as it is of what brings together as well as what pushes apart.



## Staging America

Subsidiary characters are played by the same actors that play the principal parts, with the exception of Olivia. It is not to be presented realistically. Indeed, when, in one production, it was, Hudes was disappointed feeling that the music might have played more of a role, giving momentum to the journey. She was also dissatisfied, to some degree, with her own story: 'I wanted to write a story about different ethnicities joining in one family. But I didn't feel that. I felt that the divisions were almost so subtle that the audience, and even I, was not totally convinced of them.' It was not, she confessed, her favourite piece of writing. She was also, she said, 'thinking about immigration at the time, the way immigration really affects family structures in this country.'<sup>31</sup> In the end this led in the direction of transforming the play into a musical, *Miss You Like Hell*. Initially concerned that it might no longer seem relevant, she drew attention to the effect the country's immigration laws were having, separating families. There was also a pragmatic reason for writing musicals, lamenting that straight plays 'don't pay bills,' even as the collaborative dimension of writing for musicals dilutes individual contributions and responsibility.

There is a sense in which Hudes writes about centripetal and centrifugal forces, fragmentation and cohesion, dissonance and harmony. There are forces which threaten the individual, the integrity of the self. Bodies suffer assaults, carry wounds, self-inflicted or otherwise. There are divisions, gaps which open up, societal or familial. Yet there is a counter force, a sense of community. There are acts of charity. If communication can be compromised, not least because there are two languages in play, English and Spanish (in *Water by the Spoonful* there is even a ghost who speaks Arabic), the urge to communicate, to reach out, to share, is equally strong. Nor is that true only of the world in which she was raised, with divorced parents and an extended family which itself ranged from those with a confident grasp on life to those battling to keep their heads above water and addiction at bay, yet evidencing a certain solidarity. Their struggles with identity, with surviving the moment, yet their acknowledgement of what is shared, of certain human obligations, applies with equal force to the country at large and beyond, and that would lie at the heart of her next play, *Water by the Spoonful*, a play about family and community but one which extends out into the world, a virtual community which exists, for much of the time, online. The '*real world*' (her italics) is represented by a jumble of chairs which represent different locations, while the 'online world' is an empty space. There are, in other words, two communities each of which embodies both alienation and the desire for connection, two states to be reflected in music which echoes these different states.

In this play, written over a three-year period, she turned back to the figure of Elliot from *A Soldier's Fugue*, the work, she confessed, of which she was most proud it being, in her view, the best writing she had done. She now decided to create a trilogy each based on musical structures. *A Soldier's Fugue* had been based on classical music, while *Water by the Spoonful* was to be on jazz (inspired by the music of John Coltrane, which she played while writing, especially, she noted, the late Coltrane) and the third, *The Happiest Song Plays Last*, which she claimed in some ways to have been writing for fourteen years (with seven or eight versions along the way), on folk music.<sup>32</sup>

*Water by the Spoonful*, which she has described as big and sprawling, she having seen both *Angels in America* and *August: Osage County*, brings together a 'young Japanese woman in Hokkaido [Yoshiko Sakai] and a middle-aged African-American man in California [Clayton Wilkie],' along with Puerto Ricans, in part, she has explained, because 'I am hungry to find new ways to put divergent characters in rooms together and see where the electricity is. I would like

to be a Latina playwright penning characters from all ethnicities and lifestyles. It's a way to get to know the world.<sup>33</sup>

*Water by the Spoonful* is concerned with addiction and recovery and, in preparation, she attended AA meetings where she was struck by the ironic humour of those in other ways desperate, the humour balancing the darkness that had led them there. Hartford Stage, which would present the play, put her in touch with the Institute of Living at Hartford Hospital, with its addiction recovery programme, where she conducted interviews, though largely with the staff. In terms of characters, she 'decided to widen the lens' feeling that she was in danger of being 'ghettoised in terms of theatre,' hence her inclusion of an African-American, a Japanese-American and a white character, along with her decision to set the play in different places. It was still to be about a Latin family but was opened up to other ethnicities, this being the world she lived in.<sup>34</sup>

Yazmin Ortiz, known as Yaz, once the only Puerto Rican girl in an all-white school, is now an adjunct professor of music at Swarthmore College. Like Hudes, she had studied under Don Rappaport at Settlement Music School and, again like Hudes, is cousin to Elliot, who is now a would-be actor performing in advertisements on Spanish-language television while working at a fast food store. We encounter her in a seminar playing Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme', and explaining that 'Dissonance is still a gateway to resolution.'<sup>35</sup> Though she does not mention it, 'A Love Supreme', is broken up into four tracks whose titles will, in fact, reflect the process underlying Hudes' play, those tracks being 'Acknowledgement', 'Resolution', 'Pursuance' and 'Psalm', the whole record, his most popular, echoing stages in a spiritual struggle. This, it turns out, is an accurate reflection of those in the play who are themselves trying to emerge from confusion through acknowledging their problems, looking for some kind of salvation.

One of those successfully struggling to escape addiction tells a story which is, in effect, a metaphor. He had been sucked under by a wave when swimming, 'sinking to the bottom', (14) only to be rescued, prompting him immediately to seek the help he needs by joining a group and reciting the Serenity Prayer, Reinhold Niebuhr's poem which had been given to soldiers and was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous, though not quoted in the play: 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace.'<sup>36</sup>

The poem insists that though supreme happiness can only lie in the next world it is possible to be 'reasonably happy in this life', a modest enough objective but, to those in thrall to addiction, perhaps a reasonable objective. Meanwhile, living one day at a time is what the play's addicts have to attempt, even as acceptance and change prove difficult to reconcile and, indeed, Yaz also invokes Coltrane's 'Ascension', which marked the beginnings of free jazz, the musicians working to no instructions beyond the need for ending solos with crescendos, solos and group-playing alternating as in the play individual stories are integrated with those of the group. The risk, Yaz remarks, is that 'freedom is a hard thing to express musically without spinning into noise,' (15) which proves equally true, it transpires, of those who struggle to communicate with one another through the noise of their contending stories, the confusing and debilitating mess of lives lived in dissonance. Yaz, herself, has her own problems with acceptance. Her marriage to a man with 'Quaker Oats for DNA' (25), and who comes from a different background, is about to end while Elliot's aunt is herself dying of cancer, her ashes to be scattered in Puerto Rico.

Elliot's birth mother, Odessa, whose own life is a mess, living 'one notch above squalor', and who knows what it is to come close to destroying her life through addiction, has set up a

## Staging America

website for those needing help: [www.recovertogether.com](http://www.recovertogether.com). Her online name is Haikumom (named for her interest in Haiku). In the online world she puts in touch with one another those in need, each having different identities, in the case of one, multiple identities. Orangutan, born in Japan as Yoshiko Sakai, was adopted and became Madeleine Mays living in Maine where there were no Asians except one working on a deli counter. She now lives back in Japan having seemingly escaped her addiction with the help of her virtual companions, except, having been clean for ninety-six days, she asks for help, or at least a distraction, the need still there. Chutes & Ladders (real name Clayton Wilkie), a 56-year-old God-fearing African-American working in a low-level job in the IRS, is alienated from his son, redeemed only by his sense of humour and the fact that he has been clean for ten years. Orangutan invites him to Japan so that they can meet outside a virtual environment. Urged by Odessa/Haikumom to recognize an offer of friendship he gives his address and actual name, a first step into the real no matter how unreal the offer seems.

Another, Fountainhead, real name John, is a white computer programmer and entrepreneur. This community cuts across racial and class lines as is apparent from the fact that for him, crashing his Porsche and having to rent a Ford, 'is as close to rock bottom as I'd like to get' (18). He steers clear of meetings, doctors and experts for fear he will leave a trail. He celebrates a single day without cocaine, congratulating himself that, 'At least it's not heroin,' (19) refusing to admit to himself that he is an addict having smoked crack for two years. His post is not well received ('We don't come to this site for a pat on the back' [20]) except that Odessa/Haikumom, as site administrator, having herself been clean for years but only after losing her family, reminds the others of their own desperation in joining. Four days later he is back online confessing that three days was all he could manage, not least because his wife suffers from depression and is in therapy. He then adds that having previously made three hundred thousand dollars he is now unemployed. Truth is hard to come by even as it is the price of entry to the site. Haikumom offers consolation and advice: 'For three days straight, you didn't try to kill yourself on an hourly basis. Please. Talk to your wife about your addiction . . . You are in for the fight of your life . . . The only way out of it is through it' (32).

The scene intercuts with one in which Elliot appears, haunted by a ghost, the embodiment of his memory of the person he had killed in Iraq, a man who repeats an Arabic sentence which he has learned means, 'May I please have my passport back,' the significance of which would become evident in her next play, he having taken the passport from the man's dead body. These are all characters who have betrayed themselves and others. Odessa may offer help and forgiveness to others but herself has a secret. When her two-year-old daughter, Elliot's sister, had suffered from flu she had failed to give her the treatment she required for her dehydrated condition, a spoonful of water every five minutes, her own need for drugs taking her away. As a result, the child had died, her name, Mary Lou, never thereafter spoken, a wound not to be healed. She would have survived had she had her regular spoonful, just as the addicts survive by taking a day at a time.

For all their failures, the addicts seem to follow the path of Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme', from acknowledgement, through pursuit, to psalm, that word signifying songs, words accompanying music. Here the songs are the essence of their lives, as they are in August Wilson's plays, Wilson, Hudes has said, always hovering over her with his sense of the importance of music, his concern with spirituality. Chutes & Ladders is no longer using, no longer hurting others. Virtual relationships edge towards real ones, as he responds to the invitation to join Madeleine Mays/

Yoshiko/Orangutan. 'This is about me wanting relationships,' he says, 'With humans, not ones and zeroes,' (46)

Meanwhile, they honour a woman who has died. Eugenia Ortiz had been at the centre of the community, pulling it together, living to serve. She had spent time in the Army Nurse Corps but demonstrated for peace while Elliot was in Iraq. She had created public gardens from abandoned lots, as Hudes' mother had done, as Ginny had in *Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue*, refurbished homes to sell to young families. As Yaz declares, 'She. Was. Here' (49). She stood as a counterforce to those who have conspired in their own invisibility, cut off by their addiction from those who could be their redemption. As she had told Elliot, 'nobody can make you invisible but you' (48). Odessa pours a spoonful of water on the floor. Yet on the day of the funeral she, the administrator, creator of the help site, the moderator, herself relapses after being clean for six years, overdosing, her spectral presence watching as she comes close to dying. With her family flying to Puerto Rico to scatter Eugenia's ashes it is left to John, one day clean, to care for her.

Yaz, Odessa's niece and Elliot's cousin, now takes over as administrator, under the name Freedom&Noise, recalling Odessa's battle with addiction, acknowledging an obligation to her aunt whose fight had left her conscious of her own privileged life. Speaking to Elliot, she asks: 'What did I do to have all that I have? Have I done anything difficult in my whole life? . . . I didn't hold your hand when you were in the desert popping pills trying to make yourself disappear,' (56-7) an immunity of which Hudes herself was surely consciously aware, as she was, of the problems faced by members of her own family.

John now tends to Odessa having confessed to his wife and given her the password to the website and hence the password to his life. Clayton (Chutes & Ladders) meets with Yoshiko (Orangutan). For the first time they make physical contact, giving one another a 'hug of basic survival and necessary friendship' (59). Yaz plans to move in with Elliot except that he has decided to move on, to Hollywood, chasing a dream, shaking free of what haunts him. Together, they scatter Eugenia's ashes in a ceremony which marks not an end but a beginning, for them, as for the others, a journey completed, another begun.

Once again Hudes' cousin Elliot attended a play in which his own experiences, real and imagined, featured, both the after-effects of his time in Iraq and his earlier struggles with addiction. As she observed, 'He said it was hard seeing some of the things, but all in all he felt really honoured that his story seemed to have some value for other people. I think he feels very positive that maybe his story is an important part of a conversation about veterans who have left Iraq. We're still a nation trying to find our way through that right now.' That, perhaps, is the sense in which she has said that writers 'get to be curators of culture, curators of reality.'<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the cousin who inspired the character of Odessa had been clean for sixteen years, 'but it takes 80 percent of her energy just staying sober.' When she saw the play, at 'intermission she was a total mess, and I said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought you here – let me take you back to the hotel and we can hang out." She refused, telling everyone that the part was based on her.'<sup>38</sup> The following day, however, she confessed that she had almost not made it to Connecticut to see the play, the need for drugs, even this time later, being so strong that she asked her husband to lock her in the bathroom for almost a day.

Hudes has said that, "Water by the Spoonful" has what I would almost call three love stories, though the love is not necessarily romantic at all. But I think it is, in some ways, a play about finding love and grace and companionship in unexpected places.<sup>39</sup>

## Staging America

The concluding part of the Elliot trilogy, *The Happiest Song Plays Last*, which opened at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in April, 2013, before moving to New York's Second Stage Theatre the following year, picks up the story shortly after *Water by the Spoonful*. It was to be a work which explored the notion of social engagement. 'What,' she asked herself, 'is the role of protest in our lives any more for issues that are near and dear to our hearts that we want to give voice to. My mother was a community activist, engaged in many marches as I grew up. So it is [part] of the fabric of who I am. I don't think that my generation has completely figured out how to connect in person anymore. So that's one of the questions I think the play invites the audience to grapple with. What do we do with social issues which matter to us now? Is there only online connection? Is there a way that a community gathering still has value?'<sup>40</sup> It is a play in which protest is an immediate issue in Philadelphia but equally around the world as the action alternates between the barrio and the Middle East.

Once again, Elliot is at the heart of the play and in her acknowledgements, in the published version, she explains, 'I am marrow-deep grateful to Elliot Ruiz – my cousin, my muse, my inspiration. When he returned from Iraq that boyish sparkle in his eye had changed, ever so slightly. As his life story continued to unfold I continued to write and Elliot gave me his blessing and took my creative license in his stride.'<sup>41</sup>

For a man whose acting credits only previously extended to a toothpaste commercial, however, he had now recovered sufficiently to begin a significant acting career with a major role in a film, playing the leader of a group of Marines, his performance reviewed in *The New York Times* and elsewhere. The person who had returned from war, injured, as baffled by the cause he was supposedly fighting for as he had been when he enrolled, had now not simply recovered but flourished.

The play, the last in a sequence which, as Hudes explained, tells of the coming of age of a young man as he finally steps into his manhood, even as he re-experiences some of the experiences which had damaged him, begins with Elliot on the film set of *Haditha on Fire*, based on Nick Broomfield's docu-drama *Battle for Haditha* set three months after the actual battle when US Marines killed twenty-four civilians following the death of a fellow Marine blown up by a bomb. Elliot was a star of the film, playing the part of Corporal Ramirez. Interviewed by *The Guardian*, he said:

I was aware of the shootings in Haditha before I got involved in the movie – everybody was. It was all people in the military talked about, and it actually changed a lot of the way things are run in Iraq. The reporters who wrote about it could never understand what it was like to be there – they hadn't fought in Iraq. It was easy for them to write about 'massacres' and paint the marines as killers. They don't know about the amount of stress and emotion the soldiers go through.

After that soldier was killed in an attack on the US convoy, we felt bad for the marines who were with him because they had lost a friend. But at the same time we're trained not to act like they did. Those marines let their emotions drive them and that's something we can't do. If it is true that it was a massacre, the way they say it was, then they've got to serve time for that. You can't blame the soldiers for losing their composure considering the position they were put in but, if they did it, they were still wrong. If they did it, they let their emotions get the better of them and that led to the death of innocent people . . . I don't think we should be in Iraq. I say support the troops but to hell with the war.<sup>42</sup>

The film, in which Elliot improvised a scene in which he destroys a barracks following the death of his friend, was described as ‘reality fiction,’ being a reconstruction of events, and ‘reality fiction’ is perhaps not a bad description of Hudes’ approach. Many of the characters in *The Happiest Song Plays Last* had their real-life counterparts, including Yaz who now returns to Philadelphia where she keeps open house for all who come by, one of whom, a man called Lefty, is described as a ‘cultural outsider’ and who was also based on a number of actual people as Agustín, a musician, is a version of a family friend, a teacher and activist.

Yaz and Elliot are divided by class but pulled together by their sense of a shared community. Yaz, a professor, nonetheless returns to the place which shaped her, buying a house in a run-down neighbourhood and being committed to addressing some of the issues confronting that community, trying to balance her two commitments. Part of the point of the play, for Hudes, was to explore the relationship between the pleasures of community, celebration and protest, something she found reflected in certain Puerto Rican music which itself could embrace that double commitment.

The play opens in Jordan with the sound of an explosion as an Arab-American actress is seen on the ground having been thrown there by virtue of a flying harness, a stunt which will have to be repeated not having gone as expected. Elliot says, ‘Everything’s gotta be real,’ (10) even as, manifestly, it is not but then artifice may be a route to truth which is the basis of Hudes’ weaving of fact and fiction.

Elliot has been promoted from technical advisor to actor and with a day off in prospect tries to persuade Ali, himself an advisor, to drive him to Egypt where events are unfolding in Tahir Square signalling the Arab Spring. Meanwhile, back in Philadelphia, Yaz takes over her aunt’s role, nurturing a garden in an abandoned lot as a way of nurturing those who for different reasons themselves feel abandoned, as she cooks food to sustain those in need. Accused of being someone who has moved away from the barrio, she replies, ‘This block is my children’ (25). Below them, though, are buried rivers which carry the threat of subsidence, what is buried breaking surface even as Elliot suffers from nightmares while other characters keep a tenuous grasp on their lives.

A central figure is Agustín, a player of the cuatro, Puerto Rico’s national instrument – and Hudes calls for a trio of musicians, a guitar player, a cuatro player and a bongo or güiro player, a güiro being a percussion instrument made from a hollow gourd. Agustín, rescued from a drink-drive charge as a result of Yaz’s intervention (‘Alcoholism runs in the blood, it’s genetic, it’s a proclivity’ she says of him) (26), is a one-time protestor against the American use of a Puerto Rican island, Vieques, for bombing practice by the Marines. He is also a music teacher, having taught Yaz before, like Hudes, she went to Yale.

Agustín, with whom she has an affair, subsequently dies of a heart attack modelled on that of another Puerto Rican American, Joaquin Rivera. He had also been a school guidance counsellor, an activist as a founder of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, and a musician who had learned his music in the mountains of Cayay, in Puerto Rico, and who, in 2009, died in a Philadelphia emergency room. His passing went unnoticed by all but three homeless drug addicts one of whom stole his watch, hence the significance in the play of Yaz giving him a watch.

In a press conference, Yaz, in an extensive speech, explains the circumstances of Agustín’s death, Hudes borrowing in part from news reports and in part, as she acknowledges, from an actual speech written by Roger Zepernick, assistant to the pastor at Christ Church and Ambrose

in North Philadelphia. She calls for a boycott of every Kappa Health Partners clinic in the city: 'It's protest time,' (59) she declares. His death marks the loss of a link to the past and something which brings people together in the present so that she calls for people to, 'Take your music to people who don't know anything about Puerto Rico . . . grab ahold of a güiro player and go out to the maximum-security prison at Graterford and bring tears of memory and joy to men who made a mistake or are paying for someone else's mistake. And next time some brass hats decide to play war games on the land of your patria, grab your guitar and jump on the next bus to Lafayette Park by the White House' (58). Later, she watches a recording of his death and the theft of the watch on YouTube (a real recording of Rivera's death which was still available to view several years after his death, although now difficult to access).

The ghost of Agustín appears recalling an encounter with Maso Rivera, a classic cuatro player, and Ramito, a troubadour known as the king of Jibaro music, both of them dead, themselves now ghosts. Agustín fades away but the musicians take over even as few people turn up to the planned protest meeting.

In the Middle East, Elliot goes to Egypt thrilled at the revolution, returning to Philadelphia with Shar, an Arab-American actress in the film, though she grew up in Beverly Hills and trained at the Julliard and is now pregnant. His nightmares have not gone away but he has become a successful actor. However, back in Philadelphia, a parcel is waiting for him. He had charged Ali with returning the passport he had taken from the Iraqi he had killed, and whose ghost had haunted him, but an easy closure is not on offer as he learns that the man's wife believes he had spit on the body and stolen his wallet while the man's son had been struck dumb, not speaking for eight years and has nightmares of his own. As Ali insists, 'Man make ghost, man keeps ghost' (85). He could not bury the past and there is a particular reason for that. As he now confesses, 'This guy? Taarek Taleb? I knew he was a civilian. At first I thought it was a AK in his hands. Split second before I shoot, I'm like, that's a cricket bat. And then I pulled the trigger and took his face off' (85). It is Shar who takes a trowel and buries the passport in the garden Yaz has made. It is a ceremony completed when she hands Elliot Agustín's cuatro, previously broken but now repaired. He hesitantly begins to play as the lights fade on him and up on the musicians who 'sing a nostalgic verse about Puerto Rico' (87).

Outside the play, the hopes of the Arab Spring would come to nothing. The promise of Tahir Square proved illusory. Power changed hands but did not fall into those of the people. The play is set in 2011, the year of the revolution. By the time of its first production Mubarak had been replaced by Mohamed Morsi whose plans to give himself unprecedented powers led to his overthrow three months after it opened at the Goodman. Nor is nostalgia without its conservatism although the troubadours sang of more than sentimental regret and melancholy. The trilogy ends, though, on a note of reconciliation as love and friendship prevail. Elliot discovers himself in discovering someone else. The community may not have turned out to protest but sustains a sense of identity in a culture itself always questing its own.

Reviewing the Goodman Theatre production, Chris Jones, in the *Chicago Tribune*, suggested that 'Hudes has become a better and better writer as she has forged this tale over these years — the qualitative difference between this script and "Soldier's Fugue" is really something. Hudes now is a very accomplished storyteller, a playwright with an emergent, fulsome American narrative, a young writer who knows that her best material is not so far away, as long as she is willing to put her family out there.'<sup>43</sup> For Charles Isherwood, though, writing in *The New York Times* and commenting on the Second Stage production the following year, 'In

attempting to write rich new chapters in her two principal characters' complicated lives, Ms. Hudes does run into problems of focus and weight, primarily in her efforts to draw into the play larger issues of social and cultural concern . . . I found myself thinking that Ms. Hudes' play might have been more satisfying if she herself had not felt the need to engage sympathetically with so many thorny issues. Writers can also undermine their work by spreading their interests and affections too broadly.<sup>44</sup> That, though, was of course precisely what she wished to do, tracing connections between the private and the public world, personal and social commitments, the pressures which separate and the ties that bind.

With her next play, *Daphne's Dive*, Hudes moved away from her family, or almost so in that once again her characters were in part based on those she had known. An incident in which a police raid leaves a young girl abandoned was drawn from the experience of one of her cousins who took her in and adopted her for a while. It was, she has said, an act of abandonment combined with an act of generosity which she wanted to explore.

An activist/performer, Jenn [Jennifer Song], was based on Kathy Chang, a Chinese-American married to the writer Frank Chin, who later changed her name, significantly, to Change, performing on the streets of Philadelphia, particularly, as in Hudes' play, in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, dancing and waving a handmade flag of protest at the economic system and people's passivity. In 1996 she immolated herself on the University of Pennsylvania campus in front of the peace symbol sculpture, dancing as she died. What she had wanted was a democracy based on individual communities and there is a sense that Hudes' emphasis on community chimed with that desire. Composer Kevin Norton subsequently created a suite in her name, called 'Change Dance Troubled Energy', music, as in Hudes' work, seeking to capture the essence of the community from which she came. Meanwhile, a play set in a bar owed something to the fact that Hudes' stepfather owned bars in Philadelphia and she used to spend time in them.

Having written a trilogy about a man's coming of age, she explained, she wanted to explore the relationship between women having, as she confessed, scraped by on the Bechdel Test (named for the cartoonist Alison Bechdel, author of the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*), this being a test as to whether a work of fiction features at least two women who talk to one another about some other subject than a man. In *Daphne's Dive* what she describes as 'these very enigmatic, atypical female characters get to relate to one another on their own terms.'<sup>45</sup> These are story tellers, their stories reflecting their own sensibilities but also what holds this group of disparate individuals together. Sometimes the stories are confessional, sometimes a way of evading or dealing with aspects of their lives and experiences. At the same time, though they talk to one another, the men are not extraneous to their conversations, particularly Acosta, a power in the community, not least because he can give them, and the other men, access to what they need: work, accommodation, support of one kind or another. There is also another kind of conversation, that between the action and the music composed by Michel Camilo, himself from the Dominican Republic, a jazz pianist. As Hudes remarked, "There's something about the explosive celebration of his music that made her "want that spark of life to be in my play" . . . despite the fact that there are heavy and painful moments in it."<sup>46</sup>

*Daphne's Dive* brings together a group of women telling stories in a North Philadelphia bar, between 1994 and 2011, 1994, as she explained, marking the so-called culture wars between conservative and liberal values, while 2011 saw the Occupy movement, a revolt against social and economic inequality. The women consist of Daphne, the bar owner, pregnant and



## Staging America

abandoned by the age of twelve, her sister Inez, who has moved to Haverford, a wealthy and substantially white suburb, Jenn, an Asian-American performance artist first seen in a sequined American flag bikini with a handmade flag declaring, 'PEACE LIBERTY ECOLOGY DEMOCRACY',<sup>47</sup> and a young woman called Ruby who we first encounter at eleven (though rather than use different actors for her at different ages, she simply announces her age as the play progresses). Also present are Daphne's husband Acosta, a businessman with ambitions to become a politician, a Latino painter, Pablo, creating art from trash, and a manual labourer, Rey to be played Hudes explains, by an actor of any ethnicity. For all their differences they support one another in their separate existences perhaps because, as Hudes explained, there is a sense in which they are all drawn together precisely because they are outsiders:

... why do they all want to be in this room? Why do they all want to come here together? ... Despite their very divergent portfolios of who they are, they're all outsiders. Even Acosta. He is a man of his people, but he becomes a politician and that makes him a little bit of an outsider. Inez is an outsider because she lives in this community and works in this community, but she's like, 'Get me to the suburbs, I don't want to breathe this air pollution.' She doesn't want to live on these blocks. Jenn is obviously an outsider. They all have outsider qualities. And then there's this character of Rey who is this biker dude who hangs in the bar. He's not from Philadelphia, he's not Latino, it's a mystery why he's there, but he just likes them and that's why he's there. In some ways it's a place where these outsiders can be themselves together. So, discovering what makes each of them an outsider in a different way, and how they show off to each other about who they are, and how they brag about who they are, and how they compete over who is more authentic or who has the funnier story – that was a lot of the character work.<sup>48</sup>

Time moves on, Ruby announcing her age – fifteen. Acosta is elected Councilman, wearing a suit which generations of Acostas have worn over the years, passing it down to those in need of it for special occasions, often not able to afford one of their own, but a link, evidence of a past not abandoned.

In the case of the women, though, that past holds secrets of betrayals and abandonments, an accumulation of pain. Below the surface of a bar which brings people together is evidence of what drives them apart. Ruby, it turns out, is now in therapy, adopted by Daphne because of abuse at the hands of her stepfather. Inez, too, had been abused, in her case by her father. Daphne, meanwhile, has married a homosexual who thought marriage would cure him, divorcing immediately only for him to die of AIDS. Jenn has been thrown out of her home by her father, while her mother committed suicide, she herself abandoning a demanding husband and becoming a prostitute for a while. So, anarchy, moral and otherwise, seems to have been their fate.

The action then moves on five years. Ruby, a would-be social worker, is now in college and stages an exhibition of Pablo's work as part of an assignment. Acosta has his eye on being a state senator but meanwhile, as Counsellor, has ejected Jenn from a squat as Daphne has from the bar, throwing her clothes after her, calling the police, her mental condition deteriorating until, finally, she had committed suicide, setting fire to herself. It is the eve of a memorial (as there is a real memorial every year to Kathy Chang/Change), Daphne arriving to take Ruby back for it. For Ruby, Jenn's suicide is a sacrifice with meaning, in the name of 'Belief, marrow-deep, so real

it hurts . . . that was her gift,' while accusing herself and the others: 'Name one thing any of us believes in?' (40)

For his part, Pablo offers paintings consisting of the detritus of his society, the ashes of burnt buildings, art as social commentary perhaps but not art offering transcendence. For Ruby, he was doing no more than pour gasoline on a society while accusing herself of walking by, failing to pick up the baton of protest. She reads pages of Jenn's suicide note: 'And so I will be your sunrise awakening/And so I will be your torch for liberty/And so I will try to spark the discussion/ I'll light the match of your human memory/ And come ablaze with transformation/ Wake up/Wake up/ Wake up' (40-1). For Pablo, though, the true heroism lies in survival not a suspect death, evidence, if anything, of mental instability rather than commitment: 'Your parents threw you out with the goddamn trash, you woke up the next morning and every morning since then and decided to breathe. *That's brave. That's fucking heroic*' (40).

This is not so much a dialectic, a rational engagement, as a staking out of emotional territory protest seldom lacking an emotional dimension and the fact is that self-immolation is not without its history from the Buddhist monks in Vietnam to Jan Palach in the former Czechoslovakia who sacrificed himself outside the National Museum in Wenceslas Square, in 1969, not so much as a protest against the Soviet invasion the year before as against the fact that the population had simply resigned itself, that compromise seemed the path of least resistance. He, too, was calling upon people to wake up and his death played its role in the subsequent defeat of communism in his country.

The action then moves on a further five years as, back in the bar, they drink and salsa plays, Daphne on a güiro, Pablo tapping a bongo and Ruby a rum bottle with a spoon, as Rey shakes a jar of pennies before Inez and Acosta, now a senator, dance as do Pablo and Ruby. The events of five years earlier seem remote, the old solidarity seemingly restored as they reminisce, Acosta and Inez recalling their first encounter when they had argued about feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment, he telling her to 'come down to earth, wake up to life en el barrio' (44). As they prepare to eat brownies 'plus' they recall sharing marijuana and magic mushrooms, Ruby reveals that she has tracked down her missing brother 'in a duct-taped wheelchair,' (48) and Rey remembers Acosta consoling the victim of a hit-and-run accident as he dies before the community came together to celebrate his life, Jenn among them.

Then, four years later, with Ruby now twenty-nine, popping Xanax (used to treat anxiety disorders) and working behind the bar, they are gathered to commemorate the death of Jenn even as the Occupy movement is underway. In Ruby's mind a spectral Jenn appears, once again calling for revolution, before the action switches back to when she was eleven, waiting to hear whether she would have to return to her mother or stay with Daphne. Daphne now tells one last story, one in which her mother, back in Puerto Rico, had once stood up against her domineering husband who had removed one of her shoes to stop her taking part in a contest to make the best caldo santo, a seafood broth. She had won the contest even though her foot was bloody and raw from walking barefoot to the event. Daphne decides to let Ruby stay. She, in turn, takes off a shoe and nails it to the bar, a shoe which had featured in all the previous scenes, an image of her resistance. The play ends with the sound of music from above. By this stage we know what lies ahead, the anguish and pain, but, like Daphne's mother, they have the support of the community as represented by one another, a unity underlined by the presence of the shoe and of the music which accompanies the action.

## Staging America

The decision to end the play effectively where it began was, she explained, one made during rehearsals. Originally it had progressed chronologically but she came to feel that it was in essence a memory play, the past carried forward, never really abandoned. Not for nothing was she an admirer of *Death of a Salesman*.

For all that their lives have been patterned with betrayals, desertions, loss, there is a solidarity which survives the stresses to which they have been subjected, survival being a central theme. But survival in the name of what? Jenn pursues a social imperative but, like the woman on whom she is modelled, is mentally unstable. The Occupy movement is underway but there is little sense that any of them will be committed to it, though Jenn foreshadowed it. It seemed to Hudes that Jenn, 'missed her chance, she missed a moment in our cultural history where her outsider-ness, her rebellious nature, her commitment to what seemed like a fringe ideology, might have been embraced. I can even imagine that during Occupy she could have been somewhat of an effective leader . . . One of the things that I think the movement struggled with was finding those leaders that could have stuck with it for the long haul, and I feel like . . . Jennifer Song, could have done that.'<sup>49</sup>

Hudes has said that the movement 'was the anchor point for me, and I had to work backwards from there,' even as 1994 was also the year of the Republican Party's Contract with America which, as it happens given Daphne's experience, contained provisions to discourage teenage pregnancy and tax credits for adoption.

It is Acosta who has the greatest purchase on the world beyond this bar, using his political position to help others but especially this group of people who gather to share stories while music plays, reminding them of their origins, a counterbalance to the problems to which they admit, the damage they have experienced. These are characters who have experienced disappointments, with the exception of Acosta existing on the margin of the public world or, in the case of Jenn, with an oblique relationship to it. While that world may define the parameters within which they live, as with August Wilson's characters that is not where they exist and have their being. What Hudes had aimed for in the play was to present 'the ebbs and flows of a group of friends over time, and this group of friends in particular is almost like each other's family.' They were deliberately of 'different ethnicities, class, political interests,'<sup>50</sup> drawn together in a place of refuge where there is a certain mutuality of need and trust.

The social and political context exists, and we are aware of it, but it is off stage as it is for most people for most of the time. For Hudes, there is another context, that of a world with which she is familiar and wishes to celebrate but which is regarded by her society as marginal, in an unequal negotiation with an assumed norm. She has been accused of a certain nostalgia for a pure culture, with its myths, values and practices intact, and she is a story teller who listens for familiar rhythms to which lives may be lived. She can, though, scarcely be accused of failing to acknowledge the injuries her characters carry, like her cousin with a leg wounded in a suspect cause. What interests her is how they sustain themselves as individuals, the poetry which infiltrates their lives, even as they are haunted by ghosts from a past by no means bereft of pain.

For Charles Isherwood, reviewing the Signature Theatre production in *The New York Times*, *Daphne's Dive* was 'warm-spirited if loose-jointed' though not untouched with sentimentality, while Hudes had 'a supple feel for characterization and a wide-ranging sympathy for life's waifs and strays.'<sup>51</sup> Britain's Michael Billington, writing in *The Guardian*, while doubtful about the plotting and characterizations, nonetheless found 'an unassailable heart to Hudes' work – a

fierce compassion for the people she creates and an equally ardent love for the ethnically and culturally diverse city that raised her.<sup>52</sup>

For all her excursions to Iraq, by virtue of the trajectory of her cousin's life, throughout her work Quiara Alegría Hudes has been drawn to stage the lives of those she knows, members of her family, of the community whose derelictions and triumphs she dramatizes. She herself is aware of being within and without, granted a perspective which carries its own obligations. If her plays can seem loosely constructed it is in part because she is conscious of the social and psychological fragmentations experienced by those whose loyalties can be divided, their identities in flux, even as she sets herself to trace the connections between them. Biographical and social facts penetrate her work with a transparency unusual in playwrights. She has sat beside those on whom she has modelled her characters even as they watched a version of themselves on stage revealing intimate secrets, a high-risk project requiring trust on their part and perhaps what Graham Greene famously called a splinter of ice in the heart on hers. There can be a price to be paid for turning the pain, anxieties, sufferings of others into art redeemed, surely, in her case, by the humanity she brings to bear.



# CHAPTER 5

## YOUNG JEAN LEE

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I'm getting tired of this demand from theaters that we entertain their audience for an hour.

Young Jean Lee<sup>1</sup>

Destroy the audience.

Motto of Young Jean Lee Theater Company

There can seem something essentially reassuring about realism. There are explanations for behaviour. Even the irrational is constrained by form as language is presumed to be fully transitive, itself evidence of a structure to experience, a level of shared perception. It tends to deal in completed actions, resolutions. But, as a character in Young Jean Lee's *Lear* remarks: 'you think you are creating reality through the words you use and the stories you tell but you are not creating realities, you have no idea what the fuck is going on.'<sup>2</sup>

There was a time when painting was admired for its verisimilitude, music for its harmonies. Yet there has always been a current flowing in the other direction, from the novel's very beginnings, with Lawrence Sterne and Miguel de Cervantes, through to Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett and Robert Coover. The fairy tale takes leave of the familiar, disavows the seeming solidities of the quotidian, disappearing down the rabbit hole into a world liberated from logic. Artists are drawn to exploring colour, shape, the human form shattered into so many fractured planes, a smear of paint, disavowing the gravitational pull of surface. Hieronymus Bosch's 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' anticipates the surrealists. Guillaume Apollinaire not only wrote a surrealist play, *The Breasts of Tiresias*, but was a supporter of Cubism and the author of concrete poetry. Composers experiment with silence, chance, resist aesthetic conventions. Alfred Jarry, whose pataphysics was, he explained, concerned with studying a universe beyond the one we know, wrote *Ubu Roi*, whose first word was an expletive and which, like Young Jean Lee's later play, was in part a parody of *King Lear* though largely of *Macbeth*.

Experimental theatre, then, did not spring into existence in the 1960s (Beckett, after all, mocked the desire for plot, character, detailed setting, language shrinking down or exploding into often baffling arias), nor even in America, but there is a sense in which the modern American theatre was born in experiment, in the work of Gertrude Stein, with its non-sequiturs and language spills, in Wallace Stevens's *Three Travelers Watch the Sunrise*, and in the Provincetown Players, whose work included Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* and E.E. Cummings's *him*. For Cummings, 'the productions of the conventional theatre, like academic sculpture and painting and music, are thoroughly dead.' 'All genuine theatre,' he insisted, 'is a verb and not a noun.'<sup>3</sup> Even Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* would, in 1993, seventy-three years after its first production, be staged by the Wooster Group, recognizing its radical nature. These were playwrights who would restlessly try out different styles, disassemble character, play with words, challenge audiences with works disturbing conventional notions of dramaturgy.

## Staging America

Nonetheless, the 1960s did see a focus on the experimental, sparked in part by the impact of Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*, translated into English and published in 1958, if also by the fact that this was a period of radical politics, in which institutions, language, authority were distrusted. In terms of what presented itself as being a self-consciously experimental theatre the distinction between character and actor, performers and audience, different art forms was explored or even rejected. The Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, the Performance Group examined the significance of the body, of space, sounds which did not necessarily cohere into speech. Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and Lee Breuer became key figures. The Off Broadway company La MaMa included the word 'experimental' in its title, though unlike some of the other groups focussed on the work of the playwright.

This was very much a New York-centred phenomenon and by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century had in a sense become an institution. The Living Theatre was established in 1947 and, like La MaMa, founded in 1961, has survived, as does Mabou Mines which began at La MaMa. The Open Theatre, founded in 1963, lasted a decade, the director Joseph Chaikin moving from the Living Theatre to the Open Theatre and thence to the Public Theatre. The Performance Group, founded by Richard Schechner in 1967, later transmuted into the Wooster Group under Elizabeth LeCompte. In other words, though such groups sprang out of a particular social, political, aesthetic moment, experimental theatre remains a present fact in the American theatre, still with the power to challenge audiences and daunt critics, even as after half a century and more it lacks the context which made it seem part of the revolutionary ethos of 1960s America.

Young Jean Lee was belatedly attracted to theatre but not that of a familiar dramatic mode, even as she was aware that experimentation had its own tradition. For her,

contemporary American theater is very aesthetically conservative . . . It isn't adventurous or challenging enough—I'm thinking of mainstream commercial theater where everything has a linear plot line and there's very little formal experimentation. I think the New York experimental theater/performance scene is still exciting. The stronger artists tend to have longer developmental processes. The performers have a lot of charisma and intelligence. There's a lot of collaboration. On the other hand, I think a danger with experimental theater is when it gets locked into its own kind of tradition and you just see a bunch of experimental-theater clichés being played out.<sup>4</sup>

The world of experimental theatre is by definition one which addresses a particular audience. For Lee, those involved in what she called cutting-edge work addressed those from a specific world consisting, in her case, of liberal, college-educated, arts-centre people, a theatre in which there was no overwhelming commercial imperative and a general receptiveness to, and support of, the new, the edgy, the challenging. When she stepped outside of that world, as she did with a production of *Church*, she realized how privileged she was working in such a context, though with *Straight White Men* she would step even further as she became the first Asian-American female playwright to be produced on Broadway.

For her, theatre was,

an attempt to do something I've never done before, that I have no idea how to do . . . I tend to pick things that would be my worst nightmare to try, because they take me out of

my comfort zone . . . All of my plays are experiments involving the audience, which means I have to know my audience really well. . . My goal is never to realize my ‘singular artistic vision.’ Instead, I’m trying to find ways to get past my audience’s defences against uncomfortable subjects and open people up to difficult questions by keeping them disoriented and laughing.<sup>5</sup>

All theatre is collaborative but, in her case, that frequently involved extensive consultations, in a 2012 interview explaining her approach:

I would never be able to write one of my plays alone. I have a dramaturge who I’ve been working with for nine years and I’m on the phone to him constantly. I get so much feedback from audiences, from my actors, from my associate director. Anybody who looks at my body of work is basically looking at the work of all the people who supported me and contributed . . . It’s almost like I’m the captain of a ship. If I were just standing on the ship as a captain, the boat wouldn’t go anywhere.<sup>6</sup>

She is not, she claims,

an auteur in the sense that I have this great . . . vision in my head of how I want things to be and then everybody helps me achieve that vision . . . my vision is much more . . . nebulous . . . so much of my work comes from the performers and . . . from whoever happens to be in the room at the time. It’s really not the case that I’m the puppet master just sitting and having people do what I want. I think you have to be a certain kind of genius for things to work that way.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, she was suspicious of the very concept of a solitary playwright, requiring nothing in the way of such collaboration, in her case taking advantage of social media when working on a play. Remaining open to the opinion and suggestions of others is important to her, not quite in the sense of democratizing art but from an awareness that they might have something valuable to offer, a different perspective, information, questions. Aware of her own limitations when it comes to experiencing the world, she is open to the opinions and feelings of others. The advice to young writers that they should write what they know is, to her, to accept limitations. It is not that there is no value in writing out of that self but that she wishes to explore unknown territory hence, among other things, her resistance to being typed as an Asian-American playwright as if that involved conforming to a familiar model.

Her collaborative approach is both a method and a conviction. When she began touring her work, in the United States and Europe, she would effect changes, sometimes radical depending on responses. If her audiences are disturbed, sometimes confused or provoked, that is part of her strategy which is to involve, sometimes directly address, those who she is not willing to regard as passive consumers. In different works she deploys music and dance, explores caricatures, different performance styles, generates visual images. She thrives on abrupt changes of direction, on contradictions, resisting resolutions. She is anxious to disturb presumptions, while resisting polemic. As she has said, ‘I avoid any form of preachiness. If the audience sits there and is, like, “I understand the message” or “I understand what she’s trying to do here,” then it doesn’t work. Instead, the whole thing becomes a process of trying to keep everyone



## Staging America

disconcerted and on their toes. Not knowing exactly what's going to happen next. By the end there are no solutions or morals provided, so you're left with your own thoughts and embarrassments.<sup>8</sup>

Her own self-doubts, though, echo through her work. In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* a Korean-America, like herself apparently involved in developing a play, confesses, as she herself would in interviews, that 'I walk around all day feeling like I have no idea what I'm doing and am messing everything up,' adding, 'You think you can work hard and be an artist and that you can create something good and new but, in reality, all is vanity because everything we try has already been done . . . The first step of my theory is that I don't know what I am doing. The next step is that I am scared.'<sup>9</sup>

Young Jean Lee's parents, James and Inn-Soo Lee (original name Sohn), left their native Korea in 1976, taking with them their two-year-old daughter. James, himself born in Seoul in 1946, had received his Master's degree there, but travelled to America to study for his doctorate at the University of Kentucky before, in 1983, moving to teach chemical engineering at Washington State University where, a non-smoker, he used tobacco leaves to research a protein to be used in cancer treatment (himself dying of cancer in 2010).

Washington State is situated in Pullman, a small town, currently of 30,000, in south-eastern Washington, some 280 miles from Seattle. It is named for George Pullman, the engineer who designed and manufactured the sleeping car, though he never lived there and had no real connection with it. Today, it is 79 per cent white, with 11 per cent Asian, though when Young Jean Lee was there the figure was 8.4 per cent and her experience was of being the only Asian, let alone Korean, girl in her school. The percentage of Native Americans was less than 1 per cent but among their number was the writer Sherman Alexie. As one of his characters in his short story 'The Search Engine' remarked, exoticism was hard to find in Pullman.

Lee was not happy there: 'the town I lived in was predominantly white, and I had a really hard time fitting in.' The highlight for her was not the annual National Lentil Festival but being taken to summer stock. However, as she explained, 'when I tried to join my school's drama club, I talked to the drama teacher about it and he said, "Well, we're doing Oklahoma! And there are no Asians in Oklahoma!"'<sup>10</sup> 'When you talk to young people now, they can't conceive the level of racism I experienced . . . I almost wasn't considered human. I didn't get to be in that category . . . I didn't know what was going on. I thought something was really wrong with me.'<sup>11</sup> If she was to deal with the question of identity when she finally turned to the theatre, albeit acknowledging its problematics, there was a clear reason for it. Who exactly was she in the world? Her family chose to hide aspects of their culture, including the food they ate.

She was, she explained, lonely, shy, with few friends, frequently playing on her own, experiencing what she would call total social isolation. Her parents were Christians, requiring her to attend church every Sunday: 'I would just sit there and look around at the people and hate them . . . just think how awful they were.'<sup>12</sup> She lost what faith she had by the age of seven or eight.

Coming from an Asian background, she has said, her parents wanted her to be a lawyer or go into business, but she was determined to leave Pullman and secured a place at the University of California, Berkeley, where she studied as an undergraduate from 1992 to 1996, majoring in English. Here, everything changed. The distance between Pullman and Berkeley turned out to be more than the fourteen plus hours it would take to drive the 860 miles. Here, Asians were everywhere and race and racial identity on the agenda. Today the campus is only 21 per cent

white. She has described her undergraduate experience as perfect even as she would accuse herself of becoming militantly anti-Christian, absorbing the prevailing mood of the campus as opposed to that of her home, and that tension would later surface, ambiguously, in her work.

Though she majored in English she did not turn to theatre but at graduate school launched on a dissertation about *King Lear* intended to explore the differences between Shakespeare's play and its source. In contrast to her undergraduate experience, graduate school was 'hell'.<sup>13</sup> Returning to the campus in 2009, she explained that though her father was dying at the time, graduate school was worse, the various deadlines being as stressful as later putting together a play. Her father, she explained, still had nightmares about being in boot camp in Korea while she still had nightmares about grad school: 'I hated it so much I have a hard time even fathoming now hating [my] life as much as I hated my life when I was in academia.'<sup>14</sup> It was while she was in graduate school, though, that she joined a playwriting class organized by Korean-American Julia Cho, writing a one-act play.

In 2000 she married and followed her new husband to Yale, he having dropped out of his own PhD in order to go to law school in New Haven. For two further years she continued to work on her dissertation but, three thousand miles away from Berkeley, finally abandoned it having, as she explained, spent ten years of her life with the goal of becoming a professor specializing in Shakespeare before deciding, finally, that she hated the academic world 'passionately'. But she had another interest. As she has explained, on consulting a therapist she was asked what she really wished to do and found herself saying she wanted to be a playwright, something she had never previously considered. She was familiar with no playwrights beyond Beckett.

With the help of Google, she discovered a playwriting group operating in a small town, even as the works they were producing were, in her view, the worst plays conceivable. They responded in kind, evicting her as 'too weird'.

Her next step was to read plays by those on the faculty of the Yale School of Drama. She was especially drawn to the work of Jeffrey M. Jones (to whom she would later dedicate her play *Yaggo*), who had been a manager of the Wooster Group and whose own works were anything but conventional. He read one of her plays and provided her with a list of those who might interest her. These included the experimental playwright and director Richard Maxwell (his play *Drummer Wanted* being the first she saw in New York) and Richard Foreman. By now divorced, she moved to New York, and contacted a number of them, interning with some of their companies, impressed, in particular, with one modestly called The National Theatre of the United States of America (founded in 2000) and their production of a work called *Placebo Sunrise*.<sup>15</sup> Through them she became involved in another company, Radiohole, working with them for a year.

