

# CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY



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Beginning in the cafés, lofts and small spaces of Off-Off-Broadway, and continuing in the Off-Broadway and regional theatres of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, new American playwrights emerged committed to exploring the potential of their craft, the nature of American experience and the politics of gender and sexuality. In this study Christopher Bigsby explores the works and influences of ten contemporary American playwrights: John Guare, Tina Howe, Tony Kushner, Emily Mann, Richard Nelson, Marsha Norman, David Rabe, Paula Vogel, Wendy Wasserstein and Lanford Wilson. Bigsby examines, in some detail, the developing careers of some of America's most fascinating and original dramatic talents. In addition to well-known works, Bigsby discusses some of the latest plays to reach the stage. This lively and accessible book, by one of the leading writers on American theatre, will be of interest to students and scholars of American drama, literature and culture, as well as to general theatre-goers.

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY is Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia and has published more than twenty-five books covering American theatre, popular culture and British drama, including *Modern American Drama* (Cambridge, 1992). He is also an award-winning novelist and regular radio and television broadcaster.



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## *Preface*

There has been a tendency, perhaps now beginning to change, for American drama to find itself marginalised in academe. The novel, a form virtually coterminous with America's development and a principal mechanism for investigating its amorphous nature, has been seen as central. The Great American Novel shared a national hubris. It was large, all-encompassing, because the nation itself was expanding and expansive, itself an imaginative enterprise that seemed to require a form commensurate with its ambition. Its achievements, meanwhile, have been acknowledged by a cluster of Nobel prizes, some more explicable than others.

Theatre, however, seemed not quite at the centre of the culture. Its history lay outside the country while for several centuries the principal lament was its failure to engage American talents, the American mind or American reality. To many, indeed, it seemed principally a twentieth-century invention and hence curiously unrooted. In fact, America's hunger for theatre, at the popular no less than the elite level, was strikingly apparent from the earliest days. For much of its history, indeed, it was precisely to the theatre, in its many forms, that Americans turned for an understanding of a society whose changing nature was both its central promise and the cause of anxiety (see Richard Nelson's *The General from America*). If that is less true today, when the popular dimension of theatre has been ceded to Hollywood and television, drama remains not only a sensitive barometer of social change, replying to shifting moral and intellectual pressures, but also an internationally respected aspect of American cultural life.

Nonetheless, even in the present century the canon has proved remarkably restricted. Given drama's marginal role in the syllabus only a limited number of playwrights have an assured place in the intimidating piles of set texts to be found in campus book stores, along with the T-shirts and posters. In terms of the postwar theatre, Edward Albee,

Arthur Miller, August Wilson and Tennessee Williams are predictable figures, but, despite long and impressive careers, not John Guare, David Rabe or Lanford Wilson. Sometimes individual plays find their way in by way of courses stressing ethnicity, gender or sexual preference but otherwise major talents, whose work has often been acknowledged by prizes and productions, remain if scarcely unknown then largely unstudied. This book is an attempt to look at the work of a number of such writers.

The immediate and legitimate question is why these and not others? Certainly, if there were no constraints of space (and Cambridge University Press frequently and gently reminds me that there are) I would have added many more, and did before such chapters had to be sacrificed to the twin necessities of length and price. There must, inevitably, therefore, be an element of the arbitrary. Where, you might ask, are Constance Congdon, Christopher Durang, Maria Irene Fornes, A. R. Gurney, Romulus Linney, Donald Margulies, Terrence McNally, Rochelle Owens, Wallace Shawn, Megan Terry? The list is, if not infinitely extensible, then at least a good deal longer than this, and it is that sheer length which explains such absences.

For the moment, then, and for the purposes of this study, I have chosen a heterogeneous group of ten writers who, for different reasons, seem to merit greater attention or whose public reputation has attached itself to certain plays at the expense of others. Thus, John Guare is best known for *The House of Blue Leaves* and *Six Degrees of Separation* while *Lydie Breeze* and *Women and Water* seem to fall below the critical threshold. Tony Kushner is admired for *Angels in America* while *A Bright Room Called Day* seems to me to be undervalued. David Rabe still tends to be thought of as primarily a Vietnam writer, and Marsha Norman as the author of *'night Mother* and little else. Richard Nelson, meanwhile, seems to escape attention because, for the last decade, he has chosen to open his plays in England and to address an international theme. Others – such as Tina Howe and Paula Vogel – have had to battle for recognition, their idiosyncratic approaches initially proving unpopular with directors and critics or, like Wendy Wasserstein, have fallen foul of the suspicion that humour and inconsequence are organically related. There are, of course, those embraced by academe but largely ignored by the theatre. Susan Glaspell, from earlier in the century, would be one such, and Adrienne Kennedy another. But for the most part it is the other way around and it is that phenomenon which has led to this book.

These are, admittedly, scarcely unknown or unacknowledged writers.

Far from it. Between them they have won most of the available awards and experienced considerable success in the theatre. Several have been writing plays for more than thirty years but, to date, only one has been the subject of a critical monograph, and that is the point. Academe would benefit not only from allowing American drama a more prominent position in the syllabus but also from a more generous definition of the canon. Whatever else it may do, therefore, I hope that what follows may serve to underline the strength in depth of the American theatre and the sheer quality of American dramatic writing.

Without treating every play by every author I have, within the constraints of length, tried to give a sense of the trajectory of individual careers. I have also endeavoured to allow the writers to speak for themselves and in that context must acknowledge more than the usual gratitude to the editors and compilers of the various books of interviews on which I have drawn. Hence, my thanks go to Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, to Jackson R. Bryer, Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, and to David Savran. I have been a beneficiary of their shrewd and sympathetic questioning. I am also grateful to Paula Vogel who submitted to an interview on the eve of the opening of the London production of *How I Learned to Drive*.

The American theatre, at the turn of a century and a millennium, remains one of the most vibrant in the world. I hope that this book gives at least a flavour of what makes that so.



*John Guare*

John Guare is something of a paradox in the American theatre. He has been writing plays for forty years, more than thirty of them professionally. His work has been staged on and off Broadway. He is not only prolific but, in his early works, frequently wildly inventive and extremely funny. He has had a number of significant successes, picked up awards and established himself as a familiar part of the American theatrical scene. Yet if critics have sometimes been exhilarated they have also occasionally been baffled, and he has never quite established himself in the canon, except, perhaps, for *The House of Blue Leaves*, from the early seventies, and his 1990 play, *Six Degrees of Separation*. He has been called the Jackson Pollock of playwrights, a recognition of the wildness of a talent which splashes itself apparently randomly as well as of the vibrancy and energy of his work. He has equally well been accused of diffuseness and self-indulgence, of a failure to shape the apparent spontaneity of his invention into fully coherent drama.

It is hard to agree. Few writers have matched his exuberant inventiveness but few have aspired to, or achieved, the lyrical intensity or intellectual astuteness of a man with a vivid sense of the physical and linguistic possibilities of theatre. Acknowledged as a moralist, he has nonetheless been chided for burying his social and ethical critique in plays whose roots fail to sink deep enough into the human psyche. Initially a comic writer, a *farceur*, he has been seen as deflecting his moral concerns into extravagant physical actions or dispersing them in a deluge of language and bizarre plotting. His defence, akin to that of Joe Orton, was, at first, to see in farce the only form adequate to address a crisis in experience and perception: 'I chose farce because it's the most abrasive, anxious form. I think the chaotic state of the world demands it.'<sup>1</sup> Yet farce is not antithetical to moral concern and would later give way to a different kind

<sup>1</sup> John Harrop, "'Ibsen Translated by Lewis Carroll': the Theatre of John Guare", *New Theatre Quarterly* 3 (May 1985), p. 152.

of play for there is also another side to John Guare – poetic, profoundly metaphoric. In his Nantucket plays, in particular, he explores history and myth in dramatic metaphors of genuine force and originality, metaphors which offer an account of the fate of American utopianism and the self's struggle for meaning. Indeed in *Lydie Breeze* and *Women and Water* he has written two plays of great linguistic and theatrical subtlety, plays which sharply contrast with those which first attracted attention a quarter of a century before. What links the different phases of his career, however, is a resistance to naturalism in all its guises.

For Guare, escaping naturalism has always been a central objective. Regarding Stanislavsky's impact on the American theatre, at least as interpreted by advocates of the Method, as almost wholly baleful, he insists that, for him at least, 'theatrical reality happens on a much higher plane'. Actors exist 'to drive us crazy'.<sup>2</sup> His chief obligation as a playwright, indeed, he believes, is to 'break the domination of naturalism and get the theatre back to being a place of poetry, a place where language can reign' (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 102). This does not mean a return to verse drama – though it is a declared interest of his – but it does suggest the degree to which he is drawn to the lyrical and the metaphorical, the extent to which the energy, the inventive possibilities, the shaping power of language, as well as its plastic ambiguities, are a way equally of engaging and transforming the real. The epic ambition of the artist necessitates a commensurate language. Theatre poetry, he explains, 'is a response to the large event, events that force the poetry' (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 102). It can be felt in the structure of an Ibsen play no less than in the substance of Greek drama. Naturalistic acting, meanwhile, belongs on a television or movie screen because acting is 'about finding truth on the large scale with the recognition of the actor as performer' (p. 102). It is on this level, perhaps, that the actor connects with an audience in that to some degree we all recognise and acknowledge that we, too, are performers, finding in that truth not a mark of insincerity or the inauthentic but a confession that we too take pleasure in the language we use, feel the energy in a coded rhythm, aspire to a truth not reducible to prosaic veracity. Performance, on stage or in life, lifts us into a world of possibility which stretches the envelope of the real.

John Guare was brought up in a family with a tradition of theatre. From 1880 to 1917 two of his great-uncles toured with their own stock company, producing such plays as *Pawn Ticket 210* and *The Old Toll House*.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Cattaneo, 'John Guare: The Art of Theater ix', *The Paris Review*, 125 (Winter 1992), p. 99.

His uncle had also been part of the act and, as he explained to Jackson Bryer,<sup>3</sup> went on to be an agent and head of casting at MGM from 1934 to 1956. Thespianism then skipped a generation. His father worked on Wall Street, but hated it so much that he was happy to support his son's somewhat precocious dramatic ambitions ('Whatever you do, never get a job,' he had warned his son, advice he was happy to take). Enthused by a *Life* magazine report of a film of *Tom Sawyer* made by two boys, at the age of eleven he wrote three scripts. Hollywood did not beat a path to his door but at twelve he was given a typewriter by his parents which he still owns and uses.

Despite his fascination with theatre, Guare has claimed that he learned as much about dramatic structure, as a teenager, from record sleeves as he did from studying plays:

for learning about the structure of plays, I read the record jackets of show albums. I recognized that the first or second number will always be a 'want' song. 'All I want is a room somewhere.' 'We've got to have, we plot to have, because it's so dreary not to have, that certain thing called the boy friend.' 'Something's Coming.' It was such a revelation, in the record store, reading those notes. You really can tell how the story is told through the songs. 'Guys and Dolls' contains the three themes of that show. Recognizing that was a revelation. Therefore, beginning a play, what is my 'want'? I came to Stanislavski through record jackets, at the age of twelve, thirteen, fourteen. So I always approach plays in a practical way.<sup>4</sup>

Following his father's attack of angina in 1950 he and his mother moved briefly to Ellenville, in upstate New York, where the local school's resolute secularism led to his being educated at home where, on reading a report of Joshua Logan's success on Broadway in *The Wisteria Tree*, based on *The Cherry Orchard*, the twelve-year-old Guare set himself to read the latter, along with other Chekhov plays. He also saw the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and typed a play in which, as he has explained, he substituted New Orleans for Moscow. Back in New York he saw more plays, continuing his theatrical education.

Guare spent the last four years of the 1950s at Georgetown University, moving on to Yale for three years, graduating with a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1963, a period of study prolonged by fear of the draft. As he has explained, both locations were valuable for an aspiring playwright: 'When I was at Georgetown, Washington was a strong tryout town. I

<sup>3</sup> Jackson R. Bryer, *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995), p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York, 1988), pp. 88–9.

went to plays all the time. Then I went to Yale Drama School. New Haven was also a tryout town. We spent all our time arguing because every play that came in was a play in trouble. You never saw a finished play' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 89).

At Georgetown, in 1957, he entered a one-act play contest and decided that his future lay as a dramatist, not least because his family history suggested to him that 'the theatre was something very possible' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 71). Thereafter he wrote a play a year, and was editor of the literary magazine. In his final year he wrote a musical called *The Thirties Girl*, later using the songs from it in *The House of Blue Leaves*.

At Yale he studied drama with John Gassner but, more importantly, in his opinion, studied design with Donald Oenslager learning valuable lessons about lighting, set design and differing styles of presentation. As he has said, 'I work with the director and the lighting designer, the set designer, the costume designer, to focus in so that everybody's telling the same story. That to me is what the theatrical experience is – the audience watching a group of people all trying to produce the same effect' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 88). The central lesson, however, was 'the fact that everything that appears on the stage comes from the writing' (p. 89).

His own family's Irish background led him to the work of Wilde, O'Casey and Shaw while a college production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* prompted him to write a play in emulation of Wilde. Feeling that *The Plough and the Stars* was unfinished, he provided an extra act. He also admired the work of Irish-American Philip Barry, particularly for the rhythm and artificiality of his high comedy and for its sudden mood changes. He worked on a number of shows and read widely. Several of his plays received campus productions and he won a prize in a Washington play contest. *Theatre Girl* and *The Toadstool Boy* were produced in Washington, in 1959 and 1960, and *The Golden Cherub* and *Did You Write My Name in the Snow* in New Haven in 1962–3. Following a year in the services, which he regarded as rendering everything that mattered to him valueless, he was ready for the theatre, boosted by a ten-thousand dollar gift from his aunt, who offered the money on condition that he turned his back on a job offer as writing trainee at Universal Studios, and devoted himself to playwriting.

It is still true that without the Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway movement of the 1960s Guare's prospects, along with those of so many other writers, would not have been bright. He regarded these as per-

forming the function for young writers that Paris had in the 1920s. His breakthrough came with a play performed at the Barr–Albee–Wilder workshop. As he has explained, ‘Edward Albee was a saint . . . With the money that he made from *Virginia Woolf*. . . he took a lease on a theatre in Vandaam Street and for six months [of the year, for six years] did a new play every week-end, full productions!’ (Bryer, *The Playwright’s Art*, p. 72).

Success, or at least exposure, here in turn led to the Eugene O’Neill Playwrights Conference, in Waterford, Connecticut, of which he became a founder member. The piece he presented was the first act of what was to be *The House of Blue Leaves*, which he had begun writing in 1965 while on a trip to Cairo where he received a newspaper clipping describing the Pope’s visit to New York. At that moment, he has said, he ‘heard the sound of my life’ (Cattaneo, ‘John Guare’, p. 89) and was no longer a secret Southern writer, intent on writing Chekhovian drama set in New Orleans. He was a New York author.

The essence of Off-Off-Broadway, as Sam Shepard was to find, was that it was possible for a new, young writer, with no track record, to have a play read or produced, sometimes before the ink was dry. As Guare recalls:

I once wrote a play on Thursday and gave it to a friend. She said, ‘Come down to Theatre Genesis. They’re doing new plays on Monday.’ My play was done that very Monday. There was a real energy in the air. Writing a play was a thing of great pleasure and fun – more like singing. The theatre was not Broadway, not so serious. The plays were not reviewed. That, in retrospect, gave one a great deal of confidence. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 87)

Among his earliest plays were *Something I’ll Tell You Tuesday* and *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year*, performed as a double bill at the Caffè Cino, in October 1966. Cino was a Sicilian steam presser who worked at his regular job until late afternoon and then ran a theatre on Cornelia Street in New York, in a café decorated with Christmas tree lights, religious statues and pictures of Jean Harlow and Maria Callas. The ‘theatre’ was small, narrow and long, a theatre, in other words, that did not lend itself to large casts. Cino also operated on a somewhat bizarre basis, insisting to Guare that he was only prepared to stage plays by Aquarians. By luck Guare is an Aquarian: ‘He looked at my driver’s licence and he said, “All right.” He checked his chart and he said, “These are the dates when you’ll open, and you run for two weeks because of Saturn, and I think we’ll give you a one-week extension,” and we ran three weeks’ (Bryer, *The Playwright’s Art*, p. 72).

*Something I'll Tell You Tuesday*, described by Guare as ideally a play about old people to be played by young people, concerns an elderly couple, Agnes and Andrew, preparing for the woman's hospitalisation, who are visited by their daughter and son-in-law, Hildegarde and George, whose energy seems to go mostly into arguments. Requiring nothing more than two chairs – elaborate stagings were, anyway, not practicable at the Caffè Cino – *Something I'll Tell You Tuesday* is a character study in which the contrasting rhythms and tones of the conversations – those between Agnes and Andrew are deliberate, quiet, those between Hildegarde and George fast and hysterical – establish the nature of the individuals and their relationships to one another. Agnes is apparently romantic, Andrew practical; Hildegarde is self-regarding, George potentially violent. Yet for all their apparently settled life there are tensions between the older couple that are no less real for being subtly displayed.

Agnes wishes to walk to the hospital, not for romantic reasons but because she wishes, finally, to justify their decision to live near a hospital and remote, it is implied, from other things. It is, moreover, the first time they have been out together for some time. Neither is their relationship as close as it once was. Indeed, it is implied that the young couple may be no more than a version of the older one, their fight mirroring those of Agnes and Andrew. What makes them seem so devoted now is in some degree simply a loss of energy and will, a realisation which brings home to them their advancing age.

No more than a sketch, the play nonetheless reveals a commitment to character, an awareness of the significance of nuances, of tone and rhythm, a sense of currents which can flow in different directions within a speech, a sensitivity to irony, as dramatic method and subject, which would surface more powerfully in Guare's later work.

Its companion piece, *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year*, is equally slight, almost anecdotal. It features two figures, in characteristic Off-Off-Broadway style called simply He and She, who, in equally Off-Off-Broadway style, address the audience from time to time. They conduct a flirtation in a park, he telling apparently outrageous stories about his relatives, including his wife, who he alleges will kill them with a high powered rifle if she discovers them. She does.

A further work for Caffè Cino, *A Day for Surprises*, shrinks the character names still further – to A and B – in an absurdist work about two librarians who lament the death of a fellow librarian (eaten by a stone lion) before conducting a curious love affair. In other words, Guare

began his career by writing derivative works, influenced now less by Chekhov and Williams than Ionesco. These early plays are not particularly significant in their own right, but they do suggest Guare's commitment to experimenting with character, language and plot, his taste for the oblique, the ironic and even the surreal as well, incidentally, as the openness of Off-Off-Broadway to stylistic variety; though, to his mind, by the mid 1960s some of the energy and inventiveness had begun to dissipate. He dates the decline to the moment newspapers began to review it: 'a recklessness and a sense of it being underground . . . went out of it' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 76). The death of Joe Cino, who stabbed himself to death, marked a further stage in that decline. But, by then, Guare had moved on.

It was the O'Neill Centre that seems to have been the most significant experience for him in the middle-late 1960s, in that he wrote a series of plays there from 1965 through to 1968. Guare was one of a cluster of talents identified by the Centre. Others included Lanford Wilson, Leonard Melfi, Terrence McNally and Sam Shepard. It was here that one of the most successful of his early works was performed in 1967 and then, the following year, at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York. As he has explained, 'I wrote *Muzeeka* about all those undergraduates I saw around me, so free and happy but wondering what in adult life would allow them to keep their spirit and freedom? How do we keep any ideals in this particular society? Vietnam was starting to become a specter' (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 91). And the war in Vietnam, with its distorting pressure on the self, its political corruptions, its moral corrosiveness, is, if not the subject, then the distorting lens through which Guare invites his audience to view a culture itself dedicated to unreality and whose media homogenise and commodify experience. The play begins as its protagonist reads from an American coin, reciting the very principle which his society seems in process of denying: *E Pluribus Unum*. In God We Trust.

The central character, Jack Argue, is a man who can arrange but not compose music. He applies for a job with *Muzeeka*, a company which produces the bland music played in restaurants, elevators and rest rooms, intending, eventually, to sabotage it with his own work so that the whole of his society will begin to dance. We follow his adventures with a prostitute and then in war, as he goes to serve in Vietnam, a war presented as being run primarily for the advantage of competing American television companies. While there he anticipates his return when he will be able to recount the details of his killings, content to re-enter a world

in which such events are easily smoothed away: 'I'll go back and be convinced, the *Reader's Digest* will convince me, and the newspapers and *TV Guide* and my *Muzeeka* will stick their hands in my ears and massage my brain and convince me I didn't do anything wrong. And life will be so nice.'<sup>5</sup> Unable, finally, to face the prospect, Argue stabs himself, while the man who had hoped to enrol him in his atomic cess pool company dies as a prostitute dressed in a bikini sings a song which jumbles together the names of politicians with those of other icons of the day.