Hers was effectively a crash course in experimental theatre in which actors in collectives wrote and directed their own work, providing her with a model when it came to making her own theatre. Those she met were all influenced by Richard Foreman and the Wooster Group. As she told Richard Maxwell in 2008,

my first year when I was in New York when I was trying to write my first show I was surrounded by all these downtown artists who I was so in awe of. All I wanted to do was imitate you . . . I had a few scripts of yours that I would pore over. I would pore over Foreman's . . . published scripts. I would pore over Radiohole's scripts. I wanted to do

## Staging America

something that was cool so badly ... And ... it was weird because all these companies were doing such different work. It was like I was trying to write something that would fit my idea of what a really cool downtown theatre artist would make. As opposed to just making something that I wanted to make.<sup>16</sup>

In an interview with *The Believer* she explained that,

Before I came to New York, I'd never had the feeling of belonging anywhere in my entire life ... I never had a group of friends that I fit in with ... I literally just never had the experience of feeling like I belonged where I was ... The second I was involved in any aspect of theatre I was instantly flooded with this feeling – like a fish in water: I can breathe! I know what I am doing! All my instincts are valued here! It was the first place I'd ever been where everything I was, was valued ... Prior to that, it was just a lifetime of desperation, a lifetime of never being able to do anything that I was really good at that I enjoyed.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, Jones had recommended Mac Wellman's programme at Brooklyn College, his own plays abandoning plot and character, drawing attention to their theatricality (in 2006, he and Lee would co-edit *New Downtown Now: An Anthology of New Theater from Downtown New York*, a volume which included her own *The Appeal*, along with Will Eno's *Tragedy: A Tragedy* and a further eight plays). When she entered the programme she struggled, uncertain of herself. Her first efforts were, she confessed, derivative as she tried to write something which might impress those she had met in the downtown theatre scene. His response was to ask her to write the worst play she could. Her solution was to write a play which she thought would attract the contempt of those she admired and hence produced an historical play about the Romantic poets, writing it, she explained, as badly as she could. To her surprise, her group liked it. That play was *The Appeal* (2004), which showed evidence of her time as an English major, featuring the Romantic poets Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron, even as she turned literary history into comedy.

Before that, however, she had a brief sketch, *Yaggo* (2003), performed at the Little Theater at Tonic in New York, itself co-created by Jeffrey M. Jones.<sup>18</sup> In a monologue, a figure called Whaler refers to a Captain Hakluyt, somewhat unbelievably in the context of a rambling confession of self-doubt and alienation, a real figure, though that fact is both invisible to the audience and scarcely relevant, though it would be a game she also played in *The Appeal* which is seeded with unattributed quotations and references.

A month later came *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, a thirty-five minute piece staged at the Ontological-Hysteric Theater (founded by Richard Foreman in 1968, later moving to St. Marks until 2010), whose title mirrored that of a book by Immanuel Kant though in fact a take on the 1932 film *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. This was a bizarre, violent and essentially racist story based on the novels of Sax Rohmer, a one-time British civil servant whose real name was Arthur Ward and who had no knowledge of the China he was happy to invoke.

Lee herself donated \$300 towards the production while cast and crew worked free, Soho Rep providing free rehearsal space. The play begins with an empty stage, the actors being gathered behind a screen and carrying on the minimal props when required. It unwinds in a series of brief scenes in which characters offer details of the plot, perform parodic dances, wear

masks, make stylized gestures in performances which are sometimes naturalistic and sometimes not, language occasionally devolving into nonsensical sounds, while music makes seemingly irrelevant interjections. The characters' names are those used in the film, the plot of the original accelerated in a series of fragmentary moments, except that here Fu Manchu, given to singing in mock Chinese ('Bong chong ding dong bing bang bong dang dong' which he explains means 'The little Chinese men work in the rice paddy')<sup>19</sup> is black, wears clothes which fail to fit him and is an unlikely enthusiast for rap. The question of identity is raised but initially by the two white characters, one, Terrence, asking, 'When I look in the mirror, am I really seeing myself, or a representation of myself?' (162) while Sheila utters familiar pieties: 'I don't like to think in terms of race. I like to see people as individuals . . . I'm going to show everyone . . . that I can succeed without these complaints of racism bringing me down . . . I want everything to be fair and non-discriminatory and based on knowledge,' (173) and this is in a story in which Asians and whites set about annihilating each other.

*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* is not primarily a parody of *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, making a good job of that itself. It is a parody of plot, character, language, apparently the component elements of drama. The speeches about identity are an ironic take on presumptions about the supposed subjects to be embraced by Asian playwrights as the pretentious statements made by her characters are undercut by humour. If the audience is likely to be unsettled by a work which seems to revel in what appears a hopelessly amateur presentation, unsettling the audience would become a central objective of a playwright suspicious of theatre's capacity to console with form, invite a specious and reassuring empathy.

*The Appeal*, with which she had had genuine doubts, was staged the following year by Soho Rep with Lee directing. To produce it, she hired actors from the companies she had admired: 'there was Pete Simpson, who was in [Maxwell's] *Drummer Wanted*, there was James Stanley from National Theatre of the United States of America, there was Maggie Hoffman from Radiohole, and there was Michael Portnoy [the performance artist] from Soy Bomb [not a company but the word he had written across his chest when he intervened in Bob Dylan's performance at the 1998 Grammy Awards].'<sup>20</sup>

Her aim, then and thereafter, was to disturb audiences by addressing issues which equally disturbed her. As she explained, 'I've found that the best way to make theatre that unsettles and challenges my audience is to do things that make me uncomfortable . . . My work is about struggling to achieve something in the face of failure and incompetence and not-knowing. The discomfort and awkwardness involved in watching this struggle reflects the truth of my experience.'<sup>21</sup>

*The Appeal* was, on the face of it an odd play for her to write, not least because:

I never really liked the Romantic poets, except for Blake—they were all really annoying to me. So, I thought, 'What would be more annoying than a historical-period drama of the English Romantic poets, talking about life and art in a cottage?' That sounded uncool and horrible on every level. I wrote that play, and it was like a kid playing really sadistically with Barbie dolls. You stick their heads in the toilet, you throw them out the window. The characters were really annoying, and I wrote as badly as I could. When I got bored, I'd restart the scene in the middle without throwing anything away, like a video-game reset. I just did whatever I wanted and followed every impulse, and then the play was done. I was scared to bring it into class, but when we read it, everyone was just hysterical. It

## Staging America

turned out to be funny and interesting, because Mac had found a way to tap into my actual creative impulses.<sup>22</sup>

*The Appeal* features Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy, Coleridge and Byron, though not quite as they are remembered, high-fiving one another, their language owing something to contemporary America ('By-bye, Fuckface,' says Wordsworth to Coleridge), their identities being obligingly identified – 'Hi, Dorothy my sister.'<sup>23</sup> Dorothy, anticipating Franklin Roosevelt, announces, 'There is nothing to fear but fear itself,' (116) as Wordsworth echoes the title of Bruce Springsteen's 1999 song 'Shut Out the Light', (117) while Coleridge renames Dorothy 'Honora', which may be a reference to the adopted foster sister of Romantic poet Anna Seward. Since he also calls her Honus, it is tempting to see this as a reference to a famous baseball player Honus Wagner, but in the context of free-associating characters any association may be as misleading as any other. In scene six she goes a step further as the three of them take drugs and masturbate, Dorothy spanking herself with her diary.

Wordsworth then recites a poem, though since this is from Ezra Pound's Canto XVI this is a case of advance plagiarism, Pound, incidentally, being one of Lee's favourite authors. He develops a habit of speaking of himself and his contemporaries in the past tense as if lecturing to a future audience, in fact the present audience: 'I almost forgot to tell you about Byron. He was considered as a rock musician in our time' (124). At this point Coleridge enters as Byron even as the 'real' Byron himself appears in the second act, though given to unaccountably dancing while reciting his little-known poem:

Ching Chong Chinaman  
Chinkety-Ching  
Wing Wong Wang Wung  
Bing Bang Bing (130)

The joke, perhaps, is that, in fact, Byron confessed to inadvertently plagiarizing Coleridge's 'Christabel' while Byron and Wordsworth were not friends. Thus, Lee has Byron praise Wordsworth's poems, while in fact, as Lee would have known, he referred to him as Turdsworth. It was he who wrote:

Next comes the dull disciple of thy school,  
That mild apostate from poetic rule,  
The simple WORDSWORTH.  
...  
Who, both by precept and example, shows  
That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose;  
Convincing all, by demonstration plain,  
Poetic souls delight in prose insane;<sup>24</sup>

Lee takes pleasure in misquoting, misrepresenting, misleading her audience to the point that, short of annotation, it is impossible to know what to make of references buried in a flurry of language. The characters free associate, quote without acknowledging, including from Elizabeth Barrett Browning ('Let me list all the ways.' [135]) Wordsworth quotes (136), again without

acknowledgement, from an entry in Sir Richard Steele's *The Tatler: or Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq.*, Bickerstaff being a pseudonym adopted by Jonathan Swift, and the quote an April Fool's day joke by Swift, which perhaps hints at Lee's motive for its inclusion, while Wordsworth and Coleridge recall smoking an 1881 L Flor de La Isabela cigar, the cigar being real enough but Wordsworth was thirty-one years dead by 1881 and Coleridge forty-seven years.

*The Appeal* is a play which largely baffled the *CurtainUp* reviewer who found it an 'obscure and obscurely titled' play, adding, 'it's not clear what Lee, who also directs, wants the play to be,' its appeal remaining elusive.<sup>25</sup> For *Time Out*, however, Lee's was 'a brainy absurdism' with language which was energetic and muscular.<sup>26</sup> Alexis Soloski, in *The Village Voice*, while finding it 'slight and somewhat jejune,' thought it 'an amiable burlesque,' 'unexpectedly refreshing' and signalling 'delightful things to come.'<sup>27</sup>

It is not clear that the word 'delightful' quite captures what Lee's work is about but already, with this play, she was creating something of a template for work which would be threaded through with humour, ironies, provocations.

Her next play, staged at Performance Space 122, located in an abandoned public-school building at 150 First Avenue in the East Village, and with a declared mission to challenge the boundaries of live performance, was *Pullman, WA*, a play she wrote following a period of writer's block. On the stage, bare but for two chairs, with no lighting or sound changes, three characters, wearing ordinary street clothes, address the audience, the house lights remaining on throughout, an indication that those watching are to be a part of what ensues.

The characters are named for the actors performing the parts (in this case, Tom, Pete and Tory) hence changing with subsequent productions, gender being irrelevant. Seen as a parody of self-help promoters, those offering maxims for people who feel themselves failures, which, in part, it is, the title suggests a personal dimension. Lee, after all, raised in Pullman, had felt precisely the anxieties, self-doubts and despair identified by the character here named Pete. The image of social isolation which he offers echoes her own sense of being shunned by others. As she grew up in a place where she had felt alien she was aware of the difficulty of defining herself, in the words of the play of 'the distance between you and the thing you are supposed to be' (83). If his nostrums can seem, and are, banal they are not without an element of truth. She, too, after all, had discovered the truth of his insistence that 'it's important to develop whatever part of yourself you want to develop,' (84) that essentially being what her therapist had told her.

When Tory, who, together with Tom, in turn offers the mystical and religious consolations of a kind which Lee's parents had offered her, speaks of fears that 'You are incompetent. You have no idea what you are doing,' that 'People are trusting you to do a good job' but that 'The whole premise behind what you are doing sucks' and that 'You've made a series of incredibly bad decisions' so that 'Everybody is mad at you,' (89) this echoes Lee's own confessions about the stages she goes through in creating her own work.

Audience members are exhorted, insulted, – 'I can see you sitting out there with your little . . . pinched-up prissy disapproving face going, "I don't like this."' (95) – dismissed as losers to be redeemed only by embracing that fact as a truth, along with the platitudinous injunction, 'Don't do bad things . . . Eat healthy and exercise. Don't smoke. Don't drink. Get lots of sleep . . . Don't use drugs . . . Don't hurt anyone' (93–4). The dialogue gives way to chanting and the play ends with fantasies spun out by Tory.

Reviewers reacted with some uncertainty. For the reviewer of *Time Out*, responding to a later production, it was about failed communication, disorienting and funny, a 'perverse

## Staging America

theatrical prank,<sup>28</sup> while Jason Zinoman in *The New York Times*, while regarding 'the show often quite precious' and acknowledging that it would not 'win over many who are already sceptical about experimental theatre' nonetheless suggested that 'while this is not a major work, it is an honest one that takes itself seriously, and that is refreshing.'<sup>29</sup>

Lee herself was not happy with these early works, confessing that 'I was really embarrassed by my first plays in New York. I wanted to do something really awesome and cool and so to make shows that had nothing to do with any of the aesthetics my peers had was hard.'<sup>30</sup>

Given her background, she found herself under pressure to write an Asian-American play, not least because companies felt they could secure funding in a context in which identity had become a fashionable topic of discussion. It was a play she did not want to write but by now that was virtually an incentive to go ahead while subverting the usual tropes. In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006), a deliberately exotic title (echoing the title of a fifteenth-century Korean poem, 'Yongbi och'on ka') as if such were de rigueur for Asian plays, she played with stereotypes, sometimes the Korean figures seemingly conforming to type, at others suddenly and unaccountably violent.

It begins by crushing the audience into what she calls 'an oppressively Asian space', before they are allowed in, only the beginning of her desire to disorient those who she wishes to confuse, discomfort, unsettle, unsure from moment to moment how to respond to the sudden and disturbing changes of direction in a play which at times is wilfully obscure, deploying foreign languages. She had even commissioned an illustration for a postcard to advertise the show which included every possible offensive Asian stereotype but presented as though for a children's book, while on the other side was a statement that, despite its title, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* was to be a show about white people in love.

The play begins in the dark with the sound of a figure rehearsing being slapped in the face. It is, a character later observes, practise for a play. Whose play? Seemingly Lee's, but, despite the fact that it was in fact Lee being hit, she insists that, 'One of the big identity politics clichés is that it's a confessional narrative about you . . . So . . . I make it seem as if the Korean-American character is an explicit stand-in for me, when really she's just this self-hating, racist freak who says a lot of crap I don't believe. I think that most people get that it's a joke, but occasionally someone will think that's she's really supposed to be me.' As it continues, so the audience becomes increasingly restive, by her own account half of them getting ready to leave. Why this scene? According to Lee, 'sometimes things just pop into my head. They don't really come out of any logic, and I make sense of them after the fact. The hitting video now makes sense to me, but when I first thought of it, it just popped into my head as the right way to begin the show . . . After the fact, when I was thinking about how it fit into the show, I felt it was really a play on Asian self-hatred . . . Which is a huge cliché – it's like bad '60s performance art.'<sup>31</sup>

The characters are identified only as Korean 1, 2, 3, Korean-American, White Person 1 and 2. In a note to the published version she explains that the Korean parts should be played by actresses who are one hundred per cent Korean, Chinese or Japanese who, when not speaking in English, should use their native languages, thus rendering them unintelligible at various moments in the play.

The audience are seemingly relieved when a video of the assault on Young Jean ends, only immediately to be discommoded as the Korean-American, smiling at the audience and seemingly inviting a degree of complicity, asks, 'Have you ever noticed how most Asian-Americans are slightly brain-damaged from having grown up with Asian parents? It's like

being raised by monkeys – these retarded monkeys who can barely speak English and are too evil to understand anything besides conformity and status,’ only to continue, ‘I am so mad about all the racist things against me in this country,’ before declaring that ‘minorities have all the power. We can take the word racism and hurl it at people and demolish them . . . I can promise you one thing, which is that we will crush you.’<sup>32</sup> It is a reversal that will typify many of Lee’s plays. As she has said, ‘The one thing that’s been consistent throughout all of my shows is that there’s not a single argument in them, ever. I’m not trying to make one point. I’m trying to lay out all of the conflict that I see, present it, and have you wrestle with it on your own.’<sup>33</sup>

It is not always rewarding to look for a through-logic in her plays. There can be an arbitrariness to the contradictions, reversals, aporias. Perhaps alarmingly, she has confessed that, ‘When I’m writing, I get bored constantly, so a lot of those weird non-sequiturs come out of the fact that I just got bored with the conversation that the characters were having. In “Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven,” the white couple are having this conversation, and then suddenly one of them says “Are you happy you’re white” and that was just because I was writing their conversation and got bored of what they were talking about.’<sup>34</sup>

Beyond that, she is suspicious of plays which themselves do have a dramatic logic, as she is of characters who are psychologically complex and dramatically coherent. The seeming, and often deliberated, arbitrariness of her plays does indeed not serve a singular meaning. Actions, images, bursts of music, parodic presentations, fractured arias, simulated violence, bizarre dances, generate a field of meaning, disparate material brought together with metaphoric force. Provocations are designed to destabilize, prompt the active involvement of audiences required, moment by moment, to make provisional sense of a disjointed flow of language. She sets herself to obviate expectations, to create a sense of unease which reflects her own. In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, the character called Korean-American taunts the audience: ‘I feel so much pity for you right now. You have no idea what’s going on. The wiliness of the Korean is beyond anything you could ever hope to imagine’ (41). In a stage note, Lee instructs that ‘the Koreans address each other by constantly changing fake-Asian names, so there’s no use trying to keep track,’ (43) a fact underlined by having two of them converse in Korean and the third in Cantonese even as a Ghost-Man’s voice is heard. The Korean-American, meanwhile ‘makes racist faces at the Koreans,’ (47) even as she complains about racism and expresses hatred for white people, as a white couple enter, bickering before being corralled into joining the Koreans in singing a Christian song.

Lee has spoken of making it impossible for those watching her work ‘to identify at any given point what it is they’re watching . . . the second they think they’ve identified it, it immediately shifts to something else so that they’re constantly . . . unstable and therefore open and vulnerable . . . I have a . . . combative relationship with my audience, but that’s because I am my audience.’<sup>35</sup> In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* the Koreans and Korean-American come together to confess that they ‘don’t know what the white people are doing in this show,’ that they ‘don’t even know what the Asian people are doing,’ echoing a familiar resistance to work which addresses race (‘I don’t think of people in terms of race. I find it more interesting to focus on our shared human experience . . . What about the fact that I’m a woman’), while reassuring those in the audience who might think that, ‘This is so much less complicated and interesting than all the other parts of the show that weren’t just about race . . . don’t worry. If enough white people hate it, I’ll cut it’ (66).

Ironically, the play ends on the white couple as they fantasize a life together, once they have consulted a therapist, seemingly appropriating the play. For Lee, ‘White people identify with



## Staging America

those characters, but they don't realize that they're identifying with them because they're in a relationship, and not because they're white. Ultimately, I'm interested in the homogeneity of a certain demographic, which is strikingly similar across racial lines: the college-educated, urbane, thirty-something navel-gazing American.<sup>36</sup> It is not clear, though, that this is evident from a play in which the ground shifts so frequently, attitudes are parodied, statements made and then contradicted. As Jiehae Park, who played the role of Korean-American in a Studio 2ndStage production, remarked, 'The play can be really confusing, and as a cast we still debate what this or that moment might mean.'<sup>37</sup>

If her work had the capacity to divide audiences, the same could be true of critics though in this case critical response was favourable. Anita Gates, in *The New York Times*, found it 'hysterically funny',<sup>38</sup> while Peter Marks, in the *Washington Post* described it as a 'wildly sardonic performance piece,' a 'provocateur's funny, guns-blazing take on the utter banality of ethnic stereotypes and other cross-cultural outrages.'<sup>39</sup> In *The Village Voice*, Alexis Soloski thought it 'perverse, provocative and very funny,' a 'troubling and dense and droll festival of racism.'<sup>40</sup> In the other camp was the theatre critic of the *Seattle Times*, Misha Berson, who, in reviewing a later production, thought it 'archly tiresome . . . neither fresh, funny nor varied enough to sustain its 80 minutes.'<sup>41</sup>

In her next play *Church*, first staged by her own company in 2007 and then subsequently at the Public Theatre the following year, she presented what was in effect an evangelical church service. As she explained, 'With all the George W. Bush stuff . . . I was hearing more and more blanket beliefs that all Christians are evil morons' while her parents, 'really smart, really good people'<sup>42</sup> were not. The play was thus to be targeted towards atheistic liberals such as herself. She wanted to make a show that would convert even her, and accordingly removed any reference to homophobia or right-wing politics. In the end, she explained, the Christians in the audience responded positively, even as they had been waiting for an attack which in her mind never came, even responding as it devolved, in her own words, into nonsense, seemingly aware that evangelical services were not without their wilder aspects. Meanwhile the liberals responded to the music.

A note on performance insists that 'The performers are natural and sincere at all times. They should come across as real Christians who are doing an actual church service. They are unpretentious and appealing and never seem fake . . . we believe that they believe what they're saying, no matter how bizarre their language becomes' (6).

The audience enters, in silence, into what appears a simple church as a choir sings 'Sherburne' ('To God our voices let us raise/ And loudly chant the joyful strain/That rock of strength oh let us praise!/Whence free salvation we obtain'), before the Reverend José begins to preach from behind the audience who thereby become congregants, assailed as being 'stuffed fat with self-interest and anxiety' and invited to 'Let go' of 'superficial earthly ties and deliver yourself in humility to the Lord' (9). A burst of Mahalia Jackson singing 'Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho' hails the entrance of three women ministers, one of whom expresses pleasure in being in whatever the city and venue the play/service is taking place, inviting prayer requests. In the event that the audience do not reply, two of them confess to their own problems before a reading from Hebrews.

If the audience have begun to feel uneasy that sense is heightened as the Reverend José singles out individuals listing a series of catastrophes potentially awaiting them from contracting cancer, being paralysed in a traffic accident, being betrayed by a partner who may

be killed, having children tortured and kidnapped, to simply losing their looks and getting older: 'Your mind weakens, your body fails and you begin to long for death' (14). The accumulation of disasters is not without its humour in its sheer excess even as it is not remote from evangelical arias on sin with promised redemption.

The views of this cluster of preachers seem irreproachably liberal. They are against racial discrimination, homophobia, capital punishment, commercialism, war and self-absorption, while being for abortion, even as, balancing this, and again with what is clearly a risible catalogue, the Reverend Weena confesses to having accumulated an impressive array of vices from heavy drug taking and drink to resorting to prostitutes and extreme violence, waking one day 'in a hotel room with a swastika on my forehead, naked with one leg shaved' (17). As if this were not enough, she had sex with 'multiple partners in multiple configurations' with 'many unwanted pregnancies lined up in jars on our bureau tables' while also taking time to invade military bases. A sudden revelation of her sin, however, turns out not to have been either overwhelming or immediate since it has evidently taken her ten years to come to the reductive realization that, 'none of this stuff mattered at all, and that sin has nothing to do with being messed up. Amen' (17-18).

When the Reverend José stands to deliver a sermon, a stage direction insists that '*he preaches with total conviction and is never cartoonish or silly*,' (18) while what follows is, in fact, increasingly bizarre as he explains that he lives on a mountainside where his best friend is a goat and that Jesus 'had five favorite child molesters'. The sermon then recounts a story about mummies which 'eat cotton balls and excrete them on the sidewalk to serve as an affliction to all who walk there,' suggesting that the audience/congregants are themselves mummies and as such Satan's minions who can 'drink human blood that is infected with the AIDS virus' (20). The sermon is indeed preached with total conviction but the idea that he never becomes cartoonish is hard to accept as it continues with ever stranger injunctions, analogies, surreal images.

The Reverend Karinne's sermon is hardly more coherent as she describes escaping from a blond seductress 'knowing my mind could bend reality and using my will to make it happen,' before a 'scary man' cornered her in the bathroom 'and I shoved my fingers down his throat as far as they would go and he started spewing out everything inside him, but it was represented as objects and not vomit' (23). She then takes a microphone and sings a cappella song accompanied by Reverend Katie and Reverend Weena (the names, incidentally, of the actresses in the inaugural production).

The audience, Lee explained, was never sure which way the play would go: 'They didn't know where it was going . . . they didn't know whether it was going to become creepily Christian or whether it was going to nail Christians . . . The thing is always just to keep people from shutting down because as soon as people can categorise something they are instantly gone . . . I also wanted to do a show that my mom could come and see because she had been begging me to write a show without sex and profanity.' *Church* was in part designed to acknowledge some of the virtues of the faith she had rejected. Her mother, however, must have been somewhat mystified given the impressive list of vices enumerated by the Reverend Weena while Lee had not lost her love of subversion in a play which offers evidence of her Rabelaisian instinct.

The Reverend Katie prepares to send the audience to their homes before joining with the other female ministers in an exuberant dance before the Reverend José joins them and they 'all jam together' (26). The play concludes as he offers an elaborate story which devolves into

## Staging America

fantasy as a woman enters singing 'Ain't Got Time to Die', followed by a sixty-person choir. The effect, a direction explains, 'should be akin to that of clowns emerging endlessly from a clown car.' The play concludes with 'clapping, dancing and "joyous abandon"' (29).

Critical responses were ambivalent. For Jason Zinoman, in *The New York Times*, it was 'slyly subversive' while presenting 'an earnest and surprisingly moving Christian church service,' though at its most convincing 'when her characters stop talking and begin dancing and singing.'<sup>43</sup> Don Aucoin, in the *Boston Globe*, found it 'alternately engrossing and irksome, insightful and wilfully opaque' while declaring that, 'Some parts are as rich and strange and moving as faith itself, touching on questions not just of who we are but why we are' while 'others reek of self-indulgence on the part of a playwright who allows a gift for poetic expression to take her, and us, up some blind alleys.'<sup>44</sup> By the same token, the *Denver Post* reviewer, responding to a production by TheatreWorks in Colorado Springs, home of megachurches, referred to a baffled audience while feeling that the idea of the revivalist service, 'doesn't fully hold together as a theatrical conceit.' Accepting that it served to jolt the audience out of passivity, it remained unclear precisely what force the ending was supposed to have: 'Wherever it was that TheatreWorks wanted to take us, we never quite get all the way there.'<sup>45</sup>

A 2018 production by Crowded Fire Theatre at San Francisco's Potrero Stage prompted a review which found that the play consisted of 'bits and pieces rather than a unified narrative' and that there had not been 'any particular dramatic arc to the evening',<sup>46</sup> but unified narratives and dramatic arcs are precisely what Lee has tended to eschew.

With her next play, *The Shipment* (2009), she entered dangerous territory, confronting the issue of race. As she explained, she wished to explore black identity, 'and you can immediately see a million ways in which I could get into trouble.'<sup>47</sup> It might be that racial prejudice is structured into human behaviour, but she was an Asian-American writing about the experiences of others. As she confessed,

Asians occupy this ... nebulous area ... our families came here by choice and we're considered to be 'honorary white people' in certain segments of society, but we still experience all kinds of racism within that sphere of relative privilege. So, I think there's this uneasy mixture of 'white guilt' combined with a desire to acknowledge the racism we experience, and black people can sometimes become the targets of our fascination because their fight against oppression is so extreme. The crazy thing is that even black people are constantly asked to prove that racism exists. People want to think we are post-race because we have a black president, but that is still so far from being the case.<sup>48</sup>

It was two years in the writing and with a title, she explained, evocative of slavery, 'of people ... being kidnapped and brought over as a shipment.' It was 'an attempt to do a black identity show and doing a black identity show made the Asian identity play like a piece of cake ... We started it pre-Obama and people did not want to talk about racism against black people ... The whole process was me asking my cast what were the things that they wanted to say, what were the things that bothered them, what did they want to communicate through the show because I don't really have a lot to say ... That's where all the content of the show was.'

Early workshops proved problematic when invited audiences also saw it as simply a play about identity politics, an angry piece, but one which seemed not to disturb, a largely white audience invited to join those on stage willingly doing so. 'It was,' she said, 'one of the worst

artistic experiences of my life – seeing all the black people walk out and the white people happy, so happy.<sup>49</sup> As she remarked, ‘I’m obsessed with unsettling complacency – because I think that contradiction and uncertainty bring us closer to the truth than pat ideologies<sup>50</sup> but ‘I was trying, as a Korean-American, to make a Black identity-politics show, and the results were as bad as one would expect. I ended up throwing out my entire script and recasting the show and starting over from scratch. I wanted to make a show that reflected my cast’s race-related concerns in an unexpected way that wouldn’t make the audience tune out, since a lot of people shut down when confronted with your garden-variety identity-politics,<sup>51</sup> either that or readily accommodate it as a badge of their liberalism.

Aware of the risk of cultural appropriation, she asked her actors, ‘what kind of roles they would like to play since they were so often cast in stereotypical ways, what kind of play they would like it to be and they said they wanted it to be a totally straight naturalistic play, which I had never done before but the rule I had set myself was that I would do whatever they wanted so this was my first attempt at naturalism.’ The naturalism, however, would await the second half of the play. ‘The first half . . . was about how in the act of doing something you love it was somehow degrading so [it] was about the different stereotypes of black entertainment . . . we did everything really badly . . . there was no attempt at authenticity . . . the image that we used was that they were wearing the stereotypes like an ill-fitting paper doll costume.’<sup>52</sup>

In an author’s note, Lee explained that,

The show is divided into two parts. The first is structured like a minstrel show – dance, stand-up routine, sketches, and a song – and I wrote it to address the stereotypes my cast felt they had to deal with as black performers. Our goal was to walk the line between stock forms of black entertainment and some unidentifiable weirdness to the point where the audience wasn’t sure what they were watching or how they were supposed to respond . . . The second half of the show is a relatively straight naturalistic comedy.<sup>53</sup>

The play, for which the audience is likely to be largely white, accordingly begins with two dancers whose movements hint at minstrelsy, at which point a stand-up comedian enters and addresses the audience, naming the city and venue where the play is taking place, before segueing into a routine which begins with pornographic references seemingly testing the limits of their tolerance for what they perhaps assume is the norm for black comedy even as he attacks them before doing the same with his fellow blacks: ‘I been talkin’ shit ‘bout white folks for a while. Now it’s time for me to go after some niggas,’ (13) confessing that ‘I . . . been accused a playin’ a stereotype to cater to a white audience. Well, that’s true, but mostly I talk this way because I’m fuckin’ terrified a black people!’ (14) He proceeds to denounce whites for their crass insensitivity, confessing to having a white wife and interracial children, signing off with a sentimentality before a series of sketches about a would-be rapper, scenes which include a drive-by shooting, drug dealing, a crack-head, a whore, religion and would-be murderers, stereotypes fast accumulating. The rapper calls for the death of whitey in a way reminiscent of Amiri Baraka’s *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* of the late 1960s, before they transform into the figures called Singer 1 and Singer 2 performing a capella versions of ‘Dark Center of the Universe’ (Modest Mouse’s song which includes the lyrics ‘everyone’s life ends but nobody ever/ completes it’) before the stage is transformed for the naturalistic play, the actors from the first half now transformed.

The room, as it is now assembled, is, she directs, to be modern, expensive and male. There are four men and one woman. At first the conversation is inconsequential but what seems like a brittle fencing devolves into something else as their host, Thomas, announces that he has poisoned their drinks, only to declare it a joke and explain that he is suicidal. At this point, and somewhat oddly in the circumstance, they decide to play a game of Library in which the players have to write a sentence in the style of a book chosen from the bookshelves, the book turning out to be *Sexual Anorexia: Overcoming Sexual Self-Hatred*, obviously somewhat revealing given Thomas's state of mind. When that yields unsatisfactory results, Thomas himself chooses another which proves even more revealing containing, as it does, a chapter entitled 'Negro Superstitions'. The guests are required to complete a sentence beginning, 'The Negro believes . . .' The results are all pejorative. When one of the guests doubts they would have played the game had a black person been in the room he is told, in the play's final line, 'I guess that would depend in what kind of black person it was' (53).

The irony, of course, is that the audience finally realize that the black actors had been playing white people in a setting which at some level they might have assumed to be white, a sudden reversal exposing underlying racial stereotypes subtler than those with which the show had started.

Lee was surprised by the success of the play even as, sitting in the audience, as is her habit, she registered the differing responses of black and white audience members. Though one critic, Pamela Vesper, writing for *Triangle Arts and Entertainment*, walked out of a Common Ground Theatre production (this being an African-American company based in San Diego) nonetheless publishing a review in which she called it 'degrading, disgusting and ridiculous,' not art but 'elephant dung,'<sup>54</sup> responses were positive. For Charles Isherwood, in *The New York Times*, it was 'provocative but never polemical . . . pleasingly eclectic,' while Lee 'sets you thinking about how we unconsciously process experience—at the theater, or in life—through the filter of racial perspective, and how hard it can be to see the world truly in something other than black and white.'<sup>55</sup> For *Time Out* it was one of the best plays of 2009. For Lee herself, 'I think ultimately it doesn't matter that much, since people end up getting kind of stumped by the show regardless of what they read in the press . . . We tried to make everything off-kilter and unrecognisable, so the audience got really nervous and wasn't sure how to react.'<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps it takes a certain chutzpah for a Korean-American to attempt a riff on *King Lear* but, then, it was a play she had worked on for her doctoral thesis for six years. She returned to it now refracted through her experience of a very different kind of theatre. 'All of the things that I was trying to do in *Lear*,' she explained, 'were reflective of my sense of what tragedy is, and what a big play is. It was an homage to the original – not trying to be as great as that play or anything – just trying to get into the spirit of complexity and madness and tragedy and the wrenching language of despair. My voice is mostly comic, and it was my first time working with tragedy.'

It was a challenge to the writer, audiences and, it turned out, critics. As she confessed, 'I do think my *Lear* ended up being by far my most challenging work. It was the first time I'd had really mixed audience responses. Even though it was more fun to have a show that people loved, like *The Shipment*, I feel . . . there's a connection between longevity and something that you really have to wrestle with, and *Lear* is the play of mine that you have to wrestle with the most . . . I would say that *Lear* is a play that's still over my head. I made the show, but when I watch it, I have the same experience that my audience has. I struggle with it. And that was sort of my goal—to write something that was big enough that I couldn't control it.'<sup>57</sup>

*The New York Times* critic Charles Isherwood was inclined to agree. He found it an 'intermittently funny but mostly flailing attempt to excavate new meanings from the consideration of a celebrated text. From perhaps the most imposing something in the theatrical canon, Ms. Lee has constructed a big, fat nothing . . . a misfired play.'<sup>58</sup> For *The New Yorker* it was 'a hot mess,' 'the kind of misfire any young artist is entitled to . . . a collage of things, with no over-arching emotion, no prominent thought to hold it together.'<sup>59</sup> *CurtainUp* provided no consolation, Gregory A.S. Wilson noting that, 'There's nothing more frustrating for a critic than watching a production which promises things it ultimately doesn't provide, and Lee's new play *Lear* at the Soho Rep delivers this frustration in spades.' To him, the play had 'no narrative through line, nothing to ground the audience's experience.'<sup>60</sup>

In one sense Lee's is a curious admission. What, after all, do we expect of a playwright if not a personal vision carefully constructed to realize that vision. That, however, has never been her method or intent. Not only has she been open to the input of others but the reversals, sudden shifts in style, the deployment of music and dance, anachronisms, profanities, vulgarities are designed to disturb any sense of assurance for herself no less than for audiences. The only predictable aspect of her work is to expect the unexpected. Meanings are not patrolled, pre-determined. At the same time, for all its gnomic gestures, its seemingly inconsequential dialogue and dark comedy, there is an underlying theme and mood to *Lear*. It begins with an approaching death and ends as a threnody, a lament not for Lear, a man who we never see, though whose fate we know, but for an existence that seems to render up no apparent coherence, no justification. It is a play in which death is a presence, a work about mortality albeit approached with a sometimes-brutal humour and disorienting shifts of focus.

The set and costumes for *Lear* are elaborate, even sumptuous, as if for a classical production of Shakespeare's play. We are in the court, now presided over by Goneril and Regan (like Cordelia played by black actresses) along with Gloucester's two sons, Edgar and Edmund, the figures of Lear and Gloucester having been abandoned by Lee following workshops in which they had become too dominant. We enter as the characters perform a courtly dance to authentic Elizabethan music. These are not, though, characters at ease, Edmund in particular feeling guilty at his treatment of his father Gloucester, even as, surprisingly, his brother and Goneril extol the virtues of Buddhism which they see as endorsing the idea of simply accepting whatever happens, including their own violence and betrayals. Edgar, meanwhile, in a far from Elizabethan language, discusses body dysmorphia and the possibility that someday modern technology may cure baldness and other physical problems, the deconstructions affected by time, a subject clearly of interest to him having witnessed, and taken advantage of, the vulnerability of his father and a king whose power proved no defence against decline.

Goneril, meanwhile, in a soliloquy, declares that 'all I wish is to be good to the people around me, to make them feel whole and important,' but not, it appears, out of any sense of altruism, merely that then 'they will dance to my bidding and bend to my will,' (66) even as she has witnessed the fragility of will. For her part, Cordelia returns from France where she has been living with the King of France. Asked what she has been doing, she replies 'Nothing,' an echo of her answer to Lear's enquiry as to what she can offer in the way of love for him, and a word which recurs in the text of Lee's play. 'I told the world to be what it was, come what may' she declares, before contradicting herself: 'and I would transform shit into sugar blossom.' In the same way, Edgar confesses that 'I kick beggars . . . I wear extremely expensive and heavy boots and I kick beggars every chance I get' only to reverse himself: 'I've never kicked a beggar in my

## Staging America

life and my boots are neither heavy nor expensive,' (77) language neutralizing itself as Beckett's Estragon says, 'Let's go' only for the stage direction to indicate 'They do not move.' This is, indeed, less *Lear* as tragedy than as the absurd as Regan observes that, 'Everyone dies,' only for Goneril to ask, 'Then why live. What is there?' 'Some things' she notes, 'are unspeakable' (70–1).

The play now takes two swift changes of direction. The actors abandon their characters and use their own names. The actor playing Edgar, in what is plainly a high-risk gesture, walks into the audience asking, 'What are you doing here? Is this really what you want to be doing with your life? Being here? Doing this?' (88)

The play then takes a further abrupt turn as the actor previously playing Edmund enters as Big Bird, the principal figure from *Sesame Street*, 'bent over upside down and walking backwards' while holding onto his ankles with his hands and talking through his legs to the actor previously playing Edgar. Why is he speaking through his legs? 'Because,' he replies (echoing a key word from the relevant episode of *Sesame Street* in which Big Bird enters in the same way).

When the actress formerly playing Goneril enters she quotes directly from Lear's speech on the death of Cordelia, which in turn is echoed in an exchange which comes directly from episode 1,839 of *Sesame Street* called 'I'm Sure Gonna Miss You, Mr. Hooper!' an episode designed to introduce children to the idea of death. Mr. Hooper was one of the few human characters in *Sesame Street*. He died in 1982. His friends try to explain to Big Bird that he will never return as Lear had declaimed 'Thou'lt come no more, Never, never, never, never, never.' When Big Bird, in the television show, asks why he died he is told, 'Because.'

The play ends with an extended speech from the actor who had played Edmund and Big Bird. In a play dedicated to Lee's father, who had died by the time it was published, this speech is about the future death of a father and the need to seize the moment before it is too late. 'I can't imagine what it will be like when he is dying . . . that loss is going to be too much. You can't lose that much' (97). With strobe lights flickering on and off he opens his arms as if waiting for someone's arrival repeating the words 'I'll miss you', ten times, an echo of the phrase used by Big Bird of Mr. Hooper.

Asked for her own interpretation of the play, Lee said,

I think there's a lot of possible interpretations. The one that I had in mind when I was writing was the phenomenon of being an adult and having a parent get sick and realizing their mortality and then realizing your own mortality. In the first half of the play a lot of those themes get played out, most obviously with the rejection of the father, but also with the obsession with getting fat or bald, and just the idea of being incapable of love, love of others or self-love. The first half of the play contains a lot of themes that are in all of my work, which are the tendencies of myself and my demographic.<sup>61</sup>

Given that her father was terminally ill when she wrote, there is a poignancy to her observation that, 'I feel there's a moment in every person's life when they realize their parents will die. When this hits, it's like the ground opens up and things aren't solid anymore.'<sup>62</sup> Hers is a play in which, in truth, there is little room for tragedy. Death lies off stage, but its pressure is present, a fact which its characters experience as dark comedy, farce or the centrifugal force of the absurd, a truth held at a distance and whose function can prompt no answer beyond the blank 'because.' Things in Lee's *Lear* are indeed not solid. They were dissolving even as she wrote it. Edgar's question to the audience – 'What are you doing here' – is more than a

provocation, it is an existential question which equally lies behind that asked by Shakespeare's *King Lear*, up against the brute fact of existence and here quoted by Lee: 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more' (90). Language is no defence, devolving into Lear's reiterated 'never, never, never' and here, in Lee's play, into the echoic, 'I'll miss you, I'll miss you. I'll miss you,' (98) repeated until the stage turns to black.

The *Time Out* critic, David Cote, acknowledged the negative reviews the play had provoked (*On Off Broadway* called it 'a really, really bad play') but asked 'after all the reviews have been forgotten and/or archived, will anyone want to revisit this messy, disorienting, obsessive text?' Answering his own question, he added that while, 'at the end of the day, *Lear* may not be as sleek and stunning as *The Shipment*, . . . it has power and ought to endure.'<sup>63</sup>

Though *Untitled Feminist Show* had its first workshop in December 2010, it would be 2012 before it emerged from development, opening at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Meanwhile she moved in a very different direction with *We're Gonna Die* which would go on to win an Obie and which was a performance co-produced with 13P, the company formed by thirteen playwrights and committed to closing after each had staged a play. Hers was to be number eleven. After a performance of the music at John Zorn's *The Stone*, an experimental music performance venue in Greenwich Village which had formerly been a Chinese restaurant, it was staged at Joe's Pub, one of the six spaces within the Public Theatre in New York City, in April 2011.

*We're Gonna Die*, however, is not so much a play as a cabaret and Joe's Pub offers a cabaret setting. Still committed to produce what scared her, in her own mind being neither an actress, a singer (though she had briefly sung in a band at college and now took singing lessons) nor a lyricist, she had written a series of songs and performed them with a band which consisted not only of musicians but those who were themselves singer-songwriters. For the show she wrote a series of stories which she would perform between the songs.

If *Lear* had been written when her father was dying, death was, she explained, still on her mind now that he had gone, and this was to be a work in which death would be a common theme. Text and songs were to centre on the fear of loneliness, heartbreak, ageing, sickness and death. The stories were all true, but only one was her own, one in which she addresses her father's death. This was not, though, to be a dirge, a lament, an absurdist performance about the irony of human existence, but a recognition of what is shared and thereby a consolation. It was, in a sense, an antidote to *Lear*. The relationship to the audience was to be different. She no longer wished to provoke and disorient them nor was it an experimental piece, though it involved a moment when she and her band join together in an ironically choreographed dance. As she explained,

If I get on stage I don't look incredibly special and talented. It became this experiment to see, can you just present a person being themselves on stage, communicating directly to an audience, and have that compelling? Normally I have these larger-than-life performers doing this experimental, controversial work that's . . . unpredictable and . . . a little crazy. With this show I wanted to go in the totally opposite direction where it's just about telling these truthful, simple stories and singing these songs in a way that makes people watching feel like they could imagine themselves up there doing what I am doing.<sup>64</sup>

To that end, she dressed in everyday clothes and it turned out was an excellent composer and singer, the intimacy of presentation and setting underscoring her desire to engage with her



## Staging America

audience this time by 'entertainment rather than weirdness.' One thing she had discovered in writing songs was that 'my lyrics are way more straightforward than my playwriting. I am incapable of being weird or poetic or avant-garde in any way when I'm writing songs – if I try, it feels incredibly wrong and fake.'<sup>65</sup>

Though the fifty-minute show consists of individual stories there is an overall direction, an acknowledgement that the various pains, desertions, sadnesses, traumas, narrated in them are shared, and that there is consolation in that fact, even as there is no flinching from the fact that, in the words of a song entitled 'When You Get Old,' 'everything will hurt all the time . . . And you will be a burden in the world.'<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly the most affecting story is Lee's own as she recounts her father's suffering, dying in terror, approved for an experimental treatment which might have saved him but for a delay which meant that approval only arrived the day of his death leaving Lee enraged and fearful of one day repeating her father's experience until a letter from a friend, who had experienced blows of her own, asks why she had assumed that she was immune from tragedy, from the various wounds life inflicts. This brings her to a realization which is the essential theme of the show: 'when you're a person, all kinds of really terrible things can happen to you. That's why my father died the way he did, and if I die the same way, it'll be for the same reason: because I'm a person.' As she confesses, 'It wasn't some big, profound revelation. But for the first time in a long time, I felt a little bit of comfort' (31). The 'because' of *Lear* now becomes sufficient.

Death is, indeed, the end of the journey but the final song, 'I'm Gonna Die', which acknowledges that 'we can't live forever' and that 'We can't keep each other safe from harm,' (37) concludes with the band members joining Lee in a curious dislocated dance before they come together to sing an a capella version of the song, encouraging the audience to join in the repeated lyric 'We are going to die,' an acceptance of a common bond, offering a shape to contingency, music and song elevating private fact to shared experience.

In 2012 *We're Gonna Die* moved to the newly-constructed 114-seat Claire Tow Theater (LCT3) at Lincoln Centre, returning the following year. Besides winning an Obie Award, it also received praise from Charles Isherwood in *The New York Times* as it did in *The Chicago Tribune* and *Time Out* (New York and Chicago). The play's text comes complete with a CD with the stories told not by Lee but by those she persuaded to work for nothing including Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, Colin Stetson and others.

Her next work, *Untitled Feminist Show*, (originally *Untitled Feminist Multi-Media Technology Show*), though its first workshop had preceded *We're Gonna Die*, represented a radical change of direction as she gradually removed language in favour of dance. Out, too, went clothes, the six actors, drawn from the world of cabaret, theatre and burlesque, one of whom was transgender, performing naked. For Lee, this was a way of stripping away more than clothes, more than habits or the seeming requirements of presentation. For her, 'the thing that makes nudity a little bit different from how nudity has been used in a lot of feminist work is that these people on stage are completely in utopia. They are in a state of total joy. That's the thing that makes it feel different . . . it's the first show [*We're Gonna Die* aside] that I've made that is not trying to make the audience feel uncomfortable . . . The nudity is not confrontational. A lot of people forget about it after the first five minutes. The nudity itself is not where the provocation is.'<sup>67</sup>

Though dance had occurred in her other shows, here it gradually becomes the essence of the work. In her original notes she had simply described dances in what she thought of as a play without words, only to doubt the legitimacy of this confessing that as a writer rather than a

choreographer she had a hard time relinquishing words only to find that in the end images were more powerful.

Nonetheless, it began as a text. In a series of workshops through 2010 and 2011, beginning with a residency at the New Museum in New York City, she assembled a highly articulate cast with whom she had discussions over feminism but in the end removed all words from the original text following what struck her as the anger of actors and audiences at the original: 'our audiences did nothing but make academic arguments about feminism' where she 'wanted to hit people on a more emotional, visceral level.' As a result, 'I kept cutting out more and more of the text until there was nothing left but movement, and the audience was forced to react emotionally. I tried hard to write words that could compete with the movement and dance, but I couldn't. We found that movement communicated what we wanted much more strongly than words did.'<sup>68</sup> Once the words were removed, 'People still got really angry, but they couldn't angry about anything specific.'<sup>69</sup> The word 'Untitled', indeed, reflected her sense that any more precise word would be limited and limiting.

For all that *Untitled Feminist Show*, focussed on dance, it was, she insisted, 'a dance-theater piece that was not operating in any way within the context of the dance scene, it wasn't really in conversation with the dance scene at all, but it was using the elements of dance to make a theater piece.'<sup>70</sup> Thus, she worked with a choreographer but was also open to input from others involved. Conscious that she did not come from a dance background, 'the show became [a question of] using dance to achieve the specific aims that I want to achieve,' confessing that 'it's not a choreographically sophisticated show' but that she was 'interested to see whether the dance world is going to understand that this is borrowing in the same way that dance borrows text all the time but is not a play.' She was 'using the language of music and dance and mime, every non-verbal form of communication that there is,' feeling that 'it is incredibly communicative,' that 'there is a lot of non-verbal communication that is theatrical.'<sup>71</sup>

The performance shifts from mood to mood, style to style, because, as she insisted, it is in part concerned with transformation. So, there is a representation of daily experiences, a fight, a seduction, a scene in which the performers carry pink parasols. The music echoes these shifts, fluidity of identity being part of Lee's objective.

There are stories implied in each section but, for Lee, there was a secret narrative, not supposed to be clear to the audience.

The whole theatre is a temple and the cast are high priestesses of this temple. Their job is to generate power for themselves, for the audience, and for people outside the theatre. They are doing a series of rituals to evoke and summon up different forms of power . . . the first half of the show is [the] summoning of power, summoning the power of the domestic worker, they summon the power of femininity, despised femininity, they summon the power of old archetypes . . . In the second half of the show they summon the total primal id which is not civilised . . . aggression, sexuality, and joy, hysteria . . . unleashed wild energy . . . The two become fused at the end . . . the ability to be fluid. The end of the show is channelling the crazy energy. The climax is the closest I come to what gender fluidity feels like.<sup>72</sup>

The greatest criticism came from those in the dance community, for whom it was not their idea of modern dance, and from some of those involved in feminist art who looked for a

critique of sexism rather than the celebratory rituals at which she was aiming. When it came to mainstream critics, however, there was a marked difference of opinion. For Charles Isherwood, in *The New York Times*, 'Ms. Lee has created an almost undefinable and often, alas, uncommunicative romp.' He acknowledged the element of ritual but regretted that it 'never comes into focus,' finding that 'Any real ideas . . . are clouded in an amiable but weightless air of general playfulness' and that 'the performers gradually come to seem undifferentiated, alike in their sometimes overly cute or coy playfulness.'<sup>73</sup> By contrast, *Time Out* and the *Huffington Post* were enthusiastic, as was Hilton Als in *The New Yorker* for whom it was 'one of the more moving and imaginative works I have ever seen on the American stage.'<sup>74</sup>

In researching the piece, Lee looked for recordings of the work of choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, who had worked with the Wooster Group, and Pina Bausch, of the Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, and there is certainly something of her approach in Lee's attitude to the theatre as, here, in her use of dance. It was Bausch who remarked that, 'We are not only here to please, we cannot help challenging the spectator,'<sup>75</sup> as Lee would endeavour 'to find ways to get past [her] audiences' defences . . . keeping them disoriented . . . trying to figure out how to build the best trap for the audience.'<sup>76</sup> Bausch, though, was more radical, in *Café Müller* requiring her performers to dance with their eyes closed, stumbling over furniture. She placed an emphasis on repetition and the relationship between men and women. On the other hand, she explored precisely that connection between theatre and dance evidenced here by Lee. She also constructed her works in a similar way, questioning her performers, slowly constructing her works, bringing disparate elements together, musically as well as in other ways. Neither required trained dancers, improvisation being the starting point and not the destination. Lee embraced what Bausche called 'danced body language.'

George Steiner has pointed out that though we 'live inside the act of discourse . . . we should not assume that a verbal matrix is the only one in which the articulateness and conduct of the mind are conceivable.'<sup>77</sup> Music is one such, as is dance, both challenging the critic for though both mediums may access the emotions, tell stories through sound and movement, they may step beyond that, reach out in ways that defy simple description, (often a response to experimental work) or critical analysis, fail to account for the act of translation, of decoding, required of the critic in re-entering language, seeking to account for the visceral, the essentially unarticulated response to form, movement, shifting patterns, in words which carry their own history, socially, culturally, aesthetically. Critical judgements have their context, their vocabulary, their imperatives. This is not to say that Lee should be seen as a radical innovator, carving out new territory, but she is interested in blurring boundaries, unsettling those for whom consistency, evident coherence, meanings freely offered, are if not primary then desirable aspects of a theatrical presentation. Given that she sees herself as deliberately troubling the waters in her work, provoking and even dividing audiences, it is hardly surprising that critics respond similarly. If it were not so, it is tempting to believe that Lee might be disappointed. Ready acceptance has seldom been the goal of the experimental artist. It is not that critics have got her right or wrong. She, after all, has seldom been without self-doubt. It is those self-doubts, however, which in some ways drive her on, always challenging herself to venture where she and others are surprised to see her go, and her next work would provide evidence of that.

In *Interview Magazine*, in 2013, she confessed that the 'ultimate challenge for me [is] can I just do something normal that isn't weird at all,' insisting that 'In terms of the downtown world, I'm not the biggest weirdo. There, I'm one of the more normal ones, which makes it seem . . . I

could appeal to the mainstream.<sup>78</sup> Her next move, indeed, was to the mainstream, to Broadway (The Hayes Theater on 44th Street), via Brown University, the Wexler Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, a European tour, a Steppenwolf production in Chicago, and the Public Theatre, a long way from the downtown theatre world where she had started.

What attracted her to *Straight White Men* was that suddenly they were seen as having an ethnic identity. Until then they had simply been the default human. Now, for the first time, they were experiencing what others had done. Lacking any real knowledge about them, however, she set out to have conversations with as many as she could. Being an only child she was also interested in the relationship between brothers since the play was about three such. She also brought together a number of women and minorities and asked what they thought of straight white men, only to be taken aback by the onslaught which followed. Further conversations followed with the cast and the wider community. In *The Interval* she explained that,

For *Straight White Men* I knew that I wanted a banker, a novelist, somebody who was living at home, and an older retired engineer. So, I just posted on Facebook, ‘Hey, does anybody know straight white men who fit this description?’ . . . So, all my Facebook friends hooked me up with these guys. I interviewed a bunch of bankers, a bunch of retired engineers, I even interviewed a bunch of women who I modelled the mom character after, who’s not in the play . . . In interviewing a wide range of people, a character begins to emerge in my mind and I learn how they speak, and I learn what the person’s background is and where they’re coming from . . . I interviewed maybe six novelists, and there were these points of overlap in everyone’s stories that then became part of [the character called] Drew.<sup>79</sup>

*Straight White Men* was her first traditional three-act play. In preparation, she read classic works, including those of Arthur Miller, and had her actors improvise to enable her to familiarize herself with the unfamiliar speech patterns and behaviours of white men. She explained that she,

saw the traditional three-act structure as the ‘straight white male’ of theatrical forms, or the form that has historically been used to present straight white male narratives as universal. And I thought it would be interesting to explore the boundaries of that form at the same time as its content. It is a naturalistic three-act play, the only conventional narrative I’ve ever done. And at first people just could not enjoy that show. They kept expecting everybody to break the fourth wall or take off all their clothes. People could not even really experience the show, because they were just waiting for that moment to come, and they were so frustrated when it didn’t. So, I had to build in a pre-show announcement where the audience is told that the actors will stay in character throughout the show and pretend not to see you, and that helped a bit.<sup>80</sup>

There is more to that last strategy, though, than mere convenience. As a note in the published text insists, ‘The pre-show music, curtain speech, and transitions are an important part of this play. They should create a sense that the show is under the control of people who are not straight white men.’<sup>81</sup> Though it indicates that the play should be performed without irony, the framing introduces an element of distance. The audience enters to designedly loud hip-hop

## Staging America

‘with sexually explicit lyrics by female rappers, music by women of colour,’ too loud for some it turned out, while two figures ‘played by gender-nonconforming performers (preferably of color),’ called Persons in Charge, draw attention to the fact that this is, indeed, to be a naturalistic play with its own conventions. Indeed, the Persons in Charge lead the actors on stage, carefully arranging them, like museum objects about to be activated, in the process implying the limitations of the form. One of the Persons in Charge, unlike the other actors, is allowed to ad lib and determine her own costumes and performance styles with ‘the power and support to have audience members removed from the theatre should the actors deem it necessary’ (5). The other Person in Charge is a non-speaking character, expressing solidarity. If possible, the stage hands were also to be female. So, a play about straight white men takes place in the context of those who are none of those things.

The play’s action covers three days of Christmas in the Midwestern home of the widowed Ed, a retired engineer, who is joined by his three sons, all in their forties. Jake is a successful banker, dedicated to climbing the ladder, selling himself, though recently divorced from his African-American wife who has their two children with her for the holidays. Drew is a teacher and author of a book attacking the country’s materialism, believing he is serving something bigger than himself, even as he is seeing a therapist. Matt, the oldest brother who, long ago, at school, had challenged a production of *Oklahoma* which had found no place for non-whites, an echo of Lee’s experience at her own school, is a Harvard graduate (though ten years on a PhD programme at Stanford suggests something not quite in order) of whom great things had been expected but having once spent time in Africa, to no apparent end it seems, now lives with his father while working at a temporary job with a community group. Throughout the play he intermittently tidies the room, as if this defined his new role, either a surrender to fate or an embracing of a role.

Back in the family home, they revert to their old relationships, enjoy what seems an easy familiarity, playing out customary rituals. They rough house, dance, exchange presents, play a game of Monopoly but one which their mother had revised into one called Privilege, a reminder that they had been raised to recognize their advantages. The game board is revealed to have an anti-money symbol on one half and a female-gender symbol on the other, one of the game pieces earning an ‘Undervalued domestic labor bonus’ (13). It includes an ‘excuses card’ which requires fifty dollars to be paid to a Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center for excusing a racist, sexist or homophobic remark as just a joke.

When young, it turns out, Matt had been a revolutionary, though alarmed at the thought of revolutionary violence, while Drew, prompted by Jake, had been disaffected, convinced of his intellectual superiority. They have all moved on. As they share a Chinese meal, however, it is evident that there is something wrong. For no apparent reason, Matt breaks down in tears.

If he is going through a crisis, however, all of them have been raised to believe that their privileges imply responsibilities, that their lives need to mean something, and there is a level at which none of them seem entirely sure they have fulfilled such even as they are angry at Matt’s rejection of their various interpretations of his state of mind. They feel he has betrayed a family ethos, a moral responsibility, even as they find ways to justify themselves. His benign father is no surer what to make of Matt’s passivity, having, in his own mind, justified himself through a lifetime of work, even if that was not a job he had chosen.

For Jake, Matt’s problem is racial guilt, something which he acknowledges feeling himself, failing to support minorities in his company even as his own children are of mixed race. Having been handed every advantage, he suggests, Matt feels unworthy of success and therefore unwilling to seek

it, something Matt rejects. He is, in effect, a Bartleby figure, simply preferring not to accept other people's interpretations of his life, their admonitions and solutions. After a lifetime in which he has, in his own mind, failed to make a difference, he is apparently content to play a minor role at home and at work. His brothers have chased success while never quite forgetting the lessons taught by their long-dead mother. The play ends, however, with his father determined to expel him from his home, feeling that he has conspired in his son's failure to fulfil himself. He acts out of love and yet Matt is left alone, his future seemingly about to foreclose. As in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *Death of a Salesman*, love is an ambiguous force.

*Straight White Men* is not an attack on white men. Hers are not characters who exist to exemplify a thesis, and that despite the presence of *Persons in Charge*. It is as much a family play as *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Death of a Salesman* or *August: Osage County*. It is about lives that have not quite turned out as expected, about the love between a father and his sons, and between sons who have chosen different paths but done so in a search of a meaning they once thought gifted to them, within their grasp, and there is a wider context as, implicitly, there is in O'Neill and Miller's plays. That, I take, to be the significance of Matt choosing to read a passage from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in which Silenus, companion to Dionysus, and given to drunkenness (Lee's characters having just woken following a night of drinking), asked what is desirable for mankind, replies that the 'best of all things is . . . not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best thing for you – is to die soon' (55). For Nietzsche, art, especially tragedy, simultaneously acknowledged the inescapable given of existence and the resistant spirit. The challenge is to justify existence. Lee's characters have been set to do no less by their mother, even as they are to acknowledge that they have been given advantages which apparently gift them access to meaningful existences.

For Lee, her characters were 'very politically aware and sensitive . . . cool guys [who] really loved each other. They are very straight white male, but very loving.'<sup>82</sup> Indeed in writing it she came to recognize her own privileges at a time when identity politics confer their own advantages:

One of the discoveries I made working on the show was just how much privilege I have that is comparable to the privilege of a straight white male. To what extent am I able to enjoy and exploit my privilege in a way I can get away with because I am an Asian female? There are a few lines in the play where the characters say, 'Unlike women, queer people, and people of color, we can't pretend we're doing enough just by pursuing our own ambition,' which is a problem for me personally. It's just taken for granted that my success is good for the world, and that that's somehow enough, which I don't think it is. I've had people of color come to the show expecting to be totally alienated by all the characters, and then being freaked out by how much they identified.<sup>83</sup>

For Lee, then, this is not simply a play about white men uncertain about how their values can be realized in a world with its own resistances, in which life fails to conform to expectations, meaning never quite cohering, 'it becomes an even bigger question of: What do we want *people* to do? What are our values in society. . . I think that's what the play ended up being about.'<sup>84</sup> Beyond that, it was a play, she confessed, which stopped her being 'snotty' about naturalistic theatre having 'rewired' her brain in terms of character and plot, the very things against which she had originally rebelled.

Throughout, I have quoted reviews as evidence of the ambivalent responses Lee has received, varying from enthusiastic support to bafflement. Given that one of her objectives was to divide and disturb audiences it is hardly surprising that critics should respond similarly, more especially since her objective was to move out of her own comfort zone and to provoke those watching to do likewise. With this play, however, she received almost unanimously positive reviews, with one notable, and surely surprising exception.

The positive reviews ranged from Charles Isherwood's in *The New York Times* for whom it was 'fascinating' going beyond 'cheap satire [and] ultimately becoming [a] compassionate and stimulating exploration of one man's existential crisis,'<sup>85</sup> to David Cote's in *Time Out (New York)* for whom it was 'both emotionally satisfying . . . and unflinching in its critique of white-driven social justice.'<sup>86</sup> In a review of a later production, he found it 'immensely pleasurable' in its wit while working 'both as a political satire . . . and also as a philosophical study of human limitations' doing both 'brilliantly.' It was, he declared, 'thrillingly great.'<sup>87</sup> Marilyn Stasio in *Variety* judged it a 'cutting but deeply humane satire.'<sup>88</sup> *Huffington Post* was equally enthusiastic, but an extraordinary attack was launched in *The New Yorker* by, of all people, Hilton Als who had responded so enthusiastically to her other work.

This was, he declared, a play without a script Lee having, in his view, not 'so much written a play as handed it over, to the director' and actors, providing only 'notes in the shape of a play. That those notes are flat and boring, with no organic force or comedic interest whatsoever, is only part of the problem' since the work was 'rigged' so that audiences could 'give a thumbs-down to some straight white men.' It appeared to Als that Lee, 'wanted to make a "straight" play and hang out with the Broadway boys, without appearing to aspire to anything other than the spectacle's success.' Is her point, he asked, 'that straight men are superficial creatures bound by codes of behaviour that make them stupid and puerile?' adding that, 'The dishonesty in the play runs deep,' she having 'scripted a simplistic morality play whose thrust is Them bad, Us – audience members, Persons in Charge – good.' *Straight White Men*, he declared, is 'ultimately, not much more than a repetitive Twitter rant about what's wrong with other people.' It lacked the humour and passion of her earlier work when she was writing about her own culture or American racism. Now she was content to create characters who were 'like silhouettes in a shooting gallery – easy marks.' Characters were underwritten while the play itself was 'soulless . . . shallow, soporific, and all about itself.'<sup>89</sup>

So, instead of cleaving to explorations of race, gender and identity, here she was focussing on white men, who hardly lacked dramatic, social or political attention, apparently in the process handing them a free pass when she should have been exposing them for the very privileges whose inadequacies Lee, in truth, had set herself to explore finding them not quite so remote from her own experience as she, and, as it turned out, Als, had assumed.

It seems to have struck him as akin to the moment Bob Dylan picked up an electric guitar. There is a distinct sense of betrayal in his remarks. He had been an admirer of her work as a leading figure in experimental theatre and now here she was on Broadway with a naturalistic play though, as we have seen, she had deliberately infiltrated a subversive element by framing the play with 'gender nonconforming performers,' free to break free of the text.

Does *Straight White Men* deserve Als's strictures? He certainly seems to have misread Lee's attitude to her characters while seeming tone deaf to the play's humour and unaware of the significance of the framing device. He accuses her of writing a 'white' play, in effect of passing, assuming the values of those she satirizes. A British Prime Minister, John Major, in a debate on

law and order, once remarked that we should condemn a little more and understand a little less. That would seem to be the implication of Als's concern while surely the reverse of her intent. His sense of *Straight White Men* being an incomplete play was perhaps a recognition of her refusal to resolve the issue she raises, though that, of course, had always been evident in her earlier work.

One of the curious aspects of Als's remarks is that in a 2014 article in *The New Yorker* he had explained that, 'Lee has moved on from the internalized view of white men she explored in "Songs of Dragons." She has given the straight white male his own body and heart, though he is not entirely free of her distinctly political view. Nor should he be. The challenge, when Lee began writing "Straight White Men," was to find a way to be both herself and not herself; that is, to inhabit the title of the work, its declaration and its challenge.' At this stage he praised what he called a 'profound scene' from the play in which the brothers dance together 'in a kind of awkward tribal rite.'<sup>90</sup> It is unclear why he now chose to read the play differently.

For Lee, this was one more experiment, even as there was an undeniable irony in her choosing to write a play of the kind against which she had once rebelled and for an audience which she acknowledged was,

still mostly white. In the big theaters, everybody's over sixty, mostly over seventy. They're all straight, they're mostly there in couples. It's bad. Downtown, of course, it's much better, much younger, more diverse, but it's still very white, college-educated. Classwise, there's very little diversity. I definitely see more diversity in a museum, especially the ones that are free. I find that there's also a lot more openness in visual art on the part of practitioners and patrons. I feel like theater is way behind visual art. If the art world were the theater world, most people would still be demanding figurative painting. Anybody who did anything remotely abstract would be considered very marginal. Whereas visual art patrons just have always insisted on boldness. In the theater, the older generation just wants their stories, they don't want anything else, and theater caters to them. In art, there's a market-driven search for the new, whereas in theater, the market drives the search for the familiar.<sup>91</sup>

Yet just as Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* has made it evident that a person of colour can have a major impact with a form that is radically different, she has expressed the hope that her own work may, in turn, open doors for others, that the unfamiliar would begin to command attention. Meanwhile, even as her plays are performed across America and around the world, she runs her own theatre company, is part of the band called Future Wife, and has turned her attention to film and television, unwilling to be contained either by the expectations of others or, indeed, by her own. Hers is a restless talent.





# CHAPTER 6

## BRUCE NORRIS

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What's the progress for dogs? . . . We have certain responsibilities, [but] we don't have progress. I think every generation is one away from a holocaust.

Bruce Norris<sup>1</sup>

[If] we want to claim that we're changing the world, well we're changing the world in the same way a jester changed the world in Charlemagne's court or Genghis Khan's yurt. That's the kind of difference we make . . . I know a couple of people who really think that *Waiting for Godot* is an affirmation of all that's 'heroic in mankind' . . . If we could hook up . . . a belt and a generator to Samuel Beckett's corpse in his grave, you could power a small city with the spinning of his corpse.

Bruce Norris<sup>2</sup>

Bruce Norris is a social observer and social critic, even as that criticism extends to himself. He explores the human comedy, acknowledging that it derives as much from a determinism resolutely denied as from the manner in which individuals and communities seek to justify their worst instincts, or patrol the borders of what they assume to be defining affinities. His is a world in which love can be touched with danger, his characters confused as to its constituents and what its boundaries might be. He is committed to a theatre whose political utility he doubts, and which he suspects is sustained by the very people he is inclined to distrust, even if they are hardly different from himself. If there is an irony in his insistence that it has no power to effect change, the ironies which interest him go deeper than that as his characters pursue a meaning which is elusive and contingent. Writing plays, he suggests, is no more than a *jeu desprit*. He is certainly not interested in providing answers, sending audiences away with the idea that they have been enlightened, except, of course, they have been in so far as he stirs the water and leaves a phosphorescent glow.

His characters are often damaged, sometimes unaware of the source of that damage, or subsisting on denial. They are following a path which seems ordained because the terms of their existence are fixed, or they behave as though they are. But his plays are not versions of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, unrelenting, hermetic, though there are at times echoes of the reflexive humour of *Waiting for Godot*. The joke may be on mankind but he is as interested in the self-inflicted pain, the social ironies, which come from obsessions, prejudices, class and racial presumptions treated as though they have a natural authority, a coherence implying some natural order rather than learned behaviour. Like O'Neill, and the Nietzsche that playwrights read and admired, he sees little evidence of moral progress, human nature resolutely remaining the same along with the conditions of its existence. His are plays about human folly but equally about a wilful embrace of such.

Norris was born in Houston, where his family attended the same church as the Bushes, and grew up there in a largely segregated area, his parents having moved house to avoid the

possibility of bussing, which they believed would damage their children's education, Bruce having a brother and a sister. The only African-American he encountered until his early teens was the family maid, though, when he was seven, a social studies teacher introduced her class to the film of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* which had both an immediate and long-term impact in that he would write a response to it in *Clybourne Park*. In an interview with Tim Sanford, of *Playwrights Horizons*, he remarked on the fact that it 'wasn't really until a couple of years later that I put together the irony that we were watching a movie about someone asking a black family not to move into a neighbourhood when we had taken the other way out, which was we moved out of the neighbourhood. And so, either that social studies teacher was oblivious to what she was showing us, or she was subversive and trying to fuck with our heads a little bit . . . but it did . . . fuck with my head.'<sup>3</sup> Still later, he saw the musical of the play, the actor in him realizing that there was only one part he could play, that of the white man, Karl Lindner, who tries to block the Younger family's access to their future. By the time he wrote *Clybourne Park*, however, he no longer saw himself as playing the role.

His father was a doctor and disciplinarian, 'who ran the house with enormous pressure to behave in a compliant fashion. And that had to do with language' which he was evidently committed to policing, on one occasion upbraiding his son when he used the word 'hooker'. By contrast, his mother was 'very lively and fun and subversive', once with 'aspirations to be a painter or costume designer'<sup>4</sup> but giving these up to raise her family, a sacrifice which, he explained to John Guare, may have played a role in the fact that she became a serious drinker. He had, he said, genetically inherited conflict, his parents waging war on one another, his father being a subtle tyrant, not that the young Bruce registered this, being involved in acting in local productions, recalling, in particular, his appearance in *The Sound of Music*.

He performed at Houston's Alley Theatre (which is where he would get his Equity card), though when he went to Boston University it was as a scenic designer before he moved to Northwestern, in Evanston, as a theatre major. When he left, he found his way as an actor, in Chicago and New York, appearing at the Goodman Theatre and Steppenwolf as well as on Broadway (Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues*, 1985, Wendy Wasserstein's *An American Daughter*, 1997, David Hirson's *Wrong Mountain*, 2000), alongside a number of television projects with minor parts in films (*Class*, 1983, *A Civil Action*, 1998, *Reach the Rock*, 1998, *The Sixth Sense*, 1999). He lived in Chicago for eighteen years before moving to New York in 1997, ultimately abandoning acting because he despised auditions which he found demeaning.

His first play, though, *The Actor Retires*, a comedy produced at the small Remains Theatre in Chicago, in 1991, was, he explained, 'about my own inability to deal with vanity, the actor's narcissism, the actor's twin hats of being grandiose and grovelling . . . its characters, the producers, directors, whoever was being parodied, are portrayed as normal people whereas the sick one is myself. It was also a vanity project because I was in it.' Later, Steppenwolf Theatre commissioned him to write a play called *Blue Bonnet State*, which he described as 'autobiographical in a not very successful way that you have to get out of your system. They did a reading of it. I was in it, but that was part of the problem . . . It had that kind of self-aware autobiographical voice to it. And I didn't like that voice' (xi). It is now, he has said, hidden away forever though did lead to a second commission which turned out to be *The Infidel*, one rooted in part, again, in his own experience but also in a 1993 case involving a New York judge.

Judge Sol Wachtler, New York State's Chief Judge, had had a four-year affair with a woman. When this ended he had stalked her, sending obscene letters and a condom as well as making

a stream of telephone calls. This had culminated in him threatening both her and her daughter, masquerading as a Texas private eye. A central issue was whether he accepted responsibility for his actions and was ready to apologize. His defence was that he had been suffering from a mental illness exacerbated by the amphetamines and tranquilizers he had taken. He was sentenced to fifteen months in prison, serving thirteen. This being America – though it lies outside the scope of the play – on his release Wachtler wrote a memoir and a work of fiction, contributed to *The New Yorker*, was awarded a Chair at the Law and Psychiatry Institute of North Shore Long Island Jewish Hospital and, in 2007, had his New York law licence restored.

As to the personal dimension, while he does not regard it, or *Purple Heart*, which followed, as directly autobiographical both did reflect a moment in his own life. 'Both of these plays,' he confessed, 'are about something deeply personal to me. They're both about things that frightened me in my life, and they're both about things that have to do with love . . . Both plays share a vexed relationship between a man's sexual feelings and his romantic feelings for a woman, and those irreconcilable feelings are something I was going through at the time' (xiii). *The Infidel* was, he has said, his first real play.

It is, indeed, a play about relationships, love, the acceptance of an ordered life or a reckless commitment to a fantasy of possibility. It is also a play which ultimately mocks the desire for resolution, as if drama exists to pose questions only to answer them. Meanwhile, there is little attractive about the central character. He is certainly no Gatsby, blind to his own dangerous romanticism if in some way fascinating in his blind commitment less to a person than an idea of that person.

Staged by Steppenwolf in March 2000, it is set in a room in a federal building, sparsely furnished but with a television and VCR which will play a role in the proceedings as Judge Garvey, who appears in person and on the television screen, sits, in a neat suit (his prison garb having been temporarily exchanged for this), at one end of a table while at the other end, as a guard stands by, is a former colleague, Moss, a hearing officer, set to explore whether he deserves any degree of leniency. It proves a difficult task in that Garvey seems to have trouble concentrating or sustaining a conversation without misunderstandings and digressions. During the proceedings video and sound recordings are played in as evidence of his crime. Beyond the central question of whether he shows any sign of accepting responsibility for his actions, a requirement if he is to qualify for any mitigation, is the issue of his mental competency.

He seems strangely detached, having difficulty focussing, making jokes as if not quite grasping the significance of the situation. The opening dialogue is a series of questions not answered, or deflected, as he tries to explain that he experiences brief caesuras, that it was as if he were entering experiences halfway through, trying to understand the plot of his life perhaps because of the drugs he is taking, twice-a-day lithium to treat transient dissociative aphronia, a borderline personality disorder in which people can disappear for a moment into a void in their minds, a response to feelings of stress or abandonment, and he does claim abandonment. He certainly appears not to appreciate the gravity of his situation or what is required of him despite the fact, as he is reminded, that he had himself drafted the code which requires contrition for an amendment to a sentence. He is, at times, articulate, ironic, while confessing that he finds 'mastering that illusion of sincerity' required of him difficult, a self-defeating confession.

This dialogue, though, is interrupted as his dissociated state finds external expression. Images begin to appear on the television set, a car radio plays and the guard, now transformed

into a trooper, comes forward with a flashlight, playing out an encounter Garvey had had when he was pulled over for crossing lanes without signalling. His behaviour is as strange as it had been before this transformation. Apropos of nothing, he tells the trooper that he should be looking for a man called Claude Tompkins. When the trooper realizes that he is a judge, however, he is waved on his way, but not before that trooper has noted a cowboy hat on the seat, an item whose significance only becomes apparent later.

The action then switches back to the room where he has now been joined by his wife, Helen, who is also to be deposed. Even here, with so much at stake, they cannot resist bickering with one another over trivia even as he wishes to blame her for withdrawing love and sex and hence setting him on a path which made him seek both elsewhere. The irony is that she is the author of *Healthy Sex, Healing Hearts*, holding seminars, previously with her husband's assistance, for fee-paying customers, despite the evident failure of their own marriage in that regard. He, it seems, is not the only one suffering from a degree of disassociation. When she is asked for a definition of mental health she replies, 'An aversion to emotional extremes. An acceptance of the tedium of daily life.'<sup>5</sup>

Beyond a drama about a man systematically behaving in a way which undermines the resolution for which he should hope there is a debate about the legitimate response to life, to relationships. For Helen, men should embrace family, home, security, emotional stability, be, in other words, more like women as she conceives of them, noting that 'a slight increase in estrogen levels in men' frequently brings that about which 'is why geldings are more easily domesticated,' (153) a thought which comes too readily to mind as does her invoking of animals in which the male dies after sex, his biological function over. Men may continue to live but the day comes when they are like cities which surrender to the infidel: 'Every . . . amorous encounter follows a more or less predictable path. It is born and it dies' (155).

On the other hand, Garvey's crime is not only his possessive stalking of a woman, his surrender to excess, rejection of a bland existence. It takes a darker form even as the scene changes again, the guard now a bartender as Garvey, back in this scene from his past, swallows tablets and alcohol asking himself whether marriage was a contract whose terms were unclear, its fine print ignored: 'then thirty years go by and this woman has lain beside you, there she is, night after night, the hair goes gray, the flesh withers, the muscles go slack, she is becoming one with the bed, one continuous undifferentiated mass of beige on beige' (157). 'We're *captives*, you see? And it's *voluntary* captivity. We enlist' (162).

Then we are back in the room again where Garvey is joined by Casper, a lawyer, and Alma, the Hispanic woman he had pursued and, it turns out, threatened. Time has passed, unnoticed by Garvey. Now the evidence against him is laid out, the unsolicited gifts, the multiple telephone calls, answer machine messages and letters, his sudden appearance at her place of work and finally details of threats of violence supposedly from a man in Texas called Claude Tompkins, hence the significance of the cowboy hat in the car and his comment to the trooper. The recordings are played back, Garvey clearly identifiable as he spills out racial abuse. Video is played of him wearing the cowboy hat, lingering outside her apartment and being stopped by the trooper, the last a view from the dashboard camera of the police cruiser. He finally arranges to meet her outside the bar only to be arrested as he kneels down to present her with a ring.

Given the chance to respond, he does little more than suggest that he will one day return to his work in the law. Beyond that, and clearly as a comment with relevance to those who watch the play, he says, 'If you want some sort of climax, some moment in which great truths are

spoken well, check your ticket stubs because you have come to the wrong performance. Whereas in Greek tragedy it would arrive on cue with tears and soliloquies, this happens to be real life and, as such, does not conform to the niceties of dramatic structure . . . however pleasing that might be to contemporary tastes' (183).

Ironically, it does end in tears. Caught making a phone call during a recess he had telephoned not the woman he had so manically pursued, but his wife, asking her 'Why did you stop loving me?' (185) As they all prepare to leave, Moss now tells a story, '*To himself as much as anyone else*,' recounting an experience from his own youth when his mother kissed his brother on the lips at bedtime but never him until he sought to kiss her, only for her to push him away and wipe her mouth with the back of her hand. 'I never kissed her again,' (186) he confesses, love denied leaving its mark.

The characters exit, Garvey now in handcuffs, but the play has not ended. As music plays, snow begins to fall and Alma appears in a winter coat. The door to the bar opens and Garvey steps out. This is the scene from the surveillance videotape, except that the police are not in view as he kneels before her and says, '*Mi preciosa. Mi flaquita. Mi chulita*' (My precious. My dear. My darling) (188). He is, he says, 'awake at last,' but awake to what? His arrest is a moment away, the death of a dream from which he refuses to awake. What he had hoped would open a door in his life is about to slam.

It is a play of some stylistic bravado and one which signals what will emerge as a motif in his work, a sense of an unfolding logic in which his characters are trapped, victims of their own impulses if also evidence of a certain determination as they look, seemingly fruitlessly, to discover meaning beyond the mere unfolding of events. For Garvey and his wife, something has been lost, the future offering nothing but entropy. Love, which to Garvey was to redeem what seemed a life drained of purpose, dies or defers to obsession. What remains is not transcendence but irony.

His next play, *Purple Heart* (2002) was, he explained, 'a huge moment for me when it was done at Steppenwolf. It was when I was making the transition from actor to playwright. It was my first show in the main house so it felt like a validation.'<sup>6</sup> Looking back from the perspective of 2013, he said that it, 'is like my special child that no one ever recognised . . . It's an oddly personal play and about something which I haven't written about in a while, which is – for lack of a better word – love. And how it is expressed in unexpected ways.'<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, it was also a play which he recalled writing out of a sense of rage even as he misremembered writing it during the invasion of Iraq which occurred in the following year, though the echoes of 9/11 were still in the air and it was a decade on from the Gulf War.

The play is set in late 1972, during the Vietnam War whose images he recalled watching on television when he grew up, never believing that America would become involved in further wars. When it was later staged in London, Iraq had happened, as had the invasion of Afghanistan, to his mind two illegitimate wars which had destroyed any optimism he might have felt about an end to the country's overseas ventures. *Purple Heart*, however, is not concerned with the rights or wrongs of Vietnam. It is about loss, private trauma, the contradictions and ambiguities of love, a life continued when its point is no longer clear. Vietnam is seen only out of the corner of the eye. It is an explosion whose echoes, though, still sound for the characters in the play and still echoed three decades later when it was written.

For much of the play love seems in scarce supply. A man, we slowly learn, has died in Vietnam three months earlier leaving a wife who had anyway not seen him for six, sent spinning

## Staging America

into depression and alcoholism, her world diminished, except it gradually emerges that he had been violent himself, suffering from what was surely the stress of war. He had been obsessed with details, like the character in Ernest Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River' for whom a concern with such details, controllable, precise, was an attempt to hold at bay what was not controllable, mere anarchy. We never see this man but his absence registers even as his pain is acknowledged, both he and his wife victims, closing down as the body does certain functions under stress in order to preserve existence, except that in his case this was itself, it seems, to no purpose.

The play is set in the living room of a house in a medium-sized city in the Midwest, though that location plays little role in the play, except in so far as the caustic atmosphere works against any assumption of an average home in a heartland America presumed to be a place of comfort. Carla, a woman in her thirties, lies on a couch, insensible to what is going on around her, in particular to Thor, her twelve-year-old somewhat foul-mouthed if bright son, obsessed with mail order magic tricks which he tries on anyone who will let him. 'I hate you. Lazy whore,' he says to her. 'Watch what you say to me, you little piece of shit,' she replies, mother and son in disharmony. Thor never mentions his dead father but the war has plainly registered as a boy who is into practical jokes enquires how to make punji traps, shit-smearred stakes used by the Viet Cong, is fluent in the language deployed by Vietnamese prostitutes, improvises a flame thrower, and has discovered how to make napalm.

Carla has failed to do the shopping and has liquor concealed in the laundry basket. The sympathy offered to her by neighbours, who have turned up with food as an offering for her loss, fails to address her real feelings, indeed become a constant irritant and reminder of the very fact that has left her with no resource but alcohol. The third person in the house is Grace, her mother-in-law, passive-aggressive, whose disapproval provides the backdrop to this dysfunctional family. Her idea of casual conversation is to tell Carla of a neighbour's oesophageal cancer. 'There's one thing to be grateful for,' she adds, 'We have our health,' (22) this addressed to a woman who has anaesthetized herself with vodka and is pregnant for, beyond the alcoholism, and Norris, of course, had seen such at close hand, there is the issue of Carla's questionable relationships with men.

Grace wears a hearing aid which malfunctions from time to time and she has a tendency to mishear as she also has a tendency towards a cruelty masked as concern, unless that concern itself masks love if not for Carla then for her son whose memory is in danger of being lost, the two people in this house being a last link, each seemingly wrapped up in themselves. On the other hand, she offers a mixture of advice and bland reassurance of a familiar kind even as it seems not to register the nature of her daughter-in-law's despair: 'When Gene [her husband] died I felt for quite some time that I wouldn't be able to go on. I did. Yet here I am . . . you will feel better someday, I think I have enough experience to say so' (24). At the same time, her own mother, she explains, had been born with her internal organs reversed which made her 'by no means convivial', her father meanwhile not being one to complain. Perseverance in the face of problems seems to have been a virtue in her family.

Carla lacks this cheerful assurance. Her husband dead, she is invited to 'Go home. Remember life? Remember living *people*?' (46) even as his commander turns up to present a posthumous medal, accompanied by a photographer to catch the moment. She steps away even as Grace moves forward, adjusting her make-up as she has evidently adjusted her emotions. Life must go on except that Carla cannot quite see why.

It is not a play without humour, Thor given to making ironic comments, Grace's hearing aid to precipitating confusion. Even Carla is capable of moments of wit as she contends with her mother-in-law. For a time, it could almost be a dark sitcom, with family members, at odds, firing off each other, but then it takes a sudden turn as they are joined by another character, Purdy, a corporal in the military who lost his hand to a mine and who visits, though with quite what in mind is never clear. He is a link not to the dead man, who in fact he may not have known, but to Carla since he had found himself in the same hospital as her when, having travelled to her husband's funeral, its open casket a brutal reminder of his fate, she broke down, her hands tied to prevent her doing damage to herself or others. This is the husband who used to hit her in front of the children and who carried a photograph in his wallet not of her or their children but of a young, very young, Vietnamese prostitute sitting on his lap. How, then, love this man? Why a sense of loss? Why a sense of unjustified guilt when the cause of this lay elsewhere in a system which so readily accommodated the need for violence abroad with a seemingly reassuring normality at home, a world of 'comfy sofas and football games and beer and rock and roll and *Playboy* magazine and *The Tonight Show* and *Hollywood Squares* and Hallmark cards . . . and the theatre and church on Sunday' (56). The reference to theatre, in such a list, incidentally reflecting Norris's own scepticism about the world in which he moves.

The Christian love which Grace believes herself to offer, the need, Purdy recalls, 'to love our enemies as ourselves,' supposedly embraced by a Christian country waging war abroad, is, he points out, 'the very same voice, which, with equal urgency, counsels others that the proper thing to do is to roast their enemies' bodies and then say a prayer as they begin dining on their flesh?' (92)

It is some time, however, before this past is revealed so that what had seemed her indifference to her son, her need for liquor, her wilful complicity in her own decline, is only slowly seen to be a result of trauma and with it the possibility that she had in fact loved the man who had abused her and whose own behaviour had been disturbing. There is a painful ambiguity when Carla finally, and seemingly unambiguously, says, 'I loved him so much . . . I miss him so much' (108–9). What is it, after all, that Carla is trying to blot out if not a sense of loss, albeit for a man who exists now only in the minds of these four people in the domestic world of a mid-American home.

It is, Norris has said, in part a play about 'a man who has a thwarted love relationship with a woman,'<sup>8</sup> and, he might have added, she for him. It is not only war that can be corrosive. Love, too, it appears from *The Infidel* and *Purple Heart*, can contain contradictions, its intensity or ending creating collateral damage if also consolation. As Purdy remarks, 'it's such a historically ill-defined and ambiguous notion, pathetic, really, the concept for which more lives have arguably been lost, next to the concept of a *god*, this concept of *love*, a word best spoken through clenched teeth,' but 'I suppose one is forced to fall back on a word like "love" in order to explain his feelings and . . . I'm trying to say, in a roundabout way, and I do hope you won't *laugh* at this . . . because I'm fairly certain that the feeling is at least partly reciprocal, that feeling' (109–10).

Is this what he has come to tell her, a woman whose beauty had struck him when he saw her in the hospital? Is he perhaps himself drawn by love, this man himself damaged by 'buried ordnance,' carrying a wound of his own thus earning himself the Purple Heart of the title, the medal awarded to those wounded or killed in battle, though there are others in this play who qualify for that, Carla having been handed it as if it could fill the sudden void in her life. There seems to be a reconciliation at the end, as she and Grace reach out to each other, Carla pregnant,



though bleeding, except that the play ends as Thor produces a trick can of snakes which his father had arranged to be sent to him. The snakes duly spring into the air but as Purdy remarks, 'Once the snakes are out of the can, how do you get them back in again?' (118) a question which applies equally to a distant war, to the wounds it causes and to love's pleasures and pains.

There is, however, another Purple Heart, beyond that offered for war wounds, though equally a product of war. Speaking of his time in Vietnam, Purdy recalls, 'There was a village. It had been burned the week before. We were on patrol. Came to this village. Behind this hut there was a woman on the ground. A dog had its head inside her rib cage . . . It ran away with something in its mouth. Something purple. Looked like a heart' (116).

There were reviewers who thought this an anti-war play, regretting the absence of more evidence from beyond this Midwestern home, but you do not have to stare into the sun to feel its heat while there are other wars in this play, not least one which a woman declares on herself. As a character in Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* remarks, if two people love one another there can be no happy end to it, one dying before the other. Nor is there any accounting for the ambiguous nature of love, nor for its power to offer consolation only to have such withdrawn. We never see the figure at the heart of the play but do witness the damage caused by the death of a man also at war with himself before he went abroad to wage it on others. Those we do see are all damaged, including Purdy who bears the literal wounds of war and seems studiously polite but is almost a Pinteresque character, ominous, his motives unclear. He describes his hand as 'a little creepy' and that could apply equally to himself.

In the *Chicago Tribune* Michael Phillips found it a mixed bag praising Norris's use of language while finding it hollow. 'Like "The Infidel"' he suggested, 'which drew you ever deeper into one ambiguous creation's psyche' it 'resists easy classification,' confessing, though, that 'This is an excellent sign. Norris is a slippery fish, and well worth encouraging.'<sup>9</sup> Eleven years later, on its British premiere, *Time Out's* Andrzej Lukowski found it, 'a cracking play, a smart excoriation of sentimental assumptions about veterans and war widows that shows Norris's fantastically caustic language and scathing contempt for polite society was in place long before his big West End hit [*Clybourne Park*].'<sup>10</sup>

He followed this play set in the living room of a Midwestern city with a ninety-minute drama set in a nursing home activity room. *We All Went Down to Amsterdam*, 2003, (whose title derives from a scout song, the joke of which turns on the word 'damn' which should not be uttered) features three employees of the home and a man, Mr Wood, recalling his wife and baby but still guilty about some event whose nature does not become clear until the arrival of a stranger who speaks of his fear of water stemming from a childhood swimming lesson when something clearly occurred. Strangers who enter plays are rarely harbingers of joy. As in the song, there is something not to be spoken, not to be acknowledged, opening the door, as it threatens to do, not only on the past but on a view of human nature.

The tension slowly builds, past cruelties having present echoes. Revenge is in the air even as a battle wages between the custodian and one of the inmates who complains of his harassment. These are separate people sharing only their circumstances, perhaps not a plight restricted to those who find themselves forced together with those with whom they have nothing in common, guarding their privacies. For Mr Wood the past is less consolation than threat. As often in Norris's work, what is repressed forces its way to the surface, humour, as in Beckett or Pinter, less solace than the source of a dispiriting irony. He has described it as, 'sort of a comedy'

and 'sort of sick'.<sup>11</sup> These are characters aware of what has been lost. In 2018 Norris said that he regarded the play as unfinished.

There is loss, too, at the heart of his next play, *The Pain and the Itch*, which opened at Steppenwolf Theatre in June, 2005, before moving to Playwrights Horizons in New York, the following year. The loss here is of a moral compass, a sense of values which go beyond the pieties of a liberal elite. It is a play which seems to move into familiar territory, that of an American family tearing itself apart, in this case in several directions, husband battling with wife, brother against brother, one of those against his mistress, even mother love being in short supply, each with secrets suddenly exposed, wounds to open. There is the same corrosive wit which characterized *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *August: Osage County*, the same sense that beyond this family something is falling apart on a wider scale. For much of the time it seems a satire of rich liberals whose politics begin and end with a fashionable rhetoric which places social justice on a par with the choice of the right food or drink, cant about honouring emotions, concern with the threat from invading animals, the caffeine in Coke, chemicals in the environment, children's games involving guns, swords or martial arts. They are against genetically modified food as they are against George Bush and anyone who voted for him: 'you TGI Fridays customer. You TJ Maxx shopper with your iceberg lettuce and your ranch dressing and the right to vote.'<sup>12</sup> Quite what they are in favour of, though, beyond their own self-satisfaction, is far from clear.

In 2015 a development at Liverpool Street station in London uncovered a group of what had evidently been hastily buried skeletons from the Black Death plague of 1665. Just below the surface of modern life lay evidence of pain, a more primal experience. In the intricately constructed world of *The Pain and the Itch* there are other buried bodies, other evidences of what has been hastily covered up, of primitive instincts beneath what passes for contemporary civilization.

The occasion is a Thanksgiving dinner, though this rapidly devolves into vituperation and invective even as it is almost the length of the play before the audience is made aware of the dangerous current that has been flowing beneath the surface but which eventually, and in a dramatic twist, breaks surface. The brittle arguments, practiced insults, recalled injustices reshaped as weapons, suddenly seem minor beside the immediate cause.

The family consists of husband and wife, Clay and Kelly, she being the one who brings in the money, he relegated to looking after their daughter Kayla when he is not playing golf. The power clearly lies with her, she even demanding that he kill his cat in case it brings any disease into the house (toxoplasmosis), a sensitivity which is eventually revealed as ironic since far worse has already invaded their home. At the same time, she is worried about glue traps for pest control because they cause animal suffering and are sadistic, despite not being beyond a certain sadism herself when it comes to treatment of her husband. Sex, it turns out, is not much on her agenda while he amasses videotapes of pornography left casually around the house.

Kelly polishes her liberal credentials the better to reflect her sense of her own moral superiority, itself, it transpires, suspect. She expresses concern for other people while more concerned with her lifestyle than their lives. Her equilibrium, though, which she works so fastidiously to maintain, is easily disturbed. The castle of her detachment has already been stormed. She may maintain a sexual distance from the husband who has retreated to pornography, but her sexual defences have already been breached.

## Staging America

Clay's life reverberates with its vacuity. He seems to have no function beyond echoing his wife's paranoia. He segues with ease from discussions of trivia (whether an avocado is a fruit or a vegetable) to social analyses which collapse of their own weight. This society, he declares, in a Mametesque speech, 'our society, as a whole . . . (*Flailing.*) Okay. Once again. What does that *mean*? Society as a whole? I don't even know what that *means*. I can only talk about *us*. The things that motivate *us*, because - ' (11) He loses his way linguistically, as he does in other respects.

Both claim to have been abused, though this seems little more than an attempt to climb on board what evidently strikes them as a fashionable cause, her abuse consisting, she insists, of 'Neglect alternating with sarcasm,' 'emotional *abuse*,' (50) Clay explains in the face of his mother's scepticism. She claims as an authority Alice Miller, the Swiss psychotherapist and psychologist who, ironically, given that Kelly invokes her, had argued that a child's need for love was often exploited by parents for their own purposes. Clay, meanwhile, insists that he was more abused than his brother, a case, it seems, less of abuse than sibling rivalry.

Clay has not seen his brother, Cash, a plastic surgeon, for some while, the reason only apparent later in the play. For much of the time Cash appears a sardonic observer, offering quips from the sidelines, suggesting a sense of detachment, even from his trophy girlfriend Kalina, an immigrant beautician, not quite a master of the language, treated with casual contempt but with secrets of her own which link her to this family in freefall. She is startlingly anti-Semitic and racist, but herself the victim of genuine and terrifying abuse in her own country, and here is where the play becomes more than a critique of certain liberals. Clay and Cash's mother, Carol, who struggles with her memory and tends to deal with contention by blithely ignoring it, declares herself a socialist blind to what that has meant for Kalina living in a socialist country in which, as a girl, she had been repeatedly raped by soldiers and suffered a botched abortion, a confession which elicits no response from this family with its expressed concern for the fate of others, beyond Cash's determination to correct her English. They see no connection with their own lives, except that there is one which, when revealed, explains the title.

It turns out that she was infected by the soldiers and has passed that infection to Cash who has then passed it to Kelly, he having an affair with his brother's wife. Finally, that infection has passed to Kelly's daughter, Kayla, who has developed a rash, the visible evidence of a connection, the itch which they, unlike Kayla, do not wish to scratch.

There is another character, albeit one we never see. She is a maid who lacks English and to whom the family condescend even as Carol accuses her of theft, albeit of half of a twelve-dollar loaf, that being the kind of loaf this family buys. She, it turns out, is the reason the story of the evening unfolds.

*The Pain and the Itch* begins oddly in that a character called Mr Hadid is being consoled though who he is and why he should need consoling is far from clear. For some reason he constantly asks about the cost of everything, including the house, as if taking an inventory, trying to get some purchase on who this family are and what they value. For most of the play he is a marginal figure, his presence unexplained, until it becomes apparent that he is in some way responsible for the action, prompting a series of scenes which are then played back as police might reconstruct the prelude to a crime.

The story of their Thanksgiving, in a family in which there is little evidence of cause for thanks, is retrieved for the benefit of Mr Hadid, replayed in an attempt for him to understand its significance, what generated the momentum that led to an action which preceded the first

scene but of which the audience will remain in ignorance until the play nears its end. In one sense, fate had its hand in a series of events, conversations, which seem no more than evidence of contingency as Clay, chasing what he presumes is a squirrel, accidentally smashes a window which triggers an alarm which in turn precipitates a telephone call from the police who overhear an accusation of theft against Mr Hadid's wife, the maid, whose headscarf suggests she is a Muslim. This in turn leads to a police raid and her arrest shortly after she has injected herself with insulin, suffering, as she does, from diabetes. When they refuse to allow her to eat she goes into a coma and dies. Where does responsibility lie since there is a logical connection between what has happened in this discordant house, with its tensions, suspicions, racial prejudices, sometimes overt, sometimes implicit, and the death of a woman? Nor is this the only evidence of human cruelty and dereliction.