*Muzeeka* is scarcely subtle. The fact that Argue's name is an anagram for Guare perhaps suggests some of the personal anger behind a work that satirises contemporary America, a play in which, Brecht-like, stagehands hold up banners announcing each scene. One of the comparatively few plays to engage with the issue of Vietnam, it offers a picaresque account of the hero's journey less into the heart of darkness than into a society whose principal achievement is to drain experience of moral and social content and replay it as entertainment. Argue invokes the Etruscans as a civilisation once vivid and alive and now preserved only in its art. A similar fate, he seems to suggest, awaits America, which has already surrendered its vitality and betrayed its ideals.

Yet if here, and in his later work, Guare was concerned to offer a critique of American values, his theatrical models lay elsewhere. As he explained:

Durrenmatt's *The Visit* . . . had a profound effect on me. To have a play draw you in with humor and then make you crazy and send you out mixed-up! When I got to Feydeau, Strindberg, Pinter, Joe Orton and the 'dis-ease' they created, I was home. Pinter's plays had the rhythm of high comedy trapped in the wrong surroundings; I identified with that. I loved the strictures of farce, besides liking the sound of an audience laughing . . . And Feydeau's hysteria opened the door to Strindberg. I always liked plays to be funny and early on stumbled upon the truth that farce is tragedy speeded up . . . The intensity puts it on the edge. (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 85)

High comedy trapped in the wrong surroundings certainly seemed to characterise the play which first established Guare's reputation, *The House of Blue Leaves*, whose opening act he wrote in 1966 and presented the following year at the O'Neill Centre, with himself playing the central role. At that stage it only involved three people because, as he later explained, he lacked the skill or experience to handle the nine characters who would constitute the final play, and could not then sustain the

<sup>5</sup> John Guare, *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun and Other Plays* (New York, 1993), pp. 136–7.

complexities of farce. It took him a further five years to complete it. The central problem seemed to lie with the character of Corrinna Stroller, an actress who appears in the second act and whose nature changed from draft to draft. Since it seemed central to the plot that she should know what had happened in the first act, too much time was spent with exposition. The problem was solved by making her deaf, a decision which also facilitated a new line in comic action and which underlined the extent to which none of the characters in the play listens to any of the others.

Guare insists that the play has its roots in autobiography. His father (who died the day he finished it) had worked for the New York Stock Exchange but called it 'the zoo' (Artie is a zoo keeper); his uncle had been head of casting at MGM and had engaged in precisely the conversation about Huckleberry Finn which opens the second act. Beyond that, it is fantasy, inspired, so he suggests, by seeing Laurence Olivier in *The Dance of Death* and *A Flea in Her Ear* on consecutive nights, a wedding of two apparently opposing theatrical traditions which led him to abandon an earlier version in favour of the play first performed in February 1971, at the Truck and Warehouse Theatre in New York, which won an Obie Award, an Outer Circle Critics Award and the New York Drama Critics Award as Best American Play. Revived in 1986 at Lincoln Centre it won four Tony Awards.

*The House of Blue Leaves* (1971) is a farce. It tells the story of Artie Shaughnessy, a composer anxious to break into show business. His wife Bananas is, as her name implies, slightly crazy and Artie is in process of trading her in for Bunny Flingus, profligate with her sexual charms but saving her culinary skills for marriage. In the outside world the Pope is visiting the Queens district of New York and there is general hysteria. As the parade goes by Bunny holds up Artie's music to be blessed, in the hope of divine intervention, while a group of slightly crazed nuns fight for a view of the pontiff. Into this scene intrude Billy Einhorn, Artie's one-time friend and now a Hollywood producer, and his twenty-two-year-old girlfriend, Corrinna Stroller. Artie's son, Ronnie, meanwhile, plans to assassinate the Pope, but succeeds only in blowing up Miss Stroller and a high percentage of the nuns.

The first director, somewhat incredibly, saw this as a naturalistic work, but was replaced by Mel Shapiro, who responded to what Guare himself characterised as a blend of Feydeau and Strindberg, farcical in style but, as he saw it, with a more serious dimension. Indeed, when a decade later an attempt was actually made to assassinate the Pope Guare remarked

that, 'I felt as if a protective wall had shattered and the audience had tumbled onto the same side of the mirror as the play.' The effect, it seemed to him, was that 'their perception allowed them to see the characters' needs and hungers with much more directness than in 1971'.<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to take the observation entirely seriously since the world of *The House of Blue Leaves* is so evidently and unrelentingly farcical, death being reduced to an off-stage plot device, the occasion for jokes. Like Joe Orton's plays, which preceded it, but which had more of an anarchic edge to them, it does, perhaps, say something about a world of lost dreams and failed ambitions. However, it lacks Orton's detached cruelty. Its surreal humour never quite matches Orton's, whose characters exist in a world beyond morality. Orton was not a satirist who held up an alternative model of human behaviour. He revelled in the deconstruction of character, being himself a consummate role player for whom performance was the essence of being. He had no commitment to values and no nostalgia for a society in which such values might once have operated. Far from presenting the two-dimensionality of farce as reflecting the decay of private and public form, far from yearning for the order which farce momentarily disrupts only to re-establish, he celebrated chaos. Guare, by contrast, is a moralist who simultaneously stages and laments the reduction of character to role and offers a prognosis of a society substituting appearance for reality. He is a satirist, identifying and mocking a culture which dedicates itself to the pursuit of happiness with no clear idea of what might constitute such happiness, beyond the saccharine ballads of true love or the projections of the media, a dream as imprecise as it is pervasive. As Artie sings at the beginning of the play:

I'm looking for Something.  
I've searched everywhere.  
I'm looking for Something  
And just when I'm there,  
Whenever I'm near it  
I can see it and hear it.  
I'm almost upon it,  
Then it's gone.<sup>7</sup>

For Orton, society was a decaying corpse inhabited by human lice determined to deny evidence of putrefaction. He was an absurd *farceur*, having little in common with Feydeau and still less with the cruder British tradition. If the British were liable to take mysterious pleasure in

<sup>6</sup> John Harrop, 'Living in the Dark Room: the Playwright and His Audience', *New Theatre Quarterly* 3 (May 1985), p. 155.      <sup>7</sup> John Guare, *The House of Blue Leaves* (New York, 1971), p. 6.

the sight of vicars dropping their trousers it was a way of playing with authority and disorder that depended on an underlying confidence in the unchallengeable rightness and continuing power of that social system. For Orton, in contrast, that system was the enemy while the absurd was liberating. He did not yearn for transcendence or for a restored society which would find a place for him. His work rigorously excludes all sentiment, as it does a yearning for expressive language or transitive relationships. His resolutions are all deliberately ironic.

Guare is a horse of a different colour. He, too, is capable of creating surreal scenes and bizarre juxtapositions. He, too, has an eye for the absurdity of the world which his characters inhabit. Thus, Bunny recalls one of Billy's movies in which, 'Doris Day comes down that flight of stairs in that bathrobe and thinks Rock Hudson is the plumber to fix her bathtub and in reality he's an atomic scientist' (*The House of Blue Leaves*, p. 26). Yet, since this is a scenario hardly remote from other Doris Day/Rock Hudson movies, Guare is dealing here with satire and not absurdity. The Pope and movie stars are equivalents in his play but so they are beyond the confines of the theatre. There is virtually nothing in *The House of Blue Leaves* that does not have its equivalent in American society, from trendy nuns to crazed movie producers and vacuous movie stars, from wannabe composers to bewildered assassins. Guare's problem is that, as Don DeLillo points out in relation to *Mao II*, American reality is liable to outstrip anything a writer can invent. Nonetheless, there is in *The House of Blue Leaves*, and beyond the pleasure which Guare plainly takes in the contrivances of farce, an instinct to root events in the real, no matter how transformed, distorted or ironised. Indeed, he has explained the setting as itself a part of that reality which lies just beyond the cartoon frenzy of the action.

For Guare, the very decision to set the play in Queens was especially significant. It was never, he insisted, a borough with its own sense of identity. It was either a stepping stone to something greater or the place where hopes stalled and the whole web of ambition unwound. Its location, close to but never really a part of a hustling, lively and successful New York (read Manhattan), is reflected, in *The House of Blue Leaves*, in lives which are similarly marginal or spiralling down into apocalypse. He sees the inhabitants of Queens as asking themselves why their dreams are the source of humiliation, why they never achieve what ought to be so securely in their grasp, living, as they do, so close to the centre of power and possibility. New York is, after all, the symbol of tomorrow (to be replaced, as in the play, by California). But, as he has remarked,

'Fourteen minutes on the Flushing line is a very long distance' (Foreword, *The House of Blue Leaves*, p. ix). This play is, in his mind, more than anything, therefore, about humiliation, and certainly, as he suggests, there is virtually no one in the play who escapes such a fate.

It is tempting to see something of Guare himself in the figure of Artie. More than a decade after writing his first play, and despite positive response to his work, he had still not achieved the breakthrough that had come almost immediately to Edward Albee, to Jack Gelber and LeRoi Jones. He was at the centre of the new theatre in America and yet, like Artie, was still waiting for the success which, ironically, *The House of Blue Leaves* offered. But, beyond that, the play exposes a more general frustration as all the characters face being humiliated 'by their dreams, their loves, their wants, their best parts' (Foreword, *The House of Blue Leaves*, p. x). Rejecting accusations of cruelty, in his portraits of characters whose fantasies are so manifestly unrealisable and whose treatment of one another is so casual, he objected that,

I don't think any play from the Oresteia on down has ever reached the cruelty of the smallest moments in our lives, what we have done to others, what others have done to us. I'm not interested so much in how people survive as in how they avoid humiliation. Chekhov says we must never humiliate one another, and I think avoiding humiliation is the core of tragedy and comedy and probably of our lives. (p. x)

In *The House of Blue Leaves* Artie loses both his hopes of Hollywood success and his lover, who transfers her attention to the Hollywood mogul, Billy Einhorn. His wife has already lost his affections and, to a degree, her mind. Corrinna and several nuns, more radically, lose their lives in a spasm of violence. Guare recalled being in Egypt in 1965, when the Pope left for New York where he was to plead for peace in the world. By the time of the play's production, however, the war in Vietnam was edging towards its violent conclusion. Peace was far from being evident, any more than it had been in 1965, the year of the Watts riot, or, indeed, in the years which saw the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and Malcolm X. The play, in that sense, did not require the attempted assassination of a Pope to validate its random violence.

At the same time, Guare insists, 'The Pope's no loser. Neither is Artie Shaughnessy, whom *The House of Blue Leaves* is about. They both had big dreams. Lots of possibilities. The Pope's just into more real estate' (p. xi), and, despite the irony of these remarks, the play does, indeed, end on a sentimental note, which seems almost a parodic version of the con-

cluding scene of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Artie and his wife are reconciled and Artie sings a song as blue leaves appear and he steps into a blue spotlight. But despite Guare's reference to Artie's big dreams he is a performer, with no more substance than the Hollywood he aspires to join. References to the 'needs' and 'hungers' of the characters in the end carry little conviction precisely because these are no more than figures in a farce, and if its cruelties go beyond those of Feydeau they do not go as deep as Orton's. A comment on a society in pursuit of dreams, trading truth for illusion, and with a paranoid impulse buried at the heart of its sentimentalities, it stops short, nonetheless, of the savage and maniacal intensity which Guare saw as having given it birth. It does offer an ironic perspective on a national obsession with success, on a consumerism which extends into human affairs. The links between his characters are tenuous, their grasp on reality uncertain, as movies and television define the real and the possible and they step into a fantasy believing it to have substance and transcending purpose. This is Albee's *The American Dream* wedded to *Hellzapoppin*. But claims for its moral seriousness would seem to impose a greater weight than the play can bear.

Guare's response to such accusations, however, was perhaps implicit in his observation, on the occasion of the first production, that the audience's sense of reality would have to catch up with the play. It was an ironic remark, but it could, perhaps, be plausibly argued that, Papal assassinations aside, a presidency in which a former actor brought the fantasies of Hollywood to Washington (from *Star Wars* to a Disneyfied version of family and social life), did eventually turn *The House of Blue Leaves* into a realist drama. Certainly it offered a portrait of a culture whose sense of the real was thoroughly infiltrated by fantasy and myth. But Guare's claims went further than this.

For him, the play was centrally concerned with limits, in the depiction of people limited by a lack of talent, limited economically, emotionally, geographically. But if Artie and the others, rooted in a Queens they wish to escape, desperate to break out of fixed roles and determined circumstances, are frustrated and deformed by a world less expansive than their dreams, then Billy, the man they hope will release them from their constraints, has the opposite problem. He has the power to create possibilities, to give substance to dreams. Indeed, he lives in a world where dreams are the stuff of everyday life and the generators of reality, albeit a reality itself metastasised with illusion. He has what the others lack: power, wealth, mobility. What he in turn lacks is limits and, as Guare has

asked, 'What do you hang onto in a limitless world?'<sup>8</sup> His answer is 'yourself', but in *The House of Blue Leaves* there is no self. Billy succeeds by feeling nothing, being nothing but a series of gestures. One woman dies, another is at hand. Why not, in a world in which reality is simply projected light? Why not, when all is possible?

This is hardly the world of Camus's *Caligula*, not least because Billy is an unlikely source of existential angst, but the absurdity explored by Camus does share something with that presented by Guare, for when there are no limits there are no values to affront, no codes to breach, no principles to abandon. Camus's central character explores the implications of inhabiting an antinomian world, piling up experiences as if the simple accumulation of those experiences will precipitate meaning, stir a blunted sensibility. Guare's characters are not allowed this degree of self-awareness. The blood is not real; the pain is a momentary neuralgia. There is, in truth, no dark shadow which might have led to the territory explored by Camus. But then this is America, not postwar Europe, in which the absurd had a perfectly recognisable historical referent. Indeed it could, perhaps, be argued that it is the absence of that historical pressure which deflects so much of American drama into the personal and the psychological rather than the social and the metaphysical, though Vietnam bred its own sense of a world in which American insularities and national myths deferred to more profound slippages in the sense of the real. True or not, Guare was to take up the issues he saw raised in part by *The House of Blue Leaves* in a later work, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*. For the moment, though, he had written a play in which farce performed a more consoling than disturbing role. This was not the sad vaudeville of *Waiting for Godot* or the linguistic echo chamber of Ionesco. It was a play which owed as much to the Marx Brothers as to Feydeau.

Guare followed *The House of Blue Leaves* with a highly successful, though loose, musical adaptation of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* which managed to reflect something of the social protest of the era, combined with Guare's off-beat humour. First performed in Central Park, in July 1971, it transferred to Broadway in December of the same year. But if these two productions taken together seemed to indicate that he had broken through on to a new level of success and popularity this was not quite the case.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> John Guare, 'Author's Note', *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* (New York, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> John Guare, *Rich and Famous* (New York, 1977), pp. 10–11.

Following the death of Joe Cino, Guare and others, including the director Mel Shapiro, moved to Nantucket and started a theatre where he staged *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*. The move was to prove less significant for that fact, however, than for the transformation it was to work in his career. He wished, he has explained, to stop focussing on New York, to 'draw water out of a different well' (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 93). That well produced a series of plays of genuine lyrical power, beginning with *Lydie Breeze*, though these still lay several years in the future. A more immediate result of the move was a play that, in his own words, was 'so freeform that you could put anything into it' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 84).

*Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, a play set near the Arctic Circle and first staged by the Nantucket Stage Company, in Bicentennial year, 1976, was Guare's somewhat premature millennial play, the one anniversary perhaps reminding him of another. As Guare has explained, 'it was a play that got me realizing that structure was not a cage. I understood from that play . . . that Ibsen was a great playwright because he made the machinery work in a poetic way rather than being formulaic' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 84) It was also, however, a play with so many layers that he confessed he could himself no longer see it clearly. In an author's note he explained:

Each character in 'Marco Polo Sings a Solo' is yearning for an ever greater glory, an ever greater beauty, a greater power, a greater love, a greater truth, and moving into such intense territory by yourself, that very same self becomes all the more important. Everyone in the play is a Marco Polo, travelling out by himself, herself or both selves as in the case of one character. The people's very freedom makes them terrified. All walls are down. They are by themselves. They each are forced to search out for some kind of structure, whether it be a chemical formula to end cancer or a film to ennoble the world or a love to hang onto at night. ('Author's Note', *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, p. 4)

This obsession with self is, Guare suggests, the basis of the comedy in a play that he wished to see presented as if it were 'some 21st century reworking of *The Philadelphia Story* with all kinds of Katharine Hepburns and Cary Grants littering the stage' ('Author's Note', p. 4).

The curtain rises on a surreal scene, with a number of characters gathered together in a seemingly domestic setting but in fact on an iceberg. They are, it appears, in Norway to shoot a film about Marco Polo. The year is 1999. The world appears to be disintegrating, Hawaii having been destroyed in an earthquake and part of Italy disappearing into the sea.

In space, meanwhile, launched from Cape Kissinger, is a spaceship captained by one Frank Schaeffer, charged with locating and securing a new planet. The greatest scientific achievement, meanwhile, seems to be the decoding of dolphin language, an accomplishment only muted by the discovery that their variegated squeaks can be adequately translated as: 'Sun goes down, Tide goes out, darkies gather round and dey all begin to shout' (*Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, p. 16). No wonder, you might think, that Guare himself was hard put to disentangle the play's various layers, even while offering such an elaborate description of its theme.

A baroque extravaganza, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* is a high voltage work, full of energy and invention but finally falling somewhat short of his own claims for it. Thus, there comes a moment when a series of cosmic lightning bolts shoot randomly down from the sky in an attempt to impregnate Frank Shaeffer's wife. They hit a piano, a baby carriage and a flask containing a cure for cancer. Guare's note informs us that 'The bolts from heaven come down to wake these people up, to purify them, to restore nature to some kind of balance before this new century comes into being' ('Author's Note', p. 4). The gulf between this interpretation and the action is a little too wide to be bridged. Guare's utopianism, which is a significant aspect of his writing, extends, apparently, to his faith in the ability of audiences to impose or perceive a meaning not always immediately apparent.

He followed *Marco Polo* with an altogether more focussed work, *Landscape of the Body*, first produced at the Academy Festival Theatre in Lake Forest, Illinois, in July 1977, and then, three months later, by Joseph Papp's Public Theatre in New York. The play opens on the open deck of a ferry boat sailing from Hyannisport to Nantucket. A woman is writing messages on pieces of paper and throwing them, in bottles, into the ocean. A man, in heavy, but patent, disguise, engages her in conversation, the subject of which is the death of her child some months earlier. She identifies him as Captain Marvin Holahan, a homicide detective. The play then reprises the circumstances of the death of the child, decapitated and abandoned in New York.

If this description makes the play sound like a conventional whodunit, it is, in fact, anything but that, though there is a mystery to be unfolded. Guare deploys his usual alienating devices, from quick-fire humour to flashbacks and musical numbers. Characters return from the dead, comment on the action, explicate their motives. Yet, beneath this kaleidoscope of fractured images the play is a lament for lost values, for the decay of hope and the destruction of innocence.

Betty and her son Bert come to New York from their home in Bangor, Maine (a limited world, mundane, but with its own coherences). They come to find Betty's sister Rosalie, who works for a fraudulent travel agent while making pornographic films on the side. With her eye on stardom and success, she celebrates her alienation: 'I live here on Christopher Street. A lovely building. Lovely neighbors. Leave you alone. Nobody knows me. I don't know anybody. I'm flying high.'<sup>10</sup> To succeed in persuading her sister to join her would be to win a victory over her mother and thus justify her own lifestyle. Betty is accordingly pulled into this world, as her son takes to a life of petty crime mugging gay men.