No one's hands in this family, celebrating an American festival, are clean. 'Basically,' says Clay, 'we're about the family,' in a play in which the family, an American icon, implodes, while beyond them is a world with its own cruelties, sometimes buried but sometimes, as in the plague victims, forcing their way to the surface. It is surely not simply about 'the shallow nature of the liberal views espoused by members of the urban bourgeoisie,' as Charles Isherwood suggested in his *New York Times* review, adding that the practices in the play were 'too unrelievably repellent to be mistaken for the real behaviour of real people.'<sup>13</sup> Indeed in speaking of his work Norris has remarked, 'I would say it's not about a mission to unmask the privileged bourgeois hypocrites . . . and it's not a campaign to bring down the American way of life. I guess, if I were to be pretentious about it, it's a campaign to bring down the species. I think as a species we have some big problems that are unsurmountable. I think we are . . . doomed, and our responsibility is to just be perpetually vigilant to our worst tendencies.'<sup>14</sup>

The cruelties in the play, indeed, have more than an American accent, distrust of those who fail to share a language, a faith, an ideology being too familiar to be denied. As Norris suggests, we seem hardwired to seek advantage, privilege our own, condone or ignore the pain of those remote from ourselves but also those closer to home where betrayal is an instinct not always denied. He has declared himself a pessimist believing that 'Optimism is dangerous. It provides a soft cushion: we become less vigilant, and we need to be constantly vigilant to the worst excesses of our behaviour . . . Our competitive instincts outnumber our cooperative instincts by a factor of 3.6 to 1 . . . As a species, we usually do the wrong thing.'<sup>15</sup>

It was John Galsworthy who suggested that the optimist is someone, 'who cannot bear the world as it is, and is forced by his nature to picture it as it ought to be, and the pessimist one who cannot only bear the world as it is, but loves it well enough to draw it faithfully . . . the true painter of human life one who blinks at nothing' and may thus be its true benefactor.<sup>16</sup> Norris claimed that he was a pessimist but not a cynic: 'Cynical would imply one is indifferent to outcomes. I'm very sad about the outcome of things – but I feel unable to do anything about them.'<sup>17</sup>

He has named his favourite author as the British economist and philosopher John Gray, whose 'recurrent theme is about the folly of optimism.'<sup>18</sup> Gray rejected the Enlightenment's assumption that history is progressive along with the notion that human nature advances in the way that science does, one evidence for the contrary being the American use of torture as well as the damage wrought by communism. Why, then, write plays? 'What I'm doing, by writing plays, is just completely selfish. If you want to change the world, and you go into theatre as a way to do that, I feel you've chosen the most inefficient means possible.'<sup>19</sup>

## Staging America

Perhaps, too, it is worth recalling another Galsworthy observation, in relation to *The Pain and the Itch*. He insisted that dramatic action is 'what characters do, at once contrary, as it were, to expectation, and yet because they have already done other things. No dramatist should let his audience know what is coming; but neither should he suffer his characters to act without making his audience feel that those actions are in harmony with temperament, and arise from previous known actions, with the temperaments and previous known actions of the other characters in the play. The dramatist who hangs his characters to his plot, instead of hanging his plot to his characters, is guilty of cardinal sin.'<sup>20</sup>

In 2006 Norris staged another play at Steppenwolf Theatre, which once again proposed an apparently unchanging human nature, the capacity of people to be blind to their own hypocrisies, a comedy with an increasingly dark undertow. *The Unmentionables*, set in a Western equatorial country, begins with Etienne, a sixteen-year-old black boy, telling the audience, in what is described as halting, thickly French-African-accented English, that if they think they will be improved as people from watching the play they would be better off going home to watch television, inviting them to demand their money back, even as the usual announcements about cell phones and the use of cameras are made. It is a meta-theatrical gesture which is not repeated until the end of the play, even as Etienne turns out to be a key figure within it.

The events unfold in a house reaching back to colonial times but now bearing the marks of what is described as American good taste. In other words, for all the passage of time there is a certain continuity as the Americans gathered here serve their own purposes even as they insist that they have come to improve the spiritual or material well-being of the native population. Dave is a missionary who sets up a school trading education for religious indoctrination. It is not, as Auntie Mimi, a woman with political power, observes, 'giving to make them sit in a classroom while you lecture to them about Jesus Christ, and only *then* do you give them a bowl of Kellogg's Frosted Flakes. I do not call this giving.'<sup>21</sup>

His partner, Jane, is an actress who has given up her part in a meretricious television show, having been inspired by pictures of suffering Africans, wishing to do 'something meaningful for a change, rather than waste another year of my life churning out mindless, moronic shit for the consumption of an audience of shithheads,' (36) bearing in mind that the play had begun with the suggestion that the audience should abandon the theatre for, presumably, just such television programmes. Ironically, it is her appearance on television which gives her leverage in a country whose heat and conditions she had not anticipated and which prompt an illness which may or may not be real.

They are sheltering in this house, owned by an American businessman because their school has been burned down, their activities evidently not appreciated by some in a country whose politics are corrupt, his predecessor having been killed and his body dismantled, his homosexuality evidently not to be tolerated. Dave is, it turns out, a virgin, a symbol of an innocence which, it seems, can contain its own dangers. At what point does innocence become self-absorption, wilful ignorance?

The businessman, Don, married to the seemingly vacuous Nancy, hair dyed blond, twenty years his junior and with a child-like sentimentality when it comes to her dog, boasts of bringing work to the country, ignoring the price in terms of the environment, the 'concentration of atmospheric mercury downwind of the plant,' the 'arsenic in the groundwater ... , the forty percent spike in infant mortality within a three-mile radius of the production

facility,' (62–3), charges brought against him by Dave, all facilitated by a cosy relationship to the government.

At the same time Don insists that he is not only concerned with the bottom line, that he is 'a person with feelings,' (71) anxious to understand, to show empathy, defending Dave on the grounds that he and Jane are guests in his house, a moral fastidiousness which seems not to extend beyond its bounds. He even admires Dave as an optimist, in Norris's vocabulary not a positive quality more especially since he is a man for whom religious faith takes primacy. These are all people who say they wish to make a difference even as what seems to motivate them is a desire to make a difference in their own lives, to respond to a sense of personal dissatisfaction, incompleteness. As Norris has said, 'Either [the American characters] have decided to go there to make money but are telling themselves it's for the good of the community, or they've gone there to do good for the community but in fact are trying to gratify their own egos, so it's all about what people intend and what they say they intend.'<sup>22</sup> Nancy, wishing to offer evidence of her own emotional involvement in the world, declares that she had lost someone in 9/11 but, pressed, explains that it was her brother's wife's sister's best friend in high school's cousin, 'things like that,' she explains, being 'just extremely hard for me to recover from.'<sup>(79)</sup> Where, in such a world, does authenticity lie?

*The Unmentionables* is not an indictment of those who seek to help those in need, but an exploration of tangled motives, the degree to which self-concern lies at the heart of actions. It is not simply a demonstration of the continued impact of neo-colonialism, though it is plainly that, but of the blindness – moral, political, social – of those who intervene in a world of which they know little being equally myopic about their own actions, convinced that they are agents of progress.

The play takes a sudden turn when Dave disappears, apparently kidnapped as his predecessor had been. The tension grows greater when Etienne tries to retrieve a track shoe he had left in the house (a reward for doing the military's urging and burning the school) and is seized and interrogated as to Dave's whereabouts. Given the urgency, they debate whether or not he should be tortured for the information, the ticking bomb scenario actively debated in America following 9/11, torture becoming official American policy with even the Democrats signing up to it. Here, only the doctor, cynical but rational, disagrees, resisting the panic which overtakes the others. Even Jane finally agrees only for Dave to reappear having spent time on the beach. Don, the chief advocate, is reduced to stuttering self-justification: 'I, uh . . . I don't know, I do still contend that, uh . . . there's a fundamental . . . a responsibility that we . . . that all of us . . . uh . . .' (127).

In the face of what has happened, they all turn inward, Nancy going in search of her sleeping pills, Jane asking the doctor to replace the pills she has been taking only to be told that they were placebos, while Dave is in tears having doubts about his faith and sexuality. The play ends as Etienne once again addresses the audience reminding them that he had advised them to watch TV instead of a play which is '*depressin*'. Make pipo feel bad,' (131) precisely the accusation often levelled at Norris.

To one side of the action throughout, apparently detached, sceptical, ironic, is a black doctor, 'who gets stoned all the time and who's a completely morally irresponsible person.' He, Norris has said, is 'like me, and so gets to be my voice in the play.'<sup>23</sup> It is the doctor who underlines how little things have changed: 'what is interesting about the *Americans*' he says, is that they are convinced that 'they are very *different* . . . You always say to us, no no no, we are not like the

## Staging America

Belgians or the French or the English . . . *We don't want to prosper. No, the Americans, you see, they must always believe they have come to this country for the good of the world . . . we never mention that this is the same thing people have been promising to us for the past five hundred years'* (93–4). Is this a lesson that will be carried away from the theatre after this ninety-minute play when Etienne declares, 'Timah go home?' (131) They watch, 'for about ninety minutes,' Norris has said, 'and then . . . go home and I don't think the experience really exists outside of those ninety minutes.'<sup>24</sup>

And there is, of course, a question as to how far art can impact on the world beyond the foyer. David Hare, in the mid-1970s, had to admit that socialist theatre in Britain, far from shaping the culture, had proved irrelevant to those who went out and voted for Margaret Thatcher, and continued to do so. Brecht may have changed theatre but did he change the world? Olafur Eliasson, the Icelandic-Danish artist, though, has said that art can make the world 'felt'. It may capture it in a way that statistics and analyses do not, and that that may be a spur to thought and with thought comes the possibility of action. There have certainly been occasions and times when gathering together for a performance was subversive and even illegal, governments sufficiently convinced of theatre's capacity to threaten their authority to ban it, but propinquity may be no more than the condition of consumption, a momentary sharing with no residue beyond the pleasure of the moment, a consolidation of existing convictions, or a fond memory.

Yet plays exist in the world and are as real as anything else which bears upon our consciousness. Terrence McNally has insisted on the ability of theatre to change minds, citing *Death of a Salesman* as a play which forced a re-examination of how people felt about national values no less than familial relationships. Why, then, does Norris so frequently insist that they are written for the sheer enjoyment of doing so, and consumed as a passing pleasure? Well, he does not entirely. He has spoken of his plays as candies with a bitter centre, and that bitter centre is designed to provoke, disturb, leave a taste in the mouth. Is that a taste which survives the journey home? He suggests not but some tastes are remarkably persistent. There was a play, though, which arguably did have an impact on the world, which left its taste beyond the moment, one which he had known from his early days at school, and it was to that play that he now turned.

In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry staged a play on Broadway, the first by a black American woman to be presented there. In many ways it reflected her own family's experiences. Her father had been a real estate broker and, in 1938, bought a house for his family in the Washington Park Subdivision of the South Side of Chicago (a house, ironically, designated an historical monument in 2010). The problem was that this was an all-white area and legal attempts were made to force them out, invoking a then common restrictive covenant. Hansberry herself was nearly injured when a brick was thrown through their window. She described their time there as hellishly hostile. The case reached the Supreme Court. When her father died, eight years later, she claimed that American racism had been partly to blame. It was a battle, though, which clearly inspired her. At the University of Wisconsin, she became involved in a campaign to integrate a dormitory. She then became a staff member at Paul Robeson's *Freedom Newspaper* and was involved in the Civil Rights movement as well as protesting the execution of the Rosenbergs.

*A Raisin in the Sun* opened in March 1959 and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best play before being staged around the world. It ran for 530 performances. Her

second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, closed on her death, by pancreatic cancer, five years later. Her final work, *Les Blancs*, begun in 1960 in response to seeing Jean Genet's *Les Nègres*, but not finished until after her death when it was completed from her notes by her husband, Robert Nemiroff, addressed the subject of colonialism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa.

*A Raisin in the Sun* concerns the efforts of the Younger family to move into a new house in a white area only to find themselves approached to withdraw, mirroring her own family's experience. As noted earlier, the only character Norris could identify with when he first saw the film of it as a child was that of Karl Lindner, the white man who tries to buy them off. 'That's a lesson,' he confessed, 'that sticks with you, the lesson that you are, essentially, the villain in someone else's story . . . Many years later,' he explained, 'I thought, what if we turned the story around and told it from the opposite angle, the angle of people like my family, the villains, the ones who wanted to keep them out?'<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, he decided to revisit the play setting the first act in 1959 and the second fifty years later, though this time focussing not on the Younger family, battling with their own problems as well as with those who try to stop them realizing their dream, but on two white families, the first in 1959, selling to the Youngers, and the second, in 2009, as a white family wish to buy and rebuild the house, the area being gentrified, their plans to be approved by the local housing association, one of whose representatives is a great-niece of Lena Younger. It was a play, he has said, 'aimed specifically at white people, taking a swing at people like me and all our insincere etiquette around race.'<sup>26</sup>

It is set on Clybourne Street in Chicago, in a modest three-bedroom bungalow, as, in the first act, a white couple, Russ and Bev, prepare to move out of the house the Youngers are buying (Clayborn Park, without the 'e', is a small playground close to Steppenwolf Theatre which itself is on the corner of North Halsted and Clybourn Avenues). All seems to be well as they banter with one another but, as with *The Pain and the Itch*, and beyond the question of race which quickly emerges, there is an issue not to be addressed, a pain suppressed. There is a reason they are moving, beyond the convenience of the new location. They had a son who had served in the military during the Korean War, now six years in the past. One day, two-and-a-half years before the action of the play, he had gone to his room and hanged himself. His effects are upstairs in a trunk, evidently the last thing to be brought down as they prepare to move, and not only, perhaps, because it is a two-person job.

Russ no longer attends Rotary, the first intimation of something wrong, underlined when Bev says, 'please don't say *what's the point*' insisting that, 'I don't intend to live the remainder of my life like that and I think you could take notice of the fact that talking that way *frightens* me.'<sup>27</sup> A dream had died for them as, for another reason, it had nearly for the Youngers. He is wrestling with despair, sitting up until three in the morning, she increasingly lonely, desperate at potentially losing more than a son, offering to play cards with him, suggesting that he take Sominex as though his despair can be addressed by a good night's sleep or simple diversions. Time has not healed him nor does it seem likely to even as Bev subsists on denial.

Into this house, already tense, in which a white couple are not simply the abstract threat of Hansberry's play in which they do not appear, comes an asinine minister, evidently at Bev's suggestion, with his own blithe nostrums for what he characterizes as Russ's tendency to *brood* which he insists is '*not productive*' (19). The problem is that their dead son, Kenneth, far from being a hero, had killed civilians, that in one sense the community would be glad to see them



## Staging America

go, relieving them of the social embarrassment of their presence, except it emerges that they have sold their house to a black family thus compounding their offence.

Their only contact with the black community is by way of their maid, Francine, to whom Bev condescends, blithely unaware of her crassness, along with Francine's husband, Albert, quietly tolerant while, like his wife, conscious of the casual and unacknowledged racism to which they are submitted. 'I don't know *what* I would do,' Bev tells Albert, 'without a friend like Francine here, and on a *Saturday*,' as if her relationship with Francine were anything other than that of demanding employer, understanding nothing, and caring less, about those from a world not her own, Francine having three children of her own to look after.

The issue becomes sharper with the arrival of Karl Lindner, the go-between from Hansberry's play, and his deaf wife Betsy, in some ways a personification of the deafness of this community to the issues at stake. Karl is sensitive to 'cold beverages,' but not to much else beyond his own sense of racial privileges to be maintained. He takes pride in the community tolerating what is presumably a Jewish store keeper called Gelman, replacing the former owner with the impeccably American name of Kopeckne, but is affronted by the fact that the new owners of this house will be coloured (corrected, by Jim, to Negro, anxious not to offend on the level of language but happy to do so in other respects, as he is when he explains that he had come to speak to the man in the house).

He meets unexpected opposition from Bev and Russ, not least because an appeal to respect the wishes of their community means nothing when they have been treated with such disregard and hostility because of their son's offences: 'I'll tell you what, I don't give a shit if a hundred Ubangi tribesmen with a bone through their noses overrun this goddamn place, cuz I'm *through with all of you*, ya motherfucking sons of bitches' (49). The first act ends as Russ prepares to bury his son's trunk in the back yard, a trunk containing his last letter to his parents.

What is striking about this act, in a play prompted by Hansberry's drama, which in turn was generated from her own experience of bitter race relations, is the degree to which it places at its heart the trauma of a white couple stunned by a loss which has drained their lives of meaning, a couple who, for all their own insensitivities, fail to embrace the racism of neighbours whose callousness they have themselves experienced. To be sure, representatives of those neighbours evidence the same calculated hostility as in Hansberry's play, Karl Lindner reprising his role, but there is something else going on here. The crimes committed by Bev and Russ's son in the Korean War foreshadow those perpetrated in Vietnam and the Iraq war, the latter finally concluded in the year of *Clybourne Park*'s premiere, crimes of a kind itemized in Pulitzer Prize-winner Chris Hedges' book, *Collateral Damage: America's War Against Iraqi Civilians*, published in 2008.

It is not that Norris becomes distracted from the issue of a black family trying to buy in a white neighbourhood but that he seems to be interested in seeing this in the wider context of an unyielding or, at best, contradictory human nature. American racism sinks its roots into something altogether more primal, clan loyalties and prejudices having a history longer than that of the American Republic, shifting in form and expression but a default setting, it seems, resisted, transcended but of remarkable persistence.

So what difference would fifty years make, the second act taking place in 2009, in the same bungalow but this time bearing the marks of the intervening period characterized, as it is, as evidencing a general shabbiness? The area itself has suffered from white flight. Gelman's store has been torn down, as has its successor, the only white person remaining being a mentally

damaged man who had worked in the original store. The same actors appear but now playing different roles. Norris had thought of precisely mirroring the first act but abandoned the idea: 'I had originally thought I wanted to take the same collection of characters as in the first act, and line-by-line and scene-by-scene reproduce the structure of the first act intact, in order, in a ham-fisted way, to say nothing has changed, nothing is different. But that became a useless exercise.'<sup>28</sup> It does, though, begin with what seems the same kind of ostensibly inconsequential conversation, the same games, which had opened the first act.

This time it is whites who are buying, planning the demolition of the house and the erection of another, community complaints now focussing on what is perceived to be a property which would be out of keeping with the surrounding ones. In both periods monetary values are what is at stake.

The actors who had played Francine and Albert now appear as Lena and Kevin, their descendants, like their counterparts having three children. For Lena, the house, which had belonged to her great-aunt, and in which she had played as a child, has a history, 'part of my *history* and my *parent's history*' and '*respecting* that memory: that has value, too,' (79) being a link back to a time when buying the house involved something beyond negotiating modifications and constructing a koi pond. Unlike their forebears, Lena and Kevin are international travellers, apparently skiers while in the first act Jim, desperate to justify racial distinctions, had claimed that black people did not ski. Things have changed and things have remained the same. The echoes are clear. In the first act Karl, in response to suggestions that in principle everyone had a right to live where they wished, replied, 'But you can't live in a *principle*' (35) while in the second act it is Kevin who responds to his wife's suggestion that she is concerned less with her personal connection to the house than with the principle by observing that 'you can't *live* in a *principle*' (86).

Race is a subject to be skirted around even as it is central to the history of the house and community. It is Lena who points out that the changes in the area have an economic and even political motive deploying the same arguments used against her great-aunt – 'It happens one house at a time,' (96) – the difference being that the argument deployed by those wishing to stop black people moving into a white area – that it would depress property values – is now used in reverse, whites moving into a black area driving prices up.

The whites, anxious to gentrify the property, are desperate not to seem less than liberal except that the issue of race seems unavoidable and duly breaks surface, Lena, in the context of a discussion about property, reminding them that they live in a country where black people were once regarded as themselves property. For his part, Steve, one of the couple anxious to conclude their plans, (played by the actor who had played Karl in act one), objects that, 'Every single word we say is – is – scrutinised for some latent – Meanwhile you guys run around saying N-word this and N-word that,' before telling a racist joke whose offence, Lena declares, is not that it is racist but that it is not funny before herself telling one.

The past, though, is not easily buried. Indeed, it takes concrete form when the trunk buried by Albert fifty years earlier is disinterred. As everybody but Dan, who had uncovered it, leaves, he removes an envelope containing the letter Kenneth had written to his parents before killing himself and, as he does so, the figure of Kenneth, wearing his military uniform, appears, the lights change and we are back in 1959 as he writes the letter. His mother, Bev, joins him and Francine enters, the Francine who will later discover his body. Bev turns to Kenneth and, with an irony which reaches out beyond the moment, beyond the question of race relations, beyond

## Staging America

even what is about to happen and which she is powerless to prevent: 'I think things are about to change. I really do. I know it's been a hard couple of years for all of us, I know they have been, but I really believe things are about to change for the better. I firmly believe that' (115). They are indeed, but not for the better. Hers is a Panglossian view upheld even following her son's death and, in a sense, consonant with that of a country ever glimpsing the green light across the bay, pursuing happiness (the word happiness, incidentally, substituted by Thomas Jefferson for the word property but somehow always allied with it) and with a sense of the irrelevance of history to the national creed of advancement.

It is in some ways a play about the persistence of perceived difference, the seemingly ineradicable impulse to defend your own, no matter how that may be defined, race against race, religion against religion, nation state against nation state. It is about marking out territory, arbitrary but patrolled as if sanctioned. As Norris has said, 'It's going to happen 50 years from now. It's going to happen a hundred years from now. The details may change. It may be Hispanics versus Asian-Americans. It may be Hindus versus Muslims. We don't know, but the behaviour of humans tends to repeat itself,'<sup>29</sup> which, of course, is underlined by the way in which the second act mirrors the first, language, etiquette, social behaviour changing even as the instinct for suspicion and prejudice remains.

Beyond that, however, lie the divisions within the family or, indeed, the self (Hansberry had her own divisions not only being married to a white man but also being a lesbian). It is about language as denial and weapon, about human nature and its disturbing consistency, rationality's losing battle with emotion, what lies below a surface civility. What else motivates anyone, Norris asks, but an Ayn Rand-sanctioned selfishness, or, given his next play, Adam Smith-sanctioned, something no less true of liberals such as himself, even if the price to pay is guilt, which, after all, may have its own perverse pleasures?

At the same time, it is a funny play, much of the humour generated by the gulf between the characters, their lack of self-awareness, their desperate attempts to adjust their language to what they presume is socially acceptable. On the other hand, humour can itself be an agent of prejudice not always neutralized by a claimed irony. It can, in Norris's words, be disruptive.

*Clybourne Park* received overwhelmingly positive reviews on both sides of the Atlantic. In America it won both a Tony and the Pulitzer Prize while, in England, it won the Olivier Award for Best New Play. Reviewing the Woolly Mammoth Theatre production, Peter Marks commented on its humour finding it, 'one of [the] feistiest, funniest evenings in years.' It was a 'delectable comedy of inadvertent bad manners' one of whose strengths was his 'sophisticated take on the treacherousness of language.'<sup>30</sup> Reviewing the London transfer to the West End, in *The Telegraph*, Charles Spencer observed that,

I raved over Bruce Norris's drama about property and racial tensions in America when it opened at the Royal Court last summer . . . The good news is that *Clybourne Park* seems every bit as intelligent, funny and provocative on second viewing, and this welcome West End transfer proves a thrilling shot in the arm for London's commercial theatre. The first thing to be said is that the play is often outrageously funny as it tramples over politically correct pieties, revealing that racism is still a live issue in the States, even though most middle-class whites prefer to forget the fact. But the piece also has emotional depth.<sup>31</sup>

Norris followed it with something of a fantasy, a dark comedy about free will versus determinism, which opened at Steppenwolf in 2010. It was Benjamin Disraeli's Mr Beckendorf, in *Vivian Grey*, who remarked that, 'Man is not the creature of circumstances, circumstances are the creatures of men. We are free agents, and man is more powerful than matter.'<sup>32</sup> The truth, or otherwise, of that, of course, would be aided were it possible to see the future or test the feasibility of taking different paths, a familiar trope of science fiction. Here, that is the central device of a play which, at its heart, has what may or may not be a figure from the future depending on whether what we see is real or the projection of a character suffering from delusions. There is, though, one central inevitability which structures human lives. We are born to die and spend our time in denial, looking to discover some meaning, no matter how slight, no matter how contingent, that can hint at an agency which seems refuted by the very terms of our existence. It is that inevitability, or, rather, the pathway to it, which is debated in the play by a woman who wishes to lay claim to her freedom, to be in control of her own destiny.

*A Parallelogram* has distant echoes of J.B. Priestley and Edward Albee in that it plays games with time, and, as in the latter's *Three Tall Women*, presents three stages of a woman's life using different actors. It begins with Bee, in her early thirties, a woman who is living with Jay, late forties, early fifties, who has abandoned his wife and children for her, only for her to suffer from what appears to be uterine cancer necessitating a hysterectomy and something altogether more serious.

In truth it is hard to see what really brings them together or what their future might be. She asks him how he would feel about his life if he knew there was nothing he could do to change it. It is not something that engages him. It is that question, though, which is in part answered when Bee is allowed a glimpse into that future with the aid of a device, wielded by Bee 2, Bee 3 and Bee 4, in their sixties and seventies, which puts her in touch with her future selves. While these do not resemble one another exactly, Norris explains in a note on the characters, they do dress similarly and grow alike as the play proceeds, even to the extent of mirroring one another's mannerisms. Are these, though, projections of a brain tumour she develops or genuine figures from the future, as Marley's ghost offers Scrooge glimpses of paths taken or to be taken, though Scrooge is granted an epiphany, the possibility of change, which here seems denied.

The play begins with strange electronic sounds, as the lights come on to reveal Bee 2 in a shabby sweatshirt, with thick glasses and a tote bag, smoking a cigarette. In her hand is what looks like a remote control. This is the device which, when pressed, can revisit and animate the past, fast forward, rewind, mute the action, a past which now reveals Bee and Jay in conversation even as Bee 2 remains there but unseen. Jay divides his time between watching sport on television and bemoaning the lot of men. When he leaves the room for a moment, though, Bee and Bee 2 speak to each other, Bee alone being able to see these older women though later she will assume other forms, other characters who are visible. Jay smells the cigarette Bee 2 had been smoking. Something, then, is detectable, passing through the membrane of time. Bee 2 brings news to her younger self that her fate is fixed, including the fact that she is going to take up smoking.

Convinced that change must be possible, that different decisions can be made, Bee is allowed to replay scenes in the hope that things will have a different outcome. It seems they will not, apparent changes swiftly corrected. When Jay cuts his foot on broken glass she is allowed to replay the scene so he can be warned. He treads on the glass just the same. This is the world of John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra*. The implication is disturbing, she desperately insisting

## Staging America

that, 'My life is not meaningless. I am going to make a *difference*. A significant, tangible, *positive* –' She breaks off, interrupted and unable to see how she might bring this about more especially since Bee 2 gives her no grounds for optimism.

The news she brings is dispiriting. Bee is informed that she will one day look in the mirror and see a fat, near-sighted old woman, watching television and smoking. Beyond that, she is told not only that she will not be remembered, or those she had once loved, but that major events, such as the Holocaust or 9/11, will not either, since everyone is essentially only concerned with themselves, the past disappearing in the rear-view mirror. 'I know it's not a nice thing to say . . . but remember nine-eleven? I know it's not nice, but listen – fifteen, twenty years from now, you're gonna be downtown and you'll be on your way to lunch or the dry cleaners . . . and you'll go past that spot and you'll be like, oh yeah, there's that fountain where those planes ran into those buildings – But other than that you really won't think about it that much' (30). She has a further piece of depressing news. Most of humanity will be destroyed by a global plague, though, Bee 2, with calculated humour, suggests that at least parking will be easier.

There is a reason, then, for what appears an attempted suicide, Bee overwhelmed, it seems, by what strikes her as the futility of existence, exacerbated by the fact that Jay will, apparently, return to his former wife as she will establish a relationship with JJ, the man who mows their lawn, a relationship which, she is told, will end before he dies, falling off a ladder. Jay's former wife will also die, leaving him alone. For the most part, Bee 2 remarks, old age is horrible but at least passions and commitments now fade to the point that she will no longer 'give a shit'.

With a push of the button, Bee is in a hospital room. Bee 2 is now dressed as a doctor, renamed Bee 3 though still in possession of the time-shifting device, or perhaps it is only a pager since she challenges Bee's suggestion that she is a later version of herself. Is she, then, from the future or a projection caused by Bee's brain tumour, a glioblastoma, one of whose side-effects is a problem with vision, potentially seeing things that are not there? If the latter, Bee 2, 3 and 4 do not exist but the earlier smell of cigarette smoke had come from somewhere.

Increasingly desperate, Bee declares, 'Even if I can't change anything about the ultimate – I mean, yes, the world will still be a terrible, horrible place and our lives ultimately meaningless – but what if for, like, two *seconds* . . . If for one tiny little moment I make things *nicer*. . . even if it's a lie and totally fake and we're all just deluded and lying to ourselves, still – doesn't that count for *something*? At least we can *pretend* things will get better! What's wrong with that?'<sup>33</sup> Given the projected history of her decline and the prophesied cataclysm, a great deal, hence Norris's contempt for those who would make *Waiting for Godot* life affirming.

So, where the comedy, especially in a play in which nothing is secure, privately or publicly, in which suicide, disease and mass extinction are invoked? It lies in ironies exposed by juxtaposing hopes and realities, conversations, real or imagined, between a woman and her alternative selves, the moment-by-moment fun to be had from shifting back and forth as if life were a video, the future traveller offering comments on what has yet to occur.

It is often said of science fiction that ideas trump character and there were those who levelled this criticism at Norris. For all the decline and pain foretold, for individual and society alike, Bee lacks substance perhaps precisely because the ironies are generated not only by a sense of an individual in thrall to time but by juxtapositions carefully and knowingly contrived, though what, after all, had *Three Tall Women* been, both commenting on the dark humour of time's deprivations, human beings bio-engineered to die.

As *Variety*'s Steven Oxman remarked of the *Steppenwolf* production, 'This is a substantive, funny and even fitfully moving work about humanity's lack of substance, a meaningful play about meaninglessness.'<sup>34</sup> When it reached Second Stage in 2017, *The New York Times* was unimpressed but Sara Holdren, in *Vulture*, thought it had gained a new political relevance: 'For me, it's a play that springs directly from the ashes of November 9, 2016 [the election of President Trump]: How do we live when we feel powerless to bring about change, even in ourselves? What do we do when the system seems all-encompassing, unbeatable? If there is any hope to be found in Norris's unsparing send-up of our human attempts to give a shit — and then to do something, *anything* with our compassion — then it is a Pandora's box kind of hope, frail and perhaps doomed with the rest of our efforts.'<sup>35</sup> Indeed hope was the last item in Pandora's box. However, as Beckett well knew, hope was the very thing that would lead mankind to persist in a doomed search for coherence and purpose.

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* was published in a significant year – 1776. It was later praised by Thomas Jefferson, which is hardly surprising since Smith was an advocate of American independence. It argued that there should be no regulations on commerce and that division of labour would encourage the accumulation of capital which should be guarded against theft. He called for free trade and a market economy. He believed in saving to invest and regarded taxation of capital as counter-productive. He was a believer in self-interest.

There is a reason that he is the man who opens Norris's *The Low Road*, whose premiere was at the Royal Court Theatre in 2013, five years on from the financial collapse occasioned by the greed and hubris of American banks liberated from regulation by President Clinton and later George W. Bush (the right-wing Cato Institute, founded by the Koch Brothers in the spirit of Adam Smith, preferred the word mis-regulation to deregulation, blaming the lack of a genuinely free market and what it curiously described as a misplaced altruism).

Norris, who has called himself 'a big economic lefty' explained to Michael Schulman, in *The New Yorker*, that the inspiration for the play was 'the ascendance of Paul Ryan during the 2012 Presidential race [in which he was the Republican nominee for Vice President]. "I just kept having this nausea during that election . . . because that man with those cold, soulless blue eyes was articulating this horrifying vision—and there were people who were persuaded by it."<sup>36</sup>

A play about the excesses of capitalism itself revels in excess with some fifty characters played by twenty actors, lasting three hours, part farce, part ribald comedy, spanning two centuries. It is a picaresque in that it follows the life of a patent rogue from humble beginnings, living on his wits, amoral, the anti-matter to the medieval romance, yet here with that same entitlement which defines those with power and money who determine the parameters of the world in which he exists.

It is a parody of a Henry Fielding novel, a Brechtian fable, a tainted morality play, a burlesque, a vaudevillian account of the unchanging values of a society presided over by those for whom life consists of the pursuit of profit, and of a human nature no less unyielding and implacable in seeking advantage over others. It delights in anachronisms not least because while language changes what it expresses does not. The devices of theatre are brazenly displayed less out of a desire not to deceive than as a reminder of the artifice of human interactions, of social roles which are presumed coeval with identity, sanctioned as authentic by implacable, if unexamined, social codes. Indeed, there is a moment when a play-within-a-play is performed, intended by those who stage it to dramatize the process of slavery, only for it to prove a travesty as those who promote it wish it to conform to their prejudices, perhaps an admission of the theatre's

incapacity really to effect change. Indeed, the play ends with an acknowledgement that the theatre itself is liable to be sustained by the very people whose money has derived from suspect profits.

Norris's Smith steps forward to deliver a lecture, calling for the house lights to dim. A sign reads: 'Professor of Moral Philosophy, University of Glasgow', but this Adam Smith is not time bound. In fact, he held that post from 1752 to 1764. Here, his references swing from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first. In describing the Mohegan people of Massachusetts (as a warrior duly appears, obligingly posing as thunder sounds and lightning flashes), he explains that their belief that a benevolent giant would bring peace and blessings to their grandchildren is the reverse of the truth as 'their descendants were to be placed in internment camps and, in subsequent generations, work in gambling casinos and sell discount cigarettes.'<sup>37</sup> A gunshot rings out and the Indian drops dead, a preface, as it turns out, to a narrative whose scenes Smith introduces, the story of a baby left at the door of a brothel with a note declaring him to be the son of George Washington, promising a reward if he is taken in and raised to the age of eighteen (the young Jim later cutting down an apple tree and then lying about it, one of many jokes in a play which blends farce with social commentary).

Mrs Trumpett, brothel owner, has the same groundless optimism as the Mohegan brave as we discover when his real father, in due course, arrives to tell him that far from being George Washington's son, he is the offspring of a Nantucket whore and her customer, a man who turns out to be not just a confidence trickster but a thief into which trade he intends to induct his previously abandoned son, not realizing that that son has already perfected his own craft as a swindler.

What follows is a series of scenes as the child grows, though, for one whose life is effectively staged by a professor of moral philosophy, not morally, a brothel not being conducive to ethical behaviour. He learns something from the callous behaviour of British troops whose attitude towards the whores is the same as that of the country they represent, taking what they want and giving nothing back, effectively thieves themselves. So, what is true on a personal level is equally true at the national level. This is self-interest in action, unregulated, with no care for others.

There is something of Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* about *The Low Road* as Jim eventually sets out into the world only to be stripped naked when the money he has stolen from the prostitutes is, in turn, stolen from him. He had told the prostitutes that he was investing their money, seemingly in tune with Adam Smith's precepts though actually a Ponzi scheme, and Bernie Madoff was arrested for just such a scheme two years before Norris's play, the same year as the economic collapse prompted by the corrupt practices of banks. Indeed, what links the characters is a series of thefts, each person concerned for their own advantage.

Smith himself even enters the story, a brief Hitchcockian appearance, temporarily lodging in the brothel while not indulging in its suspect pleasures, though perhaps because he missed the offer, his presence, however, giving Jim a chance to look at what he has been writing, a passage which comes from the second chapter of *The Wealth of Nations*: 'Every individual endeavours as much as he can to employ his capital in support of domestic industry. He neither intends to promote the public interest nor knows how much he is promoting it. He intends only his own gain' (21). Smith paraphrases his own work: 'if the fruits of a man's labour may be enjoyed without regard to consequence . . . once his prosperity is thus achieved, the rest of the damnable world can stick it up their fucking arsehole' (22). In this case, the domestic industry turns out to be slavery.

*The Low Road* is an ironic bildungsroman, innocence swiftly corrupted in a society in which everyone pursues his or her own advantage, each taking the low moral road, though with the sanction of a professor of moral philosophy whose views have become the bible of a country declaring the virtue of each man being self-made, self-sufficient, self-interested. It is a non-teleological farce, full of cut-and-paste ironies, with a tumble of characters, in which even those who appear to place the interest of others before their own are exposed as selective racists while Constance, the daughter of an apparent Christian philanthropist, declares that property is theft half a century and more before the French anarchist Proudhon (who had himself inveighed against slavery) declared as much, she, meanwhile, being a highwaywoman and hence adept at relieving people of their property. When she declares that 'Profit is the result of the unequal exchange of goods or services' (56) she is referencing Marx as influenced by Smith, while Jim prefers a Darwinian defence of advantage even though he seems to be about to lose his own as he falls into the hands of Hessian troops.

Smith closes the first act by inviting the audience to consult their souvenir programmes and spend the interval drinking and smoking, the latter, of course, outside the theatre. With the second act, we are in the present and at what appears to be the very expensive and exclusive World Economic Forum in Davos (though it is not identified as such), where the elite – politicians, film stars, journalists, representatives of think tanks, billionaires – gather to discuss entrepreneurship, the state of the world economy, the marketplace, while, on occasion, protesters gather in the snow to complain at the direction society is going. It begins with a panel discussion in which serious issues are debated, Adam Smith being invoked as a justification for international and national competition. An American, perhaps significantly named Dick, described by Norris, in a stage direction, as 'bumptious . . . think Mitt Romney', recalls telling an inner-city child who wanted to know how she could make the world a better place that she should first help herself so that she would have the money to be able to help others, a principle, he explains, which justifies bankers otherwise accused of greed. Davos, incidentally, was where Robert Louis Stevenson finished *Treasure Island* in which, of course, its characters scabbled for gold. As Constance declares, 'There never was *justice* in this world . . . There was only ever *violence* and *gold*' (105).

The discussion is suddenly threatened, though, when a British delegate, Ed, objects to the fact that his fellow conferees seem to have learned nothing from the economic collapse and calls for more regulation. Having crashed the car once, he asks whether the same driver should be given the car keys again. Dick, however, has just published a book titled, *The High Road*, a book which looks back to the period of the first act and which celebrates America's gift to the world, economic *freedom*, except, of course, we have seen what that amounted to.

Control begins to slip away from the panel when they are asked how much property they own and Ed suggests that they should be discussing the failure of capitalism which, of course, is not what Davos is about and not what Adam Smith was about. Dick settles for a shrug: 'ya know what? Life's not fair,' to which Ed replies, 'But why *legislate* unfairness?' (93) calling for taxation which Dick dismisses as socialism. Slowly things disintegrate. Security is called as protesters swarm in. Finally, as everyone leaves, Smith walks in and we are back where we were at the end of the first act, Jim facing death at the hands of Hessian troops until detained as a hostage on the presumption that he really is the son of George Washington.

Jim and Blanke, a subversive slave he has purchased, are taken up by a wealthy philanthropist and Charlotte, his pampered daughter, Jim quickly fleecing him of money though the



philanthropist is himself a supporter of slavery and the profit it makes. How else, after all, could he support his charities? Placed on trial, Jim deploys an argument equally used by those who precipitated the twenty-first-century financial crisis: ‘when that market does miscarry we do but magnify the fault if we would punish those of us most fit to set it right by freer exercise of his business . . . which only flourishes when untethered from burdensome regulation’ (139). In 2017, President Trump proposed overhauling the Dodd-Frank legislation of 2010, with its restriction on financial institutions trading for their own benefit, his advisors being ex-Goldman Sachs bankers. Immediately bank shares rose.

A bribe secures Jim’s release only for him to die, inexplicably, with a knife in his chest, leaving behind a child, the result of his assault on Constance, she dying after its delivery along with the rest of her fellow Christians and Jim’s slave, Blanke, though not before a spaceship, complete with seven-foot tall aliens in the shape of bees, descends explaining, through a communicator, that mankind will be destroyed by global warming (the apocalypse invoked in *The Parallelogram*), a result of their own collective self-interest preventing any action which might have obviated it. When he dies, convinced that it must be possible to act, Adam Smith observes that he is buried in a grave which will one day be covered in asphalt as a parking space for a Taco Bell, a Pizza Hut and a Lady Footlocker.

Jim’s son survives to be one of those who will vacuum up the world’s riches disbursing ‘a very *miniscule* fraction’ to charity, even ‘to the maintenance of this very theatre . . . I mean, you don’t suppose these buildings are *free*, do you? . . . And who has that money? Not *artists*, certainly? Why, kings, have it, as they always have, as well as bankers and businessmen and thieves. For if you look *very* carefully, you’re sure to find a thief or two in the family of every millionaire’ (146–7).

Nor is Norris inclined to let the audience off the hook, not least because, as he has said, theatre is ‘a luxury product generally consumed by the privileged’,<sup>38</sup> predominantly white and inclined to embrace bourgeois attitudes. He takes pleasure, therefore, in discomforting them. Beyond that, he has insisted that, ‘I don’t think activism grows out of theatre, really. People don’t go to theatres because they want to change the world – they go because they enjoy theatre. And if you want to change the world you don’t think to yourself “I know how to do it! I’m going to write a play that rich people will see”’<sup>39</sup> What, then, was the objective behind this play and others? What he wants to do, he has said, is to unnerve, disrupt, create doubt.

For Michael Billington, writing in *The Guardian*, ‘It would be too simple to say Norris is offering a diatribe against capitalism: what he shows is how the US, for all its good intentions, has tended, when confronted by divergent paths, to take the low road of profitability rather than the high road of principle. But this does scant justice to a play that is rich, turbulent and satirical.’<sup>40</sup> *The New York Times* was less generous when it opened at the Public Theater in 2018, praising the exuberance, bustle and bawdiness of the first act but finding the second too unsubtle as if doubting the audience’s capacity to draw conclusions of its own.

In June, 2009, Mark Sanford, Governor of South Carolina, went missing, telling his staff he was going hiking on the Appalachian Trail only to be discovered at Atlanta airport having flown back from an assignation with his Argentinian mistress (who, appropriately, had a degree in international relations), not the first extramarital affair he had conducted. At first his wife had stood by him.

He was far from the only politician confronted with evidence of adultery while in office. Indeed, the list is impressively long and of long standing, reaching back to Thomas Jefferson

and Alexander Hamilton and on, in 2008, to the less impressive John Edwards, presidential candidate, and Eliot Spitzer, Governor of New York who resigned when it was revealed that he had spent \$80,000 on prostitutes. Spitzer's wife, Silda, also stood by him as he made his public apology. Two years later, as noted earlier in relation to David Auburn's *Damage Control*, Representative Anthony Weiner distinguished himself by sending what were coyly described as sexually explicit photographs to several women. If there has been what can seem a tradition of sexual betrayal by public figures so there has of wives required (as in the case of President Clinton) to stand by their men until, as in the case of Weiner and Spitzer, the impulse to repeat the offence proves too much even for the most understanding mate to take. Both divorced their husbands. Norris has said of Weiner, 'He's a moron because he could have overcome his problem so easily by saying: "I'm an idiot. Everyone tell me what an idiot I am. Everything I did was boneheaded, and I humbly ask your forgiveness" . . . instead, he lied at first, and later basically said to people: you don't have the right to judge me.'<sup>41</sup>

It is hard not to feel a sense of *schadenfreude* when faced with those who have acquired wealth and position and then thrown them away seemingly having convinced themselves of their immunity, Donald Trump's frat boy conversation about his celebrity endowing him with rights to women's bodies being a case in point, though he had inexplicably acquired immunity. Perhaps they are like those who choose to climb a rock face without ropes delighting in the possibility of a fall, never so alive as when they flout what seems the inevitable. It is not tragedy which comes to mind so much as farce except that there remains some residual mystery. What really drives them? Does deceit run so deep that it is not only others who are fooled? Is there some predisposition which goes beyond the individual, something hardwired into the male psyche, the hunter never satisfied so long as there is prey? Or is it a certain dismay at the thought of domesticity as if that were a surrender of possibility, a settling for inevitability implying a life determined, a fate embraced, as if such unsubtle rebellions were a blow against destiny?

And what of the women? Are they hardwired for submission, eternal victims of betrayal? It seems not, at least in Norris's 2015 play, *Domesticated*, being practiced at their own betrayals and gifted with the same competitive urge, resistance fighters with tactics to deploy. Men and women, it seems, are destined to dance the same dance they have ever done, an Escher-like iteration, convinced that it is possible to break the logic not of their individual lives but of the species.

Norris began thinking about *Domesticated* during the Lewinsky scandal. It features a man for whom an honest apology seems impossible and begins, or nearly so, with him, a politician, Bill Pulver, standing at a podium, his wife, Judy, beside him, to announce his resignation following an encounter with a prostitute dressed as a schoolgirl who, following a struggle, or accident, had struck her head, falling into a coma. This is not, it turns out, his only foray into paying for sex, having spent an impressive \$74,000 (\$6,000 less than Eliot Spitzer), over a ten-year period, this man who, perhaps significantly, is a gynaecologist turned politician. It is not, though, that he feels his resignation necessary, regarding himself a victim.

If he has evidenced a certain male imperative, however, he has done so in a new context, surrounded by women not only disinclined to go along with a familiar narrative, involving a grudging apology followed by redemption, but – wife, daughters, female attorney, television host – seeking some kind of advantage. The wife, indeed, writes a book, some of the profits of which will go to a charity. Judy Pulver outlines the various stages someone in her position goes

through, beginning with the drinking stage and moving to the monologue stage, insisting, accurately as it turns out, that she will be doing most of the talking. Indeed, following Bill's public confession neither he nor his attorney's husband speak, even as their lives are laid out by the women around them, some of the play's humour coming from the fact that, while addressed, the men are not permitted to respond. When Bill does try to speak he is told 'You do not control the discourse in this house.'<sup>42</sup>

Ahead, though Norris could not know it, lay the explosion of anger, and the resultant solidarity, in 2017–18, prompted by revelations of sexual exploitation by men in positions of power whose sense of entitlement had, as they assumed, left them immune, only to discover that power suddenly shifting. For Pulver, rich, privileged, seemingly powerful, things fall apart. He is surrounded by women (he being the only male in the cast, though there is a transgender figure in a bar), who come together in their determination to change the rules of the game though in doing so raise other questions as Judy finesses marital affront for career advantage. She is given primacy in the first act, even as their adopted daughter, thirteen-year-old Cassidy – Asian, asthmatic – presents a school report about the mating behaviour of animals, effectively a commentary on her father's approach as well as a frame for the play which begins with her delivering a slide show in her school uniform, natural enough until we learn of her father's predilection for prostitutes similarly dressed and, indeed, for his wife to dress in the same way for sex. Her lecture is on sexual dimorphism which, as she explains, is about the advantages and disadvantages conferred by gender in the animal world.

Norris has confessed to being obsessed with strange animal facts, adding that,

one of the things you notice when you're zoologically fixated is strange reproductive behaviour. So, when I knew I wanted to write a play about a relationship falling apart, I put it in the context of the animal kingdom. I thought since my interest in animals began in my childhood, it made sense for that to be our window, too . . . The fact that we try to draw any distinction at all strikes me as ridiculous. It's a weirdly arrogant position to take that we are a special animal that doesn't have habitual behaviors . . . We make war, we lie to each other, cheat, and have other really predictable behaviors . . . But people find it insulting and pessimistic to say humans have identifiable animal tendencies. It feels too deterministic to say we can't improve ourselves . . . I don't think there is such a thing as a better society handed down through the generation.<sup>43</sup>

In that sense, *Domesticated* echoes the assumption behind his other plays. There is a constancy to human behaviour which makes a nonsense of the idea of moral progress. Technology changes. We gain ever greater control over our environment, can even prolong life, but the nature of that life remains the same and if that can generate humour it can also darken into an irony which stops short of tragedy because we suppress knowledge of our nature, the determinism against which we might otherwise rebel, the struggle being what lifts irony in the direction of the tragic.

It is not that Pulver's wife and daughters lack power, the advantages of wealth. They have a Mexican maid (who when, for the first time, they lose their money, has to teach them how to use the washer and dryer, along with the vacuum cleaner). Seventeen-year-old Casey, with a Feta cheese intolerance, moves in the world of cotillion balls even as she expresses contempt for those who value money herself wishing to help people by circulating a petition protesting

genital mutilation in Africa at the same time barely registering the fact that her father is sobbing. She is expelled from school for posting sexually explicit images of her fellow pupils on the school website in aid, she says, of charity, charity being a justification advanced by the privileged in the play even as they are not always sure what the charities might be supporting. Meanwhile, it emerges that Bobbie, a friend of Judy and who is defending Bill, had had a sexual encounter with him, sexual indiscretions and betrayals not entirely being restricted to men, Judy herself, we learn, having had an affair with a married man when young (as it happens her thesis advisor and Chairman of the Ethical Studies Department), followed by an abortion, the moral high ground in this group of people evidently not being very high.

The first act concludes as Cassidy announces its end to the audience before opening the second with a continuation of her increasingly inappropriate, if disturbingly relevant, high school report, this time describing the fact that within the matriarchal clan of the Spotted Hyena, the female is dominant, an animal in which the clitoris elongates to form a pseudo-phallus which is licked by others to signify submission, this being a natural segue to an act in which Bill is released to speak.

Eighteen months on, still in denial, he endeavours to justify himself, refusing to be silent, wear a hair shirt for all time as if, he tellingly remarks, he was a dog to be disciplined. Talking to a trans-sexual bartender, he explains that love is no more than a rationalization of sexual desire and marriage a trap set by women whose terms and conditions are 'the three R'S . . . Restriction, Reproduction, and real Estate' (47). Men are required to fulfil their biological function and then become redundant, even as they must remain tied to a woman whose affections have transferred to the children he has conspired in creating. He is tempted to believe that promiscuity is a defining human characteristic as his wife is repelled by the idea that, for her husband, sexual gratification comes before anything else. They have a brutal meeting, crude and unforgiving. Sympathy is in short supply, even from strangers, until he seems at the epicentre of contempt, punched in the eye by a trans-sexual when he challenges her new identity. So, he spirals down, stripped even of temporary employment, self-destructive, last seen as he and Judy sit at opposite ends of a bench as their daughter is inducted into their old college and he sings, a redundant and seemingly futile attempt to retrieve a past no longer more than an irony.

Even so, cruelty is not restricted to him. As Norris has said, 'Too often we come away from these scandals with simplistic conclusions like men are bad, women are [expletive]. We demonize ourselves rather than asking if there's something species-related going on that we're really not interested in talking about.'<sup>44</sup> How far, he asks, and seems to answer, are we determined in our responses? Are we ever truly domesticated and if we were would that be at a price? In a sense he is replaying the tension at the heart of Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* as the individual looks to claim instinctive freedoms while society, civilization, requires the suppression of those instincts resulting in feelings of discontent. For Freud those instincts are immutable, in particular those relating to the desire for sex and the tendency to violence.

When Cassidy, briefly, resumes her high school report it is to describe a zombie worm (real enough) in which the male is microscopic in size, living out its existence within the female's genital sac, no more than a vestige of an earlier species and doomed one day to disappear altogether. Is this, then, to be the fate of men, at least as Bill would be inclined to see it, with no function beyond that imprinted on their DNA, an expression of hamartia, a tragic flaw which precipitates a chain of events ultimately irresistible in its logic except that there is no catharsis,

simply an error built into the system. Bill is a man of high standing brought low, less a tragic figure, though, than one following a process observable across time and species. Men and women, it seems, are simply domesticated examples of an underlying principle.

For Norris, the play extended far beyond capturing the shenanigans of hypocritical politicians. When it was staged at Lincoln Center, with characteristic directness, he said that it was aimed at ‘Steve and Cynthia Moneybags, and everyone else who donates staircases to Lincoln Center,’ who ‘frequently want to see plays about artsy people or people without money, or want to see some representation of their socio-economic that is flattering or renders their concerns as psychologically profound . . . But in my opinion, the external behaviors of that class vastly outweigh any external or psychological concerns of that class. Like politicians, their good public reputation is paramount to them, much more than they are willing to admit.’<sup>45</sup>

It is hard not to feel something of Mamet’s influence in Norris’s predilection for provocative plays addressing race and male–female relations, the kind of plays designed to provoke arguments in audiences liable to divide along racial or gender fault lines. Beyond that, though, he invites a debate about the extent to which there is true freedom of action, the possibility of change. Despite the attempt to outlaw male sexual aggression, to call men to heel in 2018, the dog is likely to continue to have its day as men and women have different agendas, needs, clinging together and driven apart by forces which seem factored into them.

Sex equally lay at the heart of his next play, *The Qualms*, a title which suggests a sense of unease. This features four couples, swingers, who are into wife swapping, and picks up on one issue raised in *Domesticated*, the necessity or otherwise for monogamy. In explaining its origins, Norris referred to seeing a documentary called *Lifestyle* which featured explicit scenes in which couples of various ages and appearances indulged in free sex while discussing the weather and football scores. Emerging into the light, he felt that there must be something radically wrong with such people. A few years later, while teaching a playwriting course at Columbia, he encountered a young woman who made money on the side by signing up to Sugardaddy.com, a site which brought together rich, older men, and those prepared, in her case, to prostitute themselves for money. Again, he was taken aback by the fact that the student saw no problem. It was, after all, a consensual relationship. So why was he judging her? ‘Why,’ he asked himself, ‘do we find it so hard to tolerate people who have different values and customs? Does the mere existence of difference erode our certainty and call into question the choices (or compromises) we’ve made in our own lives? . . . this is why I think democracy . . . very, very difficult. And I think the reasons have something to do with sex, and our sexually-driven competitiveness,’ competition being ‘the curse that dooms our species.’<sup>46</sup>

*The Qualms*, he has said, ‘for me, is as much about class-competitiveness as it is about sex. A new couple – with obvious advantages – attempts to join a group with fewer advantages, and one of them winds up feeling left out. He feels outraged that somehow the advantages he enjoys every single day of his life aren’t being respected on this one. And when that happens to us privileged people – like those of us who can afford to go to the theatre – we tend to get pissed off.’ Are there, then, no principles at play? Frankly, he observes, ‘I don’t think we operate according to “principles,” any more than do animals,’ though ‘I wish we did.’<sup>47</sup> While he could never be a part of these swingers, he confessed to admiring them in so far as, at least in principle, they reject the idea of competition, the possessiveness implied in monogamy, even as competition is in fact never far away. At the same time, in truth there is little attractive about

those gathered together to celebrate what they insist is their freedom. Their respective sexual histories are disturbing, their present behaviour alternately banal and devoid of feeling.

Chris and Kristy are new to a group of people whose 'lifestyle' involves occasional meetings for a meal and sex, the latter conducted in what is called the party room. They do, indeed, propose a belief in resisting possessiveness, as if this was a utopian community, except that they are all in search of something, including an intimacy hard to reconcile with this America suburban *La Ronde* (a play, incidentally, much admired by Freud).

The evening is presided over by Gary and Teri almost as if this were a children's party, with condoms in place of balloons, or a social club which requires dues to be paid on time – 'check the website' – along with warnings against the risk of spilling wine. Couples are only to be allowed twenty minutes for sex, thirty for threesomes, given these characters, it turns out, an over-generous allowance. If this is Sodom it is a suburban version. Chris is a hedge-fund manager, recently married to Kristy and already with a certain tension between them, she having recently had a secret meal with a former partner. Quite why he now decides they should join this group is not clear. He arrives clutching an expensive bottle of wine, not entirely sure what the etiquette of barbeque and carnality might be. Indeed, he is obviously nervous if titillated by what he assumes will ensue. As the play develops so he becomes ever more obstreperous, clearly out of place, angrily resisting approaches or declaring himself un-attracted by the woman who makes advances to him, as Norris has said, thereby digging his own grave, letting the air out of the balloon of an evening which was supposed to bring people, literally, together. His seems the voice of sceptical rationalism, as he refuses to join in, resisting their attempts to defend their behaviour as principled and philosophically justified.

Those who gather together come from different backgrounds. One woman, French speaking, comes from Martinique and seems a cut above the others. Another woman is fat, one man black and of ambiguous sexuality, another an ex-army man. There is a deal more talk than sex as the characters move from cocktail party chatter to debating a range of subjects, from pornography, homosexuality and democracy to the suggestion that American foreign policy might be connected with the national fear of sex, words not so much being foreplay as the thing itself. Indeed, as a result tempers begin to flare, energy not directed in one direction going in another. Nor is the talk always on an elevated level, Teri suggesting that conflict in the Middle East could be avoided if everyone had sex with each other, while confusing Palestinians with Pakistanis. In this case sex results in violence as Chris has a physical tussle with another man, as a consequence scattering the food which they have brought to the party. The play ends, though, with the characters, even Chris, coming together to share not sex but banana pudding, though the stage direction indicates that there are no smiles, there is no closure and no relief.

For Norris, beyond the competitive manoeuvring, the small change of vapid conversations, discussions which never plumb the depths their subjects might seem to require, bizarre though they are, there are worse aspects of human intercourse.

I think what happens in the play is that everyone tries to top each other continually with theoretical ideas, like freedom, bestiality ... "Why shouldn't I be able to engage in bestiality?" Polyamory versus monogamy. Are people instinctively competitive? Are men competitive? Are women competitive? ... then finally at the end of the play ... Teri begins talking about the irreducible complexity of every individual life ... I don't like to

## Staging America

give that much respect in general . . . yet as an antidote to all the bullshit that we say that gets us into trouble, the positioning and posturing that leads us into war, those kind of tiny individual experiences can sometimes be the balm, the olive branch . . . it's in the contemplation of our actual private, intimate experiences of life that we can't undertake the more brutal, or ideological, actions that continually fuck us up.<sup>48</sup>

Ironically, though, the tiny individual experiences in *The Qualms* are not themselves without aggression and lead to an act of violence not vitiated by a momentary cease fire, a brief and inconclusive gesture of commonality.

Bruce Norris's plays are irremediably funny and irremediably serious, the two intertwined. He is not just a critic of America's Cheery cheeriness, offering a minority report on its bland assurances about its present actions and future possibilities. He is equally prone to offer a critique of those, like himself, whose liberalism seems to confer a badge of moral superiority in the face of those whose wealth and position give them an assurance of their rights to the spoils of a Darwinian battle. He distrusts those who believe themselves to have a grasp on the truth, even as he is uncertain how firm the ground on which he stands is. He is argumentative in person and in his drama, aware that he takes pleasure in disruption, tossing a grenade onto the stage. What he is not is prescriptive, dogmatic, celebrating the resistant spirit so that audiences are clear where virtue lies.

In *Downstate*,<sup>49</sup> which opened at Steppenwolf's Upstairs Theatre in September 2018, and the following March at London's National Theatre (being a co-commissioned work), he offered an unsettling debate centring on a group of convicted paedophiles living in a down-at-heel residence in downstate Illinois. It is physically, but also morally, claustrophobic as they are required to accept restrictions on their movements even as they are encysted in past actions whose reality they resist. At times they tolerate what Eugene O'Neill would see as their pipe dreams while at other moments they turn on one another. Outside, is a hostile world (the house is attacked from time to time), theirs being an unforgivable crime even as they tend to see themselves as victims of a legal and ethical system which fails to understand, or acknowledge, actions which are alternately a product of genetic predisposition or the consequence of what they wish to see as genuine emotions. For one his rape of a minor was 'a mistake'. For another assault was a gesture of love, a love supposedly returned by his victim, as it was for the ironically named Felix who had molested his own daughter.

The problem is that into this world steps a man, Andy, who, urged on by his wife, wishes to confront his abuser, insisting that, years on from the offence against him, the perpetrator should confess to the full truth of his assault. Affronted innocence, it seems, is to confront and challenge corruption. In a Mamet-like twist, however, the abuser, Fred, is now in his seventies, living on food stamps and confined to a wheelchair following a beating, while his accuser comes from a troubled family, misremembers a key moment in the assault, and is inclined to think that paedophiles should be killed if not killing themselves. Indeed there comes a moment in which he swings a baseball bat at one of the inhabitants, as it happens a black man presumably not unacquainted with being the victim of aggression.

In one sense it is clear who the victims are. In another it is more ambiguous. The men gathered here are pariahs to be defined forever by their crimes, but they are proscribed, contained, harassed and, in one case, driven to suicide. Should there be a time limit on past crimes? Should there be a limit on how long victims should hold onto their pain if, indeed, they

have a choice, to seek some kind of public confession in search of what tends to be referred to as closure but which may segue into revenge?

The ground, in *Downstate*, is constantly shifting. There is a camaraderie in this group of outcasts. They are capable of humour, as of petty jealousies. Yet the oxygen seems to have been sucked out of this disordered house, presided over by a probation officer, weary of her work, capable of sympathy for those she is required to police even as she is alert to the lies they tell themselves and her, to temptations they are required to suppress but which may still be latent.

Norris has explained the origins of the play, and it is worth quoting him at length in so far as he explains not only the impetus behind it but also the wider context.

I know a lot of people (myself included) who, over the course of their lives, have been in sexual situations of questionable wisdom. Some have been the ‘victims’ in these situations and others ‘perpetrators.’ And a few years ago, I started doing a lot of reading about the things paroled sex offenders increasingly face—registries, residency restrictions, neighborhood watches, self-appointed vigilante groups, etc. These are *post* incarceration punishments, that don’t exist for any other category of criminal. And I also started thinking about how having a common enemy—a universally despised class of criminal (namely the pedophile)—helps the rest of us feel more virtuous about ourselves. And because social media inflames every group response, we can now all anonymously call for their violent deaths, or endorse some gruesome form of retributive justice, often wildly incommensurate to the crime that’s been committed. I think we’re living through an era of ‘payback.’ The entire 2016 election was apparently one massive act of collective psychological revenge by one group against another, elevating a man pathologically obsessed with avenging himself against his perceived enemies. And—I want to be careful how I say this—even positive social movements like #MeToo run the risk of tipping over into vengeance as those of us on the left attempt to purge ourselves of any stain of ideological impurity. And I fear that what gets left out of the current national conversation is any mention of . . . forgiveness. We’d prefer to luxuriate in our righteous hatred for each other right now, in a way that feels cruel and grotesque and tribal. So, with all of that, the thought occurred to me—how do we tamp down our retaliatory, visceral responses to these people we so easily despise? After all, pedophiles have to go on with their lives somehow, somewhere, right? And, I thought, to simply observe them going about their lives, living with the consequences of what they’ve done . . . that would require a pretty radical amount of compassion on the part of an audience . . . I often tend to satirize a particular class of people—the privileged—that I often find despicable. And I thought, ‘well, who do I extend my *sympathy* to?’ And I thought, ‘well I extend it to anyone to whom the world would *deny* sympathy . . .’ Many among us would prefer that pedophiles be killed. That would be the simple answer—to say these people are sick. They’re monsters. Let’s get rid of them. But we can’t do that. So what if we said instead, these people are human beings, and they’re living in a bad situation of their own making. Now what do we do?<sup>50</sup>

Norris’s characters tend to circle one another, subject to wilful and accidental misunderstandings, words sometimes deliberately opaque, even rendered in foreign languages, the music they perform to in a minor key. Some things change. Manners alter, characters



## Staging America

express a certain sensitivity when it comes to those whose experience differs from their own but human nature, as he stages it, is unyielding, some of the humour of his plays deriving from his characters' conviction that this is not so. A view of life as psychological, social, economic, political competition, advanced as a mantra, a national ideal, equally sinks its roots deep into a human tendency to prioritize the self, grant one interpretation of reality, one clan, one nation superior while all the time a clock is ticking towards a destiny wilfully kept out of mind. Jokes in his plays, especially in *Clybourne Park*, are funny but at the same time caustic, human instincts leading equally to alliances or their denial.

Norris is a man prone to attack the very audiences who attend his plays, privileged, financially secure, as he does those who make their tax-deductible contributions to the theatres in which they are staged, public charity itself liable to be a marker of success, the losers probably never wishing to spend a few hours of their lives in such a culturally exclusive environment.

But if his plays have a satirical edge does this not imply the possibility of transformation? Surely, he has to stand somewhere in order to get a purchase on the world he presents. There has to be some principle, some way of ordering existence, shaping behaviour, that is more desirable, more attainable than that which he presents? Why else write? But does a wolf seek to improve its prey by attacking it even though in the long term, in evolutionary terms, that may prove so? He is the scorpion who stings the frog who, against its better instincts, carries him across the river only to be stung because it is in the nature of a scorpion to sting. It is in Bruce Norris's nature likewise to sting the theatre which carries him, and those who, in attending, support him, while aware that there is an illogic to his action since what does that say about his self-imposed task. Even paradoxes, though, can stir the mind, humour emerge from and generate a new insight. His characters are not free. They exist within the world he creates. The debate which runs through his plays, though, is whether within the greater theatre which is human existence there is any room for manoeuvre, any deflection possible of a seeming inevitability given that it is a journey whose destination is fixed. Is change possible or do we end up in Samarra, after all?

# CHAPTER 7

J. T. ROGERS

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The American theatre is chock full of inward looking plays that fester over small, personal family dramas (and an 'avant-garde' take on this theme is just a new dress on an old horse) which exist as if they have no connection to the large, more complex world we actually live in . . . Instead of going to graduate school, save that money and travel to see the world and expand your ideas and vision as a citizen and artist.

J. T. Rogers<sup>1</sup>

Naomi Wallace is a self-identified socialist, a label which scarcely frightens the horses when she is in England but is more suspect in the United States. It follows that she sees the potential of theatre to address the injustices of a capitalist system. It also follows that she has a respect for history in a country which Gore Vidal called the United States of Amnesia. In J. T. Rogers's *The Overwhelming*, a character observes that, 'In America, you seem to have escaped your history.'<sup>2</sup> Wallace's vision of theatre, however, goes beyond a desire to explore past and present injustices in either country.

For her, theatre is necessarily 'an act of violation'<sup>3</sup> as the playwright enters into the lives of strangers. Boundaries are breached which some might think inviolate as race, gender, nationality prove no bar to those committed to establishing a bridge between those otherwise seemingly distant from one another. She quotes Terry Eagleton as saying that 'Neighborhood is a practice rather than a locality.'<sup>4</sup> Theatre thus becomes a means of exploring the nature of neighbourhood, the connection between those otherwise seemingly separated by time, space, experience. There is clearly an ethical dimension to such apparent transgressions, the co-opting of other people's histories and sensibilities; yet, outside of any political intent, shape shifting, time travel, are the stuff of drama.

Wallace wants to see her work as having utility. Rogers, who has also redefined neighbourhood, reaching out beyond America, has spoken of relevance. Both words are potentially suspect, as if theatre were to be pragmatically judged. In what way useful, and relevant to whom? For Wallace, indeed, a central question is 'Whom and what does my imagination serve. Where will I urge my mind to venture and roam, and to what purpose?'<sup>5</sup> Theatre has been used as a weapon, a stimulus to action, but both writers are in search of something more. For both Wallace and Rogers, understanding is the first step. As she remarked, 'We are responsible for the education of our imaginations.'<sup>6</sup> Rogers's education would take him to Rwanda and Sweden, into war and the possibility of peace, like Wallace assiduously researching his subjects the better to establish the authenticity of his work, though neither were interested in documentary theatre, the assembling and editing of material as if they were journalists reporting from the front line, though front line there might be. History was not simply to be laid out like a map on a table. It was to be inhabited in that the focus was to be on the human drama which lay beneath the passage of events, history being shaped by individuals rather than seen as a coercive force, a simple unwinding of inevitability.

## Staging America

The American theatre has hardly been devoid of political plays, and not merely in the radical 1930s and 1960s. They may not have been as prolific or, perhaps, as central as in Britain, where the state of the nation play was sufficiently common to earn that soubriquet, and plays frequently addressed international subjects, but in America issues of race, gender, sexual preference, identity politics, were staged, sometimes in theatre groups for which such were central concerns. For J. T. Rogers, however, 'I think most new British drama is outward-looking, whereas new American plays are inward-looking. Both are valid, I just have a strong preference for the former.' It was not a good description of his own early plays but reflected his direction of travel. Perhaps, too, the fact that Britain's National Theatre chose to stage *The Overwhelming*, the work of a man who at the time, he confessed, would 'not be able to be arrested in New York' and now, after twenty years of work was 'all of a sudden an "overnight sensation"' along with the fact that he was seen as 'an American playwright who writes like a Brit', may have underlined his affinity with a British theatre which did, indeed, often see drama as a social and political sounding board. So it was that he confessed, 'I still meet people in the New York theatre who are surprised to find out I'm not British.'<sup>7</sup> He has said that when *The Overwhelming* (2006) was staged in London it was seen as a political play while in New York it was regarded as a family play.

What was, if not missing, then relatively rare, it seemed to him, were plays which acknowledged a world beyond America's borders. Certainly he felt an obligation to address that world himself. As he observed, in his Laura Pels lecture of 2008, in what is in many ways a manifesto, 'I realized that as a playwright I had to lift my eyes from my navel and look out into the world . . . so that I could tell stories that dig under the surface of people and cultures that seem deeply foreign . . . to me and find the connection between us. To try and understand what those connections mean.' Why? Because 'our stories – and this continues to be a hard lesson for me to learn – . . . are no longer what is driving this world.' For him, the fact is that 'there is no separate "American Experience" any more. Our stories are just one part of a shrinking, interconnecting world. And if I don't make work that addresses this reality head-on, I'm simply writing about the past. The hard truth is that I don't have the luxury any more of making theatre that just reflects us . . . why should the world listen to us if we're just talking about ourselves?'<sup>8</sup>

What he feared was that that kind of commitment was lacking and that audiences no longer turned to the theatre to see their world reflected. Attention, it seemed to him, had moved elsewhere. Film and television were more likely to engage them, television, anyway, being where playwrights increasingly worked. It was necessary, it seemed to him, to internationalize, to dramatize 'the stories of people from countries and cultures different from our own,' stories 'about how we are connected to these people and places . . . About what these connections say about us . . . About who we are in the face of this new and terrifying and fascinating world.' As a playwright and former producer, working in a small theatre, he was acutely aware of putting such stories on stage when audiences had a preference for the familiar and there was little encouragement from critics, indeed a degree of hostility.

Interestingly, and slightly confusingly, the first example of such a play which he offers, *Rafta*, *Rafta* . . . , is by the British Pakistani writer Ayub Khan-Din and is set in England. The second, *Betrayed*, is by a journalist, George Packer, and is adapted from his own non-fiction book *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq*. The third is a semi-autobiographical rock-musical, *Passing Strange*, a first work by Stew (real name Mark Stewart), about an African-American man, also named Stew, in search of the real. Though he does visit Europe this is not where the play has its

being, and therefore hardly an example of the kind of work Rogers is calling for, but in a sense that is perhaps evidence of the paucity of available examples (though Lynn Nottage had set *Mud, River, Stone* in southeast Africa and Katori Hall would later set *Children of Killers* and *Our Lady of Kibeho* in Rwanda). More immediately relevant is his own play, *The Overwhelming*, set on the eve of the Rwandan genocide and significantly staged two years earlier at the National Theatre where it was directed by Max Stafford-Clark, whose reputation was precisely for seeking out the politically and socially relevant. He subsequently directed the American production at the Roundabout Theatre.

Nor was the venue for the British production, the National Theatre, without significance. This was no small pub theatre, important as those have been in Britain. It was the country's premier institution, the Royal Shakespeare Company aside. It suddenly gave Rogers a prominence which meant that those in the American theatre who had previously ignored his work now hastened to court him. In fact, both venues, along with the Royal Court Theatre, would turn out to be important to new American playwrights as well as staging classics of the American theatre. At the same time *The Guardian's* theatre critic Michael Billington welcomed the play for raising British audiences' eyes from domestic issues, distance having acted as an analgesic, with issues closer to hand having primacy.

Rogers' choice of the Roundabout Theatre for the New York production of *The Overwhelming* was in part because 'there had never been a play set in East Africa on a major New York stage, about which I felt a great responsibility, and a Roundabout production would make this a Broadway-like event.' Beyond that, though, there was an element of pragmatism because, 'I was very poor. I was in debt. I was determined to try and leverage this production so that I would no longer have to work a day job. In the not-for-profit theatre the playwright gets a percentage of the gate, just like in the commercial theater. I would make more money if the Roundabout did it because they were going to put it into the Laura Pels Theatre, which has a very large seating capacity for an Off Broadway theatre [400 seats]. Sixteen weeks at the Laura Pels versus four weeks at a smaller theatre downtown was a no-brainer.'<sup>9</sup> Now, he hoped, he would be a fully professional playwright, though real financial independence would only come with *Oslo* (2016). Beyond that, *The Overwhelming* became his first play published in an acting edition.

For Rogers, the theatre was ideally suited to his sense of the need for what he called a 'mapless new world', in that it was a public space in which life could be breathed into characters whose experience, assumptions, possibilities, differed from those who saw and heard them act out their lives, even as those lives were not so different in their human qualities and content. Arthur Miller had believed that the theatre was a place in which he could have a conversation with America but his plays, perhaps to his initial surprise, reached out beyond the boundaries of his own country, and not simply in that his metaphors were available for translation by audiences in different places at different times. He also set them in other countries, in France, Czechoslovakia, South America. They reflected, after all, his own political internationalism married, as he was, to a Magnum photographer whose work took her around the world, while assuming the presidency of International PEN. Apart from anything else, there were few limits to the American imperium and understanding those beyond its own territorial waters a political no less than human imperative.

Of course, such plays were not lacking in America, from Tony Kushner's work to that of Wallace Shawn, but there was often the sense of swimming against the tide. For those shaping a season for subscription audiences, plays liable to fall outside their experiences could prove

## Staging America

less than popular which explains Rogers' rallying cry in his Laura Pels lecture at the American Repertory Theatre. It was, he ended by remarking, a conversation he wanted to initiate with those in the theatre the better to begin one with the audiences they addressed.

He was not, though, in his mind, a political playwright in a narrow sense. 'I write my plays,' he explained, 'not to score political points but because I am fascinated by these stories and think they will make great theatre.'<sup>10</sup> Indeed he was surprised when his plays were regarded in Britain as indictments of American foreign policy, *The Overwhelming* being seen as a parable about the American invasion of Iraq: 'To which I thought, "Who knew?"'<sup>11</sup>

In an article for *The New York Times* he explained what, after his early plays, would become his artistic creed:

As a playwright, I look to tell stories that are framed against great political rupture. I am obsessed with putting characters onstage who struggle with, and against, cascading world events – and who are changed forever through that struggle. While journalism sharpens our minds, the theatre can expand our sense of what it means to be human. It is where we come together in a communal space to hear ideas that grip us, surprise us – even infuriate us – as we learn of things we didn't know. For me, that is a deeply, thrillingly, political act.<sup>12</sup>

At the heart of a number of his plays is the question of trust, at a private and social level. Without it, the fabric of social life potentially tears. Yet at the same time, there are moments, situations, when the truth may not serve a higher purpose. In personal relations and public negotiations, discretion and even deceit may have a human sanction even as they have a price. The rupture to which he refers certainly has its political dimension but the struggle is not only with world events, though he wishes to bring those to the stage where what is secret or concealed is laid before audiences. It is within his protagonists who are aware of the compromises that are part of lives whose moral borders are indistinct, their fallibilities a marker not so much of their divided selves as of the complexities of everyday life and social existence alike. The stage becomes a place where public histories intertwine with personal ones, the challenge being to make both manifest.

Rogers was born in Berkeley, California, but spent part of the year with his mother in her apartment on East 10th Street in New York City, his parents being divorced, and part in Columbia, Missouri, which he has described as a sleepy small college town. As he explained, 'My parents are Berkeley grads, from the time when it was a hotbed of intellectual and political pursuit. My father was a political science professor. In lieu of sports, we'd talk about politics around the kitchen table when I was growing up. And my mother was a super lefty, deeply involved in politics.'<sup>13</sup>

As a result of his father's career as a political scientist who taught Southeast Asian studies, he spent two years in rural Malaysia and Indonesia, which he has said marked both his life and his work and would certainly seem to explain part of his fascination with other countries. As he has said,

The constant theme in both homes was a passionate engagement in politics and a deep knowledge of and interest in other countries – both my parents having lived, together and apart, all over the world. As a playwright, I spent many years working through and shedding different skins, trying to find my voice and the subject matters that truly

gripped me. It's only with hindsight that I understand that what my parents exposed me to, and what they raised me to value, would so inform my work. In essence, writing plays that delve into and are set against international and political concerns is simply me, as a writer, being called home.<sup>14</sup>

Though he apparently told his mother that his ambition was to be either a writer or a baseball player, in fact he had wanted to be an actor from the age of nine when he played in *Snow White* in a community-theatre production in central Missouri. It was, therefore, as a would-be actor that he enrolled in the North Carolina School of the Arts' Acting Conservatory in Winston-Salem. Amongst other alumni are Mary-Louise Parker and Jennifer Ehle (daughter to the actress Rosemary Harris and the writer John Ehle), the latter a year behind him. Ehle would later play the role of Mona Juul in *Oslo*. Asked who had been the most influential member of staff he named Bob Francesconi who had taught at the Moscow Art Theatre.

Despite the fact that he had begun to command leading roles he had also written monologues and short plays for his fellow students, including Ehle, and began to realize that he no longer wished to act. Even so, when he moved to New York he did audition for a number of shows, a process with which he was quickly disillusioned in part, perhaps, because he failed to land the roles, making money by catering and driving a trolley car in Central Park. At the same time, he believed that learning how to act had given him the tools for being a playwright. In terms of his writing, he was influenced by seeing a production in 1993, at NYU, of Tony Kushner's *Perestroika*, part of *Angels in America*, a play which was engaged with social and moral issues.

Back at the Conservatory he had met Gus Reyes who would direct his work for a decade and a half and who, together with Rogers and his wife, Rebecca Ashley, a choreographer, would go on to found The Next Stage Company. As he has recalled, 'We did plays, multimedia pieces, and dance. We got a nice little black box theatre on 46th Street, in St. Mary's Church. We did that for eight years. That was my education in the theatre. Then we closed it, because keeping a small theatre going about killed us. So, then I started over again.' His own early, unpublished plays, he described as 'Ersatz Mamet'.<sup>15</sup>

*White People* was given a workshop production by The Next Stage Company in 1998 before its premiere at the Philadelphia Company in 2000. That company had been established in 1974 with a mission to stage new works (it claims to have produced 140 new plays and musicals), 50 per cent moving on to New York and other major cities. *White People* did reach Off Broadway, though nine years later by which time he had produced further plays. Also 2000 had seen a production of the play by the Salt Lake City Acting Company, committed to producing contemporary American plays, and this led to a long-term relationship.

If in his later work Rogers would reach out into the world, *White People* engaged with an America in which social changes had left some of its citizens confused and angry, if unable openly to express their feelings. It features three characters: Alan, a teacher, in New York; Mara Lynn Dodson, a working-class woman in her mid-thirties, in North Carolina, and Martin Bahmueller, head of a company, in St Louis. What connects them is that they are white and uncomfortable with those who are not, but also that their marriages have proved fragile, their lives not what they had planned. In a series of intercut monologues, they reveal what they otherwise suppress as though the audience were priest/therapists.

Alan's wife is the real breadwinner while his career seems stalled as he teaches those who, for the most part, have no interest in what he says, not sharing his concerns or even his language.

## Staging America

Mara, once homecoming queen and captain of the cheerleaders at the state university, had married a star wrestler only to be saddled with a man who can now only hold down a menial job and with a child who has severe behavioural problems. Martin, meanwhile, alarmed by the complexion of his New York neighbourhood, has dragged his wife back to the Midwest from which she had escaped only for her to leave him to go east again. All three are aware that things are not as they wished, that their lives are slipping away, while clinging to what seem to them to be certainties no matter how dubious they may be, no matter that language itself seems incapable of expressing what they want to say or truly what they feel, except that their monologues, addressed directly to the audience, are confessionals of a sort, falling short because confession is blended with self-justification. They all feel that in some way society is drifting away from them, that they no longer know what is possible or acceptable, resisting, yet sensing that theirs is a losing hand.

Race, in particular, is a problem. The words they are used to are no longer permissible, those they are offered losing the sharpness, the edge which their own vocabulary once had. The wrong people have power if not by virtue of their position then by some claim whose validity escapes them and which they instinctively reject. History, which they thought secure, is now presented to them in a different way even as it explains something of who they are and how they think. South, Midwest, East Coast come together.

There is a reason the speeches are intercut. It is because, at whatever level, there is the same anxiety. Even as they insist on their own visions, trying to shape the world to their requirements, they share a sense that they are no longer in control. Mara's son's doctor is an Indian. She wants to insist that he has no right in the country, feels certain she is patronized, but this is what is on offer. Martin believes himself in control, wanting everyone to conform to his demands, even as he is aware that he is being denied the right to say what he truly thinks, that menial black workers have some hold on him which he cannot articulate but which is nonetheless real. The gulf, for him, as for the others, is not only between himself and the immediate world from which he feels alienated, but between himself and his family. Wife and children are mysteries embracing the very culture which baffles and disturbs him. Communication has become problematic.

Addressing the audience, as they do throughout, they can say what they sense they otherwise cannot and these internal monologues have echoes of David Mamet as in Martin's aria:

You wanna sip pina coladas on your sun deck, feel pure? That what you want? . . . You wanna ring your hands at the world and know you are innocent? Look at your life. You think the price we are paying here today is enough? Don't come to me with 'bake sale, buy the right tuna, slip some homeless schmuck five bucks.' You wanna be absolved? That costs . . . You want an even playing field, you wanna be clean, that costs . . . come home, find your daughter raped in a pool of blood and there's nothing you can do? No? No? THEN SHUT YOUR MOUTH.<sup>16</sup>

When his own son is involved in a violent racist attack, Martin is bemused, not least because that son lacks his own inhibition when it comes to language, a language suppressed but available. When Alan and his wife are attacked by a group of black boys it is he who screams out obscenities. When he is confronted by one of his pupils for whom he had expressed admiration, he confesses that 'my mind says: Nigger. You filthy, ignorant nigger' (36). She

becomes ‘Them.’ The result is a mixture of shame, guilt, bafflement, along with resentment that he should have to acknowledge that what lies at the heart of such a confused response is an awareness that, ‘I know in my heart, I am like everyone: What is different, what is strange, I do not like, I do not trust . . . They want possibility . . . But there’s only so much possibility to go around’ and ‘before I take less, me and every person that looks like me would kill every person who looks like you’ (37).

It is not that Rogers has no sympathy for these people. Quite the contrary. They each struggle to understand what is happening, why they feel as they do. They suspect their own growing irrelevance. Mara’s love for her mentally damaged son is real enough, as is her frustration with him. She is poor but struggling to do what she can. Her plea is not without its force when she says,

don’t tell me it’s about ‘history’! Don’t tell me it’s about ‘making amends’! What’s that got to do with me? ‘Cause my great-great-granddaddy owned somebody else’s? ‘Cause my mamma wouldn’t sit at the back of the bus? Guilt is not transferred through blood. I am clawing through life, just like everybody else! Now I know the world is changing, but I can change too! I am not ignorant! Just tell me what to do! Look at me! Look at who I am! . . . I WILL NOT BE ERASED! (35)

For a second, the language seems not quite her own and at that moment the other two characters’ comments are interspersed with hers, Martin asking ‘Where does this anger come from?’ and Alan declaring that ‘There is fear for a reason!’ (35)

*White People* is a powerful and disquieting work, touching an exposed nerve. Its language can disturb audiences and is designed to do such, focussing, as it does, on the point where feelings, prejudices, anxieties, break surface, and though he would later look beyond America there are aspects of that work here. Direct address to the audience would become a familiar tactic as would a concern with the nuances of language, its ambiguities and suppressions. History bears on these characters as it would on those in the plays which followed.

The Salt Lake City Acting Company later commissioned and staged *Seeing the Elephant*, *Madagascar* and *The Overwhelming*. *Seeing the Elephant* (a nineteenth-century expression meaning gaining experience at a cost) was described by the actress Anne Cullimore Decker, who played the principal part of Vera, a woman in her sixties, as ‘dealing with the deaths of her son and husband, and . . . with lots of emotions—guilt, confusion. She tries to be charming, effusive and outrageous, but underneath she’s really sublimating and not facing life in its reality.’<sup>17</sup> *Madagascar*, commissioned and given its first production by the Salt Lake Acting Company in 2004, had more of Albee and even Tennessee Williams about it than Mamet. It consists of a series of monologues though, for Rogers, ‘The interesting thing about *Madagascar* is that when it’s played, it doesn’t seem like a monologue play at all. There are three actors, and because the other two are always on stage and, more importantly, play characters, including themselves as remembered by the other people on stage, at times even contradicting what they say when they’re in their story, it’s much more fluid, and for lack of a better phrase, play like, than, say, a traditional Irish monologue play that’s all the rage of late, or *White People*.’

Explaining what had sparked the play, he said that, ‘I had an image of an older woman coming onto the stage, hearing the click clack of her heels on wood. She sat down, and in my mind I could hear the sound of a cello, and she was speaking to us. I didn’t know what she was



saying, but there was something mysterious and a bit spooky about it. That sent me off to the races, and it was quite a long time before I realized, oh, these are the connections between these people. Hopefully now it's clear and well-made, entertaining for the audience and thought-provoking, but there was a bit of blind faith, unnervingly at times, working on it.<sup>18</sup>

The action, which does, indeed, begin with the sound of a cello, moves backwards and forwards through time as it is gradually revealed that Nathan and Lilian, now in their sixties, had had an affair while her husband was away, a husband who subsequently died. June, Lilian's daughter, gives her blessing but her brother (Paul, to her, Gideon to his mother) is alienated and leaves, telling his mother, it is because 'so much of what I believe in is a lie' (38).

The story moves on. He has been missing for years, his mother waiting in a hotel room in Rome, hoping for his return, a room occupied by all the characters at different times, characters remaining on stage throughout. What follows are monologues addressed in part to an audience and in part to themselves. There are other characters who help to tell the stories but they are played by the same actors.

Paul's disappearance is literal but it emerges that he had been disappearing in another sense, not able to find himself, not fitting in, escaping from himself and already tense with something unknowable before he left. The relationship with his mother is not good knowing, as he does, of her betrayal, information kept from her even as it is one reason for his disappearance. He leaves for Madagascar as an aid worker. For six months he writes to his sister but never his mother having learned, he tells June, that 'people can't be trusted' (34). The letters then stop.

Lilian's relationship with her daughter, meanwhile, has become distant, never as strong as that between her twin children. She is not even sure what June does. This is not a family emotionally or even physically close, living in different places, emotionally withdrawn from one another and even hostile. As Lilian says, 'she does not care for me. It would be best in her eyes if I were gone . . . Not dead, but . . . absent.'<sup>19</sup>

When June calls, after her brother has been missing for two years, to say that it must be assumed he is dead, Lilian commits suicide by drowning. For a while, for years, June resists the same logic, one day receiving a postcard with the cryptic message, 'I'm . . . still . . . here' (40). Who is? If it is her brother, it is not sufficient. She also commits suicide, preferring pills. The postcard is found, its message scratched out until it is illegible. For Nathan, Lilian's adulterous lover, who finds it, while a secret 'is an answer waiting to be revealed . . . a mystery,' is 'just that: a mystery,' (41) even as he also says, 'it's the hidden connections between actions which fascinate' (16). So, with the play, whose images recur, dreams melding into reality, works of art reflecting relationships, connections broken but still tenuously there.

The play begins with a projected image of a fragment of the Eleusinian Relief of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, the latter married to the god of the underworld, Hades, with a boy poised beneath them, Rogers having studied Greek and Roman mythology. Demeter is a goddess of abundance, as Lilian is rich, while Persephone is queen of the underworld. The Eleusinian Mysteries were secret religious rites concerned with three phases, loss, search and ascent, as the abducted Persephone is restored to her mother. In *Madagascar* it is the boy who is lost, for whom the search seems fruitless and for whom there is, it seems, no restoration though the play ends with June recalling their childhood games in which Madagascar was a magical place full of 'wonderful, wonderful things' (43).

When Nathan visited the Metropolitan Museum to see the Eleusinian Relief he realized that the fingers of the figures are missing: 'what they were giving, reaching for, it's impossible to

tell. No one knows what they held, or what was supposed to happen next. Just another mystery' (42). Mystery, indeed, is both the subject and the method in a play in which people's inner lives remain a cipher not to be decoded, in which secrets, truths withheld, erode not only trust but the ties that were supposed to bind.

For the most part, reviewers were intrigued but found it gnostic, Michael Billington, in *The Guardian*, confessing that he found a 2010 production 'somewhat baffling'. The following year, reviewing an Evanston production, Scotty Zacher, in *Chicago Theater Beat*, suggested that 'there's too much deliberate or perverse mystery-mangling in this tortuous witness to an escape that remains maddeningly evasive. There are too many blanks for the audience to fill in without finally feeling that the playwright hasn't played fair with the facts.'<sup>20</sup> *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Chris Jones, meanwhile, commented on its puzzle-like structure seeing it as 'a very smart and stimulating piece about three wealthy, neurotic Americans trying and failing to connect,'<sup>21</sup> surely a somewhat reductive interpretation of a play which invites its audience to address more than the mystery of a missing man, let alone the plight of neurotic Americans, though the word connection is, indeed, crucial, and not only to the characters. It is a play in which fragmented narratives, contested memories, shifting perspectives, missing facts, suggest those elements of experience which stubbornly refuse to render up their meaning, pieces of a human jigsaw which never quite cohere. Loss, in particular, is an irremediable fact, a wound never to be healed or even fully to be inhabited.

In 1994, between April and July, 800,000 people were murdered in Rwanda, 10 per cent of the population. A quarter of a million women were raped, the resultant children (those not aborted or killed at birth) called *les enfants mauvais souvenir*. Rogers has recalled being shocked by reports of the genocide, not least because he knew nothing of Rwanda and found the reports confusing. He began to read about it, at first for interest but then as a playwright wondering how he could address it: 'I became more and more fascinated by the intricacies of the political situation, and the sort of moral vacuum and the terror that people were going through . . . And slowly the dramaturge in me took over and I began to think, "Well, if you were there, Rogers, facing a situation like this, what would you do, when all your decisions or all your options were monstrous."<sup>22</sup> He studied the language, Kinyarwanda, and even a map of Kigali. The question remained, how could he deal with an event so overwhelming.

'From the beginning,' he explained, 'I wanted to tell a story that a Western theatre audience would invest in. If I was going to write about the politics of a place deeply foreign to everyone watching then the form of the play would need to be something that they could sink their teeth into . . . My ah-ha moment was choosing to set the action right before the genocide. This way . . . the spectre of what is to come knocks on the door, louder and louder as the play progresses. Letting the audience imagine the unimaginable seemed the most dramatically effective choice, and the most ethical.'<sup>23</sup>

Though in *The Overwhelming* a French diplomat rejects the idea that imperialism played any role in what happened as 'the argument of college students,' (66) in a note to the play Rogers explains both its historical context and the significance of its title. He recalls that in the late nineteenth century the Belgian king, Leopold II, launched a campaign to conquer the Congo basin, the result, over time, being the death of millions, the word in the Mongo language for this being, in translation, the overwhelming. Where do historical events have their beginning? What would be seen as an African genocide had its antecedent in colonial greed. This was the world captured in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in which the true darkness lay less

## Staging America

in what Europeans chose to call the dark continent because of its supposed savagery, than in the imperial powers. The Welsh American explorer Henry Morton Stanley, who titled his books *Through the Dark Continent* and *In Darkest Africa*, made a deal with the same King Leopold and boasted of destroying Congolese towns, a statue of him in Kinshasa being pulled down in 1971.

This is not a play which insists on a post-imperial guilt, though it is invoked and the significance of events in Rwanda is seen as reaching out beyond its borders even as in America a deliberate decision was made to suppress or ignore news of what was happening there once the killing had begun. A Freedom of Information request subsequently revealed that though the word genocide was being used within the administration little more than two weeks after the violence broke out, President Clinton had decided against involvement. Rwanda had no resources of value and the disaster of American involvement in Somalia militated against committing Americans to prevent the slaughter, even as the UN lost men and withdrew.

As Charles Woolsey, a US Embassy official in *The Overwhelming*, remarks, 'this country's so small, "Rwanda" has to be written outside the borders. Little arrow pointing to it' (78). Four years later, in the capital, Kigali, Clinton apologized for his inaction and for failing to name the killings genocide. He believed that if they had intervened they could have saved a third of the lives that were lost. Indifference, as the play implies, has its cost though, of course, as we were to discover in Iraq, so does intervention and Rogers' play explores the ambiguities of the Rwandan situation as it does of the individuals who constitute it. Perhaps that is one reason that he calls for parts to be doubled. There are villains but this doubling is a reminder that that role has been shared. There are echoes of former brutalities as there is a foreshadowing of those still to come. Motives are ambivalent, trust betrayed, reality and truth a matter of political convenience and hard to penetrate. It is a play about a time and a place but it is equally about personal and public deceptions. Precisely located, it is nonetheless a reminder of other failures of the human imagination and moral responsibility.

Rwanda is 85 per cent Hutu and 14 per cent Tutsi, though it was the Tutsis who had power. There was a history of animosity between the two groups, themselves in large part a product of Belgian colonial rule rather than an essential difference of identity. Economic pressure led many to cross the border into Uganda before returning to do battle. For a while it looked as though peace could be secured and maintained by a UN presence with power being shared. When the Hutu President's plane was shot down, however, the killing began, the UN withdrawing most of its troops.

Rogers' play is not offered as an indictment but as his own journey into the heart of darkness and, as with Conrad, that darkness reaches out beyond those preparing to kill their neighbours, as elsewhere, and at the same time, they did in the former Yugoslavia where an estimated 133,000 died, a conflict which also had its roots in history.

Having finished the play, Rogers asked his agent to send it to the National Theatre feeling that a work requiring eleven actors and set in francophone Africa was more likely to be staged there than in America. Even so, he was surprised when he took a call from the National's Artistic Director, Nicholas Hytner, asking him to fly to London. *The Overwhelming* was to be staged by the National in association with Out of Joint, a touring company founded by Max Stafford-Clark, which had premiered plays by David Edgar, Caryl Churchill and David Hare, Timberlake Wertenbaker, in other words writers who, like Rogers, wrote plays set outside their own society, addressing issues of immediate relevance.

Rogers and Max Stafford-Clark visited Rwanda. For all his earlier stab at Kinyarwanda, he spoke neither that language nor French relying on survivors in America for translations. What they learned on their trip necessitated certain minor changes in the text. Extracts from some of their interviews are included at the back of the published text, along with a brief piece by the BBC's Fergal Keane, who covered the genocide and who explains that genocide was a state policy. Jean-Pierre Sagahutu, one of those interviewed, confirmed that, 'It was systematic. Taxi drivers killed taxi drivers, doctors killed doctors. All knew each other here. Colleagues killed colleagues. My father was a doctor. Another doctor killed him' (136–7). A woman called Serafina describes her own experience: 'My husband was killed on the night of 7 April 1994. My mother and two children were killed. My children were burned alive . . . Killers found me hiding . . . they raped me . . . A man came by . . . he took my baby, he took him to a big tree and beat his head . . . then hung him by his feet' (137). The interviews were overwhelming (and there is a reason for the play's title beyond its literal root) in their particularities as in their aggregating impact.

How to write about such a situation, to stage such events? As those who sought to address the Holocaust in fiction, drama, art, discovered not only did any attempt necessarily fail to capture the reality of what happened but there was also the risk of appropriating the experience of others for aesthetic and, indeed, commercial effect. Beyond that, how could language capture what lay outside of language, except that in one interview a woman, who had been raped and contracted HIV as a result, bearing a child by her rapist, says, 'I . . . always wanted to be an actor. That is why I am telling you this. The theatre is important for this – to tell this' (140).

For Fergal Keane, himself a journalist, the 'theatre can reach an audience, and convey truths, with a power that can elude those of us who operate in the strict language of the news bulletin or the newspaper dispatch . . . a play can entertain, challenge, upset and anger an audience; at its best it can make them think deeply about the world in which they live and be prepared to challenge orthodoxies and lies' (133–4). For him, *The Overwhelming* was an antidote to the indifference which had characterized responses to the genocide, a call to action not only in relation to Rwanda, now fast disappearing in the rear-view mirror, but to subsequent horrors. He names Darfur but that, too, has slipped from the headlines, only to be replaced by other challenges to our sense of a shared humanity.