*Landscape of the Body* is a play littered with dead bodies. Rosalie dies in a freak accident, her employer as the result of a prank. Characters only have to be mentioned for their death to be confirmed. But, as Rosalie affirms, 'The good thing about being dead is at least you know where you stand. You have one piece of information in life and you think life means this. Then you get a new piece of info and everything you knew means something else . . . Life was always wriggling out of my hands like a fish you thought you had hooked' (*Landscape of the Body*, p. 16). The New York in which these characters live and die is a hell in which the only still point is their desire to serve the self. The ambition of Raulito, head of the fraudulent travel agency, is to appear as the principal guest on the Johnny Carson Show. Meaning is deferred. Rosalie sings an ironic song in which she celebrates the American dream of a bright future which will redeem an empty past: 'It's amazing how a little tomorrow/Can make up for a whole lot of yesterday' (p. 35).

Betty, meanwhile, is crushed by a sense of failure which prevents her intervening in her own life. When a man appears to redeem her, a figure from her past who becomes an embodiment of that hope celebrated by Rosalie, he turns out to have recently emerged from a mental hospital, an expression of the dementia which infects the world she inhabits. His observation that 'the only landscape worth looking at is the landscape of the human body' (p. 41), seems like an invitation to intimacy, an acceptance of the value of the individual. In fact it is evidence of his derangement as what seems a poetic celebration of beauty spirals down into madness:

I kiss your Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. I kiss your Missouri and Monongahela and Susquehanna and Shenandoah and Rio Grande. I kiss the

<sup>10</sup> John Guare, *Landscape of the Body* (New York, 1978), p. 21.

confluence of all those rivers. I kiss your amber waves of grain. I kiss your spacious skies, your rocket's red glare, your land I love, your purple mountain's majesty. But most of all I kiss your head. I kiss the place where we keep our resolves. The place where we do our dreams. I kiss behind the eyes where we store up secrets and knowledge to save us if we're caught in a corridor on a dark, wintry evening. And you, with your mouth, kiss my head because that's the place where I kept the pictures of you all these years. (p. 41)

He follows this slowly dislocating encomium with a refusal to accept Betty's son, forcing her to leave him behind, abandoning him to his death. Her hope comes to nothing as she travels with a man locked inside his own madness.

Bert, meanwhile, turns from his banal but coherent existence in the no man's land of adolescence and joins a group obsessed with violence, devoid of values and frightened of a world they barely understand. As one of the girls in the gang remarks, 'Can I walk with you? I don't want to go home yet. My mother's watching television. My father's kicking ass in the living room. I got to talk to somebody. Something happened to me this afternoon . . . Something is happening to my body' (p. 53).

This account may seem to suggest that *Landscape of the Body* is a naturalistic play. It is not. John Guare works by indirection. Betty's sense of shock is reflected by a dislocated prose, albeit one which makes a kind of sense as she regrets that spoken language lacks the emphasis and authority of the printed word: 'I cannot cannot cannot – draw underlines under the cannot – cannot cannot cannot – six negatives make a positive – cannot understand' (p. 9). The play, indeed, is framed by her attempts to write down the facts of the case in the hope that such words will shape themselves into meaning – 'Sentences. Places. People's names. Secrets. Things I wanted to be. I thought maybe out of all that I'd find the magic clue who killed my kid. I'd say I see' (p. 55). These are the messages which she puts in bottles and throws into the sea.

Something analogous is true of Guare's play in which seemingly random events, words, images are deployed, messages are thrown out, in the hope that they will form into a revelatory meaning. As Holahan, the detective, observes, 'dossiers . . . All disconnected. All disjointed. Still I know more' (p. 56). The process whereby the crime is slowly exposed mirrors that by which Guare edges towards his own revelatory truth which has little to do with the violence of urban life. For at the heart of the play is a fear, born, he suggests, at the moment of puberty, that we are not fated to live for ever in a protected environment, that we are not, in short, born to live for ever and that the journey on which we go is sol-

itary. As Rosalie explains to her sister, at the very moment that sister is on the verge of adulthood:

the planet Earth has these fishing hooks on it . . . and all the nice things in the world are baited on those hooks and our spirits floating up there all loose and aimless spy these baited hooks and we bite . . . we spend the rest of our stay on this planet trying to free our mouths of that hook, fighting, fighting . . . You travel alone because other people are only there to remind you how much that hook hurts . . . Wait for that one day we can bite free and get back out there in space where we belong . . . Only the taste of blood to remind us we ever existed. (pp. 56–7)

Guare deals in metaphors. He has a poet's faith in the power of language to create as well as to describe. The twists and turns of the plot, its movement through time, its assonances and dissonances, reflect his attempt to build meaning through accretion. The play begins and ends with a journey, a journey which he suggests should be brightly lit at the opening to capture 'the zest when journeys begin'. For the rest, he sees the characters as moving in and out of darkness 'where dreams and memories and mindless violence can take their turn' (p. 58).

He praised the play's original set design, a series of black boxes from which people entered and exited as if in a dream, because 'it made manifest the central theme of the play: people fighting against death in all our lives' (p. 58). Yet the play ends, paradoxically, as Betty and Holahan edge towards one another, as if, once the truth were exposed, some kind of reconciliation and relief might be possible, an ending not untypical of Guare's work in which, more often than not, epiphany is permitted, in which absurdity is wished away in a gesture that sometimes lacks conviction because of the power of the images which have preceded it.

Guare's next play, *Bosoms and Neglect* (1979), an ironic comedy which plays with the idea of fictiveness – 'We're the subsidiary characters in everybody's lives. That's the joke, the joke of our lives'<sup>11</sup> – marked another stage in a development which began, perhaps, with *Landscape of the Body*, away from the more bizarre images and exuberant prose of the earlier plays towards a more spare and affecting, though still witty and occasionally farcical examination of characters rooted if not in a wholly real world then at least in one which bears more directly on the real. The flattened characters of farce give way to figures with a history and, at least in part, a psychologically convincing sensibility. Pain and violence still feature but are aspects of private and public lives which press closer

<sup>11</sup> John Guare, *Bosoms and Neglect* (New York, 1980), p. 37.

to a sense of the real. The first production closed after a few days but a 1999 revision, staged by the Signature Theatre in New York, revealed the real strength of the piece.

The play features two patients of the same psychiatrist who compete with one another with respect to their separate neuroses. The man, who has been having an affair with his best friend's wife and is about to go off with her, is now drawn to a woman he encountered in a book store and, indeed, much of the play's humour comes from their obsessive references to literary texts which act as a stimulus, correlative and substitute for their passion. But a third character haunts them – the man's blind mother who suddenly reveals that she has been concealing her breast cancer, a revelation which now threatens her son's plans. The first act ends with the man and woman fighting one another, their subsequent hospitalisation creating the bridge into the second act.

This features a conversation between mother and son, which, while brilliantly funny, slowly exposes a human pain that is no less felt for the relentless humour with which it is conducted and through which it is expressed. Indeed, *Bosoms and Neglect* is the answer to those critics who supposed that moral concern was driven out by physical humour and a facility with language. Guare has the ability to switch from one dramatic mode to another, from one concept of character to another, from seemingly irrational arias to moving speeches in a fraction of a second. *Bosoms and Neglect* never succumbs to sentimentality but is never content to rest in its own ironies, indeed never content to rest at all, its frenzied pace, like its neurotic articulateness, offering a commentary on lives which have become performances, texts. This is a juggler's work in which everything is kept in play – a satire of psychiatry and intellectual pretensions, a sometimes moving but relentlessly funny account of family relationships, a staging of human vulnerabilities. In many ways the best of his early works, *Bosoms and Neglect*, which ends on a moment of painful abandonment, the humour stilled, anticipated one of his next plays, though it is tempting to say that nothing in Guare's work really prepares one for *Lydie Breeze* (1982), tempting but not entirely true. The poetic prose is foreshadowed in his earlier plays, along with the compassionate view of individual suffering. But never before had all elements come together in a work of such affecting power.

To come upon *Lydie Breeze* after Guare's earlier work is like wandering out of a nightclub on New Year's Eve and into a nearby chapel. It is not that the earlier experience is inferior and, indeed, sounds from that other building are faintly audible, but what strikes one most is the calm air, the

lyrical language, the sense of enacted ritual, the pressure of metaphor, the respect for human vulnerabilities, fears and fallibilities. The closest analogy would be the works of Synge, Yeats or O'Casey as they might have been absorbed by Eugene O'Neill. There is something of Chekhov here, as there is of Susan Glaspell. By virtue of the subject matter there is also an echo of Ibsen. But this is a play not best understood by reference to its ingredient parts, still less the shadow of other writers. For it is Guare's consummate achievement.

The busyness of his early plays falls away, the self-conscious displays of wit, the over-exuberant inventiveness. In their place is a simple metaphor in which utopian dreams are betrayed only to be renewed, in which innocence is destroyed and found again. *Lydie Breeze* is a tone poem in which individual lives render up their meaning, and private pain and its alleviation stand for larger issues having to do with broken contracts endlessly renewed.

Guare has explained that his move to Nantucket had stirred his interest in New England, his mother having originated in Lynn, Massachusetts, and his father having roots in Gloucester, Massachusetts and Montpelier, Vermont. His father's grandfather, indeed, had been a ship's captain working out of Gloucester. Both parents had been born in the nineteenth century and he wished to project himself back into that pre-Freudian time and make sense out of the fragments of family legends and myths he had absorbed, the tensions he had detected in overheard conversations. For him, the move to Nantucket opened up a new imaginative life and gave him access to half-formed memories and subconscious anxieties. The result was a play sequence, two of which are among the finest works of the last three decades.

Joshua Hickman, together with his friends, Dan Grady and Amos Mason, we learn, had formed a utopian community in nineteenth-century Nantucket. A misunderstanding led to Joshua killing Grady, an offence for which he was imprisoned. But Grady had already had his revenge on his killer by infecting Joshua's wife with syphilis. In *Ghosts* Ibsen made venereal disease a symbol for inherited characteristics. That is not how it functions here where it becomes both the literal source of an infection which spreads within the group and a metaphor for that cruelty which may contaminate love.

In revenge for his infecting her, Lydie passes on the disease to Grady's son, Jeremiah, before herself committing suicide. He, in turn, infects Beauty, the Hickmans' maid, who tries to pass the blame, though not the

illness, to Amos Mason, now a successful politician and would-be presidential candidate. And so the taint of corruption moves out from the centre.

The characters in *Lydie Breeze* are tied together by their hopes and failings. They are one another's fates, guilty of inflicting pain and destroying their jointly imagined futures, as well as pooling their anxieties, projecting their dreams beyond a troubled present. Love is the source of corruption and death as well as of a transforming ecstasy. Indeed the same moment engenders both. But that, it appears, is the nature of experience, the double burden of existence. Dreaming of a utopia, imagining with their country that innocence can be sustained, they learn that their Eden is flawed. For some that proves a knowledge too great to bear. For others it breeds a cynicism which, translated into national policy, justifies ambition and cruelty. For still others, it creates a new understanding of the nature of a life whose rhythms cannot be disrupted, whose necessities must be served. Theirs is a fortunate fall which brings with it an understanding of others and of a natural world which is something more than the backdrop to the drama of human life.

The play is set in 1895 in a sea-front house. The dunes disappear to the sea. An upended rowing boat, half-buried in sand, becomes a correlative for the past, itself half-buried and soon to be disinterred when Joshua Hickman's elder daughter, Gussie, arrives. Mistress to Amos Mason, she has persuaded her lover, and his friend and promoter the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, to divert their luxury yacht to Nantucket so that she can show off her new connection, flaunt what seems to her to be her success. Her younger sister, fifteen-year-old Lydie (named for her mother), meanwhile, is haunted by memories of her mother as recounted to her by Beaty. Beaty recalls and recreates the sound which the young girl's mother made as her feet banged against the bannister when she hanged herself, and invokes the sight of her naked father fighting to revive the woman to whom he has returned after his imprisonment, a woman who has allowed him no sexual contact but with whom he effectively seems to simulate intercourse as he tries to squeeze life back into her. Convinced that her mother is in some way still spiritually present, the young Lydie is partly consoled and partly terrified as she acts out this ritual with Beaty, who has reasons of her own for her behaviour.

The young Lydie, like the girl in *Landscape of the Body*, is terrified of the onset of puberty, associating everything that has happened to her with mysteries into which she has yet to be initiated and feeling that to give in

to love will be to break the bond which Beaty insists she must retain with her dead mother. Temporarily blinded by an accident with fireworks in a bottle, she is equally blind to the cause of the events which obsess her.

The opening scene has the appearance of a ceremony, a holy drama in which girl and maid recite responses in a secular mass. It has, it seems, been performed many times before. Lydie is the prompter. It is a ritual designed to keep the dead mother alive as the mass resurrects Christ to die again. Beaty feels herself a disciple, if not beatified. She believes the woman she served has left her with a double responsibility, to teach and to revenge. The blood she invokes, however, is not the stuff of redemption, a transubstantiation. It is the blood of menstruation which the young Lydie awaits and fears as Beaty hones her into a weapon which she can use against those she believes destroyed her own paradise ('I'm getting you ready for the blood between men and women,'<sup>12</sup> she tells Lydie). Yet she fears the change which will unsheathe this weapon (the weapon of sexuality) in that the price she will pay is to lose her last physical link with the woman she worships. So long as the young Lydie has not yet reached puberty she, Beaty, is a surrogate mother and hence one with the dead woman who gave her significance. For her part, Lydie contemplates suicide as a way of securing an indissoluble link with the mother she loves and fears.

Her sister Gussie returns, worldly-wise and with no sense of the mystery to which Lydie clings. Where Lydie has fantasies, Gussie has lies. For her, a cigarette becomes Dr Benson's Magic Asthma Stick, a mistress is a secretary while her lover's wife is confined at home 'with leprosy . . . Or something' (*Lydie Breeze*, p. 14). Her language is brutally direct and contrasts with the lyricism of Lydie. She returns with Amos Mason who is to give a speech on the future of America, a utopian who has retained the language but not the substance of his idealism. The golden future which he once thought to herald with a shared humanity he now sees as depending on the preservation of the gold standard and the provoking of a convenient war. On the brink of a new century, it seems that the future is in the hands of those who did not so much betray their utopianism as discover that utopianism can itself give birth to corruption.

Joshua, Amos and Dan were veterans of the Civil War. They bore its marks on their bodies, became part of the body politic. Their fate is thus intertwined with that of the country they saw suffer in the name of principle. The war was inscribed on them no less profoundly than Hester's

<sup>12</sup> John Guare, *Lydie Breeze* (New York, 1982), p. 8.

scarlet A was embroidered on to her dress (in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*), though where for her it was an arbitrary sign, to be reclaimed, transformed, for them, as they thought, it was rooted in their very tissue.

Now, as an ex-prisoner, Joshua has no vote, only perhaps a symbolic role as his daughter Gussie urges him to meet the man who secured his release from prison and who now seeks validation from a past from which he has severed himself.

Gussie herself, meanwhile, recounts the story of her visit to England with the putative Senator, and speaks of seeing *Frankenstein*, where the monster, made of people's dreams and nightmares, seems oddly attractive, which is hardly surprising since the young actor who plays him was himself such, and now turns up in Nantucket in search of her. That young actor is Jeremiah Grady, son of the man killed by Gussie's father. But the power which generates Frankenstein's monster is the power which, in another form, lures Gussie. She has in turn become a monster, a blend equally of dreams and nightmares. She is an amoral force, the creation of a new age.

Jeremiah Grady returns to Nantucket to confront a Lydie Breeze who, unknown to him, is long dead by her own hand. He wishes to kill her for betraying his love and tainting him with corruption. As a young man, he had loved her but she, in despair, had done him damage. For a moment, in his eyes, daughter becomes mother as he first offers to throttle the young Lydie Breeze and then embraces her. Distraught, Lydie rushes to Beaty, who recounts a secret which threatens to corrode her spirit. She tells of being infected by a man who she falsely names as Amos Mason. The bewildered Lydie tries to blot out the poison of this knowledge: 'I hear the ocean. I hear the sand. I hear the breeze. I don't want to hear this' (p. 26). But Beaty, with a vested interest in retaining her power over Lydie and hence her role in the family, her significance in her self-created myth, warns against a swift approaching maturity which she can only see as destructive. 'You're not poisoned this time. But sooner or later they find you. This sand. This beach. Here. All here' (p. 26).

The two women are drawn to one another in their fear, Lydie of a threatened loss of innocence, Beaty of a threatened loss of being, of identity. They encircle themselves in a language whose menaced lyricism is an image of their threatened selves. This is the poetry of spell and incantation. On the edge of a continent they balance, Lydie, more than Beaty, afraid of falling into life. Lydie is Beaty's apprentice in a dark magic designed to reverse the direction of time, to keep her a child. She is the instrument with which Beaty plans to unstitch the relationship

between Gussie and her lover by publicly charging Amos with infecting her with syphilis. The first scene of the second act ends as Beaty intones the mantra with which she seeks to consolidate her power over the girl, containing them within a fable of her own devising: 'When I was a child/ And you were a child/ In our kingdom by the sea.'

But romance does enter Lydie's life, in the form of Jude Emerson, a Christian Scientist who, ironically, arrives on an errand from the local doctor with drops for her damaged eye. He is employed to snare birds and band them which is, perhaps, what he plans for Lydie. The step into sexual knowledge, which Lydie and Beaty alike fear, seems imminent and, indeed, the pressure for revelation and change seems all but irresistible.

The house in which the action takes place is situated on an island where storms have already swept away much of the village. It is temporary ground, a no man's land which may well disappear with the end of this particular history. It is, at any rate, a place where resolutions are urgent.

In Act Two Joshua and Jeremiah, the son of the man Joshua murdered, the man whose company even now he misses, meet to act out a drama. 'I'm curious as to what kind of scene you want us to play' (p. 29), remarks Jeremiah. He offers a melodramatic scenario. But Joshua's burden is that he has only one role. He is a murderer. His act of violence has defined him as surely as an actor forced to play a single role throughout his life. Indeed he invokes James O'Neill, father of the playwright, who made his fortune and ruined his art and perhaps his life by repeatedly playing the Count of Monte Cristo until he was defined, as an actor, by that role. But he equally sees America settling into a role at the behest of Amos and William Randolph Hearst, surrendering its infinite possibilities to the myth of empire, to a dream of avarice. And *Lydie Breeze* is as much a play about America as about this group of characters gathered together in what is only a temporary refuge on the country's margin. The infection of innocence afflicts the nation no less than the individual. The corruption of the body is a reflection of the body politic. Utopia is as unnatural and unstable a state as total innocence, though the nostalgia for it is considerable. Jeremiah recalls lying in bed and hearing Joshua 'and Amos and my father talking about the universe being one and man willing utopias and finding new worlds in yourself' (p. 31). But they were expelled from this Eden as America was expelled from its.

Together Joshua and Jeremiah re-enact the death of Jeremiah's father,

prompting one another as Lydie and Beaty had done, performing another ritual, as much an exorcism as a trial with accuser and accused, prosecutor and defence attorney. It is an exorcism which requires that a hidden crime be exposed: Grady's infection of the first Lydie and her infection of his son, one crime prompting another in a tangle of despair and anger. And now that son returns not to kill the man who murdered his father but to destroy or embrace the woman who injured him, knowing nothing of the fact that she has already destroyed herself out of guilt and shame.

In England, it is suggested, Jeremiah's despair may have led him to murder. Certainly there are moments when he seems to recall such violence, memories which may be no more than dreams. It is this possibility, however, which leads him to acting, a profession in which he can lose himself in a multiplicity of roles. But the part he chose was Frankenstein's monster and it is this suspect role in which he is trapped until at last he receives absolution from the grave, for Lydie left a note when she committed suicide, a note presumed to be for her husband but now revealed as being for the man she so recklessly harmed: 'Little man, I take you to my grave. I gave as I was given and I regret that to my dying day which is today' (p. 36). It is a note which facilitates forgiveness and reconciliation. It is a forgiveness, however, which Joshua, her husband, rejects as a piece of theatre, a self-indulgence, a misdirected passion for, to his mind, the fault lies with the man who stole his wife and infected her, with the son who indulged his bitterness, indeed with all the utopian crew who betrayed one another and their dreams so casually: 'we all carelessly ruined each other's lives. How,' he asks, 'can you ever begin to find a path to forgiveness?' And again the leap is made from the private to the public: 'We used to dream here. America could have been great . . . but we never trusted our dreams. We only trust the itch in our pocket. Fuck what you want. Take what you want' (p. 36).

Whenever *Lydie Breeze* is set it was plainly a play for the 1980s, a decade in which greed was sanctified and the self made a primary value. The 'austere moral splendour' (p. 38) which typified the Nantucket utopia and the new-found land of America itself has now devolved into simple rapacity. The beauty of the American ideal has been destroyed as, in this bleak but beautiful play, hunters shoot a Baltimore Oriole in the nearby dunes, their gunfire an ironic comment on events.

The third act opens with Joshua dressed in part of his Civil War uniform as another world collapses around him. Beaty's ploy of accusing Mason of infecting her destroys his hopes of securing Hearst's

support for his presidential campaign as it does Gussie's of securing her future with him. The 'power that comes from being around power' (p. 42) is denied her. Jeremiah, meanwhile, apologises to Beaty for infecting her as a youth, a time when he had 'felt strength . . . power', not the power of authority (though that, too, he possessed, she being a servant), but that which was a product of youth, of feeling, suddenly, in tune with the world: 'We shimmered together' (p. 44). But power, he now feels, poisons, even a power born out of nature's gift of sexual autonomy, the puberty which the young Lydie fears. He had, after all, carelessly destroyed the woman he loved, sending her spinning into vengefulness and isolation. Now, together once more, they seek oblivion, dying together in the sea, thereby liberating themselves and Lydie from the spell of the past.

The play ends with love beckoning both daughters and Joshua reconciled with them and his life alike. As the lights fade to dark he recites a passage from Walt Whitman that his wife had read to him as they came to the island which was to be their hope and their doom, a passage in which dissonance and difference are subsumed in a greater harmony, in which all creation is seen as part of an eternal rhythm, a single creation: 'All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets, all distances of time. All souls . . . All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future, This vast similitude spans them, and always has spanned. And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them' (pp. 55–6).

The contrivances of plot, the potential for sentimentality, the patent metaphors, all clear and present facts in *Lydie Breeze*, never disturb the integrity of a play in which, for the first time, Guare allows his poetic sensibility full range. The lyrical language lifts fact into image, story into myth. The community he features was born out of a dream, and the play itself has features of a dream, as the characters move uneasily through memories, tumbling different moments together as they try to make sense of their fears, endeavour to expiate their sense of guilt, assuage a longing which they hesitate to address directly.

It is a play of echoes. The young Lydie's name reflects her mother's, as her life will shadow a familiar pathway out of innocence and into an experience in which the clarity of youth becomes obscured, just as the utopian instincts of these people (the community they form, the country they serve), defer to a knowledge that innocence and perfection are improbable and even destructive forces. Beaty and Jeremiah die rather than live with the knowledge of flawed motives and failed aspirations. Lydie, though tempted, will not.

*Lydie Breeze* is a comment on the destructiveness of power and the corruption at the heart of egotism. It is a lament over national arrogance as well as personal ambition and pride. Set in a place which is a geographical edge, it explores those who walk the edge of their sexuality, hesitating on the brink of a move which will be definitional. But it is also a play that reaches for a wider significance, exploring not just the problematic relationship between men and women, or the impulses which lead simultaneously to a common enterprise and a separate fate. It situates the confused reaching out of individuals – who scarcely understand themselves, their baffled needs, the terrible betrayals that make their lives such a whirl of exultance and depression – in the context of a cosmos which may not shine with meaning but does offer a containing shape, as a play itself offers the consolation of form.

There are echoes of O’Neill in this play, and those that followed. The lyricism is that of the sea plays, the sense of fatalism in the relationship between men and women familiar from *Desire Under the Elms*, the idea of history as myth reminiscent of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. There is, perhaps, a shadow of Chekhov, if only in his sense of capturing a culture at a moment of change, as it gathers itself to betray a past which is not without its ambiguities. But *Lydie Breeze* is of itself. Whatever its critical reception, which was not good, it marked not merely a significant advance in Guare’s craft but also a genuine achievement in postwar American theatre.

*Lydie Breeze* turned out to be the first of a sequence of plays. Just as the characters at its heart had named their community after the word utopia spelled in reverse, so the action is put into reverse and subsequent plays take us back in time. In chronological order they are *Women and Water*, set in 1861 and 1864, *Gardenia*, which takes place between 1875 and 1885, *Bullfinch’s Mythology*, whose text is yet to be finalised and set the year after *Gardenia*, and *Lydie Breeze*, 1895.

*Gardenia*, the second produced, opened at the Manhattan Theatre Club in April 1982. It begins with the lines that concluded *Lydie Breeze*, as Joshua recites what he had learned from Walt Whitman. But *Gardenia*, for all its felicities, is a retreat not only in time but craft as Guare makes explicit what was implicit, as he substitutes information for allusiveness and a somewhat arch language for the natural poetry of the first play.

The decision to fill in the details of the commune, to dissect the nature of the idealism at its heart, proved, I think, unfortunate. Left vague, it was a shared commitment, an ennobling enterprise destroyed by a

flawed human nature. Spelled out in detail it becomes no more than a naive and embarrassing project undermined by its innate contradictions and simplicity of conception. The wonder is not that it failed but that such supposedly intelligent people could ever have convinced themselves that it could succeed. It is reminiscent of Susan Glaspell's *Inheritors*, in which a similar idealism is slowly corroded by egotism and materialism, and which also fails to establish a convincing human basis for ideas that characters are prone, as here, to spell out in a language which seems rooted less in their own psychology than a dramatic necessity to explain their beliefs. We are also offered a superfluous symbol, the gardenia of the title, which has been allowed to shrivel because insufficiently nourished, as though the play's action required such a correlative. This is a hangover from Tennessee Williams's dried-up fountains, snakeskin jackets and captive iguanas. It is a nudge from the playwright determined to underscore what requires no such emphasis.

The first act is set in 1875, in the early days of the commune. We are on the beach at Nantucket. The house is out of sight. There is nothing but sand, with a few tufts of grass, some beach roses and driftwood. The characters are, appropriately enough for a community determined to turn the clock back, to start building afresh, out beyond the contaminating and seductive society of the nearby settlement. But the first blush has already gone off their idealism. Practicalities have begun to force them to contemplate a negotiation with the world which they had hoped to avoid. Lydie has been using her nursing skills to deliver a baby on the mainland (significantly born dead), though her bitterness at the materialism, corruption and sexual repressions of those she is there to help has ensured that this employment will be her last. Joshua has had the manuscript of his book returned by William Dean Howells, editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, the one man he thought might have published it and hence secured them some kind of financial independence. They even consider letting rooms, thereby allowing into their midst those they had chosen to flee, while an increasingly embittered Amos Mason has set his mind on leaving to begin a career in politics.

As Joshua tellingly remarks, 'maybe our moment of glory came in the moment we dreamed it'.<sup>13</sup> In that respect their utopia scarcely differs from that of the country they inhabit, and that is, indeed, the conceit on which this play sequence is based. It is a lament for a lost idealism and an acknowledgement that utopianism contains its own negation. As

<sup>13</sup> John Guare, *Gardenia* (New York, 1982), p. 11.

Gatsby's green light (in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*) seen across a bay had contained both mystery and purity, so their venture had seemed a selfless dream. But when Gatsby sought to invest that mystery in a living being and embrace his own vision, he discovered its fallibility. So, too, do these creators of a brave new world. The Platonic ideal founders on the reality of human imperfection.

The project, we learn, had been born in a Civil War hospital where Lydie had nursed all three men: Joshua, Amos and Dan. They had set out to buy land on the island which is thirty miles off the coast of America. In this place they would 'write manifestos and develop a society that will shine as a beacon to the world. A paradise of the mind. A garden of Eden' (*Gardenia*, p. 11). Here, spelled out, is the project alluded to in the first play. Here is that connection with the City on the Hill, the Thousand Points of Light, the new Eden, Manifest Destiny, implied but not specified in *Lydie Breeze*. Now, seven years on from its beginning, Joshua is forced to ask himself whether collapse is not 'a condition of Eden?' (p. 11) and Amos to tell Joshua what he plainly already knows:

My only pride these past seven years is that you are here writing a treatise on the transcendental purpose of life and I am part of that endeavour and when it is published and the tumultuous roar quiets the great men of the universe will flock to our community . . . a model for the ages. I endured all the impossible winters and unending summers because we were building a hothouse for these orchids that would bloom out of your head. (p. 20)

It might be suggested that he is here rehearsing for the political speeches he intends one day to make, since Joshua is surely not an appropriate audience. He, after all, hardly needs to be told that he has been writing a book for seven years or what that book is about, nor does he need to be informed about the nature of the climate. Guare has also suggested that these are characters who feel obliged to recite to themselves, let alone others, the principles on which they have based their lives, as a mantra, a desperate recapitulation of the very values and history which they suspect themselves of having abrogated. However, he was to revise *Gardenia* for a planned production in 1999 (though that proved impossible to mount for financial reasons) and those revisions seemed likely to address an over-explicitness evident, perhaps, also in his use of the orchid as central symbol. Certainly the image of orchids blooming out of anyone's head is surreal, and a patent case of the author underlining an image which gets more than its fair share of attention from all the characters. Thus, Lydie ends the first scene with a speech which under-

lines the degree to which, in *Gardenia*, as opposed to *Lydie Breeze*, Guare's characters tend to substitute rhetoric for passion, point up the theme and underscore the imagery. Addressing Amos, she remarks:

There is no choice. Let your loneliness lead you into town and let your loneliness join you up to men who find their perfect God in presidents like Ulysses S. Grant. Give into your loneliness and let your loneliness make you a spoke in the wheel of the machine that spews out human beings like Carnegie and Rockefeller and Jay Gould. Or stay here where the road is not strewn with joy, but where you shall find true heroism. Heroism to resist the doubt. Heroism to keep true to the ideals of justice. Not to be a precious gardenia that needs tending or it shall wither and die. Not to blossom without the water. To find the water in our hearts! We shall flower, Amos, whether you go into town or not. The path to town is that way. Your loneliness must know the way there. I hope you can find your way back. (p. 21)

There are no speeches like this in *Lydie Breeze*. Amos, remember, is a friend and colleague. They are together on a beach. He has just been surfing. Suddenly he is addressed as though he were the audience for a political speech. And if we are asked to accept it as a piece of rhetoric characteristic of this group of idealists, why is it being deployed in this context? The use of 'shall' is indicative. Where colloquial speech would use 'will' Lydie uses 'shall'. She is, strictly speaking, correct, in that determination may be indicated by such usage, and we are, after all, in the late nineteenth century, but it is a rhetorical trope deployed in a scene in which they have been addressing each other familiarly. The images, likewise (loneliness as a guide, Amos as a spoke in a wheel, endeavour as a road, and, of course, the gardenia as a spirit to be tended), belong less in a conversation than heard declaimed from a platform. It is true that politically committed groups have not been unknown to allow jargon to penetrate private conversations, but these are people who have suffered together in the war and lived together for years.

Even if Amos is threatening to leave he is unlikely to be held back by rehearsing for him the very principles he despairs of operating, in a language least likely to change his decision. But, then, he is equally infected by a language which increasingly seems to be all they share. 'We fought a war against false and cruel principles,' he informs Joshua. 'We were supposed to examine the purposes of being male and female . . . The search for something higher. Lightning rods for a greater evolution' (p. 15). This can scarcely come as much of a surprise to a man who has spent seven years explaining precisely this. It would not be worth labouring the point were it not for the fact that such explicitness is precisely what

undermines the poetry of *Gardenia*, along with the credibility of the characters. Later in the play Amos objects when Joshua begins recounting their shared past: 'You don't have to tell me the plot. I am the plot' (p. 49). It is a remark that Guare himself might have taken more fully to heart. Faced with the problem of writing a series of linked plays which also need to stand alone, he evidently feels the need to spell out what in *Lydie Breeze* he was content to imply, to explicate what he was there prepared to leave immanent. There is a price to be paid for that.

The commune is transformed when Dan Grady, a conductor on the Union Pacific Railroad, returns with a bag full of money he has stolen from two corrupt businessmen who, we are told, have killed one another on a train as they headed towards Washington where they were to bribe the president, Ulysses S. Grant. His name and address, indeed, are stencilled, in anagrammatic form, on the side of the bag, Grant's corruption being a leitmotif of the play sequence. The money saves the community, but at the price of compromise. Guare speaks of the third play in the series as being a melodrama but the melodramatic nature of *Gardenia* is scarcely less apparent, the whole circumstance surrounding the double murder coming out of a dramatic tradition which seems at odds with the symbolist drive, the poetic tone of the play. Yet these are characters who see the world in Manichaeic terms. Their very utopian principles lead them to stage their lives as melodramas and to constitute a language which reflects the sharply delineated nature of the world as they see it. The images are perhaps best seen not so much as Guare's as his characters', looking, as they are, for a language which can contain and express the intensity of their feelings. The gardenia appeals to them because it is organic, since that is essentially the nature of the community they seek to found, of the paradigm they offer the world. The problem, of course, is that the organic is tainted with the logic of its own inevitable decay. Intoxicated with the beauty they identify, propose and pursue, they fail to detect the smell of putrefaction born out of the beauty they celebrate. *Gardenia* is, I think, overwritten at times but that judgement must be balanced by an awareness of the degree to which rhetoric, the poetic image, hyperbole, constitute the natural mode of those aware that they must invent not only a new society but a new language, a new grammar. Turning their backs on what they see as a prosaic society, they perforce charge their speech with poetry, press lyricism to the very edge of absurdity. These are people who live, literally and figuratively, on the edge. It is what defines them. The deeper irony is that they sustain their own supposed purity at the cost of isolating themselves

from those they would redeem with the force of their convictions and the nature of their beliefs.

The second act jumps forward in time, from 1875 to 1884. Joshua's murder of Dan, alluded to in *Lydie Breeze*, has now taken place and Joshua is in prison where, courtesy of Amos, he works at a printing press while, outside, preparations are under way for the execution of a murderer. In the interim Joshua has written a new book which this time, he now learns, meets with the approval of William Dean Howells, who supports its publication. However, being a memoir of the community, it exposes truths which Amos, now a successful lawyer, wishes suppressed. He offers to secure a pardon (corruptly) at the price of Joshua agreeing to the book's suppression, a plea seconded by Lydie who, we now discover, had attempted to kill both her children in a scene once again reminiscent of melodrama. Man and wife thus confront one another and their past in the prison cell where, ironically, Joshua has felt greater freedom than he had in a community dedicated to freedom. But even now they are obliged to address one another rather than converse, as Joshua remarks that:

in all our dreaming we never allowed for the squalid, petty furies. We lived on a beach in a vast landscape. We mistook the size of the ocean, the size of the sky for the size of our souls. We were this great transparent eyeball trying to look into the mind of God. It's taken this prison to show me our true horizons. I want to look our petty furies in the face and name them and lose them. (p. 59)

This, we need to remind ourselves, is a man meeting the woman he once loved, in the privacy of a room. Whatever his tendency to elevated prose, the circumstances render his rhetoric at least ironic. When he continues by telling her that, on a visit to Europe, 'I stood in the Parthenon waiting for the connection of the ages to wash over me. I am ready for the ancient awe. Overhead, Athena and Zeus are trying to catch my attention. Sappho and Sophocles are about to sing their song. Yes! Plato and Aristotle are walking this very ground' (p. 59), any rational woman would suspect insanity, and indeed, he dangerously enquires, 'Was I mad?' To which she responds, 'Your vision's complete' (p. 60), perhaps in itself an endorsement of his suspicion on the part of a woman who has herself crossed the line between passionate intensity and insanity. Lydie finally tells Joshua to publish his book but, to protect her, he destroys it. The play ends as he begins to shred it, love for her conquering his ambition. Something, it seems, has survived.

Guare has explained that he wrote the first three parts of his

intended tetralogy ‘each in a different style’, meaning them to exist independently of each other.<sup>14</sup> That is patently true, though he links *Lydie Breeze* and *Gardenia*, both of which he contrasts with the third in the sequence, *Women and Water*. As he explained, ‘in most modern plays, the poetry, the part which is “literary”, that which is densely written, springs out of the act of remembering’ (*Women and Water*, p. 3). *Gardenia* and *Lydie Breeze*, he suggests, ‘deal with people trapped, thrilled and haunted by a specific golden time in their youth’ (p. 3). The challenge of the third in the sequence was ‘to write a play in the present tense’ (p. 3). *Women and Water* was to be ‘an adventure play where the people are moving too rapidly to remember, people so young they don’t have anything to remember’ (p. 3). The challenge was to ‘write a play where the poetry lies not in the language but in the events themselves. To write not about the memory of a golden time but to write the golden time itself’ (p. 3).

In fact, the poetry in *Gardenia* does not really ‘spring out of the act of remembering’ but out of a present need to raise the temperature of a language designed to sustain a wavering faith, to substitute words for the passion those words invoke. The poetry fails to convince precisely because the characters deploy it in place of action. The further they travel from the moment of epiphany, from the revelatory vision which set them on a path to utopia, the more they deflect into speech what was to have been achieved through action. They construct a myth only to discover that they cannot inhabit it, only to describe and celebrate it in images which contain their own dissolution. These are characters for whom the ritualistic recuperation and exorcism of the past are a priority, who reach, still, for an unattainable future but who in the present find themselves collaborating in compromise, confronted by ambiguity and failing in their most fundamental human necessities.

For me, *Gardenia* is not as successful as the other two parts of the trilogy. Images are explained rather than left to do their work on the subconscious. Past events are explicated, drained of the mystery that gave them force in the first play. On the other hand, the sight of characters wrestling with the fact of their failure, with the collapse of relationships and the attenuation of their youthful vision, lends an elegiac tone to a work in which inflated rhetoric and sententiousness are a temptation not only for the characters but also for the man who creates them and believes in their passion, their desperate desire for transcendence, if not

<sup>14</sup> John Guare, *Women and Water* (New York, 1990), p. 3.

in their callow politics, the betrayals and deceits that are the product of their utopianism rather than a means to its achievement.

Guare insists that *Women and Water*, set during the Civil War, is melodrama, which he regards as a form of expressionism, inviting director and actors to give full rein to the mechanics of that melodrama. Overlong, and even compressing too much into its epic form, it nonetheless manages to rediscover a genuine poetic mode, albeit one that does not turn on remembrance. Here the melodrama creates its own language, dense and powerful. In contrast to *Gardenia* the imagery is not gratuitous, whether it be Lydie, the Civil War nurse, tipping a corpse into the river, 'my apron smeared with blood', recounting how she had torn the apron off and 'flung it after him like flowers' (*Women and Water*, p. 28), or a man on the battlefield, carrying a flag of truce that becomes 'a white bird' which spread its wings over the field before a bullet turns it back into a banner that in turn becomes 'just a piece of cloth with a man sprawled out on it' (p. 30).

In the distorting glass of war, men become carrion fed upon by birds of prey as animals take on the appearance of men. War, in Guare's play, has the power to transform men into beasts and back again. The swirling smoke of battle diffuses the clear outline of things as it blurs the line between idealism and cupidity. People are not what they seem. They go under false colours, adopt false names. Men are killed by their own side, suffer at the hands of their own commanders. Joshua masquerades as a man of peace, a Quaker, while serving in the Secret Service, though, ironically, even here peace is on his mind. Lydie offers her clothes as a place to keep secure the possessions of soldiers about to die. She becomes a living image of the dead and their desire to survive, filling her petticoats with their money, mementoes and letters. Meanwhile, black soldiers pin pieces of paper with the names of the famous on their backs so that when they die they will have an identity they lacked in life. So, letters, orders, journals, drawings, fragments of paper flutter, themselves like so many banners on the battlefield, yet all unable to express the truth of the anarchy which prevails, to shape it into meaning, any more than can the photographs which Joshua takes with a camera fittingly smashed by a sergeant who becomes a willing servant to the chaos which commands the day. This is a surreal world, reminiscent at times of Robert Lowell's *The Old Glory* or Edward Bond's *Lear*. The poetry lies as much in the action, in the physical being of the actors, as in what they say. There is little of the false poetry of *Gardenia* here.

*Women and Water*, which was presented in a first draft by the Los

Angeles Actors Theatre in 1984, in a revised version by Arena Stage, Washington, in 1985, and in a final version by BBC Radio in 1988, derives its title from the promise made by Sergeant Bell who, in Guare's version of the battle, fought at Cold Harbour, Virginia, and urged his men into battle with this phrase, in the certain knowledge of their death. Beyond the smoke of battle, he insists, lie women and water. It is a phrase that echoes throughout the play, a symbol of a promise denied.