For all his concern with getting details right, for interviewing those involved in the genocide, Rogers was clear that he was acting as a playwright and not a journalist any more than he saw his plays as political interventions. As he remarked in the context of *Oslo*, but with immediate relevance to *The Overwhelming*,

I'm interested in political theatre not as agitprop cause-based theatre . . . What theatre does that journalism doesn't do is that, in journalism, you lay out the facts; you explain this is what happened so the reader can be informed. But theatre doesn't do that. What the theatre does is to keep asking questions. It doesn't provide answers. So, as a playwright, I want to show more and more complicated voices of people who aren't normally on the stage. And then I'm going to put them on the stage as flesh-and-blood human beings. The anxiety was that people would get upset simply because of the theatrical act of putting everyone on the stage and humanising them.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, there are those for whom addressing the specifics of a contemporary situation nonetheless has the feel of the journalistic and with the same longevity. It was an accusation with

## Staging America

which David Hare was familiar. As he explained, 'The charge against topical theatre is that it dates. The charge is always, "You are just a journalist running along behind the truck taking notes." But if you write about something that has underneath it a classical conflict then writing that kind of theatre, which may be about something extremely contemporary, is curiously lasting.'<sup>25</sup>

For Rogers, events in Rwanda were less to be confronted directly than refracted through an outsider, an American who believes himself engaged with the world but nonetheless fails to understand what confronts him. Unlike his compatriots, for whom such events seem little more than a rumour from a place they could not locate on a map, he does travel there but for him it is material for a book, as for his wife it is for an article. In that sense, here is Rogers confronting his own dilemma.

As the play opens there seems to be a fragile peace. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the rebel group largely consisting of Tutsis, had agreed to an accord with the government. Signed in August 1993, it would fail by April 1994. The play is set in Kigali, in early 1994. Into this situation comes Jack Exley, a professor of international relations. Reassured by press reports of an improved situation, he brings his family with him only to be told by Charles Woolsey, a US Embassy official, that assassinations are frequent. When the two go for a drink at a hotel, Charles remarks of their waiter, 'His wife was killed last week. Abducted. Raped. Cut up. Someone thought she was an RPF accomplice. They'll come for him. Matter of time.'<sup>26</sup>

Exley is accompanied by his African-American wife, Linda, who publishes 'personal essays. Narratives of self' (22) but now has a commission to write about Rwanda or, rather, 'my personal experiences here,' (28) insisting that she is 'from here' since her ancestor had been taken to America in chains. It is apparent to all who meet them, at the French Embassy and elsewhere, that they are unaware of the situation into which they have come. Their personal dramas take primacy. For Exley, travel may have been in the name of research, with an ethical and even philosophical dimension, but it seems equally to have served a more private function to do with career and familial tensions. In an attempt to bond with his son, he recalls an apparently idyllic trip to Bali with his former wife in which he was 'relaxed,' evidently not his normal state, a time which was 'transforming' gifting him a 'clarity' which he now hopes to recreate following his divorce and a subsequent honeymoon in Peru.

This is a family which has brought its own drama with it. Exley has divorced his first wife to marry his student, only for that first wife to be killed in a car crash. His second wife has abandoned her own career, which is not what she thought she had been promised. Meanwhile, his son, taken out of school in his last semester, treats them both with disdain, he having barely seen his father in three years. It is not, however, only Exley's wife who, whatever his declared commitments, is concerned with the self. The book he plans, it transpires, is his last hope for tenure. If he fails to write it, he will lose his job, a job in an undesirable university anyway. He is not even on sabbatical but unpaid leave. His motives, then, are not what they seem. A native saying – 'A man who tells all is naked. A naked man is weak' (54) – would seem to apply to him. Exley lies to his son, while his son lies to him. Truth, it seems, is a rare commodity on a private and public level. Here, the South African NGO worker, Jan Verbeek, insists, 'everyone lies' (93). As the French diplomat, Jean-Claude Buisson, observes, 'the straight road is seldom the one to walk,' (67) or as another character observes, 'To speak the truth is good, but to speak all truth is not' (82). There are, it seems, some truths which are dangerous.

For his part, Exley has come to meet a doctor friend who will feature in his new book about those around the world who resist the idea of history as a series of events beyond anyone's

control. People, he insists, 'aren't being swept along, they're doing the sweeping' (31). As evidence, he points to Benigno Aquino who had protested against the Marcos regime in the Philippines, only to be reminded by Woolsey that he had been shot dead. His point, though, he insists, is that 'we're the ones that have to be willing to stand up and make a difference. That's how history moves forward. One pebble redirects the river!' (34) For Samuel Mizinga, a Rwandan government official, this is something only someone blind to the situation in the country could believe. For him, it is history that has precipitated a situation in which mere survival is at a premium, even as, lapsing into his native tongue, he expresses his hatred of the Tutsis insisting that, 'We will fill the rivers with bodies . . . We will cut them, everyone' (36). The speech is not translated. Language is a door which can be slammed shut as well as opened.

Indeed, language, as used in the play, is both an expression of the gulf between the characters, a gap of understanding, and a way of retreating from communication, a switch of language being also a change of perspective. There are various acts of translation in the play as speeches delivered in one language are rendered in another but words have their own history, their own context, so that communication is freighted with assumptions which are not shared. Beyond that, language, here as elsewhere, is also a facilitator of violence. For the Hutus, Tutsis are cockroaches as in Vietnam the Viet Cong (itself an invented term designed to belittle) were gooks, while for the Nazis Jews were parasites. When the threatening Mizinga, the government official, remarks that soldiers are looking for cabbages, unbeknown to Linda he is referring to their hunting Tutsis. 'I am,' he says, 'translating from Kinyarwanda to French to English. So much is lost' (50). They speak past each other, meanings deliberately or inadvertently obscured. In the next scene Linda tries to buy cabbages in the local market only to be warned that the seller is 'a filthy Tutsi whore' who 'will poison you and you will die' (53). Here, even to speak English is to invite danger, this being the non-native language spoken by Tutsis as the Hutus speak French, both languages recalling the colonizers (after the genocide the language of government was changed from French to English).

For Jean-Claude Buisson, of the French Embassy, Rwanda is part of *la Francophonie*, their sphere of influence. He rejects Linda's suggestion that America has no interest, having trained the Tutsi rebels. The internal battle, it seems, has other players so that guilt spreads out into the world which will affect surprise and shock when the genocide begins. Clinton's non-involvement at that time conceals America's earlier finger in the pie. Though it is not explored in the play, the United States had ignored Uganda's assistance to the Tutsi rebels who had invaded in 1990 and, indeed, increased armed support for that country.

Fergal Keane quotes a French historian of the genocide as describing Rwanda as 'a claustrophobic, airless hell,' (132) but, for all his apparent confidence, Exley finds it impossible to read this country. He greets what seems to him to be an experiment in democracy, blind to a country on the brink of collapse in which violence and fear are principal determinants. 'Stop thinking like an American,' (69) a South African tells him. He even unknowingly locates his family in what is apparently little more than a brothel. It is not that his belief in the need to resist a corrosive fatalism is without its force. Indeed, that, as Fergal Keane had indicated, lies at the heart of the play, but that he brings with him a naivety which undermines his confident assertions. Offered warnings of the dangers of Kigali, he prefers to believe his own sense of things, even as the man he has come to meet seems to have disappeared or, as he is told, does not exist.

That man, Joseph, does exist for the audience in so far as he addresses it directly reading letters he has sent to Jack. He speaks, though, from the past, already, perhaps, a ghost, denied by

## Staging America

the Rwandans having run into trouble with the authorities. Little by little a sense of menace deepens. Joseph, it turns out, was a Tutsi. Meanwhile, beyond his fate, Rwandans are suffering from AIDS, malaria and sleeping sickness apart from the gathering political storm. The word 'overwhelming' is one that Joseph uses when working on AIDS. As the doctor observes, 'you have to be here to start making sense of this place. Before I came I read everything, thought I was a bloody expert. Then I got off the plane' (45). As Woolsey observes, 'People, even people we think we know . . . they're not the same here as when they are away from here' (79).

The first act ends with the arrival of Elise Kayitesi, Joseph's Hutu wife, who not only confirms that her husband has disappeared but that he had previously been imprisoned when the Tutsi rebels had crossed the border from Uganda. This is news to Exsley who was even unaware that he was married and had children. Their friendship, it seems, forged when they were college roommates, did not extend beyond the professional, further evidence of the limits of his awareness or even interest.

When he goes to the police to report Joseph as a missing person he receives no help. As a Tutsi, he is regarded as an enemy. What he does receive is a denunciation of President Clinton for not intervening on behalf of the Hutus and a warning that a cleansing is about to begin. As Elise remarks to Linda, 'If people like you understood, this country would be very different. We are beaten, we are starved, we are killed, and you do nothing. To you, we are nothing' (82). The real concern is indifference. The UN force are described by a major in the UN mission as 'a small, dirty Band-Aid on a large festering wound . . . do you think the world cares?' (87-8) The death of eighteen American soldiers in Somalia the previous year had stunned the United States but he points out that the ninety UN soldiers who died trying to rescue the Americans had barely registered, perhaps because they were from Pakistan and Malaysia, a different colour and hence invisible.

Here people are seldom what they seem. Mizinga is a member of an extremist party who, according to Jan Verbeek, 'makes Idi Amin look like a choirboy,' (94) even as he insists to Linda that she must trust him, trust being nowhere evident at a private or public level. 'So who am I supposed to trust?' (101) Exley asks, as Elise advises Linda: 'Do not trust a husband who does not trust you,' (113) while Joseph advises that 'Trust is to be earned' (115).

Is Joseph, who now suddenly reappears, taking refuge with the Exleys, a doctor seeking to save lives or a spy for the RPF with blood on his hands as Buisson alleges? It turns out that he has passed information which led to the death of what he characterizes as rapists and killers. He who holds a list of those he wants protected had a list of his own. Slowly the threatened violence becomes immediate. A Tutsi woman is killed with the connivance of a man who Exley and Linda had assumed was simply their servant. Gunfire sounds through the city. The guard outside the Exley's house has disappeared. A rock comes through the window. The telephone is dead. When Mizinga enters to take Joseph away Linda offers him the list of people at risk insisting 'WE DO NOT BELONG HERE! THIS IS NOT OUR PROBLEM!' (128) an American woman effectively spelling out American policy. To protect his family, Jack offers Joseph up as Mizinga says, 'This will mean nothing to you soon. All of us, we will mean nothing. This is so unimportant to you. You will go home and forget' (129).

The play ends, though, not with Joseph being taken away but with him turning to the audience, the light now singling him out, as he speaks the words of a letter he had sent and which was part of the correspondence that had brought the Exleys to a place they would never understand and where their moral compass would go awry, though in truth it had already been

faulty before they arrived. 'I have hope,' he says, even as hope had died, as would nearly a million people.

We are left, then, it seems, with irony. Beyond the play the genocide is about to begin. No one in *The Overwhelming* can be said to be innocent. Even naivety carries a burden of guilt. There is failure at every level. Exley's book will never be written. His career is over. The tensions within his family will surely break it apart. The UN is on the verge of a failure that will be repeated elsewhere. The various foreigners, with motives of their own, can do nothing but observe, their detachment in itself rendering them culpable. Yet there is a residue in that the play itself is an antidote to the indifference it indicts even as its acknowledgement of ambiguity is a resistance to the Manichaeism which is the tinder for genocide.

Plays have a way of beginning when the action is already underway. The consequences of past events, previous tensions, are slowly realized and resolved. In *The Overwhelming* we never quite reach that point. The action is not completed. Instead Rogers brings us to the edge, to the point where we know that nothing will stop what is about to happen. Any order, any sense of a coherent moral world, is about to disappear even as we can trace that fact back to its beginnings. History is not a force independent of human will, an inevitability. It is a construction to do with power exercised in the name of abstract ideas made concrete, whether they be those of colonialism, sectional or personal advantage. There is an opacity to genocide which seems to defy analysis, understanding or representation. Here, Rogers addresses that problem not by staring into the abyss, from which no light emerges, offering accounts of atrocities that prompt the mind to retreat, but by placing before us those who see the world through a lens clouded by falsehoods, deceptions, concealed motives, human failings, in a context in which right actions are not always clear, in which trust and charity have proved inadequate and hope denied.

The genocide ran its course and ended. Some were brought to justice. Others justified their crimes, still believing their own propaganda. It now lies in the past, fast receding. Like other such spasms of human dereliction, however, its aftershocks continue to threaten. A group of countries met in 1996 under the aegis of the UN determined that such events would not recur. They duly signed a Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide but a similar Convention had been signed in 1948. They were, it seems, swimming against a tide and that is partly where the relevance – Rogers' key word – of *The Overwhelming* lies. At the time of the play's production, genocide had already occurred in Darfur. Further ahead lay the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people in Myanmar.

Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, thought it an 'honorable' work but found the Exleys 'obtuse to the point of idiocy,' while praising it for avoiding 'the woodenness of the lecture podium.'<sup>27</sup> Charles Spencer, reviewing the earlier British production, though, had greeted it as not only the best play he had seen that year, but the most entertaining.

Rogers' next play was prompted by a commission to write for the British Tricycle Theatre, which had a reputation for producing verbatim plays. This time, though, they wanted to address the situation in Afghanistan. To do so they approached twelve playwrights whose plays were, together, to cover that country from 1842 to the present. The total running time would be seven hours. Rogers was the only American. The title for the show was *The Great Game*, a phrase first used by the explorer Arthur Conolly, a British intelligence officer, and popularized by Rudyard Kipling. It referred to the battle between the Russian and British empires for domination of central Asia.

For the British playwright David Edgar, the Tricycle was here moving away from its work based on literal transcripts: 'Theatre of fact tends to surface, as in the '50s, when people simply



don't know what to do with history. When the Berlin Wall came down, and there was all that talk about "the end of history" . . . now I think people are moving out of that a bit and saying, "Let's take the facts and make something new out of them."<sup>28</sup> Rogers' play, *Blood and Gifts*, features an undercover American involved in supplying guns to a warlord, in the 1980s, for use against Soviet troops, only to discover that they would subsequently be used by the Islamists. Nor is he the only agent for whom the war in Afghanistan is part of a wider conflict. Russia, America and Britain were all engaged in that odd gavotte which secret intelligence agencies are inclined to dance, each pursuing their own national agendas even as they are aware that national priorities are liable to change. Meanwhile, they are required to establish relationships with those who they might betray as they in turn might betray them. And all the while there are those with lives at stake in a great game which is liable to seem such only to those who can return to the safety of Washington, London or Moscow even as the lives to which they return bear the marks, the fractures and dissolutions, which are a product of their profession, though this level of complexity would await his decision to revise the play.

Not only was the production of *The Great Game* a success in England and America but it attracted the attention of the military in both countries. Head of the British army, Sir David Richards, arranged for it to be played before members of the military and those involved in policy making. In the US it was praised by General Petraeus and with the support (though not financial) of the Pentagon presented to their personnel. In the words of the Pentagon's Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, Doug Wilson, "There is an assumption that the arts and our men and women in uniform are from different planets. It's not the case. The arts can provide a means to discuss and explore and, in this case, learn about the history and culture of a very complicated country. It is tremendous food for thought."<sup>29</sup>

That may be true but it is interesting that the theatre should be addressing a knowledge deficit on the part of those already waging a war in a country whose history and culture were evidently little known and whose complexities were hardly addressed by politicians or those required to risk themselves seemingly on behalf of those whose loyalties were beyond easy comprehension.

By the time of the American production, however, Rogers had withdrawn his twenty-minute play from the cycle because he realized that he wished to develop it as a full-length play. It was replaced by a work from fellow American, Lee Blessing whose best-known play was *A Walk in the Woods*, a play, set in Switzerland, about American and Soviet arms negotiators, and as such perhaps a precursor to Rogers' *Oslo*. The result of Rogers' revision was an expanded cast list and an increased complexity, moral no less than in terms of plot. As he told Alexis Soloski in *The New York Times*, "I'm not very good at polemic or strong public opinions . . . If I'm any good as a playwright, it's because I'm always good at seeing the other side . . . Every person is complex and complicated and maddening and difficult."<sup>30</sup>

If trust had been a central issue in *The Overwhelming*, so it would be again in *Blood and Gifts* dealing, as it does, with spies and a clash of cultures. Covert action is what it is because it involves deception on all levels. Truth is relative depending on who is speaking, on motives not always easy to understand, perhaps even by the speaker. As Rogers remarked, "This is a hard play in the sense that when it works it pushes back – hard – against the American ethos that everyone speaking to you is honest and true unless you know otherwise. We are a lucky people indeed that that is our default position. For most of the world it's the opposite, whether this ethos is born out of recent traumas (Rwanda, say) or a longer, sometimes jaundiced national history (much of Europe, say). This is a play firmly rooted in the latter worldview."<sup>31</sup>

While it is not hard to understand what he means when he speaks of Europe, where for decades the Soviet Union held countries in thrall and truth was a rare and dangerous commodity, his comment on America, if not ironic, suggests a touching idealism since faith in major institutions (government, the church, the media, business, the police) has declined with deeply damaging effects. The internet, meanwhile, has become a natural home to conmen, racists, terrorists, misogynists, purveyors of what President Trump would call fake news even as he himself had difficulty in distinguishing truth from lies.

America went to war in Iraq on the basis of a lie as decades earlier Americans had been told they were winning in Vietnam shortly before rescue helicopters landed on the roof of the US Embassy in Saigon while other helicopters were pushed into the sea from aircraft carriers in the haste of evacuation. So there seems something of a paradox as Rogers invokes American innocence even as he writes plays which equate innocence with a misreading of the world leading to consequences at home and abroad. At the same time, in *Blood and Gifts* he does present a CIA agent with honourable motives even as there is a political current tugging at him and a family which pays the price of his commitments. Slowly, compromises blur the ethical connection between means and ends. Tellingly, the published version has an epigraph from William James: 'Whenever two people meet there are really six people present. There is each man as he sees himself, each man as the other person sees him, and each man as he really is.' The only aspect of that which seems implausible is the suggestion that it is possible to know who a person 'really is'.

The play was commissioned by Lincoln Center Theater and developed at PlayPenn in Philadelphia, and New Dramatists in New York, but, perhaps significantly, once again premiered at the National Theatre in England (in September, 2010), though some reviewers objected to what they saw as its naivety, in particular finding his portrait of the mujahideen implausible. Michael Billington, in *The Guardian*, welcomed it as 'a lament for America's tragic innocence,'<sup>32</sup> but five days later the same newspaper's theatre blog featured a review which criticized what its author, Lara Pawson, saw as its condescending portraits of Afghans and Pakistanis, along with a misunderstanding of the mujahideen,<sup>33</sup> a view endorsed by the BBC's John Simpson who had reported from Afghanistan and detected what seemed to him a confusion between the mujahideen and al-Qaida. In America, by contrast, Charles Isherwood, in *The New York Times*, greeted it as 'a superb new play' with 'the taut grip of a spy novel by Graham Greene or John le Carré ... lucid and compelling' while Rogers' 'knowledge of the hearts and minds of his characters is as deep as his grasp of the geopolitical games being played.'<sup>34</sup>

*Blood and Gifts* is an epic play, set in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Washington, which Rogers himself has described as a sweeping historical and political thriller located against the actual events of the Afghan war, following the lives of five members of different espionage forces. What interested him in part was the shifting alliances between them and the price they each pay in terms of their sense of self and their relationship with others. The surprise, perhaps, is that it is laced through with humour, evidence that these are characters who can, at least for a second, step back from the earnestness of the causes they separately embrace, even as their humour has a caustic edge. Both the CIA and MI6 agents are granted an integrity, a commitment, lacking in their respective countries where cynicism combines with indifference, the latter confessing that for his government, 'This mission here, we're just not a priority ... No, no, we have to save the resources for the *real* problems. Let's not worry about the Russians invading a country the size of France, about two million refugees starving in tents. No, no, that

## Staging America

would be *incidental* to the Cold War. Yes, *incidental* because these poor buggers here aren't *occidental*.<sup>35</sup>

It is a statement which seems to speak for the morality of these two men, anxious to persuade their respective governments of the necessity for involvement, but, as with *The Overwhelming*, part of the force of the play comes from an assumed knowledge of what lay ahead. Acts have consequences. For of course the fact is that Russian involvement, which the two Western agents work to subvert, would give way to American. Afghanistan would become a priority though less because that would be part of the Cold War, by then a memory, than because of terrorism and the subsequent battle against those the Americans had armed, ironically the very arms which the two agents had sought to secure believing themselves to be committed to right actions.

By May, 2015, indeed, it has been estimated, by Brown University's Watson Institute, that 149,000 had been killed in the Pakistan–Afghanistan conflict since 2001 when the US invaded, this including 31,000 civilians killed in Afghanistan. In the course of the war, 2,371 members of the American military and Department of Defence personnel had died (it would rise by a further 18 in 2017), along with 1,100 allied troops, most of them British. 3,500 civilian contractors also died. The number of Taliban and other militants killed was estimated at 35,000.<sup>36</sup> Despite a major withdrawal under President Obama, in September, 2017, President Trump ordered the deployment of an additional 3,000 US troops to Afghanistan making 14,000 troops stationed there, sixteen years after 9/11, though in 2019, in the face of military advice, he would announce a planned withdrawal.

These facts lie outside the play but they create a backward pressure on its events as we witness the foundations laid for years of violence. *Blood and Gifts* is not a history lesson, even as it takes us back to the beginnings of America's involvement (and less significantly Britain's), and has a deal of explaining to do to audiences whose knowledge of the Afghan war is presumably limited. What interests Rogers, though, is precisely the efforts of individuals to understand the world into which they are thrust and their determination to make right decisions in a context in which it is not always clear what those and their consequences might be. They, and their Russian counterpart, are required to be obedient to those who, at a distance, decide how the game is to be played, but bring their own values to the table as they enter an occluded ethical environment.

Their job requires them to bring gifts, literal and otherwise, buy influence, offer commitments, personal and political, but they, and those they deal with, act on a faith easily compromised. They are agents in more ways than one in that they are subordinate to others even as they try to be actors in a drama which they like to feel is of their own devising. It was Winston Churchill who commented on the futility of waging war in Afghanistan: 'Financially it is ruinous. Morally it is wicked. Militarily it is an open question, and politically it is a blunder.'<sup>37</sup>

Rogers is not out to indict but to dramatize moral quandaries, explore that point at which the public world impinges on the private. He is aware, too, that for those who conduct covert operations there can be an excitement, a challenge, that is seductive. The world in which they move may be morally and strategically confusing but it can seem more real than the conventionalities of life at home, the demands of personal relationships. Indeed, the personal is sacrificed, wives abandoned. They are absent when children are born, as is the case of the British agent Simon Craig, while the American, James Warnock, leaves his wife to face the death of a child alone. Craig's wife, indeed, ultimately abandons him, taking their children with her. Even the Soviet agent, Dmitri Gromov, confesses that his wife tells him to 'Stop caring

about politics! Care about your daughter,' (101) a daughter who herself is evidently about to give birth while refusing to identify the father. Betrayal, it seems, takes many forms.

Rogers' research for the play involved meetings with Jack Devine, who had been second-in-command at the CIA, and Steve Coll, author of *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden*. The play covers the period from 1981, when the CIA became involved in Afghanistan, to 1991, when it withdrew. It was, he said, to move rapidly with each scene flowing or smashing into the next without pause. As in *The Overwhelming*, speeches were to be delivered in more than one language: in this case Pashto, Farsi, Urdu and Russian, as well as English. Besides Washington, it is set in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where different groups and nationalities are brought together, in conflict or fragile alliance.

The pivotal figure is James Warnock, a CIA station chief recently married who, on landing at Islamabad Airport, encounters the Russian Dmitri Gromov. It is not an accidental meeting. They are both masquerading as what they are not while both are aware of their mutual roles. Warnock then reports to Colonel Afridi of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). He bears the gift of a revolver, the first of many gifts in the play as alliances and relationships are consolidated, the first, too, of many weapons that will be delivered, albeit at this stage in the conflict ancient stock itself evidence of the tentativeness of the proposed alliance. He is there to initiate a relationship, the US as yet only hesitantly involved in what is happening over the border. They are joined by Simon Craig of MI6 who brings news that the Chinese will contribute equally ancient weaponry to arm the mujahideen. With the Russian invaders only two hundred and fifty kilometres from Islamabad, and armed with tanks, neither offer is regarded as a serious contribution but for Warnock what matters is deniability. He is not only here to deceive the enemy but those at home not likely to favour such a policy.

Immediately they run into difficulties. Who are they to arm in a situation in which different Afghan factions are at odds given that there are seven principal commanders? Here, no one trusts anyone and clearly neither of the Western operatives entirely understands the world into which they have been thrust, making linguistic and other mistakes. 'Who can I trust?' (13), Warnock asks, a question which, as we have seen, recurs in Rogers' work and which is central to this play. 'The Afghans' he is told by Craig, 'are charming, semi-civilised, and utterly untrustworthy.' He gives his word that his American counterpart will be kept in the loop only for Warnock to ask if his word is, 'any good' (15). The answer to that is revealed when he promises that he will support Pakistan's chosen warlord while actually supporting his rival, Craig commenting, 'I shouldn't believe a word you say, should I?' (50) and this despite the fact that his superior had taught him that, 'Without trust, we cannot do our job. Those who prove they can be trusted, you hold on to, at all costs' (80). That same man, however, later proves duplicitous when it serves what he sees as a higher purpose. 'We are,' he explains, 'not there to liberate the Afghan people. We are there to keep the Soviets from winning the Cold War' (81). It also transpires that when Warnock had previously served in Iran they had abandoned their contacts to torture – one forced to watch the rape of his daughter – and death. So much for holding on to trusted people at all costs.

If Rogers is to explore the intricacies of Afghanistan and the principal players, he warns at the beginning that unravelling them will not be without its problems. One leader, supported by Pakistani intelligence, is Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Islamist, cruel, culturally misogynist, who would be known as the 'Butcher of Kabul'. He is hated by the Afghan man Warnock courts. Meanwhile, for the Pakistanis, for internal reasons, the war is to become a religious one, with

## Staging America

fighters welcomed from other Muslim countries. The man who eventually proves most effective, however, is not supported by Pakistan allegedly because his is the wrong sect of Islam, Ahmad Shah Massoud, whose army is described by Colonel Afridi as 'full of Shia', he having assembled an army of ethnic and religious minorities. Massoud would be assassinated in 2001 two days before the attack of 9/11, Hekmatyar having previously tried to do so. Again, the play stops short of this as *The Overwhelming* had stopped short of the genocide. History works backwards as what is not yet known reflects back on what is. The agents gradually become little more than 'a lousy break mechanism' (50).

When Warnock meets his Afghan contact, Abdullah Khan, he pays him money, but for information on the ISI rather than the Russians. There is, it seems, no trust even between supposedly cooperating intelligence services. There is more than one game being played in the Great Game. Challenged, Warnock denies having served in Iran or speaking Farsi, in both cases a lie but lying is a part of his craft as a spy. He is not what the Embassy declares him to be while in Washington politicians lie about the venture in which he is involved as those same politicians require the Afghan leader to lie to secure their help.

The action moves on two years. It is 1983. Now the mujahideen, gathered in the Frontier Province of Pakistan, near Jalalabad, have been armed with new sniper rifles. American involvement has clearly increased. In addressing them Warnock implies, without overtly stating, that they should use them to assassinate Russian officers inside Pakistan, while denying any such plan when challenged by Gromov. He urges Khan to join forces with the warlord financed by ISI only for him, not unreasonably, to reply, '*No one can be trusted*. I not join forces because, now, in Afghanistan, I not know who is trust and who is serpent' (38). Somehow, amidst the violence and confusion, the betrayals, Warnock, and his British counterpart, cling to the idea that, 'We're here to do what's right. And *that* matters,' (43) while back in Washington and London there are those for whom this is no more than a sideshow.

In the second act, the action moves on a further two years. It is 1985 and Khan is in Washington to appear before a committee where he is required to deliver a speech crafted for him in praise of America's assistance and in support of further funding. His job is to conceal the truth that they are losing the war. As Warnock explains, 'if he doesn't tell them what they want to hear you get nothing!' (66) What he really wants are Stinger missiles to shoot down Russian helicopters and for that he will do as they wish later insisting that 'I lied not for me but for my people' (97). By this stage, and for all involved, lying has become the common language.

Again, the action moves on, first to 1987, with the Russians in retreat and the war shifting into a religious conflict, then to 1988, as Craig and Gromov prepare to leave, their private and public worlds in disarray. Finally, as the pace picks up, the action moves to 1999. In Afghanistan there is civil war. Khan's son has been killed, he finally revealing that his deputy, Saeed, whom Warnock had once asked to be his spy, was, in fact, that son, only one of the secrets which constitute this world of conspiracies, plots, deceptions, a loss, though, which for the father means more than any abstraction, any invocation of freedom. For his part, Warnock has come to retrieve unused Stingers only to find that Khan has sold them to the Iranians and allied himself with Hekmatyar, the man he had previously hated. He now sees Islam as the only way forward and so a new logic begins, a process which will, as he says, 'cross oceans' (124). The play ends as he and his men cry, 'Allahu akbar!' (125). 9/11 lies only three years ahead.

For Michael Billington, writing in *The Guardian*, Rogers was 'that rare creature: an American dramatist who writes about global issues' and *Blood and Gifts* 'a complex, demanding play'

which ‘grippingly explores the public world and the fatal consequences of America’s anti-Soviet obsession.’<sup>38</sup> For Charles Spencer, in *The Telegraph*, however, while it ‘works well as a Cold War espionage drama . . . an entertaining, well-plotted thriller’ with ‘plenty of sharp humour and political savvy in the dialogue’ it was ‘the wrong play at the wrong time.’ Instead of concentrating on the past, he suggested, Rogers should have offered ‘an up-to-the minute account of what’s happening on the ground in Afghanistan now. Is the conflict winnable? What is life like for the troops?’ He was also happy to offer advice about how it might have been improved if there had been scenes involving ‘the terrifying real-life warlord and Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar,’ but ‘Both dramatist and the NT seem to be cravenly safe about portraying the full unpleasantness of militant Islam.’<sup>39</sup> It was an odd review given that, as in *The Overwhelming*, Rogers was interested in exploring the origins of conflict, the degree to which past actions determine subsequent events, as he was in the motives of those who believed they could shape history to their will, blind to the price to be paid for bad faith in private and public life alike.

By contrast, when it was staged, the following year, at the Lincoln Center Theater, Charles Isherwood in *The New York Times*, called it ‘a superb new play,’ an ‘engrossing, illuminating’ work which ‘gives a remarkably lucid and compelling account of how the American and British view of Afghanistan as a vital front in the Cold War against the Soviet Union shaped the calamitous recent history of the country.’ His ‘knowledge of the hearts and minds of his characters,’ he added, ‘is as deep as his grasp of the geopolitical games being played.’<sup>40</sup> Responding to the West Coast premiere at La Jolla Playhouse in 2012, the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer, Charles McNulty, confessed that while, ‘Plays about war-torn regions are about as enticing as turnips on the dessert menu . . . “Blood and Gifts” presents its historical material in a fleet-footed manner that keeps the scenes compact, flecked with surprising comic notes and full of foreboding,’ while insisting that ‘the play makes a strong case for the inescapability of history and the strategic necessity of examining conflicts from a plurality of ever-shifting perspectives — two areas that have long bedevilled American foreign policy.’<sup>41</sup>

If *Blood and Gifts* was indeed in some ways a thriller this reflected the fact that while Rogers has noted that ‘the structures of genre get short shrift from critics’ there is ‘something in thrillers, melodramas and even screwball comedy – depending on the project – that give you an underpinning that is wonderfully useful for holding a script together. You can take structural elements from a genre but then do something completely different with them. I think there’s something very satisfying and compelling about experiencing a well-told tale, regardless of what the subject matter or ideas are.’<sup>42</sup>

Rogers’ next play came about fortuitously. As he explained in an article in *The New York Times*,<sup>43</sup> when *Blood and Gifts* was ending its run at Lincoln Center Theater he met Terje Rød-Larsen, a UN special envoy who had talked to the cast about working as a negotiator in the Middle East. During their conversation he learned that he and his wife, Mona Juul, Ambassador, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Norway Mission to the United Nations, had been directly involved in the negotiations which led to the Oslo Accords in 1993, the peace deal between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). There had, he discovered, been a diplomatic back channel that had made the accords possible.

What followed was a year of research and interviews with those directly involved which convinced him that, ‘Here was the stuff of theatre – events that were almost preposterous in their strangeness: clandestine meetings, often run by those who had no experience with such things; people’s lives constantly put at risk; governments threatened with calamity; emotions

## Staging America

rising and falling at an operatic scale; people pushed to the brink of what they thought possible as friendships were fused and torn apart.<sup>44</sup>

In a country which leans into the future, the past can often seem irrelevant. In a country which tends to celebrate its exceptionalism what goes on elsewhere can appear beside the point unless its vital interests are perceived to be under threat. Intervention, at one level or another, may seem required but all too often it proves difficult to read another culture, interpretation requiring more than linguistic equivalence. Vietnam, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Iraq, the evidence accumulates of mis-readings, dark secrets kept not only from allies but from those at home enrolled in what George W. Bush referred to as an American crusade, itself evidence of a failure of historical and cultural awareness. In *Blood and Gifts* Rogers sets out not only to guide his audience through the complexities of foreign entanglement but more profoundly to explore the nature of betrayal, the ambiguity of motives, the effect of trust denied, that extends beyond the world of espionage, state obfuscations and international intrigue.

Commissioned by Lincoln Center, *Oslo*, was developed over three weeks at PlayPenn. The process involved writing and re-writing, leading to two staged readings. This time it opened first in America at Lincoln Center, in March, 2017. It won a Tony Award and moved to London's National Theatre in September of the same year. In his mind it was an intellectual thriller, albeit laced with humour. Indeed, he re-read Noel Coward plays as part of his preparation. It is also, though, as in *Blood and Gifts*, a play in which human negotiations are a key to more than the resolution of political concerns.

The characters in *Oslo* are all based on real people and carry their names. The words they speak, however, are Rogers' even as they accurately reflect the views of those on whom they are based. It is thus simultaneously factual and, on one level, fictional. It is not a transcript snatched from history but a crafted drama. The stakes are high, peace between those who publicly refuse to speak to one another. The issue, as ever in Rogers' work, is trust, the very quality which has disappeared not only from the politics of the Middle East but also from the America which at the time of the American production had seen an election in which very little could be trusted, not the President, not the rhetoric of those who courted and then wielded power, not the media, not least because it turned out that a foreign power had been a player in the game.

Here, by contrast, was a play in which rational people, motivated in part by tribal myths and realities, nonetheless learned to seek what they might have in common. It is a play about a journey. The destination is clear, the route not so. Asked what the play was about he replied, 'What would it be like to sit across from your mortal enemy, to have the courage to see them as fellow human beings, and then to find that you are the one profoundly changed by that seeing?'<sup>45</sup> It is also a play which tests the proposition that human connections can triumph over an authorized rhetoric, physical proximity close a gap of understanding. As in *Blood and Gifts*, it stages the tactics and strategies of those who construct their own narratives, who have motives and objectives of their own, and yet here can imagine a commonality whose denial has created the necessity for the dialogue to which they commit themselves.

The Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO were signed in Washington in 1993. There is an iconic photograph of the signing featuring Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, in the presence of President Clinton. But this was not a triumph for American diplomacy. It was the culmination of conversations, over time, with a rhythm of their own, initiated by those who had no dog in the fight, simply personal skills wedded to an understanding of human nature and with more

than a touch of legerdemain. Those involved did not appear in the photograph even though without them it would not have been taken.

The play, which takes place between April 1992 and September 1993, has seventeen characters, plus a number of supporting roles, and multiple scenes. For all it is three hours long, it moves with considerable speed, indeed in a note Rogers observes that, 'Each act gallops along as one long unbroken scene – with time and space constantly shifting, events swivelling between cacophony and stillness, and characters slipping back and forth between speaking to each other and to us.'<sup>46</sup> And, indeed, throughout the audience is addressed, making details clear, claiming intimacy often with an ironic, joking tone, humour being equally one means to bring people together, that and the alcohol which flows in the various meetings, lowering inhibitions, personal and political. If we are to watch a secret history unfold we are, it seems, to be privy to its workings.

The principal movers are Terje Rød-Larsen, Director of an institute for applied science, and his wife, Mona Juul, an official in the Foreign Ministry. When the play begins it quickly becomes clear that they have already initiated secret conversations with the Israelis and Palestinians as two telephones ring and gnomic messages are passed, much to the bewilderment of their guests, including the man about to become Foreign Minister and his wife, herself an executive of Rød-Larsen's institute. Neither had known anything about the meeting which is, it appears, imminent. Later, it becomes apparent that we are entering the story late and that the telephone calls were deliberately contrived to commit the incoming Minister. There is a game being played with the audience no less than with the Minister-to-be. It becomes apparent that there are many pieces in this jigsaw for those involved but also for those required to watch it assembled.

Rød-Larsen's approach is a gradualist one. Issues are to be addressed separately and by individuals, not as part of public negotiations, a process not without its risks. He outlines his views in a lecture to which Mona allows the audience access because, as she says, 'That is what I needed you to hear. Because this idea, this *process* is what drove everything – *everything* we said and did. As you watch, and judge, remember that' (18). She continues to address the audience as she describes the beginnings of their commitment. On visiting Gaza, they had witnessed two boys, from the different sides, with weapons in their hands, evidencing the same fear, the same desperate desire to be anywhere but where they were: 'there, in that moment,' she explains, 'for us, it began' (19). What they wished to do was to give the two boys a different narrative, a different fate.

Mona becomes a guide to the action, joined, on occasion, by others, establishing a relationship with the audience as she does, with such skill, with the various parties to this unlikely conspiracy. We know, of course, that the attempt will both succeed and fail. There will be an accord but it will ultimately collapse. There will be no peace. Yet the validity of the attempt itself proposes the possibility of hope even as it will suggest its fragility. For American audiences, still numb from an election which had divided the country as never before, here was a play, about a distant conflict, albeit with political relevance, which suggested that people of good will need not despair in the face of the seemingly implacable. Divisions could, if not be permanently closed, then negotiated.

The meetings are not to be held between principals, deniability being essential, even as this back channel would have no significance if there were no endorsement at some level. Ahmed Qurei is Finance Minister for the PLO, Yair Hirschfeld a professor of economics from Israel, and it is on the common ground of economics that they make the first contact, respecting one



another's work. The risks are high for everyone involved. The secret once out, all stand to lose. Both sides have their factions, their internal politics always an issue. The strategy is to establish personal relations outside the negotiations so that they meet as individuals and not simply delegates, personal trust generating the possibility of genuine engagement. The question is whether this is to be a kissing dance, or a dance of death. Four cases of Johnnie Walker Black are, perhaps, to mark the difference. The drink certainly inspires them to share jokes as shared food creates an environment in which familiar public positions momentarily defer to human interactions, though always in the context of the larger issue.

From time to time, actions on the ground intervene. Israelis are killed, Gaza is sealed off. Palestinian and Israeli crowds form on either side of the stage shouting protests. The pressure to break off the talks is clear but they continue, as in Northern Ireland they would in the face of similar provocations. Such events underline the urgency of the project, though Rød-Larsen facilitates this by lying to the Palestinians when they ask for a guarantee that the Israelis will upgrade their representation, a breach of trust which he himself had warned against. Qurei, unaware of this, insists that, 'this one speaks truth . . . He does not lie,' even as Foreign Minister Holst, speaking to Rød-Larsen, insists of Qurei that, 'If you trust him, or the Israelis, you are an even bigger fool than I thought' (53). But then he says of Rød-Larsen that, 'for months . . . you have looked *me* in the face, and you have lied' (52). When a leak occurs, Mona proposes a press release denying the report. 'We are not lying,' she says, 'We are choosing our words carefully' (65). Edward Albee once spoke of theatre as lying in the direction of truth. The negotiators do no less but we are back with the dilemma explored in *Blood and Gifts*. Trust is the pre-condition for the talks and yet trust is betrayed in the name of the talks. Can it be that truth has a destructive edge while lies become the necessary language of human interactions? The very nature of these secret conversations relies on denial of their existence. When Arafat leaks news of the back channel to the Jordanians, Qurei offers the assurance that, 'rest assured, when the Chairman is forced to speak of things he does not wish to . . . he ensures that his words make no sense whatsoever' (52).

Rogers' plays are themselves negotiations in which his characters are seldom sole possessors of truth and audiences required to confront the ambiguities of motives and actions. In this play the negotiators' role is precisely to mediate between those who see the world differently, to grant an integrity to their views. Much the same could be said of the playwright whose plays work by virtue of his resistance to a Manichean approach to his characters and, indeed, interpretation of human nature. He does not write morality plays, even as morality is a concern. In like manner, audiences are challenged to lay aside public images, political rhetoric, to engage with moral and political debates as expressed through characters whose own anxieties and vulnerabilities are made palpable.

With act two the Israeli's upgrade their representation and if their representative, Uri Savir, new to the group, seems cold and suspicious his very presence means that the conversation has moved on. It also turns out that he is excited by the privacy and joins the others in a joke at Rød-Larsen's expense. Champagne flows and he unbends still more, an enthusiast, it turns out, not only for jazz but for the possibility of a settlement. They battle one another but slowly edge towards an agreement.

Act three begins with the arrival into the procedure of Joel Singer, an Israeli lawyer who represents Yitzhak Rabin directly. He is simultaneously an indication of the success of their efforts and a challenge to them coming, as he does, to query key details of the proposals though

it seems clear that the general principles are not to be challenged. The back channel is now to become the official channel, while those involved in the Washington talks are not to be informed that they only constitute a ruse, a necessary deceit. The legal document now shaped by Singer, however, turns out not to be aligned with the agreement so painfully negotiated, there being disagreements on the Israeli side. It seems everything is lost until Mona upbraids them and sends them back for further discussions, she, once again, proving a key figure.

Finally, the deal is sealed by Arafat and Peres, the latter on the condition that the Americans are lied to, being told that the channel is closed. For 'what is a lie,' he asks, 'but a dream that could become true' (98). Even as open warfare breaks out in the Lebanon and financial support for the PLO is withdrawn, plans continue as they become ever closer as individuals, mocking their masters. Finally, the deal is done though even in Washington, as it is about to be celebrated, arguments continue. At the ceremony there are no seats for Mona and Larsen. Their role is finished. They had never been the principal actors except that without them nothing could have been achieved. The ceremony is concluded though we learn of what followed from those who had played their roles, the death of Holst, renewed violence in Hebron, the assassination of Rabin, suicide bombers. In 2000 the Second Intifada begins. In 2002 the PLO is defeated by Hamas, Arafat dying in 2004 and Peres in 2016.

To balance this litany of failure, Rød-Larsen insists that without Oslo there could have been no peace between Israel and Jordan, no withdrawal from Lebanon and Gaza, no Palestinian Authority. The final defence, though, advanced by him as he addresses the audience, is that they had created a process which could be used again, in other places and other circumstances. They had created possibility.

The political negotiations of *Oslo* are choreographed. So, too, is the play, with scenes swiftly moving in space and time. In an inner room men argue; in the outer they relax, discovering human connections absent from their discussions. Political appetites alternate with literal ones, food and drink not only sustaining them physically. Pressure is exerted and then relaxed. Mona steps in and out of the action, a midwife to assist in the birth of something new but also a go-between for characters and audience alike. Information is filtered through her as through the unfolding action. The facilitators are neutral in a neutral country but so, too, is the writer who grants integrity and its denial to both sides. They are composing an agreement, Rogers a drama, humour integral to both. There is a rhythm to this back-channel plot as there is to a play which orchestrates language and characters alike.

They lie to further a project which is to have a truth of its own. The playwright lies to give a shape to experience, to uncover the human mechanism whereby differences can be reconciled. For the negotiators, the real had first to be imagined, envisaged, before being realized. For the writer, the imagined was a route to an understanding not only of a process but of those who saw beyond the immediate and seemingly un-reconcilable to a sense of harmony. To be sure, failure lay ahead for the project but the process itself proposed human possibilities whose denial had been seen as inevitable. As Rød-Larsen says, in a speech addressed to the audience: 'My friends, do not look at where we *are*; look behind you. (*He points behind*) There! See how *far* we have come! If we have come *this far*, through blood, through fear – hatred – how much *further* can we yet go? (*Points ahead*) There! On the horizon. The Possibility. Do you see it? Do you? (*He waits. He stares at us*) Good' (115).

For Marilyn Stasio, in *Variety*, reviewing the Lincoln Center production in 2016, it was 'unequivocally fascinating,' adding, 'Would that some playwright would write as gripping a play

## Staging America

about some contemporary political issue,<sup>47</sup> except that, though set in the past, *Oslo* does, indeed, deal with contemporary political issues as those with opposing views, with differing temperaments, objectives, ultimately need to negotiate the terms on which they can coexist. When it moved to Broadway, Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, found it ‘as expansive and ambitious as any in recent Broadway history’ and the production, ‘thrilling,’ the play ‘a marvel of expository efficiency and exciting showmanship.’<sup>48</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic, Michael Billington, in *The Guardian*, confessed that he ‘went into *Oslo* expecting to be informed, and fairly confident of being interested. I did not expect to find myself following the plot as eagerly as if it were a whodunnit to which I didn’t know the ending, or often to be laughing – or to find myself once on the brink of tears.’<sup>49</sup> For *The Independent* reviewer, Paul Taylor, Rogers ‘occupies the role of chief foreign correspondent amongst American dramatists,’ finding the play itself ‘a marvel of theatrical dexterity and nimble exposition . . . a remarkable play.’<sup>50</sup>

‘If you had told me that three hours of Norwegian peace negotiations, with the Palestine Liberation Organisation thrown in, would be a Broadway hit and go to the National and the West End,’ Rogers confessed, ‘I wouldn’t have put money on that.’<sup>51</sup> He should have done. *Oslo* won multiple awards, not only the Tony Award for Best Play but the Obie Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Drama League Award, and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. The boy from the Midwest, who had initially set out to be an actor, had finally and definitively arrived. Also, speaking in 2017, he detected a change in the American theatre for which he had long been calling: ‘We do seem to be having a renaissance. I spent years railing against the state of American culture but recently I’ve wondered if maybe I should stop yelling. Four new American plays about politics are up for the Tony this year [besides *Oslo*, Lucas Hnath’s *A Doll’s House: Part 2*, Paula Vogel’s *Indecent* and Lynn Nottage’s *Sweat*].’<sup>52</sup>

# CHAPTER 8

## CHRISTOPHER SHINN

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Sexuality is too complex, too linked to social and economic structures, too enmeshed in our personal pains and traumas, to ever be a conflict-free area of human experience.

Christopher Shinn<sup>1</sup>

We persist in refusing to come to terms with who we truly are, but at the same time there is a deep desire to know.

Christopher Shinn<sup>2</sup>

There is a sense in which all writing could be said to bear the impress of the author, as of the moment, even as the imagination may seek to transcend the lodestone of the self and the times. There are, though, writers for whom the self is not just a generator of stories but the ground on which they stand, their work a therapeutic gesture, a means of understanding as they travel back along the line of their own doubts and insecurities the better to discover themselves along the way. Sexuality – celebrated, threatened, staged as fragile epiphany, remorseless vulnerability – becomes a language read in translation, whose imprecisions, imperfectly rendered necessities, are to be dramatized as fact and metaphor, its particularities to be respected along with its confusions.

In 2012, Christopher Shinn learned that he was dying. He was suffering from Ewing sarcoma, a condition in which tumours form in and around bones and which usually affects the young, most often between the ages of ten and twenty. Shinn was thirty-seven. At the time, the five-year survival rate was 7 per cent. He underwent nineteen cycles of chemotherapy, along the way suffering a relapse. Despite radiation of his lung, tumours continued to appear, particularly on his foot. At the same time a personal relationship came to an end. He decided to write one final play to be called *An Opening in Time*, though another, *Against*, was discussed with Rupert Gould and Robert Icke who were now at London's Almeida Theatre and who flew out to see him, unaware of his condition, though his treatment had ended six months earlier in February, 2014. As a result of that treatment he had improved, without entirely missing the bullet, his leg below the knee being amputated. He was now declared free of the disease, though with no certainty that it would not reappear. He sent a first draft of *Against* to the Almeida in December 2015, though there was still a sense that he was living on borrowed time.