*Women and Water* is a play in which the stage image is itself a vital part of its meaning. The smoke and dust that from time to time obscure the action are both literal and symbolic of a world in which nothing is clear. The crates which represent the medical supplies that Lydie searches out are also to be used to form trenches, battlements, ships, graves and so on but, piled like a wall, they enclose a scene from which escape is all but impossible. A huge muslin cloth above the stage is both the sail of a ship and, lowered, the beach where the characters eventually land, but in a play in which the white flag of truce remains just out of reach it has other implications. Lanterns are to cast bizarre shadows, actors to be dressed in dark clothes; a bloodstained apron is both a literal prop and an image of innocence besmeared. Lydie's skirt, filled with coins, letters, objects, becomes a history, written on her body, a bizarre memorial, a storehouse of lost lives, the shed skin of dead men.

Slowly, the cast of the later plays is formed: Dan, in charge of the medical supplies which Lydie needs and with whom she makes love, as she later will to the others; Joshua, possessor of secrets but no less a victim of circumstance than anyone else; Amos, who had served with him before. Their alliance is born out of contingency, shaped by serendipity. Together they try to discover some shape, some meaning to the shifting world in which they find themselves, a world in which the cost of idealism is apparent, tainted, as it is, by greed, stained by violence. Their dream of another way is born precisely out of the chaos of the war as, for Lydie, it is a product of her ambiguous memories.

Indeed, part way through the first act we are thrust back in time to a Nantucket itself all but lost in the mist, where colour creates a sense of vertigo. We see a scene which haunts Lydie: the burning of her father's whaling ship, the *Gardenia*, and the death of that father. The flashback is extensive and involves what we later discover to be an insurance swindle, for the ship, we learn at the end of the play, has been deliberately destroyed and her father killed by her own brother. A failed voyage would have meant penury. The faked accident puts money in their hands, if guilt in their hearts. The proof lies in the father's grave, where

a black cabin boy (shades of *Moby Dick*) has buried the ship's log which testifies to the truth. It is this truth which, later, Lydie sets herself to uncover, insisting to the cabin boy now turned soldier, that 'we are part of some imperceptible pattern. Less darkly every day. I see a path. My father died. You left the island. The path changed shape. I left the island. The puzzle began' (p. 79).

One of the problems of the play is to sustain the two stories – that of the war and of the commercial crime – and to establish the connection between the two. Each, to be sure, involves cupidity, betrayal and death. They are linked, too, by irony as the New England crew secure their ends by killing black crew members, Lydie's brother later falsely purporting to be an abolitionist assisting escaped slaves. But the elaborating of the two stories can, at times, seem disruptive, as though two plays were being forced into one.

*Women and Water* is also not short. The designed claustrophobia of both the war and the Nantucket scenes can seem over-extended, one gothic effect following another (the play is full of the dead and maimed, of wild animals, bodies rising from graves) until the impact of each risks being diminished. We are in the world of the Book of Revelation, the apocalypse. In terms of those whose fate we will follow in the other plays, or have already followed (like Lydie we now dig down into the grave of the past to discover the truth of origins), it is this fact which sets them on their quest to turn the world around. As Lydie suggests, the Bible should have started with Revelation and then traced back towards Eden in search of a new beginning. This is why the name of their settlement is Utopia spelled backwards. As *post facto* rationalisation it is also why Guare found himself writing the series backwards. The final irony, however, is that we already know what lies ahead. Unlike the characters, we have seen the future, and not only their future. They may sit, briefly, on a Nantucket beach which shines with an intense whiteness, relaxed, poised to reconstruct the world they have seen deconstruct before their eyes, but we know that ahead, for them, lie disillusionment and despair, sexual betrayal and violence. The future of the world they think to re-shape (in a strange blend of Marx and Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau), involves not merely the parochial corruptions of the Guilded Age but apocalypse more profound than that experienced on Civil War battlefields.

The Nantucket triptych is, I think, a flawed masterpiece. It flickers with the light of a poet's insight but its effects are, on occasion, laboured, its characters sometimes servants of metaphor rather than products of

private need amplified into social objective. They are too often the consequence of their own rhetoric rather than masters of it, while the idea they serve seems at times too naively conceived and too simplistically described to operate as an apt image of a flawed American idealism. Nonetheless, *Lydie Breeze* has a moving simplicity and lyric force that is deeply affecting, as *Women and Water* creates a world lit with genuinely poetic insight which disturbs through its visceral impact. There are moments in this sequence of plays when the writing, the dramatic images, the sheer theatricality, come together to form a work of compelling originality.

The American novelist has always felt obliged to take America head on, to express the essence of a country born out of myth and astonished at the sheer scale of its ambition. Don DeLillo has quoted the artist Willem De Kooning as speaking of the burden of Americanness laid on the American artist. That Americanness has to do with a sense of the unique nature of the American enterprise. The novel, which Henry James acknowledged could be a 'baggy monster', has always seemed particularly suited to the business of capturing America whole, whether it be Herman Melville trying to harpoon the ineffable meaning projected by a nation of immigrants on the blank surface of a continent, Theodore Dreiser seeking truth through accumulation, John Dos Passos netting America in the multiple perspectives of modernism or Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo exploring the hidden ciphers and codes of a society whose coherences are immanent rather than openly expressed. These are big books by virtue of the scale of their ambition. Guare shares that ambition, that epic temptation, and the Nantucket plays are the result. Indeed he has explained that the inspiration for the play sequence lay in a fascination with finding a theatrical correlative for the nineteenth-century novel and even with recuperating nineteenth-century theatrical techniques:

I envy novel writers. I love nineteenth-century novels – Wilkie Collins, Henry James, George Eliot. I wanted to create that kind of experience. When I finished *Lydie Breeze* . . . I felt there was so much more there. I didn't want to let it go. I realized I wanted to write a series of plays. I didn't know how many more, but I wanted the experience of writing a novel without it being a novel – of discovering how you translate the feelings of a nineteenth-century novel onto the stage. It was more than wanting to keep alive my utopian feelings. I wanted to restore a sense of the potential of nineteenth-century theatrical techniques . . . I wanted to have a script, a text that was bulky, in the sense of weighty . . . I wanted the experience of having to keep long threads of narrative alive. (Harrop, 'Living in the Dark Room', pp. 155–6)

The remarks about technique bear most directly on *Women and Water*. Certainly his alarm, expressed elsewhere, at the theatre becoming 'stripped down', seems odd laid beside the minimalist staging of *Lydie Breeze* and the first act of *Gardenia*, though the version of minimalism he had in mind was that theatre of visual images which he associated with Robert Wilson. In fact the first three parts of the sequence are remarkable for their acknowledged stylistic dissimilarity. The principal problem, however, was to establish a credible character development as those who are to form the flawed utopia come together, like a solar system forming out of a swirling chaos. At present there remain gaps in that development, gaps filled by rhetoric or by sudden shifts of loyalty, values or ambitions. The problem of sustaining a narrative thread, meanwhile, came home to him most acutely when he realised that the as yet unproduced *Bullfinch's Mythology* required the continued existence of a character – the black cabin boy Moncur – killed off at the end of *Women and Water*. The challenge, for a writer many of whose plays had been brief, comic and self-contained, was to create works that could stand alone but which also derived added meaning from their relationship to one another.

Guare has said that the plays had their roots in his family history, in remembered stories, conversations. Beyond that, however, they were an attempt to explore that sense of idealism which flares up and collapses with a regularity both depressing and inspiring. Resisting the notion that the plays expressed a nostalgia for the 1960s, at least in memory an age of utopian revolt, he nonetheless sees them as a celebration of those who believe not merely that change is possible but that the individual has a role in bringing it about. However, he has also said that 'it's important to look back and consider people who were trapped in their past.' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 98) That ambivalence is strong in this series of plays, all of which appear to end on a note of qualified hope but that exist in a context of spiralling moral decline, a moral decline which his protagonists reflect even in their idealism, compromising themselves in the pursuit of the ideal as though they were so many Ibsen characters unaware of the egotism buried, and not so deeply, at the heart of their demands for selflessness.

Writing in 1997, Doris Lessing looked back over a century which, like its predecessor, was to have been a century of progress. Did anyone, she asked, challenge this happy optimism? As she observed:

At the end of a century of grand revolutionary romanticism; frightful sacrifices for the sake of paradises and heavens on earth and the withering away of the

state; passionate dreams of utopias and wonderlands and perfect cities; attempts at communes and commonwealths, at co-operatives and kibbutzes and kolkhozes – after all this, would any of us have believed that most people in the world would settle gratefully for a little honesty, a little competence in government?<sup>15</sup>

In his sequence of Nantucket plays John Guare raises similar questions, like Lessing, acknowledging the seductive power and even the necessity of utopian dreams but recognising, too, the price too often paid not merely for believing that the future has the power to redeem the present, but for closing one's eyes to flaws built deep into that human nature which proposes perfection as a goal and innocence as a route to its achievement. Blinded by the brightness of the future his characters see compromises as no more than momentary imperfections swimming across the eyeball. They will not accept 'a little honesty, a little competence in government' as adequate, any more, I suspect, than will he. But they do have to settle for a brief moment of grace, for small epiphanies.

Beyond that, they inhabit a country whose own utopianism was corrupted by violence and greed almost at the moment of settlement. The implication is that it, too, must accept that its animating myths have been sustained at too great a price. Eden is not recoverable. The City on the Hill is partly obscured by a tainted fog. Its Manifest Destiny is manifest no longer. But just as Doris Lessing exchanged her own radical utopianism for a spiritual journey, so John Guare's characters ultimately look beyond the immediate and the political to the mystical. And if they still look back with some nostalgia, in spite of everything that has happened, then so, too, does Guare, as does Doris Lessing who, in recalling the utopianism of the 1960s, remarked, in the words of one of her own poems, 'When I look back I seem to remember singing' (*Walking in the Shade*, p. 369). Guare's characters, too, remember singing and Lydie, at least, is not inclined to deny the seductiveness of such rhythms.

Despite their obvious qualities, the plays had only limited success. The same could hardly be said, however, of the work which opened at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Centre in May 1990, and which transferred to Lincoln Centre's other theatre, the Vivian Beaumont, for an extended run. The material for *Six Degrees of Separation* had, Guare explained, 'been sitting inside me for a number of years, working its way . . . in and then out' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 75). A play about a

<sup>15</sup> Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949–62* (London, 1997), p. 368.

black confidence trickster who deceives a series of people, mostly rich, into giving him accommodation and money, it explores liberal guilt, racial presumptions, the reality of a divided society, dislocated families, dysfunctional lives, the performatic quality of a supposedly real life. It elevates an urban myth (though the play was based on a real case and resulted in the con man subsequently trying to sue John Guare, thereby eroding the division between theatre and life more profoundly than the avant-garde of the 1960s) into a fable of twentieth-century American life, though it is not a story without precedent. Richard Wright once described the capitulation of a Communist Party meeting before the arrogant assertion of someone they believed to be a commissar acting with the authority of the Party. Only subsequently was it revealed that he was an escaped madman. Moral cowardice, guilt and fear had combined to breed credulity.

So it proves here as rich husband and wife art dealers Ouisa and Flan, preparing for dinner with a white South African businessman who deals in gold, find their apartment invaded by a well-dressed young black man who claims to have been mugged in nearby Central Park. He has, he explains, sought them out as the parents of a fellow student at Harvard. Calling himself Paul, he is, he explains, the son of Sidney Poitier.

Ouisa and Flan are perfect victims, wanting both their wealth and the moral sanction to accumulate and enjoy it, as their guest, Geoffrey, employs 70,000 black gold-miners in South Africa while assuring himself that he is playing a 'role in history' by offering them education. Nor is the audience to be exempt from the seductiveness of the mystery that Paul represents, or the intellectual and moral flattery that he directs at his targets. His comments on literature, art, psychology and general culture are convincing in the same way that the pitches made by David Mamet's confidence tricksters and salesmen are persuasive, and for the same reason. They pick up and reflect the beliefs and needs of the listener. His references to Chekhov, Beckett and Jung assume a familiarity with their work, and a level of intellectual engagement on the part of the audience (within and without the play), which is seductively complimentary, as condescending references to popular culture simultaneously invite a shared feeling of superiority. Paul's thesis of moral decline (ironic given his deceptions) is calculated to reflect convictions held not only by those on stage but those who watch: Lincoln Centre theatre-goers. This black man is what they fear but also what they yearn for. He is the threat that haunts their dreams but also the opportunity to show their compassion and liberalism.

His sudden exposure, when he invites a male hustler into the apartment, leaves Flan and Ouisa shocked and determined to track him down. They discover that he has tried the same ploy with others, that he had learned the personal details on which he trades from an ex-high school friend who links all the victims and who trades those details for a homosexual affair.

Paul is a catalyst. His arrival is less significant in itself than for what it exposes in the world through which he moves. Ouisa and Flan discover just how alienated they are from their children, whose lives follow quite different paths from their own. Their wealth, which buys an Ivy League education for their offspring, stands between them and those who are presumably a justification for it. The gulf between them, meanwhile, reflects a deeper gulf between all those who believe themselves to share the world.

The play's title turns on the idea that 'everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation . . . The president of the United States. A gondolier in Venice. Fill in the names.'<sup>16</sup> Yet, as the play demonstrates, the more remarkable thing is how separate people are from one another, not how close, how little the responsibility each feels for the other. People exist to be exploited. Geoffrey is less a friend than a contact. The intruder is less a man than an emblem. Their children are symbols of success, never in the forefront of their minds. Paul himself, meanwhile, has no regard for the consequences of his actions. When he meets and defrauds a young couple, the man commits suicide. He has no centre. He is a collage of other people's experiences.

The final irony, Ouisa at last perceives, is that Paul wished to be them and that they were nothing to be envied. Her life, she comes to feel, has no structure. She, too, is a collage, a series of borrowed gestures. Her attempt to redeem herself is thwarted.

The play itself likewise depends on a collage construction, brief scenes overlaid on one another. Tony Walton's original set design framed both the back wall and the stage openings in gilt picture frames, thereby turning the action into art as the characters have turned their own lives into constructions. Paul's artifice is eventually clear enough. The artifice of the others is no less patent. A Kandinsky painting, meanwhile, hangs over the stage, one side described by Guare as geometric and sombre; the other as wild and vivid. The two faces are evident equally in the

<sup>16</sup> John Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation* (New York, 1990), p. 81.

action. Paul, morally corrupt, an actor desperate to become the part he plays, has the virtue of vitality, albeit a suspect verve, a false *élan*. Ouisa and Flan are more sombre, dividing their lives sharply between private and public spheres, blind to vivifying relationships. But the painting revolves at the beginning and end of the play. Neither side predominates.

The key speech of the play is that delivered by Paul, a speech which he later explains he had originally presented as a Commencement Day address, in which he talks of J. D. Salinger and the imagination. It is a central speech because while brilliantly displaying Paul's skills as con man it is a claim for the significance of the imagination, which, while being a mechanism of fraud, is also the source of transcendence. His invocation of Holden Caulfield's hatred of phoniness is an unconscious comment on his own deceptions, but his remarks on the death of the imagination press close to the heart of the play. As he says:

The imagination has moved out of the realm of being our link, our most personal link, with our inner lives and the world outside that world – this world we share . . . I believe that the imagination is the passport we create to take us into the real world. I believe the imagination is another phrase for what is uniquely *us* . . . To face ourselves. That's the hard thing. The imagination. That's God's gift to make the act of self-examination bearable. (*Six Degrees of Separation*, p. 34)

Beyond the self-justification, the suspect motives, even the blatant moral contradictions of this speech, there is, plainly, a direct relevance to those he sets out to deceive but inadvertently educates. He has the actor's skills to enter another sensibility. His imagination both carries him into another sphere and exposes his own needs, his own fears. It is the inability of the white characters to do that (even the young actors whom he meets and again educates as well as deceives) which reveals their own failure. For the fact is that the imagination is what leads into the world, what makes a shared perception possible and hence the self secure. Reality is shared or it has no operable meaning. In that sense life is art in that it requires the imagination to reveal its shape, to unlock its meaning. But the imagination has two faces, like Kandinsky's painting. Paul's inventions become all-consuming, until he treads the edge of madness. For Ouisa, though, the world is not what it was before. Suddenly it is 'all these colors' (p. 119), and the play ends as Paul appears, wearing his pink shirt, and the Kandinsky revolves. She smiles. As ever with Guare, the final gesture is one of insight and reconciliation.

Guare's career has been immensely varied. He has written one-act plays, full-length musicals and movie scripts. The plays themselves have ranged

from surreal sketches to epic sequences. It is never easy to predict which direction he will take next. Certainly few would have predicted *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun* (1992), a play with music, set in Sicily and with a cast of nine children who operate partly as a chorus. For Peter Hall, who directed it, it was an attempt to write a modern Greek tragedy, it was a masque, a high comedy, a myth, a description which suggests the extent to which it is difficult to pin down.

Penny and Philip have both abandoned their separate spouses, divorced and married one another. They have come to Sicily on an archaeological dig and summoned their children for the summer in the hope that they will adjust to the new situation. However, when Penny's thirteen-year-old daughter Halcy falls in love with Philip's thirteen-year-old son Wayne and they demand their right to consummate the affair, things begin to fall apart. The young couple, who, it turns out, had eavesdropped on their new parents' affair, see themselves as living out an ideal, blessed, it seems, from the point of view of the audience, by Eros who is an amused observer of events, interrupting from time to time with songs. Unfortunately Wayne, renamed Icarus by Penny, falls to his death and the summer ends in chaos. Philip returns to America; Penny stays. In the words of Eros:

At the end of a perfect day  
 In Sicily  
 Two people face the night in tragedy  
 A boy dies  
 A love dies  
 A family dies  
 But everything dies  
 You know that  
 They know that  
 What's the big surprise?     (*Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, p. 70)

But the sun rises again and Penny lifts her face to it, as she had once seen sculpted baboons do, holding their hands out at the pleasure of heat and light.

The play moves around in time, switches from prose to poetry, speech to song. It is a metaphor about love and its decay, about emotional arrogance, about an optimism rooted in nothing more than fantasy, about two people who imagine they can live mythically. The naturalistic surface breaks up as does the land itself, that convulses with an earthquake which undermines the archaeological dig, thereby offering a correlative of the fragile foundations of their relationship. Past, present and

future come together, casting light on that relationship and on an emotion which transcends both it and this moment.

It is hard, however, to find this compelling. The alienating techniques themselves encourage a sense of detachment. The play's ironies are, perhaps, rather too obvious, its mythic pretensions (deliberately ironised though they are) hard to sustain. The very disjunction between street-wise American teenagers and the classical setting, itself the source of humour, is equally disruptive of the more profound concerns of a play which never quite seems to discover the necessary balance between contemporary comedy and classical tragedy, if such balance were possible. Peter Hall believed he had achieved it, believed, indeed, that it was implicit in the text. But solving the production problems which the play posed may have led to a greater feeling of satisfaction than the play itself actually offers.

Whatever the virtues or otherwise of *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, however, its author has, for nearly forty years, been writing plays in which he has explored the potential of the stage and engaged the culture in which he has lived. His screenplay for *Atlantic City* won him three awards and an Academy Award nomination. *The House of Blue Leaves* won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award on its first production while its 1986 revival won him four Tony Awards. *Six Degrees of Separation* won the 1990 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, as well as the Hull Warriner Award and an Obie.

Yet for all this he seems never quite to have received his due as a mainstay of the American theatre. The fact is that few other writers have so consistently committed themselves to exploring the potential of theatre or to examining the nature of a society which has chosen to stage its history as a public drama. For all his caustic analysis of the weaknesses of that society, its moral, social and aesthetic failings, he has remained equally committed to a redemptive view both of a flawed human nature and a flawed culture. Avoiding facile resolutions, he has, nonetheless, created plays that are open-ended, that propose a future undetermined by past failings but no longer defined by a false utopianism.

It is not difficult to track the changes that have marked the career of John Guare to date, as he has moved from writing absurdist farces and surreal sketches to deeply lyrical and metaphoric dramas and existential comedies. But beneath the stylistic and structural variety, the radically varying conceptions of character, what are equally clear are continuities which link a playwright at the turn of a new century to the man who began writing for the theatre nearly forty years ago. He remains

fascinated by the power of language to shape experience, by the centrality of the imagination as a moral and political force no less than an artistic resource, and by the connection between the theatre – its mechanisms, its metaphoric power, its communalism – and the lives of those who turn to it precisely because it addresses an anxiety about the fragility of meaning and the contingency of event. As he himself has said:

I can look at a play I wrote at 2.00 AM in 1963 the night before I went into the Air Force – *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year* – and say, isn't that funny. I'm still dealing with the issues in that play – identity, faith, the desperation it takes people to get through their lives, the lunatic order we try to put on the chaos of life and, technically, how to get the play out of the kitchen sink and hurl it into the Niagara Falls of life. (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 103)

## CHAPTER 2

### *Tina Howe*

The impact of the European theatre of the absurd on American drama seems largely to have been at the level of style rather than philosophy. The bleak metaphysics of Beckett sat uneasily with American positivism while his ironies differed from those of American writers. His 'Let's go. (*They do not move*)' may have been echoed by O'Neill's characters in *The Iceman Cometh*, repeatedly announcing their imminent departure while staying resolutely rooted to the spot, as his desperate conversationalists, filling a threatening void, found their counterpart in that same author's *Hughie*, but O'Neill gave birth to his own despair. In Europe the absurd had its historical correlative in a war which saw hope denied as a simple and implacable fact of daily life. George Steiner has spoken of the terrible hope carried to the door of gas chambers whose very existence seemed to confirm something more than the fears of a persecuted people. We do, indeed, give birth astride the grave.

In America such history exists to be transcended. It is a country peopled by escapees from determinism and if even here death cannot be defeated its force can with luck be dissipated. Plastic surgeons conspire to relieve their clients of symptoms of its approach and believers in cryogenics, no less than a plethora of religious sects, look for the life eternal. Here, the war was, ultimately, seen as a triumph of the human spirit, a victory over the deeper ironies. Once over, the utopian project was back in place. For Europeans, revelations about the fragility of the self, the contingency of experience, the depth of human betrayal, could not be so easily denied. Camus's contemplation of the legitimacy of suicide, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was something more than a disinterested debate. It was necessary to stare into the abyss before decisions could be made about pursuing social justice. Meaning itself had been assaulted while the power of the resistant spirit had been profoundly changed.

It is not difficult to find reverberations from Beckett in the American theatre, indeed it would be astonishing were there to have been none.

The detonation of his work in postwar drama was liable to be registered by seismographs even at a distance of several thousand miles. Whenever characters in a contained space choose to fill the void of their lives with words we think of *Godot* (as in Jack Gelber's *The Connection*, David Mamet's *American Buffalo* or Marsha Norman's *night Mother*) in the same way that Pinter, never best viewed as an absurdist, though another Jewish writer whose sense of menace was not without an historical referent, was claimed as an influence by playwrights as diverse as Sam Shepard and David Mamet. Neil Simon saw his play *God's Favorite*, in which he tried to come to terms with what seemed to him to be the absurdity of his young wife's death, as his version of *Godot*, though his use of the Book of Job suggests a different kind of tension from that in Beckett's play.

The fact is that the early 1960s and thereafter saw a radical experimenting with style and form in the American theatre at least in part prompted by the revisioning of drama in a Europe still suffering from post-traumatic shock. Albee's early plays bore the marks of Ionesco and in turn influenced the work of Terrence McNally, while the author of *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* himself helped to foster the careers of Adrienne Kennedy, Megan Terry and Maria Irene Fornes, Kennedy seeing her plays as 'states of mind',<sup>1</sup> and Fornes invoking Beckett, Ionesco and Genet as models. Meanwhile, institutional changes – the emergence of Off- and Off-Off-Broadway – facilitated the careers of playwrights for whom experimentation was a primary objective, playwrights who no longer expected to address a supposedly homogeneous Broadway or to shoulder the burden of justifying America to itself in plays which presented characters whose realism was a guarantee of their relevance or whose symbolic force was acknowledged beyond the confines of their setting, whether that be a New Orleans apartment or a salesman's Brooklyn house.

But it is worth remembering that the first American production of *Waiting for Godot* was billed as 'The Laugh Sensation of Two Continents', and performed by two graduates of vaudeville, Tom Ewell and Bert Lahr. The fact is that there was a native tradition embracing an altogether different version of absurdity – exuberant, wild, bizarre – best exemplified by the Marx Brothers and Olsen and Johnson's vaudeville revue *Hellzapoppin* (1938), as there was another that would link the plays of Mae West to the Ridiculous Theatre of Charles Ludlam and Kenneth

<sup>1</sup> Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights* (Tuscaloosa, AL 1996), p. 84.

Bernard. The common factor is humour, dark and ironic, or surreal and fantastic.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, moreover, there was still another source for playwrights fascinated by bizarre images, non-rational events, characters wilfully denied true depth. In one direction the rediscovery of Antonin Artaud's 1936 classic *The Theatre and its Double* suggested that theatre had a function beyond the exploration of social and psychological realities, that it should properly be concerned with generating images with the power to dominate the sensibility of an audience. In another, developments in art, music and dance suggested ways in which theatre could not merely explore its affinity with the other arts but free itself of certain assumptions about character, plot and language. And this neo-surrealism chimed with certain aspects of the absurd, more especially the work of Ionesco (echoed by Edward Albee in *The American Dream*), which presented character as a free-floating sign. This rediscovery of surrealism was also an aspect of that reclaiming of modernism which made Pirandello seem a key figure for a company such as the Living Theatre, whose explorations of the borderline between the imagined and the real, the scripted and the improvised, the audience and the performer, became part of a wider concern with the nature of the theatre's obligations to the world it chose to stage.

It may seem strange to begin a consideration of the work of Tina Howe by recalling this history, but the fact is that while her best-known plays were a product of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, she began writing in a crucial year, 1959, the year of Albee's *The Zoo Story*, of *Happenings* and of the Living Theatre's production of *The Connection*, a time in which Off-Broadway began to offer the possibility of production to young writers producing work that could never hope to find a mainstream audience. She is an heir to more than one of the above traditions. In interview she is prone to credit the Europeans, even seeing herself as writing plays which are 'European in flavor'. Her 'heroes,' she explains, 'have all been Europeans: Ionesco and Beckett and Pirandello and Virginia Woolf and Proust, the artists who have tried to pin down the ineffable and who have tried to give a name to or to hold on to what's changing in front of their eyes' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 270). The list is an eclectic one and by no means as homogeneous as she makes it sound, nor is it entirely clear in what way Beckett, for example, could be seen as trying to hold on to what is changing. Thus, while insisting that she is 'firmly entrenched in the Absurdist tradition', that 'I always go back to the Absurdist, who I think were the real groundbreakers'

(p. 271), she seems to mean little more by this than a commitment to experimentation. Indeed, her later confession that she felt she had been insufficiently experimental suggests something of what she found in her European models. Thus, challenged to relate the 'nihilism' of Beckett to the frequently redemptive tone of her own work, she acknowledged a divergence between his plays and her own, confessing, 'I guess that's true. I think I'm an optimist' (p. 271). It was not, then, the philosophy of the absurd that attracted but the method.

Elsewhere, she has said that what she derived out of 'having come of age during the heyday of the absurdists' (and now she adds Genet to her list) was 'how they scrambled relationships, gender, setting and language, whipping up plays that were haunting, hilarious and profound. "Yes, yes!" I cried. "This is the style for me."<sup>2</sup> Yet, interestingly, she has also talked of family visits to Marx Brothers films where 'going berserk . . . was *allowed*'. The Marx Brothers, she insisted, 'didn't just celebrate lunacy, they turned it into a high art form. Just when you thought Groucho's stateroom couldn't hold one more living soul, a whole phalanx of waiters with teetering trays would show up. The whole point was to keep piling excess on top of excess – more props, more pratfalls, more dizzy language. Why shouldn't it be the same in the theatre?'<sup>3</sup> *Museum*, with its thirty-eight characters, in overlapping scene fragments, and *The Art of Dining*, which in her own words whips up chaos, were her attempt to answer that question in the positive.

Nor, interestingly, was the influence wholly theatrical or filmic. As is clear from her work, art plays a major role. She has a powerful sense of the visual. Beyond that, she sees her models as having rather more to do with the novel than drama: Virginia Woolf and James Joyce rather than Beckett. Indeed, offered a choice between being a contemporary Virginia Woolf or Tennessee Williams she opted immediately for the Bloomsbury author, if for a somewhat strange reason:

I suppose it's an academic argument and a ridiculous argument, but there's something about being able to sustain a whole work with only language, that you don't need lights and powders and costumes and actors and trickery but you can just do the whole thing through language. There's something in me that finds that extraordinary, and I wish with all my might and main that I could do that. And I suppose when I read literature and when I follow through a story that ends with an epiphany, I'm just swept away, and I suppose that's why I try to mimic that in my own work. (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 272)

<sup>2</sup> Tina Howe, *Approaching Zanzibar and Other Plays* (New York, 1995), p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> Tina Howe, *Coastal Disturbances: Four Plays by Tina Howe* (New York, 1989), n.p.

Not the least surprising aspect of these remarks lies in the fact that for all the occasional arias in her plays, for all their random lyricism, it is not language that first compels attention.

It is true, however, that her career was, in a sense, born out of a desire to write fiction. But though enrolled in a short-story class at Sarah Lawrence College and hoping to use what she learned there as a stepping stone to the novel she wished to write, she found herself at sea. Faced with producing an extended piece of writing, to her surprise she wrote instead a twenty-page play called *Closing Time*. To her even greater surprise, it was staged. Interestingly, in view of her above comments, she has subsequently explained that 'I'd finally found a form where I could practice my imagination but not be bogged down by all those damn words' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 262).

Following her graduation from Sarah Lawrence, she spent a year in Paris where, falling in with a group of expatriate American and English writers, she set herself to writing. Thereafter, she has explained, her understanding of craft was a product of years spent teaching in high schools where she was able to stage her own plays and test them on sceptical teenage audiences.

Tina Howe grew up in a financially and intellectually privileged environment. Her grandfather was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, her father a radio and television newscaster. She attended a series of elite private girls' schools and graduated from an expensive and prestigious women's college. Yet what she took from her time in these private schools was the potential, and actual, cruelty of girls. This, in turn, inspired a fear of women and, as she explained, of the woman in herself, the destroyer who is the obverse to the creator, a fear which she in part dealt with by a resort to humour. Meanwhile, and despite the affluence of her family, she recalls her father's radical past and stresses the fact that she was raised with liberal sympathies and an interest in the avant-garde.

Not the least interesting aspect of Tina Howe's career is the degree to which her work has often inspired critical disdain or attack. For someone who has managed to establish herself as a significant force in the American theatre she has created a number of plays that have baffled critics, disturbed theatre directors and sometimes provoked her fellow women. One play took two decades to reach the stage, a number of others have prompted hostility. At first rejecting realism, she achieved something approaching success only when she began to write plays that had more of a realist bias, slowly inching her way towards recognition. In one sense she simply shared the plight of essentially comic writers in

that her comedy seemed to blind critics to her talent and, moreover, to the seriousness which lay just beneath the skin of that comedy. Indeed, that seriousness was, on occasion, taken to be a contradictory element. Beyond that, her portraits of nervous, indeed sometimes neurotic, women, doubtful about motherhood, disturbed by the menopause and vulnerable to love, placed her ambiguously in the gender politics of the time, both with respect to men and women. She herself has remarked, in the introduction to her play *Approaching Zanzibar*, that:

It's one thing for male playwrights to show women overwrought with passion and self-loathing – when women do it, the rhythms and details are different. Ambiguity rushes in and therein lies the threat. We tend to see conflicting aspects of a situation at the same time, blending the tragic, comic, noble and absurd. It's something women poets and novelists have been doing for years. We can entertain, but the minute we step into deeper water, beware. (*Approaching Zanzibar*, p. x)

It was only with that play, indeed, that, as she explained, after 'years of being viewed as a well-heeled WASPY playwright, I suddenly emerged as a feminist' (p. x). Well, there are feminists and feminists and there are doubtless those for whom a woman playwright creating portraits of women regretting the loss of their fertility or exposed as deeply anxious and even neurotic figures would prove unacceptable but, from her early *Birth and Afterbirth* (which did, indeed, long prove unacceptable), through to *One Shoe Off* (which, as she has confessed, received almost universally hostile reviews), she did stake out a territory inhabited by no other playwright, constructing her drama out of a blend of the absurd and, whatever she may say, the realistic, out of comedy and an acute sensitivity to the pain as well as the joy of living.

Her first Off-Broadway play, *The Nest* (1969) concerns an overweight woman who hopes that her cooking will substitute for her lack of looks. It received poor reviews but, unabashed, she set herself to write another, this time about 'the wonder and terror of motherhood' (*Approaching Zanzibar*, p. ix). Now living in suburban New York, she had just had her second child, and was part of a set of young mothers who, she has suggested, 'inhabit rather wild territory' as 'their emotions range all over the place'.<sup>4</sup> This was the material for a play which, when finished, was rejected by every theatre to which it was offered, as well as by her own agent. As she

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* (New York, 1987), p. 224.

complained, 'The Absurdists can shake up our preconceptions about power and identity, but for a woman to take on the sanctity of motherhood . . .!' (*Approaching Zanzibar*, pp. ix-x). The play was not produced for over twenty years. 'It's so incendiary,' she has said, 'that I'm afraid critics would stone me to death' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 224).

*Birth and Afterbirth* takes place on the fourth birthday of Nick Apple, son to businessman Bill Apple and his wife Sally, referred to in the cast list as Mommy, an echo of Albee's *The American Dream*. At first the situation is almost naturalistic, with the young boy being little more than an over-excited child, more concerned with his presents than collaborating with his parents' plans to record events on the family video camera. By degrees, however, the boy becomes in turn a feral forest creature, growing hair on his arms, and a sophisticated player of adult games.

The birthday party takes a new direction when family friends arrive. Mia and Jeffrey are anthropologists whose idea of a present for a four-year-old is a projector featuring slides of children from around the world. Themselves childless, they have chosen to study primitive children, sublimating their need in a supposed detachment, though in fact disturbingly drawn to the horrors they proceed to describe. Among the stories they tell is an account of a tribe that performs a ritual involving the reinsertion of newly-born children into their mother's bodies and the eating of the resultant corpse as, unsurprisingly, mother and child expire. At the same time Mia is provoked into a mock birth of her own.

It is not hard to see why this play has not recommended itself to regional theatres, nor why Tina Howe's agent went into shock on reading it, for it acts out primitive fears, as its title implies, about birth and afterbirth – childhood. The child is plainly a threat, offering, as it does, a glimpse of a primitive stage in development that scarcely disappears with age. At the other end of life, the mother begins to feel her mortality, her biologic function now complete. Her hair falls out. She smells a distant sea, sand sifting out of her clothes as though humankind were not that far removed from its origins.

In part a satire – the anthropologists offer a parodic version of their profession – in part a comedy about family relations, *Birth and Afterbirth* also hints at more fundamental fears not only to do with women's ambivalent feelings about childbirth but about an urbane world that can so easily collapse into anarchy. Perhaps her later remark that 'I have always seen myself as being a child, this very young person put inside of this very tall body', that she was 'emotionally sort of a nine-year-old' (Kolin and Kullman *Speaking on Stage*, p. 269), may also explain not only the

image of the child thrust back into the womb but the child as adult which becomes a feature of the play, as the child begins to assume an adult role. For this reason, as well as the implausibility of casting a four-year-old, Howe calls for the role of Nick to be played by an adult.

The play was especially disliked by feminists, in part, she presumed, because of its domestic setting which, in the 1970s, they saw as a realm to be transcended, and in part because she saw her most sympathetic character as being the father, in some senses excluded from the business of birth and marginalised in the process of nurturing ('I've always preferred men to women because my father was very gentle and mild' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 227). In a play of shifting alliances he is, to Howe, the one most frequently excluded. It is hard to agree. With his video camera he appears to be determined to direct their lives. He requires them to perform the roles he identifies. Meanwhile, if things begin to get out of control this fact registers most directly on his wife, whose body seems slowly to be dissolved.

For one feminist critic, Nancy Backes, the play was a study of anorexia and bulimia and the birth ceremony a reversal of the psychological model 'which holds that anorexia nervosa is rooted in an oral impregnation fantasy'.<sup>5</sup> In fact the play seems to be more directly concerned with the conflicting pressures on women to give birth and to stay at home, to sustain the family (nurture, provide comfort and reassurance to others), or to follow a career and leave the home, thus claiming the supposed freedom of men, trading motherhood for achievement as judged by public success. In some ways, then, the threat in the play lies not in the bizarre child but in these alternative roles. The women are implicit rivals, menacing each other with their opposing views of experience. They envy and despise each other with equal force.

It is, perhaps, a play of its time. Social realities and feminism would, after all, move on, change the nature of the debate, though women would, inevitably, never entirely succeed in squaring the circle since a paradox can be inhabited, never really resolved. But *Birth and Afterbirth* is concerned with something more than the price to be paid for being a woman. It acknowledges, too, the price of being a man.

Tina Howe followed *Birth and Afterbirth* with what she called one of her more 'elegant' pieces, *Museum*, first staged by the Los Angeles Actors

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Backes, 'Body Art: Hunger and Satiation in the Plays of Tina Howe', in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor, MI, 1989), p. 44.

Theatre, in 1976, and then by the New York Shakespeare Festival two years later. Set in the gallery of a major American museum of modern art, on the final day of a show aptly entitled 'The Broken Silence', it is an anything but silent satire on the modishness of art criticism, on the consumption of art by gallery visitors and on the lives of those who pass through this unlikely space. Indeed Howe set herself specifically to create plays located in venues usually disdained by playwrights, even wishing to see *Museum* performed in a genuine gallery with real works of art, a project which failed only because the costs of insurance proved prohibitive, as well they might given the fate of various art works in her play.

The stage is dominated by a number of such works, ranging from four large, identical white canvases, to small constructions made largely of animal parts and a clothesline from which life-sized cloth figures hang. These are watched over by a guard whose function is the more important given reports of an attack on Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, news of which opens the play. Through the gallery pass a variety of people including college students, overseas visitors (speaking in French), gay art enthusiasts and photographers. Others are identified in the cast list as the 'lost woman', the 'inquiring woman', the 'bewildered woman', the 'man with recorded tour', (as opposed to the 'man with loud recorded tour'.) In other words this is a play which is its own art work, a crowded canvas which, Marx Brothers like, slowly fills the gallery space until, in a near riot, gallery visitors steal parts of the exhibits and anarchy reigns as they try to possess the art they admire or envy.

On this last day of the exhibition, pretentious art connoisseurs jostle with ignorant members of the public, each revealing more about themselves than the works on which they project their own anxieties, aspirations and needs. The white canvases become a kind of *Moby Dick* whose meanings lie not in themselves but in what people choose to see in them. Indeed, in some ways this seems a play about the reconstruction of art by the viewer, though observations of this kind are dangerous in a play which in part satirises the intellectualising of art and is itself a comedy. At the same time there are serious moments. In one scene Tink Solheim, a friend of the artist Agnes Vaag, whose constructions of animal teeth, feathers, fur, claws, bone, shell, scales and other natural elements form part of the exhibition, speaks of the artist not only gathering the material for her work but gnawing on the bones. For a gallery visitor this is evidence that artists are 'crazy'! For Howe herself the scene is about 'the artist's descent into his work . . . I felt it important,' she explained, 'to show the anguish an artist goes through in order to create. It was one

of the few private moments in the play. It was a note I wanted to sound.' But, she insists immediately, 'basically, *Museum* is a comedy of manners' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 229). And here is a difficulty because such private moments, such serious points about the nature of art and the artistic process, are offered in the context of a work which verges on anarchic farce, in the context of a play about criticism and its arbitrariness. The visiting French couple argue over the precise word to ascribe to works that they are in the process of re-inventing. The gay couple incorporate their observations with respect to the art work into their own psychodrama. Visitors who are silent in the face of the art burst into applause when a critic offers a plausible account of them, as though relieved that anyone can make coherent sense out of the apparently gnomic. Howe may, as she has said, love the characters because they are all aspects of herself – and there is something altogether recognisable in the visitors' attempts to find an objective language for a subjective experience – but it is difficult for the writer simultaneously to sustain an ironic detachment from and an engaged commitment to the art which she places at the centre of her comedy.

Critics found the play difficult to take. Indeed some were inclined to deny it status as a play. Howe's response was to insist that while it was the most architecturally complex of her works, and was by no means traditional, it nonetheless had a recognisable structure with, as she said, a beginning, middle and end. This is certainly true. The problem, as also perhaps the achievement, lies in the fact that it borrows its aesthetics from other realms. To begin with it is carefully choreographed, and there is a kind of dance performed by those who move through this space, reacting to the art works and to one another. The movement in the final scene, in which the art works are stolen piece by piece, is itself, of necessity, carefully contrived and described as 'not a mad scramble, but a communion, enacted with quiet reverence' (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 53), a reverence reflected in the attitude of the parents of one of the artists who stand silently absorbed in their son's achievement. In that sense the people are drawn into the works which they disassemble and carry away as booty.