It is notable that the approach had come from a British theatre in that he had found a natural home there. His first three plays opened at the Royal Court Theatre and some half of his plays received their premieres in London. He has his own reasons for this, suggesting that productions are more expensive in America and that as a result tickets are also more costly. This, in turn, influences the age of audiences and the energy he felt from that audience. Britain also has a system of subsidies to a degree that America does not, the US favouring subscription seasons so that audiences enrol in a series of plays rather than choosing one in particular. He also appreciated the longer rehearsal period in England. Despite the fact that his 2008 play *Now*

## Staging America

*or Later*, a play concerned with an American presidential election, was a success at the Royal Court (the most successful he has had in London) it was not picked up in America for four years. He did, though, find venues in America – the Vineyard Theatre, Playwrights Horizons and the Goodman – and was happy with their productions; but, despite Hartford being his hometown, it was not until 2015 that one of his plays, *An Opening in Time*, was presented at the Hartford Stage. Speaking in 2017 he noted that he had not had a production in New York for ten years.

As to the importance of the Royal Court, he has said that,

The embrace I felt from the Royal Court Theatre was profound, and it influenced the course of my writing in a deep way. They did my first play, and when they passed on the commission I wrote for them, they produced another play of mine. They commissioned me again before the second play opened; the same thing happened with my next play. To receive commissions before critics chimed in made me feel so valued as an artist. It signalled that I could risk following my own path as a writer and not worry about creating work others would praise. The fifteen years I was embraced by the Court allowed me to become the artist I am today.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond that, speaking to Robert Icke, in the context of a production at Britain's Almeida Theatre, he has said that, 'if I were to be provocative, I would say for whatever reason, I think my psyche just aligns a bit more with the European psyche. I just feel that you guys are more aware of the world. I don't know if that's just proximity to other countries, or . . . there's just a bit more social historical awareness than in America, which I just think fits the kind of work I am trying to do a bit more.' He was undeniably an American playwright, 'just because that's where I am from, that's where I live. I think about my country a lot, and I feel very American, but I feel I have certainly had better experiences [in London] . . . So, even though I think of myself as very American, I feel like London is pretty much my artistic home, certainly where I feel comfortable . . . where I do what I do. This is where it all seems to really make sense to me.'<sup>4</sup> Dominic Cooke, who directed both *Now or Later*, at the Royal Court, and *Teddy Ferrara* at the Donmar, added to that the enthusiasm of British audiences for American plays.

In an interview with Clemency Burton-Hill, in the *Spectator*, Shinn confessed to being an admirer of British playwrights Caryl Churchill and Edward Bond, and of the 'integration of the social and the psychological [in English theatre] that we don't quite have, I think, in America, where the psychological is seen as separate from the social and the political.' Tennessee Williams, he suggested, 'was a political person, but he didn't write political plays . . . Perhaps there's something repressed about the human experience, and any play that threatens to undo that repression is too scary to us as Americans? Or else, we just don't see ourselves as being shaped by the social and the political.'<sup>5</sup> Of course, Williams did write political plays, including his 1938 *Not About Nightingales*, and he was acutely aware of the struggles of those left economically stranded and the victims of racism (*Orpheus Descending*). Nor was he the only American dramatist for whom the psychological is intimately connected to the social and political, Arthur Miller scarcely standing alone, though he did lament what seemed to him to be a national lack of historical awareness. So why the claim?

The social and political would certainly constitute one element of Shinn's own work, one which his comments are clearly designed to underscore, but, at the same time, it would be hard

to think of writers for whom their own lives, emotional states, anxieties, sexual concerns, were more immediately relevant to their plays. It is not so much that his dramas mirror his life in a strictly autobiographical way in terms of plot, though there are strong echoes, as that they reflect his personal psychology, private traumas finding correlatives in terms of his characters. Beyond the plays, he speaks with surprising candour about those linkages, acknowledging, as few other writers would, moments of despair, panic, feelings of isolation and even abandonment, seeing in them the root of his drama, acknowledging the self-doubts which sent him into regular therapy, a recourse equally of a number of the figures in his plays who struggle to understand themselves and the pressures which bear upon them. At times it can seem that he is monitoring his state of mind, along with that of his society. His experience of, and readings in, psychotherapy proved key to him both personally and in terms of his work. 'When I was in my mid-20s,' he explained, in an interview with Elizabeth Williamson,

my father died [of leukaemia] and I read Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, because I understood that I had denied the reality of death up to that point in my life. Becker referenced some psychoanalytic writers and that got me into that world. I was fascinated by analytic theory because the question of human motivation—especially hidden or disavowed motivation—was central to it. Motivation is central to drama as well. So immersing myself in this world was like learning a new vocabulary for the central questions of my world. [a] fellowship [from the American Psychoanalytic Association] allowed me to see these concepts and ideas about motivation in action, as analysts discussed their highly dramatic cases. What I suppose impressed me most was hearing about the depths of human suffering that remain more or less hidden in our society. The psychic agony we typically only see in tragic dramas plays out in therapists' offices every day. This gave me more confidence that I could represent the tragic areas of the human psyche in my playwriting work, and that audiences would be able to connect with these characters, see them not as unique outliers but as everyday people.<sup>6</sup>

Shinn seems to have a repertory company in his plays which consists of actors, or would-be actors, writers, or would-be writers, gay characters – in their teens, twenties or thirties – current or previous drug takers, some on anti-depressants or stimulants, in or out of therapy or Alcoholics Anonymous, often struggling to define themselves, conscious of internal and external tensions, unsure of how they relate to themselves or others. The plays themselves stage conflicts which are seldom resolved, simply embodied in characters who represent contending interpretations of experience and possibility. If he has a central concern it is with the nature of love in its various manifestations, with sexuality and an imminent violence, the impulse towards an empathy frequently resisted, intimacy sought and denied. He writes about privacies and a public world which bears on them. He is concerned to drill down into the psyche but also to reach out into a world which is both context and an extension of private tensions. After all, where else are the roots of violence if also of the need for reconciliation?

He was born in 1975, in Wethersfield, four miles south of Hartford, Connecticut, where Peter Carey chose to set his novel *Parrot and Olivier in America*, an improvisation on the life of Alexis de Tocqueville and which describes his romance with the daughter of the governor of Wethersfield prison, the last still a feature of Wethersfield. It was in this town that Shinn would set both *Four* and *An Opening in Time*. He has described his mother as having grown up

## Staging America

deprived of culture but introducing him to it. He would attend Hartford Stage, remembering seeing an O'Neill play there when he was ten. He both wrote and acted. His father, by contrast, an investment manager, came from an upper-middle-class family. Wethersfield was economically diverse and Shinn has described his exposure to that diversity: 'My father, who was not particularly sympathetic toward the poor, nonetheless had a great interest in the different neighborhoods of Hartford, and we'd often go for early morning weekend drives through the city's streets. Here I saw the most profound and unimaginable poverty – and only five minutes away from my middle-class town. This really excited my imagination: What was it like to be rich? What was it like to be poor? When I got to NYU, I met kids who clearly did not have exposure to different classes and I was astonished at their ignorance.'<sup>7</sup>

That sense of the politics of daily life would inform his later desire for a theatre that would engage with such issues. One of the reasons for what he felt was the relative absence of politics in contemporary American drama was that non-profit theatres relied on corporate funding and wealthy individuals so that 'liberal audiences and funders are deeply invested in the current structures that have allowed them to make and preserve their wealth, and it's unlikely that they are truly interested in seeing work that questions the ideological foundations that support their class status.' Beyond that, 'There's a sense among artists today that the world is the way it is and that's it.'<sup>8</sup>

It would not be difficult to come up with a list of American playwrights for whom this is not true. Indeed, the history of American playwrights, from O'Neill and Glaspell, through to Miller, Mamet, Shepard, Wilson, Kushner, Nottage, Wallace, would seem to prove the contrary as they severally engage in a debate with the assumptions and values of their society. At the same time, it was Kushner who confessed, 'I am vexed and challenged by the difficulties of representing political struggle on stage without embarrassing everyone.'<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, it does suggest one of Shinn's own motivations, even though he was not interested in political struggle in the same way as Kushner who had a clear ideological position. Likewise, his suggestion that, 'I hope my plays can be so emotionally truthful that they break through that impenetrable shell of narcissism that characterizes the contemporary American and deliver them over to the tragic core of their vulnerability,' does not rely on a suspect and un-argued assumption – is narcissism a function of contemporary Americans or, indeed, of Americans in general – to accept the thrust of plays which are in truth designed to disturb, expose, generate a sense of empathy. In the end, though his emphasis is on distinctive aspects of gay life, he insists on what Freud called the narcissism of small differences, that exaggeration of difference by those who otherwise share a common experience.

At school he encountered an African-American boy and for the first time had a sense of people being different from himself which was a key to something more immediately and personally relevant as 'this deep sadness started to emerge: I had these feelings and thoughts about being gay, yet no one else was gay, no one was out, no one talked about it.'<sup>10</sup> He has spoken of feeling alienated from friends and family at that time and as a teenager turning to drink, driving while under the influence. This led to therapy which would be a key for him understanding both himself and his work. He would even recommend analysis to would-be playwrights when he went on to teach at the New School in Manhattan. As he has said, 'Art and psychoanalysis at their best offer us the possibility of knowledge, and confrontation too with our inability to fully know ourselves, and the dangers and temptations of believing we can.'<sup>11</sup> Asked why he wrote, he replied, to face one's pathologies, explaining that if he had not been a playwright he would have been a psychoanalyst treating disturbed children.

These were days, though, when growing up gay was difficult so that when he was seventeen and heard President Clinton refer to gays being scapegoated he felt in some way validated, but the sense of alienation and trauma would echo through his work. Nor was Wethersfield an entirely comfortable place to live. A gay man was murdered there, a fact which, he confessed, haunted his childhood. Also at seventeen, though, he saw a production of José Rivera's *Marisol*, set in the Bronx. This seemed, to him, to put the real world on stage in a way he had never seen before, even as it had a magical realism dimension to it. It included a scene on a subway and theatre's possibilities suddenly became apparent to him.

From public school in Wethersfield he went to the Greater Hartford Academy for the Arts and twice won a student playwriting competition. He was fifteen when he wrote his first play, though at that stage he found poetry more compelling. He then attended NYU, as an undergraduate majoring in the dramatic writing programme, one of his mentors being Tony Kushner whose *Angels in America* had given him the sense that it was possible, in the American theatre, to combine politics with the deeply personal. Indeed it was he who suggested the value of psychoanalysis (in 2013 Shinn was seeing a therapist five times a week). His time as an undergraduate was not relaxed, struggling, as he did, with the tensions of coming out and with relationships which proved to combine affection with betrayal. In 1995 he began a relationship which quickly fell apart as his partner succumbed to depression and anxiety, a condition from which, he realized, he also suffered. In February 1996 he wrote *Four* in a single week, the only play, he explained, he had written in his late adolescence, though he was, in fact, twenty-one, being born in May, 1975.

He graduated in 1997 and briefly attended Columbia University before completing an MFA in fiction writing, in his early twenties writing both poetry and fiction, being an admirer of Raymond Carver. He was, in fact, interested in all forms of writing, theatre simply being where he ended up, where he had success. It was the Royal Court's acceptance of *Four*, in the middle, he explained, of a first serious – if troubled – relationship, which determined his option for drama.

Attempts at placing it had come to nothing, though he sent copies to every major regional and non-profit theatre, eventually, as he explained to *American Theatre*,<sup>12</sup> flying to England, sending copies of his plays to major theatres, one arriving at the Royal Court along with a note saying that he thought his play better than two recent Court productions. To his surprise, he received a promise to produce *Four* the following year, when he was twenty-three. It was, he has said, the production responsible for his career. *Four*, he explained,

was written in the winter of 1996, in the midst of a troubled first love. I wrote *Other People* in 1998, while reeling over the end of this relationship. A year later, angry at a mentor, I began *What Didn't Happen*, which I wouldn't finish till late 2003. In the fall of 2000 I started *The Coming World*, but put it aside when my father became ill and I fell in love again. The relationship was brief; I wrote *Where Do We Live* in its aftermath. My father died in early 2003, and in the year following I reworked *The Coming World* into its present form. These plays were written to exact revenge and bring the dead back to life. They failed.<sup>13</sup>

*Four* reflects Shinn's experience as a teenager. As he has remarked,

It took place in the town in which I had grown up and focussed on a 16-year-old closeted boy. I had been a closeted 16-year-old and when I look at the play now, it feels like a cry



## Staging America

of loneliness that I had carried my entire life. All the characters are lonely and there is no one in the world they can truly share that loneliness with, though they attempt to do so in disturbed ways. This was the truth of my adolescence and it continued to be. It would be years before I could put all this into words.<sup>14</sup>

The play reflects the anxiety he felt as he grew up with an awareness not merely that he was different from those around him, but that he was unable to confront his true nature or reveal it to others. The question of identity is further complicated in the play by the racial background of characters negotiating their place in the world. Struggling to understand others goes hand in hand with trying to understand themselves.

It is set on the Fourth of July in Hartford. At its heart is a sixteen-year-old, June, a would-be actor, named for the month he was supposed to be born. He is gay but has told no one except Joe, a forty-year-old black man, a professor of literature he had met on the web and now meets in person for the first time. They share little beyond their sexuality. June admits 'I don't really like America,' feeling that it has 'done a lot of bad things.' He is alienated by the political system and the jingoism which means that 'America always has to be the best,'<sup>15</sup> while Joe professes to love everything about the country; 'Movies. Fast food. Cars. Freedom' (11). They drive, Joe insisting that driving 'has got to be the most American thing there is' (7). Together, they visit a movie theatre.

These scenes intercut and overlap with those which feature sixteen-year-old Abigail, black, middle class, looking after her mother while her father, Joe, is ostensibly at a conference in Boston while in fact busy picking up June, a boy of her own age. Abigail, too, bored with living in a place where nothing happens, goes for a ride, in her case with Dexter, half Puerto Rican, half white, a basketball player and seemingly not too bright. His parents had broken up when he was young, his father leaving home, though he keeps a photograph to remind him of when things were different. He smoked his first reefer at seven and had sex with a girl of thirteen. They drive around apparently as aimlessly as Joe and June, even though Joe clearly has an agenda of his own, taking June's hand and placing it on his crotch. June is confused, until this point concealing his own sexuality while accusing a one-time friend of being gay.

The characters are at times permitted a sudden articulacy, even lyricism, as they tell stories, charge the banal with a certain grace. Even Dexter, aware that he lacks Abigail's fluency and intelligence, is capable of rhapsodizing over the Fourth of July fireworks in that they bring people of all backgrounds together in a momentary state of wonder, his demotic bluntness segueing into something more transcendent: 'I love the fireworks. In the sky like that. That's unreal . . . Everybody standing there, all these people . . . I know you say that there be, like, drunk people and kids running around being assholes, and niggers with guns and Latin Kings with knives and white boys with baseball bats and shit, but once the shit starts, you know, *everybody* stops. *Everybody* looks up at the sky. And is like . . . you know? Everybody's looking up there' (33). Language runs out on him but there is a sense that for a moment he sees a connection between those who, linguistically and socially, he thinks of as existing in another world.

His confidence in himself, though, is fragile. Until now he has been known to all. He played basketball. He was written about in the newspaper. Yet something is adrift. He may not pray but believes in God even though the God he believes in is failing him in some respect: 'I'm always

thinking, God, God, God, man, God, brother, help me out. God, man, what you doin,' God, man, look at me, you know, I mean. . .' (34). Once again language fails him.

The action switches to Joe and June in a motel, a place, Joe remarks, so anonymous that 'you can reinvent yourself. Or *become* yourself,' (35) this being what the characters are all doing. June submits to Joe, and not unwillingly, as on another bed, on the other side of the stage, Abigayle and Dexter also have sex, in the subsequent scene the action switching between the couples, both now once again driving.

It is Joe who breaks into unexplained tears while June is no more sure of who he is than he was before, resisting the idea that anyone knows what it is that he wants, especially Joe. The two part where they had met, Joe giving him a pack of condoms and what turns out to be a sparkler, some way short of the fireworks which had enthralled Dexter.

Abigayle returns home to a house empty of all but her mother, unseen throughout, a woman who is sick and craves only love while her husband, unbeknown to her, is having sex with a sixteen-year-old boy. Abigayle cries, picking up the phone, to speak to whom is unclear. Meanwhile, June lights his sparkler looking up at the sky as fireworks explode, fireworks seen, too, by Dexter 'his eyes fixed on the silent sky. It spins and swells with color . . . The fireworks continue their garish, gorgeous assault' (50). The characters are all left alone, having experienced no more than momentary contact yet having glimpsed something which might lead them out of themselves.

The words garish and gorgeous stand as perimeter markers of lives which potentially contain both. They speak of God as if there might be a meaning which eludes them. There is an Andrew Wyeth quality about them in their solitudes, a touch of Edward Hopper as these characters share the same frame but little else even as there are moments when they are capable of a strained lyricism, a sense of something beyond themselves. They feel an urge to connect but physical connection leaves something unconsummated. A distant sky lights up though whether as promise or symbol of a cold continuity is unclear.

The two sixteen year olds are unformed, alienated from their surroundings and themselves, trembling on the brink of something, wanting to escape but unsure how to do so or what it is they seek. Betrayal is in the air. Meanwhile, the mother's world has shrunk to a single room, a Beckettian figure, an image of the isolation the next generation fear, a hint of their possible future.

There is a hollowness at the heart of these characters, unsure of what they want, the direction in which they wish to travel. Their conversations skirt around needs which never quite come into focus, sex not an answer in itself even as they hope that it may unlock meaning. Indeed their moments of physical contact are empty of content, touched with desperation. Beyond them, the splash of colour in the sky seems to offer a moment of respite except that June ends holding a solitary sparkler, doomed to splutter and fade, while Abigayle grasps a telephone through which she may or may not connect to someone else. Meanwhile, she is trapped in a house with a demanding mother, her father having seduced a minor in a motel room, a man who himself is locked in desires which lead him nowhere but to online searches for encounters with neither past nor future.

For Charles Isherwood, writing for *Variety*, and reviewing the 2001 production at the 74-seat TriBeCa Playhouse, *Four* 'justifies the positive buzz surrounding his talent,' Shinn having 'a delicate ear for the disparate voices of the play's quartet of characters who share an aching loneliness that manifests itself in ways impulsive and determined' finding the overall sympathy

## Staging America

and subtlety of his writing 'memorable'.<sup>16</sup> Reviewing the same production, Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, welcomed a 'smart, broken hearted new play' which staged 'the desolation in desire,' a work which 'throbs with an adolescent anguish and self-consciousness . . . tempered by a sober, precocious empathy that can embrace a varied scope of humanity without turning characters into types.' Shinn, he declared 'promises to be a playwright to be reckoned with'.<sup>17</sup>

In 2000, his second play, *Other People*, opened at the Royal Court, though its run only lasted two weeks at the 90-seat Theatre Upstairs. Later that same year it was presented by Playwrights Horizons' New Theater Wing in New York. As he has explained, 'I was really hurting then . . . I wanted to examine my loneliness, which I felt was determined not only by capitalism, not only by the shallow alternative culture that rebelled against it, but by my own conflicting desires as well. I was interested in finding an internal solution to my unhappiness, alongside investigation of forces outside of myself.' At the time he had been, 'a wreck . . . writing just to survive psychically'.<sup>18</sup>

At its heart are characters as deracinated as those in *Four*, insecure, fragile. Theirs are temporary existences as they wait for an epiphany that never comes, living with failure or, in one case, a success which fails to address an essential despair. Gestures of contact tend to be rejected, needs never defined clearly enough to be realized. Sex is self-reflexive, masturbation a fact and image in that these are people obsessed with their own physical and emotional states, seeking but fearing a love which evades them. At moments they offer mutual support but are so trapped in their own necessities as to fail in the empathy they affect to offer and whose centrality they nonetheless sense. Their conversations are laced with the jargon of psychotherapy or New Age diets, mind and body to be protected, theories of existence embraced as a way of making sense of what disturbs them. They all carry wounds of one kind or another, are aware of the threat of dissolution. Anxiety, guilt, vulnerability define them, even as it is these that they flee.

Set in New York City's West Village around the Christmas and New Year of 1997, it features six characters. Stephen is gay, an actor and would-be playwright, like Shinn from Connecticut, who gets by writing movie reviews for an online magazine, a job he is barely hanging onto having previously been a bar tender. Together with Petra (a woman just returned from Japan where she was a stripper), both in their mid-twenties, they await the arrival of Mark, Stephen's former lover, back from rehab having found God, though Stephen insists, 'we were never really in love, we were in need . . . something passed *between* us, and it was *genuine*'.<sup>19</sup> He is, as Petra observes, nervous, spilling words out, editing himself as he proceeds.

When they are joined in a restaurant by Mark he becomes even more loquacious. Language is evidently his way of holding anxiety at bay, even as it also leads to self-revelation. He is, he confesses, 'beginning to really *figure* out my patterns . . . just, *pathological* sex and this really degraded self-loathing "love" instinct I mean not-love but – but – I'm lonely, you know . . . I'm kind of hating my life still' (57). He is plainly not figuring out anything which is why he is in therapy.

The men (they are joined by Darren, who Stephen had met in a café) are all writers, though Mark, a former crack addict, differs in that he has written a film script and has money, though his new-found faith seems to be what matters to him having had what Stephen characterizes as his Marianne Williamson moment, she being a spiritual teacher and founder of a meals-on-wheels programme for those suffering from AIDS.

For her part, Petra, makes her money from working at a strip club even as she tells a client, a teacher, of her disgust at being propositioned at the age of eighteen by her professor, a National Book Award winner, leaving her stunned, unable, she explains, to move. She had dropped out of her undergraduate degree after eighteen months. The client, called simply Man, claims, untruthfully it turns out, to suffer from herpes and hence has to avoid sex. He comes to this club, he explains, because 'it is so distant from my life. That is why I go to movies, and plays,' (80) that last, of course, not without relevance to a play whose characters are likely to be distant from the lives of Shinn's audience.

Mark, meanwhile, invites Tan, an eighteen-year-old male hustler and dealer (though also a student of acting at NYU), back to the apartment where he is guest of Stephen and Petra, an act of kindness misconstrued, or perhaps not since he later joins him in a hotel first watching as he masturbates and then having sex with him as they take drugs, his new spirituality evidently no protection. The second act begins in an apartment with Stephen now joined by Darren because, he declares, 'I've just been feeling such a need to *connect*' (83). Darren has sold a meretricious screenplay, a romantic comedy, with a deal to co-produce the soundtrack, for three hundred thousand dollars, and is about to fly out to Hollywood. This, though, seems beside the point as he puts on a pornographic tape and makes an advance to Stephen. This is a play in which the characters do not so much make contact as use one another.

In the third act it is Petra who confesses that, 'I'm in pain because I am not loved' and who offers a central proposition of the play and, surely, Shinn's defence of his own work: 'I'll tell you exactly what people want: love. As stupid as that sounds.' In talking to Man, she describes a video of a mother abusing her baby which, when a nurse comes to rescue it, clings to that mother,

So whatever you want to call it . . . the baby wants – love – so the love is inappropriate, so what, it's what the baby knows . . . I'm in pain because I am not loved . . . the promise of love is so fleeting and inconsistent so to get noticed – people do – what they do is – just like you cheated on your wife, you see it in art too, the terror of not being loved, safe art, meaningless art, pandering art, commercial art, titillating art, outrageous art, can we sell it, can I sell myself, will I be rewarded with money, with prestige, with recognition – all those things which are perversions of love . . . If there were more love to go around. And more consciousness and less fear. People might make beautiful things . . . Art can never be better than the person who made it . . . You can't love yourself . . . Reality exists when the other person walks into the room. Life is other people. (112–13)

For Sartre, in *No Exit*, as Man reminds her, hell was other people but so, she replies, is heaven. Is this a sentimentality? Can Shinn himself not be accused of titillating, outrageous art, in terms of its sexual directness (there is nudity in the play) and there is, after all, a narcissism to his characters. The other people who walk into their lives remain strangers, except that Petra does seem to forge a relationship though surely not one based on love, at least on her part. Her new partner is in search simply of companionship which falls short of addressing a need which goes beyond that. She decides to leave, while having no particular destination in mind.

The play ends, as does the year, with Petra in her room, reading, and Stephen, alone, motionless, with his eyes closed. As with *Four*, nothing is resolved. He now has a grant to enable him to write, though we have learned nothing which suggests whether he has the talent to do

so. Mark has abandoned God for contact with another human being, though the relationship is fragile, his convictions compromised. Man has found and lost the woman he had hoped would offer him consolation. Petra is about to step into an unknown world, her career as a stripper probably at an end but still in search of an elusive love.

Is it true, incidentally, that art can never be better than the person who made it? Hardly, though in 2017 a number of actors, directors, producers lost their jobs when accused of sexual harassment and worse, their work retrospectively regarded as suspect, productions abandoned, one film reshot to exclude the accused man. But what of Caravaggio, a murderer, Wagner, Degas, Pound, all anti-Semitic, the adulterous Janáček, the incestuous Byron, Flaubert and his rent boys, Pirandello who had his Nobel Prize medallion melted down to contribute to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia? What of civil libertarian Arthur Koestler revealed as a rapist, the incestuous Eric Gill whose sculptures are in Westminster Abbey? The list is a considerable one and, in the end, surely beside the point. The works survive in their own right. There is, perhaps, a yearning, on Petra's part, for a world which survives the accommodations she has made, for a moral clarity she has hitherto found lacking, but the world does not oblige, moral clarity being as hard to achieve as the love she restlessly seeks.

Shinn followed this with another brief play dealing with the limitations of love, with characters living lives of quiet desperation on the margin of society and spinning stories with the power to deceive themselves as much as others. *The Coming World*, which opened at the Soho Theatre in London, in 2001, was concerned, he explained, with 'three souls on a beach in a working-class American town attempting to deal with an ineffable pain.' It features twin brothers, one 'an introvert who has rejected the hypocrisy of his community by withdrawing deep into himself,' while the other 'is an extrovert who tries to exploit the empty and cynical culture he's in, to wring as much pleasure and power out of it as he can.' A third character, Dora, 'has a hand in both worlds, aware of an inner life that promises access to deeper truths but also an unbearable isolation. The play is about her struggle to make up her mind about which world to live in, the inner world or the outer one. The choice she makes is the one I was still making then: the choice not to make a choice, the choice not to look more deeply.'<sup>20</sup>

Ed, with a history of drug taking and gambling, has managed to accumulate a debt to a local gangster and is trapped by his own naivety and addictions. To pay that debt he raids Dora's video store injuring her face in the process before committing suicide. Ed's twin brother, played by the same actor, is a computer programmer who has tattooed his own body. He and Dora – on pharmaceutical drugs and in therapy – are drawn together briefly in a play which moves around in time, audiences invited to fill in the spaces, too many spaces in that it remains gnomic, more a sketch for a play than the thing itself. Here, as in all his work, though, he has a talent for mastering the disjunctions, the digressions of everyday speech, so many monologues giving way to moments of communication, a dialogue in which private concerns fluctuate with a desire to connect, solitariness seeking a mutuality in which his characters are seldom willing to place their trust for more than a moment.

In what was a rush of productions, *Where Do We Live* followed at the Royal Court in May, 2002, its American premiere coming two years later at the Vineyard Theatre in New York. Explaining why he wrote it he said, 'In the fall of 2001, my father was dying, I had been through a devastating break-up ... and instead of dealing with my pain, I tried to escape it by being very social ... Everyone – myself included – seemed so terrified and disdainful of feelings, in

themselves and in art. Then 9/11 happened.<sup>21</sup> The effect was for him to stay in his room, isolate himself and write.

The play was a response to 9/11, set before and after the attack, a before narcissistic, socially divided, lacking transcendence, and an after in which nothing is really resolved, divisions persisting. It opens on 9 August 2001, in a bar as businessmen check stock prices. George W. Bush has been elected, the stock market is rising, money not only a currency but a language, a unit of human exchange. The dialogue intercuts between them and Stephen, a man in his late twenties, who tells the story of a neighbour, Timothy, whose wife has disappeared while he himself has had a leg amputated at the knee (somewhat ironically, or even spookily, since Shinn will later suffer a similar amputation). He helps Timothy even though it seems to have made his lover/partner, Tyler, an actor, jealous. Selflessness seems aberrant, attracting suspicion. A thought occurs to him, 'It made me think about empathy . . . How it comes to be. On an individual level, a societal level . . . how you imagine other people, their lives,'<sup>22</sup> 'other people', of course echoing his earlier play and Stephen is a writer for whom this is more than a philosophical question, as it is for Shinn.

Back in his apartment building a young black man, Shed, deals drugs wary of a white man such as Stephen informing on him, even as he himself wishes to get out of the drug trade. Lily, British from Chorleywood (20 miles northwest of London), which she describes as 'fucking crap', girlfriend to his white supplier, seems vacuous reading stories about movie stars, bored, taking pity on Timothy whose lack of sexual contact with anyone she remedies by a casual act of masturbation as if she were doing no more than beat an egg, and there is a question of how far Shinn, with a concern for empathy, settles for a caricature, his gay characters granted a depth denied to Lily who is, it appears, no more than she seems. Shed, meanwhile, contemptuous of his father, enjoys the homophobic lyrics of a CD which blasts from a player.

In a gay club Stephen meets Leo, an Asian man who is taking American studies at graduate school, specializing in queer representation, but who feels out of place and out of tune with those who speak of gay oppression. 'How can you even believe in homophobia,' he asks, 'Gay people are supposed to be oppressed but come on . . . I believe . . . that Iraqis are oppressed and whole continents are oppressed in brutal ways – but *this*? . . . And why would anyone here want to believe they're oppressed? It's not a pleasant way to exist' (247–8). Amidst the gossip and chatter of a room in which men are popping pills it seems a serious question, one taken up when Stephen and Tyler return to their apartment where they have been reading Eric Hobsbawm's comments on Rwanda and on the fact that society survives by changing, that the present is not the point of arrival. Tyler, on a trust fund, seems to lack the empathy of Stephen, a man with personal, social and political sensitivities.

Mediating between Stephen's passionate political views and those of others is Patricia, a young woman who insists that while he deals with his trauma 'by identifying with the pain of others, trying to understand it, in order to solve it,'(265) others' personal history differs, and that he should tolerate 'a certain amount of narcissism . . . make room for just – who people are,' or look for who 'someone might be instead of who they are.'(266) Tyler, after all, the son of an alcoholic, had tried to kill himself, the personal taking precedence over the public while Dave, a white drug dealer in his late teens, is one of those who believes that 'Things don't change . . . Nothing changes' (270).

In a debate over welfare, a gay man celebrates the passage of a bill restricting it, saying that his father had worked two jobs and he himself had never claimed, insisting that you 'can't

## Staging America

expect the world to give you things. . . No one ever gave me anything,' while Stephen asks, 'as a gay man . . . can't you identify with other groups' (283).

Things do, though, change, or perhaps only seem to, as the action moves to 27 September 2001. Shed has now stepped aside from dealing to work in a hotel only to be laid off because of 9/11, his father observing 'it's not your fault – it's just the world.' Fighter jets fly overhead. People wear face masks. With war in Afghanistan only just over a week away, Stephen contemplates a country in which people are disconnected 'from their leaders – and disconnected from each other – all these various groups occupying the same space' without being able to find common ground: 'how fractured and isolated they are – like New York, too, in some ways.' (302) In many respects, this is a key to a play in which characters do, indeed, occupy the same space while remaining separate from one another, negotiating, among other things, the degree to which they are defined by their past, their social context, their sexuality. Stephen's liberalism coexists with the conservatism of the businessmen who end the play, or almost so, chanting 'USA' and calling for the Afghans to be bombed into the Dark Ages, as the Bush administration threatened to do to Pakistan if it failed to cooperate in that war. The final words go to Stephen as he raises a glass to 'where we live' and Patricia replies, 'Cheers,' (308) an ironic and deliberately inconclusive ending, Shinn seldom nailing his colours too firmly to the mast.

We never see Stephen's liberal principles transfer into action, beyond giving the occasional cigarette and ten dollars to his crippled neighbour. He is happy to argue his case, even at the cost of personal relationships, but there is no sign that he will be socially committed, demonstrate, actively challenge the system or the power which gives it force. No one's opinion changes, indeed there is no sign that 9/11 will bring about anything but a desire for revenge, a consolidation of existing attitudes. Drink, drugs, sex, are not just the accompaniment to life. Designed to intensify experience, they serve to insulate from a reality which disappoints, oppresses, separates individuals and groups from one another.

There is another division, though, and one reflected in his other work, namely a concern with the gulf which exists, particularly in gay relationships, between love and sex. This is, perhaps, his justification for the repeated, and explicit, sometimes overly explicit, sexual acts which are laced through his work. As Patricia observes, 'I always wondered why gay men had all these friends in the way they do. It's so clear. It's so they can separate their sexual and emotional needs, because they're frightened to combine them. Boyfriends who don't have sex, sex without having to have a boyfriend' (28).

The play is called *Where Do We Live* and though it lacks a question mark one is clearly implied. Do we inhabit a self, impermeable to the needs of others, in a society which can seem likewise? Are emotional, sexual, metaphysical needs ever in alignment? How much autonomy do we have, individually or collectively, in that we are to a degree the products of contingency? On one side of an apartment building are two gay men whose relationship shatters because they see the world differently, make different demands, while on the other side is a man damaged in a traffic accident along with his son unsure of who he is or wishes to be. Elsewhere in the city are men who have suffered the loss of colleagues in the ash and detritus of the fallen towers and who see the world in Manichean terms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this early in his career, Shinn was still being praised as a new talent. In the *British Theatre Guide*, Philip Fisher, commenting on the Royal Court production, observed that, '*Where Do We Live* creates more of an impressionist sketch of New York as seen by a gay thinker than a full-scale portrait but it confirms Shinn's great promise.'<sup>23</sup> Responding

to the American premiere, at the Vineyard Theatre, Off Broadway, in 2004, Charles Isherwood, greeted 'an exceptionally fine new play' with 'its subtle, perceptive, admirably economical writing,' praising the way which it 'captures, as no playwright yet has, the strange, terrible continuity of those days in New York — how, for most people, little really changed, even as we were being told that everything had.'<sup>24</sup> At the same time he regretted that it had taken it two years to cross the Atlantic.

Shinn followed *Where Do We Live* with *On the Mountain*, produced by South Coast Repertory, in Costa Mesa, California, in January, 2005. To a degree an updated version of Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*, in which a young biographer in search of a collection of love letters by his poet subject visits and infiltrates himself into the life of the woman who was their recipient. In Shinn's case it is not letters which are at issue but the recording of a song and the subject not a poet but a musician. Besides Henry James, the inspiration came from the case of Kurt Cobain who on his suicide had left behind a song originally titled 'On the Mountain' but which was subsequently, after much contention, released as 'You Know You're Right'.

In Shinn's play, the singer is Jason, also a suicide, while the woman, a recovering alcoholic, is called Sarah, and the man who, unbeknown to her, is trying to locate the missing disc, is Carrick. What he is looking for is concealed behind a photograph of Sarah's daughter, Jaime, a depressive and would-be writer of sixteen, in fact the product of her mother's one-night stand with a musician who had moved on. This is also a figure, gender aside, based squarely on Shinn himself. While Sarah is following a 12-step programme with Alcoholics Anonymous, Jaime is in therapy, her friend's father being an unemployed violent drunk while a school friend spends time watching people having sex in cars, which perhaps explains the therapy.

By the time Sarah finally reveals the disc to Carrick, however, he has, at least ostensibly, fallen for her and confesses his motives for searching her out. The two make love as Jaime discovers the disc and plays it. Later, though, unbeknown to Sarah, Carrick steals the disc and leaves. Jaime, however, had recorded it and the play ends as Sarah moves in time to the music.

Beyond the Jamesian parallel, with its issues of personal morality, it is a play which picks up issues from *Where Do We Live* as Sarah declares, 'you have to create your own world . . . you get sober, you stop hanging out with bad friends — you do whatever you have to do, because if it's just a shitty world and there's nothing you can do, then I can just go drink and anyone can do whatever they want because it's a shitty world, and no one has to look after their own actions . . . I listened to the shrink who put [Jaime] on Prozac, I listened to the social worker who said take her out of school . . . unfortunately you have to live in the real world' (238). As to her one-time lover, while Carrick praises him as an amazing artist, she insists he was an addict, a liar and a fraud who wrote music to become rich so that he could get high. Even art, it seems, can be compromised by its creator, an echo of the issue raised in *Other People*.

Charles Isherwood, now writing for *The New York Times*, was still referring to him as an up-and-coming playwright of exceptional talent, though while finding his writing 'impeccably true to the jagged rhythms and syntactical aberrations of real speech,' thought that 'the prosaic exchanges in "On the Mountain" never suggest deeper spiritual crises glimpsed through the minutiae of daily living.'<sup>25</sup>

His next play was both deeply personal and politically engaged. It was personal in that it partly emerged from a period in psychoanalysis during which he had discovered destructive feelings in himself, a level of violence which surprised him. For this reason, *Dying City* is set in



## Staging America

an apartment like his own, looking out on the same skyline he saw every day, while the three characters it features contain aspects of himself. It was politically engaged in that it was also a response to the Iraq war. He had himself demonstrated against it, having no faith in George W. Bush, while nonetheless feeling that in some degree it was justifiable, a defence of human rights, a resistance to oppression, a division reflected in the play as brothers are played by the same actor externalizing the argument which Shinn had with himself.

It was not, he confessed, an easy play to write. Indeed, never someone to understate when it comes to describing his own state of mind or sensibility, he has said that, 'Writing it was an agony. I don't exaggerate when I say that at times I thought it would kill me. My hair changed color while I was working on it and there were whole weeks when my heart rate remained so elevated that I thought about going to the emergency room.'<sup>26</sup>

The play consists of a man and a woman on stage, except that the identity of the man changes, Peter and Craig being twin brothers, one gay, the other straight. When one exits, the other enters, but at a different time. We see Craig on the eve of his departure for Iraq, Peter, an actor, in the present. They come from the Midwest and a working-class family, Craig's wife, Kelly, a therapist, from a moneyed background. The play opens as Peter, unannounced and, it turns out, unwelcome, arrives at Kelly's apartment a year after Craig's death as a soldier in Iraq, apparently as the result of an accident. That traumatic event has echoed through time and left its mark on both of them, as has 9/11 with its dust and death. Peter arrives at the apartment, however, having just precipitated a trauma of his own, walking out in the middle of a production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as a result of a fellow actor's homophobic remark, O'Neill's play, of course, featuring tensions within a family which are here played out within and between Shinn's three characters.

Peter is another of Shinn's actor narcissists, whose first film was meretricious but which he justified as acceptable given the state of Hollywood. Meanwhile, he patronizes his fellow actors and is reckless when it comes to personal relationships having, he finally confesses, broken up with his lover in favour of a man who claimed to have been abused as a child. Craig is no less narcissistic, about to leave his wife telling her that he had never loved her from the moment they married, she being a therapist used to offering understanding to others while failing to read the man she loves.

In the course of the play we discover that Peter has betrayed his gay lover as his brother had Kelly. Love, it seems, is problematic, the ideal easily abandoned, while sex carries with it a charge not untouched with violence, a violence echoed in Iraq, the photographs from Abu Ghraib forging the connection: 'The one thing I did consciously think about was how the photographs from Abu Ghraib reminded me of hardcore pornography, and so I saw a link between what was happening in a war with what was happening in our sexuality. And that got me thinking about the overlap between violence and sexuality.'<sup>27</sup> Violence is not something brought back from Iraq but taken there. The brothers had been introduced to it when young, Craig being beaten by his Vietnam-veteran father and then beating Peter in turn. Peter's violence is of another kind, emotional, sexual.

At one moment, in the background, the television plays an episode of *Law and Order* with its reassuring message that violence can be contained, that rationality defeats the irrational, even as the evidence for that, beyond a formulaic crime series, is lacking. There is a reference to Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* with its ironic take on events but also the implication that ironic distance carries its own problems appealing as it does to those of like mind.

It turns out that Craig's death had not been an accident but suicide, the explanation contained in the emails which Peter reads out to his brother's widow, a woman still struggling to grieve over a man who had cruelly denied loving her. There is, indeed, grief in the play but it is not only for a dead brother or husband. It is for the loss of trust, for a compromised ideal, for a human nature so flawed that it does damage at the private and public level. Peter had been for the war but argued against it because his lover was in favour of it. Craig himself, originally a defender of the war turns against it, sending emails to his brother who confronts Kelly with them, though for what motive is unclear, perhaps even to him. 'The city is dying,' Craig writes, 'and we are the ones killing it . . . I do not blame my men. They were told they would be heroes bringing freedom, and instead have been told to invade people's homes and take their freedom. They are ordered to protect themselves from violence by actively doing violence, which leads to more violence to protect themselves against.'<sup>28</sup>

What he realizes, though, and what is central to Shinn's drama, is that 'the horror I feel here is not just a consequence of the war, but is horror at the core of me, of who I have always been' (265–7). At one stage Peter recalls a line from *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: 'It was a great mistake, my being born a man' (272). The following lines, not quoted, but perhaps with more relevance to Craig, are, 'I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death!'<sup>29</sup>

The play ends as Peter leaves and Kelly prepares to, packing even as *The Daily Show* plays with its laughter and applause so inappropriate to the occasion. As ever in Shinn's plays, nothing is resolved. The images of Abu Ghraib remain on the web. The war in Iraq left its deadly legacy while the human potential for violence, betrayal, abandonment remains what it has ever been. Speaking in 2013, Shinn remarked that, 'When I grew up . . . I grew up with the image of the artist as somebody who could be central to the culture in a big way, and that was the kind of artist I wanted to be. And I remember feeling with *Dying City* that I might get to be that kind of artist.'<sup>30</sup> Ben Brantley described it as a 'crafty and unsettling' play remarking that 'Anyone who doubts that Mr. Shinn ("Four," "Where Do We Live") is among the most provocative and probing of American playwrights today need only experience the creepy, sophisticated welding of form and content that is "*Dying City*," first produced at the Royal Court Theatre in London last year.'<sup>31</sup> It went on to be a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

His next work, *Now or Later*, also engaged with political issues melded with private tensions. In 2007 he considered writing a play about megachurches but in the process of research, as he explained to Lisa Timmel of the Hartford Theatre Company, interviewed someone who worked for Barack Obama, then in the process of running for the presidency, whose policy was to reach out to Christian voters by talking about his own faith. Indeed, the previous year he had given a speech on politics and religion to a Washington conference in which he described the moment when, in a church on the Southside of Chicago, he had affirmed his Christian conviction, hearing God's spirit beckoning him. At the same time, he was anxious to acknowledge the importance of the Muslim faith even as he called for the need to reach out to evangelicals. For anyone wishing to be elected there were constituencies to be addressed, not least because Obama had been attacked by Christian fundamentalists, one of whom, Alan Keyes, who himself ran for both the Senate and the presidency on three occasions, had declared that Jesus Christ would not have voted for Obama but who, according to his daughter, had thrown her out of the family home when she came out as a lesbian.

For Shinn, the religious right prompted thoughts of homophobia while that, in turn, brought Islamic fundamentalism to mind. What had started out as a play about megachurches now became one about political strategies and religion, these issues coming together in what he has called a 'very condensed play'. 'But the most important thing for me to do,' he explained, 'was to find a personal story to tell, so once I settled on a college-age kid, recent scandals involving freedom of speech on campus started to fascinate me . . . As I researched recent presidential candidates, I was struck by reports of Al Gore's difficult relationship with his son and John Edwards' son who died in a car accident. I began to build up a story from what I imagined to be the immense pressure of being a politician's child. As soon as I realized that at a certain age a child's actions could easily have a political impact, the links between the political and the personal became very clear. All political issues have a personal component and vice versa.'<sup>32</sup>

As it happens, in 1992 he had worked briefly in Bill Clinton's campaign and recalled that he had applied to Boston University to study political science before opting for NYU's playwriting programme, so that an interest in politics had co-existed with his theatrical commitment. The play, which opened in London in 2008 but which took a further four years to reach America (which fact, he said, reflected its title), the year in which it is set, takes place in real time. Despite the specificity of its setting – the action occurs late night on election day in a Southern state – this is not a play about Obama. The candidate, whose victory is confirmed in the process of the play, is white.

All is going well until a photograph appears in an online blog. It is of his son, John, and a friend, attending a party, the former dressed as Muhammad, the friend as an evangelical pastor called Pastor Bob, presumably based on Pastor Bob Coy, a former Las Vegas casino manager who founded Calvary Chapel, Florida, the state's largest megachurch with 20,000 worshipers, and who, in 2014 would leave the church as a result of sexual 'improprieties' and, in 2017, be accused of molesting a four-year-old child. These facts, which might have led the play in a different direction if available at the time, were not germane. The fancy dress choices are a response to Pastor Bob's homophobia (also what leads them to use a dildo and simulate a sexual encounter) along with what strikes John as the hypocrisy of those at his university attending a 'naked' party who had attacked him for upholding, in a student newspaper, the right of those who had posted cartoons of Muhammad around the campus on the grounds of free speech. As John points out, one of the girls who attended the party had been reduced to tears by what she saw as an attempt to dehumanize Muslims apparently seeing no contradiction between that and a fundamentalist culture: 'the cartoons were critiquing a culture that does not allow women to bare their forearms, let alone attend "naked" parties.'<sup>33</sup> He is accused of being a cultural imperialist and caring more about Muslims than male violence on campus.

Shinn's thumb, though, is not on the scales. He has never been a simple polemicist. The essence of his plays lies in conflicting ideas, divided selves, differing interpretations of experience which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In discussing this play he has invoked Harold Pinter's Nobel Prize address in which, quoting from his own comments in 1958, he had said, 'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false,' Shinn adding, 'I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art, . . . I feel we can never arrive at a final truth, an ultimate understanding of why something happened – whether at an historical level or in an artistic realm.'<sup>34</sup> It is not that there is no truth in drama, Pinter insisted, but that the truth to be found

is not singular: 'the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.'<sup>35</sup>

Like Pinter, as a citizen Shinn felt differently, the obligation to distinguish between what is true and what is false a civic responsibility, even as the interference pattern of the personal psyche will always render the resultant conviction in some way provisional if not compromised. In the case of Pinter, it was almost impossible to hope for an entirely rational response from him towards the United States and its unfolding history. Indeed in that same Nobel Prize address he referred to a brutal, scornful and ruthless United States.

John, meanwhile, is under pressure to issue an apology. It is too late to impact on the campaign but, to his father and his advisors, his behaviour had been potentially damaging and possibly dangerous and, indeed, reports of violence in Pakistan come in even as a video of the party surfaces. The question is whether the right to express himself excludes any concern for the consequences of doing so. He finally receives a call from his old analyst who reminds him that if he has a history, so do others, a truth equally of societies. He decides to allow an apology to be issued in his name. As his father appears on television to celebrate his election John asks, 'Did he come out?' (48) a significant formulation. Has he, he is asking, accepted who he really is?

John, however, has more personal problems. His gay lover has left him, unwilling to sustain a monogamous relationship, while at Ivy League universities 'queer theory professors teach that gay people who want monogamous relationships have self-loathingly internalized the value system of a patriarchal heteronormative culture' (17). There is evidently nothing quite like a university to combine passion with reductive language, liberal principles being invoked to defend illiberal views, abstract positions immune to practical consequences. More significantly, though, for the moment, and complicating John's response to the incipient scandal, is his relationship with his father, not least because when younger he had attempted suicide and spent time in therapy, though only, he suspects, because it is hard to be elected President if your son commits suicide. Is he right to be so cynical? There is evidence for and against. For John, what divides him from his father – also, he points out, named John, a sign to him of narcissism – is that father's opposition to gay marriage and his attending a rally with Pastor Bob, the reason for the Pastor Bob costume at the party. But Pastor Bob had also been a supporter of those helping with AIDS in Africa, working with the poor, showing concern for the environment.

In *Now or Later* the issues at stake are debated, though sometimes this can seem information-heavy with certain political truths spelled out to John, perhaps unnecessarily given his closeness, through his father, to the political system. So it is that John's friend, Matt, invokes America's actions against Muslim countries and elaborates reasons why they may legitimately be seen as giving offence, while his father points out the real dangers of his son's actions, politics requiring strategic approaches, patience, negotiation. Pragmatically, the gap between campaign rhetoric and subsequent action may be necessary. As Tracy, a black woman in her forties and part of the team, remarks, 'To be elected as a Democrat in the South in the '80s and '90s, there were some things you had to be on the right about,' (27) and not only then. I personally remember talking to Senator Fulbright in the 1970s and asking him why he was liberal abroad and conservative at home. He replied, 'You got to be elected, boy.' The problem of this shifting

## Staging America

of values according to audience, though, John insists, is that 'no one actually knows who you really are' (44).