In this gallery space, indeed, they are aware that they are themselves the object of attention, if only from the guard who watches them with the same concentration, and occasionally the same incomprehension, as they watch the art. Thus a number of photographers who begin by taking shots of the art end by taking photographs of the visitors. They become, in short, art themselves and producers of art.

*Museum* is part whimsical, part serious. It develops an aesthetic which is a product of its own subject matter, implicitly making a case for its own stylistic brio while focussing on innovative art of another kind. It deals in images, in brief scenes, which are sometimes comic turns, sometimes revelations of character, sometimes ironic comments on art and its consumption.

The tension, the psychological anxiety which generates some of the displayed art, spills over on to those who look at it. The gallery space becomes a site of insecurity about language, meaning and the processes involved in the construction of art. To that extent *Museum* is a metatheatrical piece in which Howe, with wit and genuine originality, acknowledges the problematic nature of art, her own art, and its reception.

For Tina Howe, who has spoken of a later play (*Painting Churches*) as 'an impressionist portrait' and another (*Coastal Disturbances*) as a 'Turner landscape', art is plainly a central point of reference and hence an art gallery a location of special significance. However, she has also commented on the importance of food and consumption in her work (from *The Nest* onwards) so that the title of her next play reflected both interests. *The Art of Dining* (in *Four Plays*), a co-production between the New York Shakespeare Festival and the Kennedy Centre, which opened in 1979, is set in a New Jersey restaurant and to her was a logical development from her previous play. *Museum*, she explains, 'led directly to *The Art of Dining*, which was the same kind of large landscape, but goes deeper' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 225). Having set one play in 'a temple of silence', which she then had to animate, she now chose another setting which was also not without its intimidation, a setting, too, in which creativity and the consumption of the product of that creativity remained a central issue. Now, however, she wished to go 'further into the pain of the characters' (p. 225).

Ellen and Cal are the co-owners of a restaurant called The Golden Carousel, situated in a nineteenth-century townhouse, its name reflecting something of the action of a play in which we glimpse a series of characters as they spin past us. The setting, she explains, should reflect a sense of 'surreal nostalgia' while 'things are on the verge of lifting off the ground or disappearing entirely. Nothing,' she insists, 'is quite what it seems' (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 59). At the same time we are offered an apparently realistic set whose realism extends to the smell of cooking food: 'the fragrance of the evening's offerings fill the air' (p. 59) – something of a challenge to the stage manager.

The couple have financed the restaurant with a considerable loan and

a running joke is generated by the tension between the chef-wife's need to create perfect meals and her husband's desire to fill the restaurant to overflowing in order to pay off the debt. For some critics this was to be seen as a symbol of men living off women's creativity, more especially since one of the guests is a woman writer being signed up by a male publisher, but it is hard to take this seriously in a play in which men and women are portrayed as deeply ambiguous with respect to creativity and the material world.

The play opens with husband and wife sampling the desserts they are to serve their customers later in the evening in a scene reminiscent of the film version of *Tom Jones*. The pleasure they evidently derive from this seems positively sexual, he dipping his spoon into the dish and groaning with pleasure as she makes 'little whimpering sounds'. She 'exhales with pleasure' and 'stares into space'; he 'makes a low sob . . . grunting'. They 'finish, breathing heavily' (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 59), capable of doing nothing but confirm the pleasure they have taken, in a scene which is paralleled later as a husband and wife order their meal, taking some time over the preliminaries but eventually rushing through to the dessert. They follow their tasting session with an ambiguous conversation:

ELLEN (*Stirring and tasting her soup*): They were firm enough, weren't they?  
 CAL (*Involved with his Floating Island*): Oh . . . so smooth!  
 ELLEN: Nothing is worse than limp pears. (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 61)

This scene is prefaced by a stage direction that rivals some of O'Neill's, or, perhaps more aptly, Arnold Wesker's, in that the kitchen has to be fully functional, the actual preparation of food accompanying and being an essential part of the action. Howe therefore identifies not only the required utensils but also the ingredients necessary for the preparation of the various items on the menu. Where in Wesker's work this serves a largely naturalistic function, however, here it is a product of theme, a functional metaphor.

The essential problem confronting the owners, we quickly discover, is not the burden of their debt but the fact that Cal is a compulsive eater, swiftly demolishing the ingredients for the night's meal. Despite his rhapsodising over the desserts, moreover, it soon becomes apparent that he has lost any power to discriminate, happily eating salt and mustard as well as the products of haute cuisine.

Those who visit the restaurant are described largely in terms of their attitude to food. Hannah and Paul Galt, the husband and wife couple, are 'hungry' and 'hungrier'; the young writer, Elizabeth Barrow Colt, is

'afraid of food', while her publisher companion is 'the son and husband of good cooks'. Of those on another table we are told that one is 'a good eater', another 'a neurotic eater', and the third 'perpetually on a diet'. What we are not told, indeed we have Howe's assurance to the contrary (she says both of Elizabeth Colt, in *The Art of Dining*, and Mags, in *Painting Churches*, that 'They're not anorexic. They're just neurotic' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 231)), is that any of them is anorexic or bulimic, though the critic Nancy Backes insists that 'Colt is the agoraphobic, the anorexic victim, who must be nurtured by women's food before she can feel safe there and become part of the social world', (Backes, 'Body Art', p. 51) while 'Cal . . . is the bulimic person', since 'Howe shows us that it is the political inequality, and not the predisposition of gender, that creates eating disorders' (p. 49). 'How could an anorexic woman find pleasure here', Backes asks, only to suggest that 'the answer is simple: the food is made safe, made "un-foreign" – domesticated, if you will – because it is prepared by a woman' (p. 48). In the context of the play, however, such remarks seem something of an over-interpretation. The fact is that food functions as a sensual element as well as the focus of neurosis. It is the source of comedy, the mechanism for character revelation, the motor force of the plot, generating a language at times ironically pretentious and at times lyrical. Far from being a serious analysis of eating disorders, *The Art of Dining* is an exuberant comedy of manners.

The play does, though, come close to Howe's personal concerns. She recalls, and Nancy Backes usefully quotes her remarks, that 'I have a fear of eating. Food was of absolutely no value in our house; meals were a time to talk. And dining out is *terrifying* to me . . . What I wanted to do in both *Museum* and *The Art of Dining* was to present a lovely exterior, then seduce the audience into the dark and mysterious places inside' ('Body Art', p. 48). The sheer beauty of the restaurant, with everything in place, elegant, nostalgic, its design a blend of the old and the new, serves to highlight, by contrast, the disorder in the lives of hosts and guests alike, the anarchy which ensues as the evening develops. The 'dark and mysterious places' to which she refers, meanwhile, seem to indicate the private anxieties and neuroses which come bubbling to the surface in this place where the consumption of food is the occasion for revealing conversations and still more revealing actions.

The first customers to enter are the Galts, sumptuously dressed, who, when seated, and despite their declared hunger, prolong the preliminaries, linger over the details of their earlier, separate lunches as Cal, their

host, tempts them with food and drink in a fast-moving, ritualised exchange which climaxes with a violent disagreement, the building sensuality subverted by a sudden tension. The process is then repeated with the same result until, finally, they seem to reach an orgasmic moment which echoes that between Ellen and Cal in the first scene. Cal turns music on (appropriately, a duo) and Paul opens his menu 'with a meaningful look'. Hannah follows suit. Paul 'glances down the length of it, sighs'. Hannah responds with a 'tense silence'. Paul 'inhales, takes a deep breath'. Hannah 'pushes a strand of hair up off her forehead'. Paul 'exhales' (*Coastal Disturbances*, pp. 73–4). And so it continues with the choice of food from the menu acting as a correlative for the sexual passions for which the food is a sublimation.

At this point Cal turns the volume of the music up, underscoring their passion as they begin to point to items on the menu which they evidently find erotic:

HANNAH: Okay . . . How about . . . ?

PAUL (*Shocked*): Hannah?

HANNAH (*Pointing elsewhere*): Plus some . . .

PAUL (*Out of breath*): Stop it!

HANNAH (*Points again*): And . . .

PAUL (*Reaches over and kisses her*): Darling! You're being obscene and you know it. (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 75)

This couple is followed into the restaurant by Elizabeth Barrow Colt, the comic centre of the play, a woman who shares certain characteristics with Tina Howe herself: tall, neurotic about food, with a mother who seems not unlike her own. Elizabeth is deeply shy, short-sighted and phobic about food. When she enters she upends her pocketbook and inadvertently sends a food cart careening across the restaurant. As the evening develops she spills soup into her lap, wanders into the kitchen in search of the toilet and spreads her own anarchy into the restaurant at large which, by this time is, anyway, in an advanced state of dissolution as the husband and wife owners row and temporarily abandon their clients.

The second act sees the arrival of the final guests, three women in their thirties. This time, and again appropriately, a trio is playing in the background. Described as 'a hearty eater . . . a guilty eater, and . . . a non eater', they proceed to play out a culinary comedy, misordering wine and food and later switching dishes like clowns in a circus exchanging hats.

The skill of the play lies in the way Howe manages to intercut between the characters, developing the action as they make their way through

their separate meals exposing their suppressed anxieties, developing their motivations. Crisis builds on crisis. At times events move at a manic pace while at other moments characters are allowed extended speeches. Elizabeth, in particular, as befits a story-teller, offers an elaborate account of family meals in which the eating of food reflects the characters of those involved, an account so stomach churning that her companion, an obsessive eater, slowly falters. Hannah and Paul, meanwhile, continue their orgasmic meal while the three women conduct psychobattles, stealing one another's meals while two of them try to force food on their dieting companion.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, food has begun to pile up in a surreal way. It has 'multiplied, tenfold. It's tumbling off the counters and overflowing on the stove. Ellen and Cal,' we are told, 'race in the midst of it like figures in a speeded-up old-time movie' (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 105). For a moment the play seems to shift, stylistically, so that we are in the world of Disney's *Fantasia*, with Mickey Mouse unable to stop the escalating action, or in the realm of nursery rhymes in which porridge pots produce ever more porridge. Ellen tries to prepare meals while taking telephone calls; Cal endeavours to serve them while himself taking bookings on another phone. He begins to fantasise about expanding the restaurant, in an escalating dream of food and money. At the same time the whole restaurant is at risk as Cal's obsessive eating slowly destroys the elaborate menu prepared by his wife. Hardly noticed by guests who are wrapped up in their own concerns, the ship on which they are sailing is drifting towards the rocks, and though Howe is disinclined to see herself as a political writer it is hard not to see some larger point here as these consumers are oblivious to anything beyond consumption or the elaboration of concerns about their appearance.

As befits a comedy, the play ends with an epiphany. Cal lures his wife back from her disaffection by himself taking over the cooking and improvising a dish which for once he does not consume before it is finished. It is his offering to her but, subsequently presented to the guests, becomes the focus of a concluding ceremony. A *flambé*, it serves as the warm focus of the evening. After the variety of meals which have been prepared and consumed, all come together for a single dish as Elizabeth recalls the function which shared meals once had for the community. As Howe indicates in a stage direction, 'Everyone's movements slow down to simple gestures, their language becomes less familiar. The fury of the November wind increases outside and the light from Ellen's bonfire burns brighter and brighter as the diners gather close to its warmth . . .

Purified of their collective civilization and private grief, they feast as the curtain slowly falls' (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 126).

The meal, which in Elizabeth's household had been a mechanism for expressing division, and in the restaurant an occasion for business, seduction, envy, aggression, consolation, pleasure, becomes, finally, an image of the communalism it once represented. The ending is celebratory, the comedy being subsumed in a ritualised gesture. And though it is Ellen who presides over this ceremony Tina Howe is not making a feminist point. Her husband, after all, has overcome his jealousy and involved himself in a creativity which some critics see as associated purely with women in the play. Beyond that, we also have Howe's assurance that 'I write about women because that's what I know best. I don't see my heroines as a vehicle for any particular point of view. I'm not making a political choice.' Indeed if she has a single commitment it would seem to be to humour – 'I love silliness and slapstick and people falling down' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 231). The redemption in her plays, indeed, lies as much in that as in the moments of epiphany to which she is drawn and with which her plays frequently conclude. As she has said, 'More than anything I want to make people laugh. It's so simple. I don't have any great message, or terribly profound contribution to make. Maybe it's having been raised on Marx Brothers movies – howling in the dark with my staid parents – it was such an incredible release. So unexpected and hilarious' (p. 232).

Tina Howe has confessed, in the Preface to *Coastal Disturbances: Four Plays*, that for her *The Art of Dining* is a favourite play 'because of the chaos it whips up. Once the food starts to fly,' she explains, 'everything leaps into an ecstatic gear' (Preface). She likens the moment to the stripping of the clothesline in *Museum* and the moment in her later play, *Coastal Disturbances*, when one of her characters is buried to the neck in sand, admitting that 'I sometimes think the whole reason I write the play is so I can ignite these lunatic climaxes when all hell breaks loose' (Preface). She also sees a parallel between the flying food and her love of 'slinging language around' (Preface), and it is not difficult to see where this kind of visual and verbal humour has its roots, given her predilection for the Marx Brothers.

Surprisingly, the reviews for *The Art of Dining* were not good and Tina Howe was forced to a re-evaluation of her career. Though drawn to unconventional settings and styles, though revelling in the bizarre and the exuberant, in visual jokes and wild comedy, she decided to write a play in a conventional setting and 'stop all this fancy horsing around'

(Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 232). The result was *Painting Churches*. The result was also an Outer Critics Circle Award, a John Gassner Award, a Rosamond Gilder Award and a televised production on *American Playhouse*. Having announced, 'God help me if I ever write a realistic play', she appeared to do just that, though she added the desperate plea: 'Oh please, don't call *Painting Churches* realistic' (p. 228). To objections that it seemed precisely that, she replied, 'No, it's quite off-center' (p. 228). In what way it could be said to be 'off-center', however, is not immediately clear.

The play, first produced in 1983 by the Second Stage on New York's Theatre Row (a company which she saw as ideal for the play because of its record of taking risks, of presenting what she called 'heightened reality'), is set in the Boston townhouse of an eminent New England poet, Gardner Church, now in his seventies, and his wife Fanny, a decade younger. The action takes place in a single room, filled with packing cases as the couple prepare, apparently for financial reasons, to retire to a small cottage on the Cape.

The assembled furniture reflects their flamboyance. Indeed in some ways it stands for their life in that, with the exception of books and papers which we learn are still in the adjacent study, this is the accumulated expression of their joint history and taste. The realism of the set is modified, however, by the light which pours through arched windows. As the stage direction indicates, 'At one hour it's hard-edged and brilliant; the next, it's dappled and yielding. It transforms whatever it touches, giving the room a distinct feeling of unreality' (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 131). In the course of the play it becomes apparent that that description could apply with equal force to those who live there and to their shifting moods: 'hard-edged and brilliant . . . dappled and yielding'. The light, slanting down through arched windows, also underlines an ambiguity in the play's title as the room, occupied by the Churches, assumes something of a churchlike feel. As befits a play in which the painting of a portrait is a central action, we are thus offered an image, a metaphor, before a single speech is delivered.

Gardner, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, is supposedly at work on a critical study, having ceased to write poetry but, we slowly learn, is doing little more than type out other people's poetry, incapable any more of bringing a critical intelligence to bear. Indeed, behind what seems at first to be a charming vagueness and an endearing deafness is a more serious decline. His wife, too, is suffering, increasingly disturbed by her husband's deterioration. The move to another house thus has a symbolic

as well as an economic force and the gathering together of their possessions something of the air of a preparation for the end. What they are leaving for is, ultimately, their death.

They are now joined by their daughter Margaret, known as Mags, an artist in her early thirties and plainly herself not entirely at ease with life. She has set herself to paint a portrait of her parents, seeking the recognition they have withheld. Her neurotic preparations for the portrait, however, along, perhaps, with her compulsive eating, are indicative of her state of mind. Even now, when she announces that she is to have a one-woman show in a prestigious gallery, their praise is less than fulsome, her mother recalling her grandmother's artistic talents and her father drifting off in search of some lost papers. When she offers, with pride, the name of the gallery – the Pratt Institute – her mother's response is either to mishear or to affect to mishear: 'Pratt, Splatt, whatever . . .' (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 142). Indeed, as though unaware of the disappointment she has inspired, Fanny now leads her daughter, in triumph, to one of her own creations, a lampshade that she has transformed into a work of art with the minimum of effort. Margaret has a child's need for parental praise but learns a familiar truth, that by the time success comes parents are wrapped up in their own lives, and, ultimately, their own impending deaths. Her mother is more anxious to share the pain of Gardner's decline with her daughter than she is to rejoice in her achievement.

Fanny Church seems increasingly abrupt with her husband, increasingly irritated by his forgetfulness, though she herself is capable of forgetting details she would once have recalled. Yet at times they are like a vaudeville team, staging a performance for themselves as much as for their daughter. Supposedly in an attempt to help her arrive at an effective pose for the portrait she is to paint, they conspire to act out famous paintings, like a couple of talented but delinquent children refusing to take the world seriously. Gardner, meanwhile, himself drifting towards a bemused silence, has eccentrically set himself to teach a pet bird to recite Gray's *Elegy*.

Tina Howe has admitted that the play has a personal resonance for her, that it could not have been written before her parents' death, and that her mother, in particular, would have been shaken by it. As a result it is very tempting to see it as in some ways at least a portrait of Howe's family relationships, that is to say she, too, is engaged in painting a portrait, she, too, is in competition with her parents, even after the point of such a competition has long since gone. While insisting that it is not

strictly speaking autobiographical she has, somewhat confusingly, confessed that she was ‘dealing with relationships that were close to home’ (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 231). Herself the daughter of a dominant mother and high-achieving father and the granddaughter of a man who, like Gardner, had won a Pulitzer Prize, she had had to create a space for herself, looking for some acknowledgement of her own accomplishments. ‘I suppose the negative aspect of coming from a well-known family,’ she has said,

is that you can never live up to the expectations. My biggest neurosis is insecurity; I’ve never felt successful. I’ve never felt I’ve ‘arrived’ in any way. It’s always uphill. I have periods when I feel so inferior and homely I can’t even go out . . . A lot of that comes from having grown up in a rather rarefied household with all those expectations whirring around. I spend too much time feeling sorry for myself. It’s much better to get on with the work. But I think most artists feel insecure. It’s just a bit extreme in my case. The reason to pick up the pen or the paint brush is to fight back. (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 226)

The use of the paintbrush as an example is revealing in the context of *Painting Churches*, for Mags is clearly fighting back in just the way Howe indicates, struggling with feelings of insecurity of precisely the kind she describes.

Mags relates directly to the figure of Elizabeth in *The Art of Dining*. Indeed in some respects she was the starting point of the play. Not the same knockabout figure, taking pratfalls and wandering, Magoo-like, through life, she is nonetheless an artist, surprised at a modest success which she is not sure will continue, and lacking any assurance.

Howe has explained that she found the play difficult to write, in part because for some time she was reaching for the wrong metaphor. She had initially planned that Mags should be a musician on the eve of her debut, a non-verbal character interacting with verbal characters. And, indeed, in the first twelve drafts she was a concert pianist returning home to be fitted for a dress for her debut performance. Unsurprisingly, the result was a mute person whose internal life was closed to the audience. Beyond that, however, it was difficult precisely because ‘I was trying to write about something that was very close to me’, because ‘there were certain things I didn’t want to say’ (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, 274).

As the play continues so the stripping of the house proceeds in tandem with the psychological stripping bare of the characters as the cruelty of Gardner’s decline is underlined, the spaces between husband and wife open and Fanny reveals her deepening insecurity. Howe manages to

dramatise the extent to which Fanny and Gardner are incompatible as she sorts through his books by the colour of their jackets and offers to throw away copies signed by the greatest writers of the century, whose inscriptions are, in some degree, a mark of her husband's own significance. It is in that sense a gesture suggesting either the envy that she feels or a failure of understanding which reverberates back through the history of their relationship. And yet at the same time it becomes ever clearer how much they depend on one another. The odd one out is their daughter, who never quite understands the games they play, never quite accepts that time has changed her relationship to them.