There was potentially another problem. How, Shinn asked himself,

do you write a play set in 2008 in 2007 when you don't know what's going to happen? One thing that was really clear was that the conflict between the freedom of expression that most Western countries hold quite dear and a sect of fundamentalist Islam that does not hold those values . . . would be lasting. When there are differences that are so profound and apparently so unresolvable even if they . . . simmer down for a while I knew would bubble up again. I don't think I had a crystal ball so much as I knew the nature of trauma . . . [the] difficulty is that when it is not resolved it comes back again. And one reason I gave the play the title *Now or Later* was that I wanted to signal to the audience, on some subliminal level, that if the events in the play were not in the news now they would be later . . . I knew when I gave the play the title *Now or Later* it was a very open-ended title which could have lots of meanings . . . It is a play which came from very deep inside, within me, in my heart, not just because of the political issue but because of the very deep personal issues as well.<sup>36</sup>

There were deep issues, too, in his next play, *Picked*, which opened at the Vineyard Theatre in 2011 and which he has described as a particularly cryptic and unsettling piece. It has at its heart an actor who, despite a single successful, if somewhat bizarre, film, has to deal with rejection, the loss of what he believes himself to value. Its title, as an epigraph indicates, derives from a line in *Hamlet*: 'one man picked out of ten thousand'. Kevin is the one man, a virtual unknown as an actor, who is selected by a director/writer for a film to be based on his own personality and thoughts, these to be derived from working with a neuromarketing company which uses scanners to monitor responses. Priding himself on discovering the truth in his character, he finds himself in a high concept, low plausibility, movie, truth not being readily available as he struggles to adjust himself to the bizarre demands of the producer while his relationship with his partner, Jen, slowly deteriorates.

Originally, he is to play two parts reflecting different aspects of himself, though eventually this gives way to the idea of casting another actor to play alongside him. Surprisingly, the film proves a success, even being nominated for an award, but, once over, Kevin finds his career stalled even as Jen, herself an actor previously unable to secure a role, becomes successful, as does his co-star. Her film, by the same director/writer, is about a woman with cancer who is gifted the power of empathy after an experimental brain operation, empathy being in short supply in her life and the movie industry as seen here. His relationship flounders and he goes back to college, living with regret. Finally, at a party, he is approached with the possibility of being in a comedy about a father and son with the same imaginary friend. It is, the casting director observes, 'really sweet' (194). He appears to be tempted, doubtless looking for truth still in the most unlikely of places.

The sense of insecurity to be found in so many of Shinn's plays finds its paradigm in the figure of the actor, always uncertain of the future, constantly confronted with judgement and rejection. In fact, the play was prompted by his failure, for some time, to place *Now or Later*, with a succession of producers, the playwright's plight being no different from that of the actor, while his involvement in the casting of his own plays made him sympathetic with those

desperate for parts, always reapplying for their own jobs. He was aware, too, that the play could be read as a metaphor for psychoanalysis, with its probing into the psyche of the central character. Here, after all, is a man whose craft, like Shinn's, draws directly on his life.

For Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, the play offered, 'ample evidence of this dramatist's singular gift for presenting human murkiness with precisely shaded clarity.' It seemed to him that *Picked*, was 'better than any play I've seen at finding the natural existential anxiety in the frustration and powerlessness of being a movie actor, a figure who is always to some degree the passive instrument of others.'<sup>37</sup>

In September, 2010, Tyler Clementi, an eighteen-year-old student at Rutgers University, jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge. It turned out that his roommate, Dharun Ravi, had used a webcam on his computer to capture the moment Tyler had kissed another man before posting details on Twitter. Again on Twitter he encouraged others to view a second encounter. By then, however, Clementi was dead. In 2012, Ravi was tried and convicted of various offences in relation to his actions, though later an appeal court reversed some of the convictions. This was the trigger for Shinn's new play even as it reflects something of his own feelings as a young, gay man at school and university where, he confessed, he had himself come close to committing suicide.

As he has explained, 'Because people were most aware of the Clementi case, I let my mind wander in that direction . . . I wasn't bullied in high school for being gay, although homophobia was part of the culture I grew up in . . . I began to wonder personally about how much of my self-destructiveness had to do with structural oppression, and how much had to do with the universal agonies of desire, intimacy and rejection. Tyler's suicide, in particular, woke up a lot of those questions inside of me.'<sup>38</sup> He was not, though, content with how Tyler's case had been presented. 'Certainly,' he confessed, 'the Tyler Clementi story stimulated profound feelings in me . . . [but] When I saw that the initial impulse from many people seemed to be to sentimentalize him, flatten his psyche and turn him into a pure victim of a cruel roommate, I became very suspicious. I think the impulse towards scapegoating allows us to flee self-scrutiny . . . That way of thinking, all it really does is flatten conversation; it flattens discourse and the opportunity . . . for real serious thought and real serious discussion.'

His was also to a degree a response to another play: 'One reason I wanted to write a play on these themes for so long was my being frustrated when I saw *The Laramie Project* and realized that not only did it not represent the victim onstage, it barely touched on sexuality at all . . . It was a really asexual play. Sex is such a big part of life and especially when writing about queer youth, one has to deal with it directly and honestly.'<sup>39</sup>

*The Laramie Project* (2000), by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project ('devoted to fostering an artistic dialogue with our audiences on the social, political and human issues that affect us all')<sup>40</sup> was a response to the brutal murder, in 1998, of University of Wyoming gay freshman Matthew Shepard, in Laramie Wyoming. He was tied to a fence post, beaten, robbed, and left to die. It was based on over two hundred interviews. As Shinn points out, by virtue of its approach, the victim himself does not appear. The drama circles around the death, with actors playing interviewees – fellow students, teachers, Laramie citizens, gays and straights, those who had dealt with Shepard, alive and dead. It was later made into an HBO film. It is an affecting work, the victim being the absent centre slowly constructed, the intersecting point of the stories other people tell, stories which equally construct a place and a state of mind. It was a crime which prompted politicians to speak out – Bill Clinton, Edward Kennedy.

It is not that Shinn is a critic of *The Laramie Project*, a genuinely moving piece. There was, after all, something entirely familiar about Matthew Shepard as there was about Tyler Clementi. Not only was he gay but, like Shinn, was fascinated with politics. It is also a drama about more than a particular case in a particular place even as it is the specifics which give it its force. It was that he wished to explore the complexity – personal, political, sexual – of an event which exposes the motives of those inclined to give themselves a pass even as the play is in many ways about power. Sexuality is at the centre of *The Laramie Project*. It could hardly be otherwise. For Shinn, though, its physical reality, the nature and centrality of desire, the connection between sexuality and violence, has always been foregrounded and would be again here, as fact and metaphor.

Though the play goes beyond recapitulating the Clementi story, it does feature exactly the incident in which he was videoed by his roommate who watched his encounter on a remote computer, but that is only one element in a play which uses this as a starting point for an exploration of politics, personal ambition, private and public betrayals. At the same time, though the dialogue is sexually explicit, and there are preludes to sexual acts, he had learned from some responses to *Where Do We Live* that on-stage nudity and sex could prove distracting. What he is not interested in, and a view reflected by one of the play's more sympathetic characters, a student called Gabe, is presenting gays as victims. For Shinn, 'We're living in a time when people think of themselves as victims, whether they're oppressed or the oppressor, whether they're doing violence or violence is being done to them . . . This is what compels me and keeps me going: I'm sympathetic to the way trauma shapes people, but as a dramatist I'm also interested in questions of agency and responsibility.'<sup>41</sup> So, Gabe insists, 'the way people make themselves out to be such victims – I'm so over it.' In a play in which the question of responsibility applies to all the characters, and the institution of which they are a part, 'This whole "blame the university" thing,' Gabe insists, 'it's so freaking easy to do. Because then you can't blame the person who actually chose to do what they did – another victim!'<sup>42</sup>

The student who commits suicide is not like Tyler Clementi. He is an exhibitionist, with a message board on a porn site who posts images of himself, albeit under an assumed name. He seems undisturbed when his encounter with a man is caught on camera by his roommate. Indeed, Shinn is less concerned with the suicide itself than its ramifications for those who all have agendas of their own at a time when sexual identity, opposing rights and obligations, have moved to the centre of attention, when contending groups seek to impose their own interpretations and strategies.

In a sense, *Teddy Ferrara*, which opened at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 2013, to a less than enthusiastic review by Chris Jones in the *Chicago Tribune*, echoes an aspect of *Now or Later* in that it involves a university president planning to run for public office, in this case for the Senate (according to Jones a thinly veiled critique of Bob Kerrey, the former Democratic senator and president of the New School who, like his fictional counterpart, harboured continued political ambitions).<sup>43</sup> He is alarmed that a story involving an apparently gay student's suicide (not Ferrara's, which occurs later) may damage his campaign, the implication being that his death might have been a consequence of attitudes at the institution over which he presides. Again, as in *Now or Later* he is advised to issue a statement, to take control of the narrative. It is the more ominous in that he has to make up his mind about demands from a Social Justice Committee (Rutgers established a new Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities after Clementi's death) which require professors to ensure diversity in

their syllabi and that minority groups are included in reading lists, these to be monitored by the Provost's office. In other words, again Shinn raises issues of free expression, here academic freedom, versus the rights of those who might feel themselves marginalized or worse.

The Committee also calls for the establishment of gender-neutral bathrooms, on the grounds that transgender and 'gender variant' students do not feel safe in gender-specific bathrooms. For the president the issue is partly one of costs, there only being a few hundred who would qualify in a university of over 40,000. In fact, though, money is the least of his concerns, while Shinn is less interested in considering the legitimacy or otherwise of such demands than he is with the uses to which the various characters put the death of Ferrara. The play carries his name as a title not because it is about him but because it is his death which sets various hares running.

The play is set 'now'. In other words, though the 'now' was initially 2013 its relevance extends beyond that, and the issues raised, topical at the time, have remained contentious. In 2012 a number of cities and institutions (including the White House) established all-gender bathrooms but there was resistance and confusion and this is a play which is not without humour as characters struggle to make decisions which are more to do with their own ambitions than the justice of the causes they need to be seen to embrace.

Few characters emerge with their integrity intact. Drew, the ambitious editor of the student newspaper, publishes a story about the suicide of Ferrara, suppressing inconvenient truths and making others up. He hopes that it may be picked up by the media not because he is interested in justice but because it will enhance his career prospects. At the same time, he writes an article about a student election even though one of the candidates is a gay partner he has abandoned. Personal relationships, indeed, are characterized by betrayals, declarations of monogamy and loyalty preceding the abandonment of both. Tim, a fellow student, in a heterosexual relationship, turns out to be a closet gay, though the fact that he is attracted to Drew would seem to taint that relationship. A faculty member seizes the occasion to advance her own ideas.

Power momentarily moves away from those in charge of the institution who are themselves primarily concerned to protect themselves and the university, the two seeming synonymous in their minds. Jaq, transgender, who self-identifies as a man, speaks for those 'on the continuum' (44) but has no interest in queer students because they form a 'homogeneous group' (46). There are, it seems, limits to his continuum. Later, he interrupts a meeting to elect a Student Assembly President, attacking the candidates whose only wish is 'TO SUCK UP TO POWER,' (101), while calling for everyone to 'SPEAK UP FOR TEDDY' using a megaphone to call for a demonstration, blocking out what was to be a democratic debate. The president tears the megaphone away, an action which Jaq declares an assault only for the president to say, 'I don't give a fuck - I just got elected to the Senate. Fuck this place' (103).

Power is equally an issue in terms of personal relationships. Gabe, otherwise seemingly a voice for sanity, refuses a relationship with fellow student Jay because he is disabled. The play ends, or almost so, as Gabe, in some senses its moral conscience, is detained by the campus police, discovered with a fellow student in the men's room, the site of gay assignations, the university's expressed desire for tolerance coming up against distaste for the actual practices of those whose seemingly random encounters take place in unsavoury locations, a distaste, as it happens, equally felt by some of the gay characters themselves. The actual ending features Tim and his girlfriend Jenny as they walk off together, she unaware that he has had a sexual encounter with the self-obsessed Drew.



## Staging America

It is a long play, perhaps overlong, with a running time equivalent to that of *Macbeth*. The length is justified by the complexities of the relationships which are explored but the risk is a loss of focus. An anxiety about gay promiscuity does relate to other issues (Shinn himself confessing that a relationship in university had foundered on just such a question) but can seem over complicated. In the end it is not so much a play about the suicide of a gay man, or even homophobia, as about loneliness, the tangled nature of relationships, the disconnect between love and sex, the manner in which physical and emotional needs find expression. It is concerned with the struggle for identity and for a language which adequately expresses it, a language which transcends reductive categories. It is concerned with private and public actions and their consequences, with where responsibility lies. It asks whether demands for separate facilities, safe spaces, control of the curriculum, are compatible with freedoms to be claimed in other spheres, whether, indeed, difference is a value as opposed to a descriptor. As usual, Shinn does not adjudicate and the issues raised remain subject for debate.

American reviews were unenthusiastic. When it was staged, two years later, at London's Donmar Warehouse, however, Kate Kellaway, in *The Guardian*, found it a 'clever play' which explored 'loneliness, belonging, gay-stereotyping, victimhood.' It was, she declared, 'a brave, gripping, provocative play.'<sup>44</sup>

His concern with violence did not end with *Teddy Ferrara*. Indeed, it became the central issue in *Against*, commissioned by the Almeida Theatre in 2013. He had been reading about Jesus and his message of non-violence and started writing in earnest in the spring of 2015, finishing a first draft by that Christmas, and receiving notes on it from London on New Year's Day. This was followed by a reading.

At its centre is the figure of a Silicon Valley multi-billionaire, Luke, who does what multi-billionaires are inclined to do once they have accumulated wealth and no longer find it offers satisfaction or meaning. He assumes himself chosen to address the world's problems. In this case he believes that God has spoken to him and tasked him with exploring the nature of violence. For Shinn, 'part of what this play is saying is that we have to look at all kinds of violence ... I was really just thinking about how people even think about non-violence, especially in America where we have a violent culture, not just obvious things like gun violence and racism and police violence but there is the violence of people who hurt each other in love. There is violence in power dynamics, and education, and the workplace. I thought what happens to a culture if you try to introduce a non-violent way of thinking in a really meaningful way ... and in a way that would really capture people's imagination. What would the reaction be?'<sup>45</sup>

In truth, in the play, if the protagonist does capture their imagination he does so in a confused rather than meaningful way as people struggle to make sense of the violence which occurs in the public and private realm, and of him as a new messiah, a messenger of peace and love, the latter in particular seeming to evade him, intimacy being less something which excites him and more something, like his wealth, ever less satisfying. Wanting, he declares, his sexuality to be in the service of love, he continues to find love a mystery to be subordinated to other imperatives.

Clearly key to the structure of the play, no less than its emerging theme, is the figure of Luke who travels from place to place, hunting out the scenes of violent incidents, school shootings, sexual violence, the coercions of the work place, gathering data, trying to understand and even console, though he is hesitant to become involved, an observer and not the redeemer some

suspect him of being. The challenge, as Shinn saw it, was how to arrive at a balance between the protagonist and the various locations he visits, the accounts he elicits: 'If we have too much of a central protagonist that limits or minimises other stories. So what if I tried to write a real ensemble play?' As a result of the reading, however, he came to feel that 'Luke intensified and took over a bit more,'<sup>46</sup> though there comes a moment in the play when he declares, 'this is not about me anymore,'<sup>47</sup> even as, in truth, it seems increasingly to be just that. The root of violence, in other words, seems to lie in an uninspected self.

The Luke who emerges is a strange mixture. On the one hand he is passive, open to suggestions, conceding when challenged, wary of becoming no more than a celebrity; on the other hand, he has the disturbing confidence of someone in possession of the truth, chosen, he believes, by God, capable of a sententious, self-righteous and even sanctimonious language, failing to recognize need when he sees it.

His strongest supporter is Sheila, a woman who travels with him and to whom he professes love but who he is liable to address as if she were an audience rather than a true partner. 'I was to change the culture,' he tells her, 'and it's exactly the same – our consumption, our discourse, our apathy – our diversions.' He needs, he explains, to 'work on myself' as well as to 'Turn over some tables' (65) as if he does, indeed, have a messianic impulse. She can hardly have welcomed his response when she asks him to confirm his love for her and he replies, 'you say you want intimacy in your life. This is intimacy. I am sharing my deepest self with you. What I think is most true about who I am. God told me to go where there's violence, then to go inside – part of what he's telling me that there is violence in me' (66). Indeed, there is since he is in process of rebuffing a woman who confesses that she is lonely. For all his professed concern for his fellow man, his implicit rejection, or at least subordination, of Sheila suggests that if God has told him to go where violence is he does, indeed, not have far to travel, though, not entirely explicably, the two of them get back together, even having sex, his spiritual self now conceding space for the physical though the act itself is aborted.

The portentous dialogue extends to other characters. When he meets a girlfriend of many years before, she tells him that she, too, had been called by God, in her case to be a teacher, telling him that 'I think you are ready to be loved,' (81) as a professor of creative writing tells his student, Anna, of her story featuring a character of the same name, 'The story never really problematizes Anna's conviction that her partners are incapable of getting to know her on a deeper level. As it's written now, Anna's presented as sensitive and mature, and her partners as shallow and narcissistic' (73). Is this a parallel to Luke's relation to Sheila? Certainly, there seems to be an echo when she declares, 'I just want to show that she feels like she can't communicate who she is anymore – so the routines they have . . . she wants to find new routines' (74).

The difficulty is that it is never entirely clear whether Shinn is making a judgement of such language, in the way that the professor speaks of a 'patriarchal conception of intimacy' and refers to 'internalised heteronormative ideas,' (74) whether he regards it as denatured, or whether it is offered as a judgement of characters who so easily retreat from physical intimacy into stylized statements, a language drained of human content. Certainly, when a business partner speaks of a new venture which, through technology, will enable those buying objects to share their choice with others online as a way of moving 'consumption from the realm of the *isolated individual to a network of human relationships*' the speciousness is evident. It is Sheila, though, who asks 'Is he full of shit or what?' (90) The same question might be asked of Luke

## Staging America

who, it turns out, is to offer himself as a sacrifice, Jesus-like, though in the name of what is never entirely clear. His encounters change people, though not always for the good. When he meets Anna he provokes her into abandoning her wish to be an artist without replacing that ambition with any other.

His message of peace and love ends with him being shot dead by a truck driver who is afraid of change. The play, indeed, carries an ambiguous epigraph from St Luke, the protagonist's name clearly being significant: 'Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.' Unsurprisingly, given Shinn's resistance to easy resolutions, nothing is resolved. Is Luke a deluded rich man on a messianic mission, unsure of who he is and what he is trying to accomplish, or is he casting light on the way in which violence pervades all aspects of experience never entirely divorced from other instincts to do with a desire to connect. A school shooting, it is suggested, is a result of a failure to understand another person's need to be acknowledged. Perhaps. The need for explanation, however, may be no more than a refusal to accept that violence may have an opacity not amenable either to rational analysis or calls for love which itself may carry a virus. If a university is the site for rational thought in the play it is also the location of a rape.

*Against* prompted ambivalent responses from critics. In England, *The Telegraph* found it lacking in depth, a watery disappointment, and, at three hours, overlong, *The Independent* also objected to its length, finding it bitty and insufficiently focussed. In *The Guardian*, Michael Billington praised an element of deft satire but thought it coming close to saying that all you need is love. For the *Evening Standard* Shinn's intentions seemed difficult to decipher. By contrast, *Variety* welcomed a morality play, a convincing anatomy of the violence coursing through America's veins.

The tumble of characters, as in *Teddy Farrara*, along with a mesh of ideas, can make it difficult to distinguish the spine of a play which by its nature sets out to draw together different instances of violence and the central character's own journey, hence reviewers' tendency to be concerned with fragmentation and length. The central thesis requires a heterogeneity of instances and characters even as dramatic tension and a sense of coherence, literal and moral, necessitates homogeneity. Luke is to be the figure who pulls the various threads together but the nature of his own confusions makes that difficult to accomplish.

*Against* was not Shinn's only play of 2015. That year also saw the production of the play he had started writing in 2012 when his medical condition suggested he had little time left to live – *An Opening in Time*. As he has explained, 'I think I was thinking of myself. I couldn't do much but think about myself all the time. But I didn't want to write an "illness" play. My oncologist said, "Don't write about this. It's been done. There are enough plays about having cancer." And I said, "You don't have to worry about me. I don't want to write about this." I wanted to escape what I had. But maybe it's a paradox writing a play set in my hometown because it's not escaping myself at all.'<sup>48</sup> Indeed, in writing a piece for his home town newspaper, the *Hartford Courant*, he explained that,

I'd never thought of myself as nostalgic. If someone had asked me before I got sick how I felt about where I was from, I would have said that it was a good enough place to grow up: The schools encouraged creativity, the landscape was beautiful, the presence of history gave life richness. But I also would have talked about the loneliness of being a gay teenager who didn't feel he could come out. I would have mentioned conformity and

cliques and narrowness of thought. At the time I couldn't wait to leave home and go to New York City.

So, 25 years later, what accounted for my sudden homesickness, my deep desire to be back on the old streets? The obvious answer is that I wished to return to a simpler time, before I really understood that sickness and death are a part of life. But I don't think it can just be that; for all the happiness of my youth, there was so much sadness too. It wasn't a simpler time at all really.

Having been off treatment for a while now, I can see that the old landscapes gave me solace because in a scary time, they let me feel that however limited my future might be, my life had been long: there were miles and miles to replay in my mind, endless hours of places seen and lives witnessed.

'An Opening In Time' is my play's title because it has a meaning particular to its characters and story. But it also carries a personal meaning for me about what I went through: In an uncertain present, I discovered within myself the limitless memories of my past. They were waiting for me if I needed them.<sup>49</sup>

It was, he has said, to be a late play in the sense that Shakespeare and Ibsen had written such late in life. Indeed, it carries an epigraph from *The Winter's Tale*: 'Come and lead me/ Unto these sorrows', words from a bleak moment in that play. Why *The Winter's Tale*? It was because,

My sense is that this is a play where Shakespeare writes frankly about the difficulties in truly loving. I found this self-scrutiny inspiring and decided to copy it and write a play in which I explored my difficulties in loving through a variety of characters. I chose that quote as an epigraph because I feel that's what only *The Winter's Tale* does as a play – it leads us into sorrow – but it's what Shakespeare was doing in writing the play: leading himself into his sorrows. I wanted the readers of *An Opening in Time* to be prepared to enter their own sorrows through the play, but I also wanted to suggest to them that the play was my attempt to confront my own pain.<sup>50</sup>

Shinn's plays, as we have seen, have always had a strong autobiographical element but here, as he assumed with death a real prospect, he wished to confront aspects of his life more directly. As he remarked,

I was at a challenging place in my life on a number of fronts and I began to think about plays in which it seemed to me writers were facing themselves squarely. Not only Shakespeare, but Chekhov and Ibsen were also on my mind. In their more mature plays we also see characters who seem to be stand-ins for their authors. The self-scrutiny and self-critique are palpable. I took inspiration from these works – that one way to deal with a difficult time in life is to try to face it through the creation of a work of art. Although *An Opening in Time* is not literally autobiographical, the conflicts and traumas the characters grapple with are familiar to me.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his illness, he turned back to the place where he had been raised, a small Connecticut town plainly based on Wetherfield (street names place it there),

## Staging America

feeling that in some way that might open aspects of himself that he wished to explore and confront, in particular, issues to do with intimacy and love, not least because along with his illness he had had to confront the collapse of his relationship with his fiancé. 'At the time I began conceiving of the play,' he explained, 'I was dealing with illness and for whatever reason had profound memories of my childhood landscapes. I realized at some point that a precise sense of geography based on personal experience had been central to so many literary works I loved. I had never set a play in the real landscape of my everyday youth, and I had a strong sense that if I were to access that emotional and literal territory within, something very personally rich would emerge. Hopefully I have found a way to translate my deep experience of place into something universal and true.'<sup>52</sup>

The central character is Anne, a woman in her sixties. Her marriage has ended with the death of her alcoholic husband and she returns to the home town where she had once had a love affair with Ron, a relationship which had broken up in acrimony. She returns, though, to be close to her son who has troubles of his own, as himself a teacher who has had an affair with an under-aged girl, and from whom she has been estranged, neither having addressed buried truths, the pain in their family. She takes up residence next to a family in which one of two foster brothers has been lost to drugs while the other is struggling to define his sexual identity. This is not quite the place of memory. Stores have changed, technology has entered into human interactions, time has moved on even as this is a town which lays claim to its distant origins.

He chose an older protagonist, he explained, because he felt that his illness had aged him psychically. It was to be a play about love and for all the other characters who constitute this sometimes edgy community it is the relationship between Anne and Ron, both school teachers, which is at its heart as they explore what had once driven them apart, each remembering differently, each capable of self-deception. There are paths not taken, misunderstandings, the stuff of life with its tangle of regrets but still an urge to connect, for some kind of reconciliation not only with others but with a former self.

If it is a play about love, though, it is also a play about loss and a late acknowledgement of responsibility for it. For Shinn, 'It's such a simple play on some level . . . It's really about regret and choices: What do you do when you come to regret a choice you made? I also wondered how things could have gone differently in many of my relationships and certainly during the period of my illness.'<sup>53</sup> It was, he said, a play which 'made me look deeper. Why have I had difficulty loving? Why haven't I been able to make successful intimacy last? When you think you are coming to the end of life, your defenses drop against fear, and you really want to know, who am I?'<sup>54</sup>

Appropriately, the play had its premiere at Hartford Stage. Reviews were largely positive, *The New York Times* finding it anxiously wistful, praising the elliptical language, silences within speech which become a kind of eloquence, and this has always been a strength of Shinn's work, that and a convincing reconstruction of the failure of language always to express feeling, feeling, indeed, to make its way into words. There are times when the proliferation of characters can distract, perhaps in a desire to show that no one is immune to the flaws in the psyche which can distort relationships, but his work has consistently sought to explore the simultaneous desire to connect and the failure to do so.

Shinn has been a Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Dying City*, won an Obie for *Where Do We Live*, and a South Bank Award for *Now or Later*, but his work, with the exception of the Lincoln Center production of *Dying City* and the Goodman Theatre's production of *Teddy Ferrara*, has

tended to be staged in smaller, regional theatres or, indeed, in England where he first found a home and continues to do so, though his adaptation of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* opened on Broadway. At the same time, his reputation has steadily grown, *The New York Times's* Ben Brantley describing him as, 'the absolute best of a new generation of American playwrights.'<sup>55</sup> Happily, this is a fiercely contested position.



# NOTES

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## Introduction

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## Notes

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# INDEX

---

- Abbie's Irish Rose*, 7  
Adjmi, David, 2  
*Adventures of the Barrio Grrr!!* (Hudes), 79  
Afghanistan invasion, 135, 177, 178, 180–4, 200  
*Against* (Shinn), 189, 210–12  
Akhtar, Ayad, 1, 6  
    *American Dervish*, 10, 13–16, 17  
    *Disgraced*, 6, 13, 16–20, 55–6  
    *Invisible Hand, The*, 6, 13, 20–2  
    *Junk: The Golden Age of Debt*, 6, 26–30  
    early life and family influences, 10–11, 15  
    *War Within, The*, 11–12  
    *Who & the What, The*, 7–8, 9, 13, 22–6  
Albee, Edward, 149, 169, 186  
Alexie, Sherman, 106  
Als, Hilton, 124, 128  
Alsop, Joseph, 47–53  
Altan, Ahmet, 80  
*Amateurs* (Auburn), 31, 46–7  
*American Dervish* (Akhtar), 10, 13–16, 17  
*Angels in America* (Kushner), 55, 68, 90, 193  
anti-Semitism, 7, 14, 41–5  
Apollinaire, Guillaume, 103  
*Appeal, The* (Lee), 108, 110–11  
*Are You Ready* (Auburn), 33  
Artaud, Antonin, 103  
*Aspern Papers, The* (James), 201  
*Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq, The* (Packer), 164  
Auburn, David, 1, 6  
    *Amateurs*, 31, 46–7  
    *Are You Ready*, 33  
    *Columnist, The*, 47–53  
    *Damage Control*, 32–3, 46, 155  
    early life and family influences, 31–2  
    *Fifth Planet*, 33  
    *Girl in the Park, The* (film), 54  
    *Gun Show*, 53–4  
    *Journals of Mihail Sebastian, The*, 6, 31, 40–6, 47, 48  
    *Lake House* (film), 53, 54  
    *Lost Lake*, 31, 53  
    *Miss You*, 33  
    *Proof*, 31, 32, 35–40, 42, 47, 52–53  
    *Skyscraper*, 32, 33–5  
    *Three Monologues*, 33  
    *We Had a Very Good Time*, 33  
    *What Do You Believe About the Future?*, 33  
Aucoin, Don, 116  
*August: Osage County* (Letts), 90, 127, 139  
Bechdel, Alison, 97  
Beckett, Samuel, 103, 107, 120, 151  
*Beautiful Mind*, A, 37  
*Betrayal* (Packer), 164  
*Between Riverside and Crazy* (Guirgis), 74–6  
‘Big Two-Hearted River’ (Hemingway), 136  
Billington, Michael, 29, 68, 100, 154, 165, 171, 179, 182–3, 188, 212  
bin Laden, Osama, 21, 22  
*Birth of Tragedy, The* (Nietzsche), 127  
*Blood and Gifts* (Rogers), 2, 6, 178–83, 184  
*Blue Bonnet State* (Norris), 132  
Bond, Edward, 190  
*Boom Boom Boom Boom* (Guirgis), 59  
Bosch, Hieronymus, 103  
Brantley, Ben, 29, 64, 68, 71, 177, 188, 196, 203, 207, 215  
*Breasts of Tiresias, The*, (Apollinaire), 103  
*Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, A, (Sheehan), 49  
*Broken Glass* (Miller), 44  
Buchwald, Art, 50  
*Bug* (Letts), 2  
Bush, George W., 114, 139, 151, 184, 199, 200, 202  
Byron, Lord, 108, 110–11  
*Cabaret*, 7  
Camus, Albert, 43, 44  
capitalism, 20–22, 26–30, 151–4, 196  
Catholicism, 57–8, 59, 75  
Cato Institute, 151  
Chang, Kathy, 97, 98  
*Children of Killers* (Hill), 164  
Christianity/Christians, 106–7, 114–16, 137, 203  
*Church* (Lee), 104, 114–16  
Churchill, Caryl, 29, 172, 190  
*Civilisation and Its Discontents* (Freud), 157  
Clementi, Tyler, 207, 209  
Clinton, Bill, 151, 155, 172–6, 184, 193, 204, 207  
*Clybourne Park* (Norris), 6, 132, 144–8, 162  
Cold War, 48, 180–3  
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 108, 110–11  
Coll, Steve, 181  
*Collateral Damage: America's War Against Iraqi Civilians* (Hedges), 146  
Coltrane, John, 90–2  
*Columnist, The* (Auburn), 47–53  
*Coming World, The* (Shinn), 193, 198  
Conrad, Joseph, 171–2  
*Cool Million, A*, (West), 152  
Cote, David, 121, 128

## Index

- Count of Monte Cristo, The* (O'Neill), 1  
*Cross Purpose* (Camus), 44  
Cummings, E.E., 103
- Dale, Jim, 56  
*Damage Control* (Auburn), 32–3, 46, 155  
*Daphne's Dive* (Hudes), 97–101  
Day, Dorothy, 59  
de las Casals, Bartolomé, 77  
de Tocqueville, Alexis, 20  
*Death in the Afternoon* (Hemingway), 138  
*Death of a Salesman* (Miller), 100, 127, 144  
*Democracy in America* (de Tocqueville), 26  
*Den of Thieves* (Guirgis), 59  
Derrida, Jacques, 23  
*Diary of Anne Frank, The* (Goodrich), 5  
*Disgraced* (Akhtar), 13, 16–20, 55–6  
*Doll's House: Part 2, A* (Hnath), 188  
*Domesticated* (Norris), 155–8  
*Doña Lisha's Island* (Lopez), 77  
*Downstate* (Norris), 160–1  
Drama Desk Award, 5, 35, 86  
Drama League Award, 188  
Duberman, Martin, 84  
*Dying City* (Shinn), 201–3  
*Dykes to Watch Out For* (comic strip), 97
- Edgar, David, 172, 177  
*Elective Affinities* (Adjmi), 2  
*Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue* (Hudes), 6, 79, 80–5, 90  
*Emperor Jones, The* (O'Neill), 103  
Engels, Friedrich, 21  
Eno, Will, 2, 108  
*Enron* (Prebble), 29  
*Eurydice* (Ruhl), 4  
Eyre, Richard, 1–2
- Fiddler on the Roof*, 7  
*Fifth Planet* (Auburn), 33  
finance. *See* capitalism  
Fleshler, Glenn, 58  
*for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (Shange), 79, 81  
*For Two Thousand Years* (Sebastian), 41  
Fornes, Maria Irene, 5  
*Four* (Shinn), 2, 191, 193–6, 197  
*Francisco and Benny* (Guirgis), 59  
Freud, Sigmund, 157, 159, 192  
Fringe First Award, 64
- Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden* (Coll), 181  
Gittings, James, 3  
Glaspell, Susan, 1, 103, 192  
*Glass Menagerie, The* (Williams), 69  
Glynn, Tom, 10–11  
Goodrich, Frances, 5  
Gorky, Maxim, 59, 61, 63  
*Great Game, The* (Rogers), 177–8
- Green, Jesse, 64  
*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Lee), 108–9
- Guirgis, Stephen Adly, 1  
*Between Riverside and Crazy*, 74–6  
*Boom Boom Boom Boom*, 59  
*Den of Thieves*, 59  
early life and family influences, 55–9  
*Francisco and Benny*, 59  
*In Arabia, We'd All Be Kings*, 59–61  
*Jesus Hopped the A' Train*, 56, 58, 61–4  
*Last Days of Judas Iscariot, The*, 57, 66–8  
*Little Flower of East Orange, The*, 68–71  
*Moonlight Mile*, 59  
*Motherfucker with the Hat*, 72–4  
*Our Lady of 121st Street*, 64–6  
*Race, Religion, Politics*, 59  
*Gun Show* (Auburn), 53–4
- Halberstam, David, 49  
*Hamilton*, 129  
*Hansberry, Lorraine*, 132, 144–5  
*Happiest Song Plays Last, The* (Hudes), 90, 94–7  
Hardy, G.H., 36, 40  
Hare, David, 1, 3, 29, 144, 172, 174  
*Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, 2  
*Heart of Darkness* (Conrad), 171–2  
Hedges, Chris, 146  
Heilpern, John, 66  
Hemingway, Ernest, 136, 138  
Hill, Katori, 164  
*him* (Cummings), 103  
Hnath, Lucas, 188  
Hoffman, Philip Seymour, 56, 58, 64  
Holocaust Memorial Museum (US), 41, 44  
Holocaust, 41, 44, 150, 173  
*Home Ground* (Shamsie), 8  
homophobia, 114, 199, 204, 207–10  
*How I Learned to Drive* (Vogel), 88  
Hudes, Quiaia Allegría, 1, 6  
26 Miles, 88–90  
*Adventures of the Barrio Grrrr!!*, 79  
*Daphne's Dive*, 97–101  
early life and family influences, 77–80  
*Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue*, 6, 79, 80–5, 90  
*Happiest Song Plays Last, The*, 90, 94–7  
*In the Heights*, 79, 80, 85–8  
*Miss You Like Hell*, 79, 90  
*Water by the Spoonful*, 77, 78, 83, 90–3  
*Yemaya's Belly*, 79–80
- Iceman Cometh, The* (O'Neill), 59, 75  
Illis, Mark, 2  
immigrants, 6, 7, 9, 13–14, 85, 86–7  
*In Arabia, We'd All Be Kings* (Guirgis), 59–61  
*In the Heights* (Hudes), 79, 80, 85–8  
*In White America* (Duberman), 84  
*Indecent* (Vogel), 188  
*Infidel, The* (Norris), 132, 133–5, 137

- Iraq War, 47, 79, 80, 81, 81–4, 92–4, 134, 146, 166, 172, 179, 202–3
- Isherwood, Charles, 19, 96, 100, 118, 119, 122, 124, 141, 179, 183, 201
- James, Henry, 201
- Jarry, Alfred, 103
- Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*, 56, 58, 61–4
- Jewish culture, 7–8, 12–15, 16–19, 40–5, 55
- Jones, Chris, 29, 96, 171, 208
- Jones, Jeffrey M., 107–8
- Journals of Mihail Sebastian, The* (Auburn), 6, 31, 40–6, 47, 48
- Junk: The Golden Age of Debt* (Akhtar), 6, 26–30
- Kafka, Franz, 44
- Kahn-Din, Ayub, 164
- Kaufman, Moisés, 207
- Kellaway, Kate, 210
- Kelly, Guy, 57
- Kennedy, Edward, 207
- Kennedy, John F., 49–50
- Kennedy, Robert, 51
- Keyes, Alan, 203
- Killer Joe* (Letts), 2
- King Lear*, 109, 107, 118, 121
- King, Martin Luther, Jr., 51
- Kipling, Rudyard, 177
- Koch Brothers, 151
- Koran. *See* Quran
- Kushner, Tony, 55, 165, 167, 192, 193, 195–6,
- La Ronde*, 159
- 'Lady of Larkspur Lotion, The,' 75
- Laramie Project, The* (Kaufman), 207–8
- Last Days of Judas Iscariot, The* (Guirgis), 57, 66–8
- Lear* (Lee), 103, 118–20, 121, 122
- Lee, Young Jean, 4, 6
- Appeal, The*, 108, 110–11
- Church*, 104, 114–16
- early life and family influences, 104–9
- Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, 108–9
- Lear*, 103, 118–20, 121, 122
- Pullman, WA, 111–12
- Shipment, The*, 116–18
- Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, 6, 106, 112–14, 129
- Straight White Men*, 104, 125–9
- Untitled Feminist Show*, 121, 122–4
- We're Gonna Die*, 121–2
- Yagoo*, 107, 108
- Les Blancs* (Hansberry), 145
- Letts, Tracy, 2, 90, 127, 139
- Little Flower of East Orange, The* (Guirgis), 68–71
- Long Days' Journey Into Night* (O'Neill), 70, 127, 131, 202, 203
- Lopez, Alfredo, 77
- Lost Lake* (Auburn), 31, 53
- Low Road, The* (Norris), 2, 151–5
- Lower Depths, The* (Gorki), 59, 61, 63
- Lucille Lortel Award, 35, 76
- Lukowski, Andrzej, 138
- Macbeth*, 103, 210
- Madagascar* (Rogers), 169–70
- Mamet, David, 10, 15, 55, 61, 160, 167–9, 192
- Mann, Emily, 83–4
- Marisol*, 193
- Marks, Peter, 35, 65, 114, 148
- Marx, Karl, 25, 27, 153
- Mask of Fu Manchu, The*, 108–9
- Mathematician's Apology, A* (Hardy), 36
- McNally, Terrence, 144
- Merton, Thomas, 67–8
- Miller, Arthur, 15, 35, 41, 89, 125, 127, 144, 165, 190, 192
- Miranda, Lin-Manuel, 79, 85, 88, 129
- Miss You* (Auburn), 33
- Miss You Like Hell* (Hudes), 79, 90
- money. *See* capitalism
- Moonlight Mile* (Guirgis), 59
- Motherfucker with the Hat* (Guirgis), 72–4
- Mud, River, Stone* (Nottage), 164
- Muslim culture, 7–9, 10–19, 22–6, 181–2, 204–5
- My Name Is Asher Lev* (Potok), 88
- 'Nana roja para mi hijo Lin Manuel' (Santiago), 85
- Nash, John F., Jr., 37
- Nelson, Richard, 2, 3
- New York Drama Critics Circle Award, 5, 76, 144, 188
- New York Drama Critics Circle, 4, 5
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 127, 131
- 9/11 (September 11), 7, 9, 11–12, 13, 59, 143, 150, 180, 182, 199–200, 202
- No Exit* (Sartre), 197
- No Passion Spent* (Steiner), 66
- Nobel Prize, 37, 198, 204, 205
- Norris, Bruce, 2, 131
- Blue Bonnet State*, 132
- Clybourne Park*, 6, 132, 144–8, 162
- Domesticated*, 155–8
- Downstate*, 160–1
- early life and family influences, 103–9, 131–2
- Infidel, The*, 132, 133–5, 137
- Low Road, The*, 2, 151–5
- Pain and the Itch, The*, 6, 139–42
- Parallelogram, A*, 149–51, 154
- Purple Heart*, 6, 133, 135–8
- Qualms, The*, 158–60
- Unmentionables, The*, 6, 142
- We All Went Down to Amsterdam*, 138
- Not About Nightingales* (Williams), 190
- Nottage, Lynn, 5, 76, 165, 188
- Now or Later* (Shinn), 189–90, 203–6, 208
- O'Neill, Eugene, 1, 6, 59–61, 66, 70, 75, 103, 127, 131, 160, 192, 202
- O'Neill, James, 1

## Index

- Obama, Barack, 46–7, 180, 203  
Obie Award, 1, 19, 22, 121, 188, 214  
Occupy movement, 97–100  
Off-Broadway Alliance Award, 76  
*Oldest Boy, The* (Ruhl), 55  
Olivier Award, 64, 148  
Olmos, Matthew Paul, 3  
*On the Mountain* (Shinn), 200–1  
*Opening Time, An* (Shinn), 189–90, 191, 212–14  
*Orpheus Descending* (Williams), 190  
Ortiz, John, 58–9  
Orton, Joe, 63–4  
Oslo (Rogers), 6, 173, 178, 183–8  
*Other People* (Shinn), 193, 196–8  
*Our Lady of 121st Street* (Guirgis), 64–6  
*Our Lady of Kibeho* (Hill), 164  
Outer Critics Circle Award, 22, 76, 188  
*Overwhelming, The* (Rogers), 2, 6, 163, 164–6, 169, 171–7, 178, 182, 183
- Packer, George, 164  
*Pain and the Itch, The* (Norris), 6, 139–42  
*Parallelogram, A* (Norris), 149–51, 154  
*Passing Strange* (Stew), 164  
*Perestroika* (Kushner), 167  
*Picked* (Shinn), 206–8  
Pinter, Harold, 204  
Potok, Chaim, 13, 88  
Prebble, Lucy, 29  
Priestley, J.B., 149  
*Proof* (Auburn), 31, 32, 35–40, 42, 47, 52–53  
Pulitzer Prize, 1, 5, 15, 19, 35, 76, 77, 80, 86, 146, 148, 203  
*Pullman, WA* (Lee), 111–12  
*Purple Heart* (Norris), 6, 133, 135–8
- Qualms, The* (Norris), 158–60  
Quran, 9, 10, 14–17, 20
- Race, Religion, Politics* (Guirgis), 59  
*Rafta, Rafta* (Khan-Din), 164  
*Raisin in the Sun, A* (Hansberry), 132, 144–5  
Rand, Ayn, 20, 148  
*Real Presences* (Steiner), 67  
Reid, Kerry, 71  
Rivera, José, 193  
Rogers, J.T., 2  
*Blood and Gifts*, 2, 6, 178–83, 184  
early life and family influences, 166–7  
*Great Game, The*, 177–8  
*Madagascar*, 169–70  
Oslo, 6, 173, 178, 183–8  
*Overwhelming, The*, 2, 6, 163, 164–6, 169, 171–7, 178, 182, 183  
*Seeing the Elephant*, 169  
*White People*, 167–9  
Romantic poets, 109–11  
Roth, Philip, 12, 41
- Ruhl, Sarah, 4, 55  
*Ruined* (Nottage), 5  
Ruiz, Elliot, 79, 80–1  
Ryan, Paul, 151
- Santiago, José Manuel Torres, 85  
Sartre, Jean-Paul, 45, 197  
Schulman, Michael, 151  
‘Search Engine, The,’ (Alexie), 107  
Sebastian, Mihail, 40–1, 54, 58  
*Seeds of Contemplation* (Merton), 67–8  
*Seeing the Elephant* (Rogers), 169  
September 11. *See* 9/11  
*Serious Money* (Churchill), 29  
*Sesame Street*, 120  
Shamsie, Kamilla, 8  
Shange, Ntozake, 79, 81  
Shawn, Wallace, 165  
Sheehan, Neil, 49  
*Sheep on the Runway* (Buchwald), 50  
Shepard, Matthew, 207–8  
Shepard, Sam, 192  
Shinn, Christopher, 2, 3  
*Against*, 189, 210–12  
*Coming World, The*, 193, 198  
*Dying City*, 201–3  
early life and family influences, 191–3  
*Four*, 2, 191, 193–6, 197  
*Now or Later*, 189–90, 203–6, 208  
*On the Mountain*, 200–1  
*Opening Time, An*, 189–90, 191, 212–14  
*Other People*, 193, 196–8  
*Picked*, 206–8  
*Teddy Ferrara*, 6, 190, 208–10  
*What Didn’t Happen*, 193  
*Where Do We Live*, 193, 198–200, 201, 208  
*Shipment, The* (Lee), 116–18  
*Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies, A* (de las Casals), 77  
*Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window, The* (Hansberry), 145  
*Skyscraper* (Auburn), 32, 33–5  
Smith, Adam, 20, 148, 151–4  
Sokolove, Michael, 8, 26,  
Soloski, Alexis, 19, 30, 111, 114, 178  
*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (Lee), 6, 106, 112–14, 129  
South Bank Award, 214  
Spencer, Charles, 68, 148, 177, 183  
St. Louis Critics Circle Award, 22  
*Star without a Name, The* (Sebastian), 58  
Steiner, George, 66, 67, 124  
Stevens, Wallace, 14, 20, 103  
Stevenson, Robert Louis, 153  
Stew (Mark Stewart), 164  
*Still Life* (Mann), 83  
*Straight White Men* (Lee), 104, 125–9  
*Stranger, The*, (Camus), 44  
*Sweat* (Nottage), 188

- Taming of the Shrew, The*, 7, 22–3, 25, 45  
*Teddy Ferrara* (Shinn), 6, 190, 208–10  
*Tender*, 2  
*Theatre and Its Double, The* (Artaud), 104  
*Three Monologues* (Auburn), 33  
*Three Tall Women* (Albee), 149, 150  
*Three Travelers Watch the Sunrise* (Stevens), 103  
 Tony Award, 1, 5, 35, 55, 73, 86, 148, 184  
*Treasure Island* (Stevenson), 153  
 Trump, Donald, 28, 151, 154, 155, 179, 180  
*26 Miles* (Hudes), 88–90  
  
*Ubu Roi* (Jarry), 103  
*Unmentionables, The* (Norris), 6, 142  
*Untitled Feminist Show* (Lee), 121, 122–4  
*Urinetown*, 41  
  
*Verge, The* (Glaspell), 103  
 Vietnam War, 47–52, 79, 80, 81–4, 85, 135–8, 146, 179  
 Vogel, Paula, 5, 79–80, 88, 188  
  
*Waiting for Godot* (Beckett), 56, 131, 150  
 Wallace, Naomi, 2, 163, 192  
*War Within, The* (Akhtar), 11–12  
  
*Water by the Spoonful* (Hudes), 77, 78, 83, 90–3  
*We All Went Down to Amsterdam* (Norris), 138  
*We Had a Very Good Time* (Auburn), 33  
*We're Gonna Die* (Lee), 121–2  
*Wealth of Nations* (Smith), 151–2  
 Weber, Bruce, 56, 59, 65–6  
*West Side Story*, 88  
 West, Nathanael, 152  
*What Didn't Happen* (Shinn), 193  
*What Do You Believe about the Future?* (Auburn), 33  
*Where Do We Live* (Shinn), 193, 198–200, 201, 208  
*White People* (Rogers), 167–9  
*Who & the What, The* (Akhtar), 7–8, 9, 13, 22–6  
*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Albee), 139  
 Williams, Tennessee, 44, 63, 69, 75, 169, 190  
*Winter's Tale, The*, 213  
*Wire, The*, 72  
 women playwrights, 4–5  
 Wordsworth, William, 108, 110–11  
  
*Yagoo* (Lee), 107, 108  
*Yemaya's Belly* (Hudes), 79–80  
  
 Zinoman, Jason, 112, 116  
*Zoo Story, The*, 71