There are, however, moments when she, too, joins in their clowning. When her mother chides her with not marrying a rich Harvard graduate she recalls his lack of facial hair and a redundant sixth finger in a momentary double act with her mother, subsequently mocking another potential husband by imitating his more absurd qualities. But she cannot sustain it. Interrupted by her father she lapses back into her former mode just as, Fanny remarks, 'she was . . . getting up a head of steam' (*Coastal Disturbances*, p. 158).

But if her parents disturb her, she retains the ability to disturb them, recounting memories of a youth in which she had been banished from the dinner table for squirting food through her teeth only to create a sculpture in her bedroom by melting crayons on a radiator, a construction mistaken by her mother for decaying food and destroyed as such. The memory, which proves too much for her mother, who shouts for her to stop, is, for Mags, evidence of her parents' failure to recognise her talents. The first act ends with Mags insisting that 'I have . . . strong abilities' (p. 163) and running from the room, overcome.

The second act begins with Fanny and Gardner dressed in formal evening clothes posing for the portrait, as Gardner recites a Yeats poem and Fanny loudly objects to her boredom, before breaking the pose. As the portrait is slowly constructed so the lives of those it pictures are slowly deconstructed, along with what has been their home. Fanny throws handfuls of Gardner's manuscript and poems into boxes as if they had no particular importance or meaning. His cry – 'THE BEST PART IS THROWN OUT! . . . LOST' (p. 173) – could apply equally to his manuscripts and his life as the past slips from his memory and his achievement is reduced to a pile of missorted papers. Only the poems that he recites give a structure to his life. These he remembers. As Fanny remarks, 'He can't give up the words. It's the best he can do' (p. 173).

Incontinent, he now wets his pants as his wife mocks him, and his

daughter feels an ever-deepening despair, shocked by her mother's cruelty, unable to see what it is that holds them together in the middle of so much disintegration, unable to recognise the pain disguised as fun, the humiliation neutralised by games. Indeed, in a key speech Fanny accuses her daughter of being more concerned with art than life, with being so wrapped up in herself that she is blind to the suffering of others, of being, in fact, an artist who cannot or will not see. As she insists, 'It's all over for Daddy and me. This is it! "Finita la commedia!" . . . All I'm trying to do is exit with a little flourish; have some fun . . . What's so terrible about that? . . . I'd put a bullet through my head in a minute, but then who'd look after him?' (p. 177). The move, she confesses, is so that in a smaller house she will be able to look after him better. The concluding remark of the speech could stand as Howe's justification for the play: 'If you want to paint us so badly, you ought to paint us as we really are' (p. 177). This is the metaphor she spent some three years trying to find. This is why the play was so painful for her to write.

As the play moves towards its end Mags reaches out to her father by recalling a shared memory, a lyrical moment when they had swum together in a sea glowing with phosphorescence and she had taken him for an angel as he shone in the dark. For a moment she wins him away from Fanny, who resists the memory by offering a blandly scientific explanation, but they touch for a few minutes in this story which ends, nonetheless, with an acknowledgement that it had also marked the conclusion of something. It is a moment of understanding, involving that pattern of possession and loss which defines the relationship between parents and children and equally the shape of individual lives. As if to underline the special nature of this moment, the pet bird suddenly recites an entire stanza from Gray's *Elegy*, the portrait is revealed and for a moment, despite an initial shock, and to Mags's amazement and deep gratification, her parents admire it, relating it to a Renoir painting of dancers.

The play finally ends as Mags watches with tears in her eyes as Gardner takes Fanny in his arms and they dance together as though they were entering that painting where they will be secure from change, magically lifted above the brute fact of decline. The lights become 'dreamy and dappled' (p. 184). It is a scene which is simultaneously realistic and symbolic, lifted out of the real into the mythic, thus, perhaps, justifying her determination that *Painting Churches* should not be seen as a realistic play.

At the same time it is not difficult to see why it should be this play that

finally gave her the public and critical response she had been missing. Indeed the risk of the play lies in its potential for sentimentality. She has noted the extent to which frequently those most moved by the play have been those who have recently lost parents, and the final scene of reconciliation, of daughter with parents, parents with one another, and of all with the fact of death, can seem too neat a conclusion. On the other hand what we have been shown of the characters makes it a logical ending, albeit one more deeply infected with irony than its apparent sentimentalities would suggest.

The achievement of the play lies in its oblique revelation of character, in psychological tensions which find indirect expression. At its heart is a man whose grasp on the world is weakening, a man who has lived by and through language but who now finds that language slipping away from him. The art which gave shape and coherence to experience is now so many words on discarded sheets of paper. Reputation, accomplishment, intellectual authority, all slip away, lose their relevance in the face of irreversible decline. His daughter, meanwhile, pitches her art against the chaos of her own life, tries, like her father, to create order and coherence where she sees none. In this sense, of course, *Painting Churches* questions its own status, acknowledges the contingent nature of art, and expresses an anxiety about the function of language. A metatheatrical work, it simultaneously asserts and queries the power of theatre, indeed of any art, to breathe significance into the losing game with time. The final grace that Tina Howe offers her characters is to allow them to step from the quotidian into art where alone they are secure from the logic of mortality. But such a gesture, as she herself demonstrates in the discarded papers and ambiguous portrait, is not finally immune from process, art itself being subject to the same deconstructive logic it is designed to neutralise. Howe is closer here to Beckett, perhaps, than in those plays in which she claimed to be most directly influenced by the absurd.

From interiors invaded by a degree of chaos, Howe next moved to a larger space. *Coastal Disturbances*, which opened at New York's Second Stage in 1986, and re-opened at the Circle in the Square the following year, is set on a stretch of private beach on the Massachusetts coast. For the closed rooms of her previous three plays she substituted 'sky, sand and ocean' stretching off into the distance. At the same time this is something of an illusory change of direction for the small beach functions in much the same way as the rooms of her earlier plays in that it is in this space that the private dramas are enacted. It is, however, a play that, for

all its concentration on personal relationships, has epic pretensions in so far as it presents three generations, from the children, who play, sometimes with an edge of violence, to those experiencing the confusions of love, to an older couple, performing rituals which consolidate their relationship.

As in her earlier work a number of the characters are artists. Holly, in her early twenties, is a photographer from New York, bewildered by her emotions, drawn equally to a young lifeguard, whose physical beauty entrances and disturbs her, and to a sophisticated gallery owner, with whom she has lived for three years, and who exudes style and power. M. J. Adams, sixty-eight, is an amateur painter, whose husband, Hamilton, is a retired eye surgeon. Their life together, like that of Fanny and Gardner in *Painting Churches*, is not without its tensions and, indeed, the relationship is close to that dramatised in the earlier play. Other characters who appear on Howe's canvas are former room-mates from Wellesley College, now in their mid-thirties: Faith Bigelow, who had long struggled to have children but is now five months pregnant, and Ariel Took, four years divorced and menopausal.

The disturbances of the title are the emotional and psychological tensions played out in the course of two weeks in August on this New England beach. Indeed Faith, we learn, has invited Ariel precisely because she has had 'a rough time' (*Four Plays*, p. 194), though whether she would have confided this, as she does, to her seven-year-old adopted daughter is doubtful. Holly, meanwhile, is 'falling apart', bursting into tears in post offices, stores, in the street, the garden and the tool shed, the last underscoring her attempt to get away from people and hence the effort involved in appearing, as she does, on the beach.

The beach itself appears to be a place of resort for those whose lives are confused. Holly and M. J. attempt to hold the scene steady, one by photographs, the other by art, but both are unable to capture its essence in part, perhaps, because its psychological and spiritual functions evade reproduction. Both equally retreat into their art as a way of placing something between them and the world which disturbs them.

Holly has until now been solipsistic to the extent of specialising in nude photographs of herself. She is, though, unable to give expression to her sensuality except through the indirection of art. M. J., meanwhile, is aware that time is passing, slowly undoing her life. Nor are the others any more secure. Ariel is not only divorced but recovering from a stay in a mental home and from what appears to have been a series of attempted suicides, while Faith seems blithely, but disturbingly, unaware

of the tensions that surround her. Still not recovered from the fact of her pregnancy, she free-associates about fertility in front of one woman undergoing a premature menopause and another who desperately wants children. Both Ariel and Holly are reduced to tears.

Hamilton and M. J. are no help. They have nine children but theirs has been far from a perfect marriage. His work as a surgeon had kept him from home, as (ironically, given his work as an eye specialist) had his eye for other women. He now struggles to live with boredom, retirement having drained his life of much of its meaning. He strides up and down like a caged animal. Even Leo, the lifeguard, has just seen the collapse of a three-year relationship (the same length of time that had characterised Holly's relationship with her New York lover), though he seems more resilient than the others.

Once again, structurally, the play moves towards a moment of resolution, an epiphany. Once more there is magic in the air (Leo is an amateur conjurer who watches over events from the height of his life-saver's chair) as if this were Tina Howe's *Tempest*, complete with a Caliban, in the form of the young Winston, Ariel's son. The significantly named Miranda, however (Faith's adopted daughter), is, at seven, as yet too young to play the role here enacted by an older woman. And though the young lovers – Leo and Holly – are not to be married the door is, perhaps, not finally closed on such a possibility, though Leo's own fanciful plans for life on the Florida Keys suggest a fantasy that can finally do nothing to resolve Holly's deeper needs. Nonetheless, Leo has a restorative power which in some ways acts as a focus for the recuperative function of a place which, like a work of art, seems lifted out of time. As Faith remarks, when Leo has performed his magic by successfully treating Miranda's cut foot, 'She's okay. You're okay . . . and even I'm okay . . . More or less' (p. 219).

As the last three words indicate, not everything is resolved. Leo may bury Holly to the neck in sand, both a joke and an expression of his desire to keep her, but her former lover appears and she seems to resume the relationship that had given her so much pain. He, however, is out of place. His name, Andre Sor, clashes with the sturdy New England names of those on the beach. He wears clothes and shoes unsuited to sand. He fits uneasily into the magic of the beach so that when Holly, too, appears in similarly inappropriate shoes she is reduced to crawling, a humiliation which re-enacts that implicit in her relationship. By giving Leo her address and telephone number, however, she indicates that she is still poised in hesitation. By defending his territory (the lifeguard's chair)

against her former lover she indicates the new loyalty she feels. By degrees, too, it becomes apparent that that lover has been married during their relationship and that he now proposes deserting her, and not for the first time, for an overseas trip. The play ends with Faith having completed the sweater she has been knitting throughout, with M. J. and her husband celebrating their anniversary with a familiar ritual involving an alfresco meal, and Leo reciting Holly's telephone number to himself; in other words the play ends, as her earlier ones had done, with a small ritual of reconciliation.

Howe has explained that, 'tired of examining artists at work', she had set out to 'write about falling in love' (Preface, *Coastal Disturbances: Four Plays*, n.p.). However, it seems clear that she does still write about artists and their work and while the play is, indeed, a 'love story', it concerns more than love damaged and repaired, found and lost. It is about people restored to themselves and fitted to move out again into the world. It is about different stages in the lives of men and women and the price paid for passions indulged and denied. It pictures those at the beginning and those at the end of their lives, seeing in the former the seeds of later pain, and in the latter the echoes of childlike feelings.

Curiously, the two characters given the most elaborate speeches are both men. Leo tells a comic story about a youthful infatuation with a girl. Andre offers an account of his family's flight from the Nazis and his father's ability to transform detritus into art. But both stories offer an explanation for Holly's attraction to them. For her, Leo represents happiness without strings, his story offering a world which she can join, as they try to top each other's remarks. Andre represents an apparently serious commitment (at least on her part), a sense of the exotic. In the end, however, neither seems to have real substance. We are asked, nonetheless, to believe that her therapeutic fornication with Leo will transform her life while acknowledging that she is drawn to him for no better reason than he had been drawn to the young woman of his story. And this underlines the essence of Howe's strengths and weaknesses as a writer. She relies on creating these charged moments, asking audiences to accept the epiphanic nature of actions which exist only in order to offer such redemptive gestures.

As in *Painting Churches*, an elderly couple come together as some guarantee that life can be ended with forgiveness, style and grace. A younger person, frightened and disturbed, finds her way back if not to total equanimity then to some sense of new possibilities. Anxieties are exposed in order to be stilled, fractured lives revealed in order to be healed. The

pain is real enough. These are characters only just holding on to their lives, only just able to convince themselves to continue. But Howe seems, at times, to content herself with a shorthand representation of those lives, with offering the merest outline of character. So concerned is she to create a convincing human landscape that the individual components can, at times, seem little more than sketches. The bruise becomes the life.

*Coastal Disturbances* is a long way from the absurdist plays that first inspired her to write and though she still takes pleasure in surreal gestures (she calls for a dead whale to appear on the beach) hers is, by this stage in her career, a symbolic drama in which the setting becomes either an image of the state of mind of her characters or the site for psychological dramas of loss and recuperation. Her fear of being seen as a realist seems muted or at least the plays no longer seem to justify the vehemence of such a reaction.

She continues to write about artists who endeavour to still the disturbing flux of life by seeking to frame and contain it. Much the same, of course, could be said of her own work and indeed we have her assurance that it is deeply autobiographical in mood if not detail. The nervous women with whom she fills her frame, frequently anxious about motherhood and worried about public recognition for their art, reflect aspects of herself about which she has chosen to speak freely. The ritual repetition of elements in these plays, the re-enacted process of exposure, confession and resolution, makes them seem akin to therapeutic sessions. Her plays are metatheatrical, tableaux vivants, magical incantations. They are comedies which confront fears of dissolution, balancing acts in which anxieties are resolved, expiations, Walpurgisnachts culminating in exorcism. And the principal fear which they seek to purge is that of death.

Indeed her next play, *Approaching Zanzibar* (1989), focusses very precisely on a fear of death. It is a road play in which a family travel across country, from New York State to New Mexico, to see a relative dying of terminal cancer. Whatever their experiences along the way this is the one ineluctable fact that shadows the journey, a journey which is both literal and metaphoric. As ever in Howe's plays, it is a journey of understanding and reconciliation. The fear which grows as they approach their destination, and as the dying woman approaches hers, is finally neutralised by a simple gesture of human contact.

Behind the play, once again, lay personal concerns. She wrote it at the age of fifty, having found that milestone particularly difficult to pass. 'In conjunction with turning fifty I'd been watching various family members

of mine die. There's also the reality of AIDS, which is ever-present in New York, which I find devastating and which I think about daily. And I wanted to write a play that in some way would deal with some of this pain, the bewilderment, turning fifty, death, people dying, survivors, how the survivors keep going' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 268).

The Blossom family – Wallace, a composer, his wife Charlotte, their son Turner, himself a musical prodigy, and daughter Pony – set out to visit Olivia Childs, an artist, a Georgia O'Keefe character on the verge of death. In Howe's earlier work the drama had been contained within single rooms or clearly circumscribed spaces that became the crucible of the action. Here, in an episodic play, she opens up the stage to reflect a journey across America which is also a journey into understanding. Thus, scenes are set in cars, on boats, in tents, by a mountain stream and in a diner, as the action slowly moves across America, from Luray, Virginia, to the Blue Ridge Mountains, to Asheville, North Carolina, to the Smoky Mountains, a lake in Oklahoma City, the Texas Panhandle and, finally, Taos, New Mexico. It is as if she had suddenly decided to take on America. She even includes an African-American and a Mexican-American, breaking out of her previous commitment to WASP characters. Yet this journey down the arteries and veins of America, like William Least Moon's *Blue Highways*, is less about the discovery of a country than the revelation of private truths. Despite emphasis on the American landscape, her real concern remains with the internal landscapes of her characters.

Once again the figures at the heart of her play are vulnerable, caught at a moment of uncertainty. The father, both of whose parents had died the year before, is a composer whose skills seem, at least momentarily, to have escaped him. His wife is experiencing menopause and confronting the physical and mental implications of that fact. Their son is a virtuoso instrumentalist, but, at the age of twelve, unsure how to integrate that fact into his normal life. Their daughter, meanwhile, is vulnerable to anxieties. Once again, too, Tina Howe focusses on the figure of the artist (a composer, a musician and, in the figure of the distant aunt, a 'site specific artist').

The family travel by road because Charlotte, the mother, is afraid of flying but her fear goes beyond that. Forced to confront the fact that her childbearing days are over she seems to suffer a small death of her own, the end of a creativity more fundamental than that of those with whom she lives. The family, meanwhile, set out for a rendezvous with death, a

fact which the young girl, Pony, finds increasingly difficult to take, as if they were, in effect, carrying death with them. Thus, if the destination carries its own threat then so, too, does the journey.

The play begins with a brilliantly funny and well-observed scene as the family do battle in the car, the children provoking their parents, Charlotte criticising her husband's driving and he losing his temper. This family comedy, however, gives way to a series of scenes in which more radical tensions start to emerge.

Charlotte begins to hear a phantom baby she believes to have been abandoned, an expression of her depression at the loss of her own fertility, a subject close to Tina Howe's heart, who wrote the play in part 'because I'm a mother and have my own children and have also reached the age when I won't have any more' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 268). As the journey progresses so she begins to behave ever more strangely. When they encounter a man with his own young baby she is plainly disturbed, ripping open her blouse, almost as if she wanted to nurture it. At the same spot they meet a deaf child of eleven who seems something of a mystic and whose (sign) language far outstrips his age, again a familiar mark of Howe's work as a magical element is introduced at a moment of tension, for the fact is that the presence of the baby, and the sudden urging of her own children for her to produce a brother or sister for them, precipitates a crisis and Charlotte collapses in tears: 'I can't bear it . . . I'll never feel life moving inside me again . . . It's like . . . like part of me's dying. . . . The best part' (*Approaching Zanzibar*, p. 29).

Later, they stay, briefly, with Charlotte's brother (another artist, this time a landscape architect) whose wife is seven months pregnant. Again the subject of babies fractures Charlotte's equanimity. She begins to pour champagne over herself, anointing herself partly because she is unable to adjust to the hot flushes from which she is suffering but more profoundly because every day seems to bring her a reminder of her condition, seems to mock her, render her life ironic. As Howe has explained, part of her anguish is realizing that she won't have children anymore. And she's on this odyssey to visit this wonderfully creative old woman before *she* dies, and they keep running into babies along the way, which are both life-affirming and cause for great joy, but which in an odd way catch the mother up and make her sad. So it's really acknowledging my fear of death but trying to celebrate life at the same time. I just feel that all of us, in one way or another, are in a period of mourning. (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 268)

Her husband, too, begins to feel his redundancy. His son, Turner, has a talent which suggests that he will surpass him musically. When he tries

to induct him into the skills of fly fishing, once again the son proves more proficient than the father. He, too, then, feels his life tilt on the fulcrum and when later, as part of a family game, the children and parents exchange roles, playing one another, they are underlining a central truth about human life.

But it is not the parents alone who are frightened of death. Their daughter Pony is especially fearful. When they camp in the woods she transforms the sounds she hears into a bizarre complex of threats which Howe externalises, offering the play's director the interesting problem of finding sound effects that will realise her stage direction that there should be 'spooky sounds. Wings flap, the baby cries and cries, an albino bat gives birth to kittens . . . A lion roars nearby' (*Approaching Zanzibar*, p. 37). She begins to eat flowers, a gesture which echoes her mother's obsessive actions but which also foreshadows the play's ending when the flowers are transformed into a garland of life.

When the family finally arrive at Taos, a place that itself seems to generate a magic aura, they are confronted with the dying Olivia, a fact that brings them all face to face with the anxiety that has been building throughout their journey, a journey whose metaphoric force is spelled out when Charlotte laments: 'You dance through childhood, race through the teenage years, fall in love a couple of million times, bear some delicious babies, and then . . . whhhhhst, it's all over' (p. 65). Nor does art seem a protection. Olivia creates constructions whose essence lies in their temporary nature, their vulnerability to the forces of nature. As Charlotte observes, 'That's the whole point – the risk of losing it all . . . Her work celebrates its vulnerability to nature . . . Prayer is eternal, but our shrines are made of air' (p. 21). At the time she makes this remark, earlier in the play, it lacks the force it gains later, in the presence of death. For her description of Olivia's art is equally a description of human life. Its beauty and its evanescence are essentially linked.

Yet for all its transience there is a continuity. Olivia creates her constructions on sacred Indian sites, thus underlining a link between the ages, between the generations, and that link is now re-enacted as the character most fearful of death, the young girl Pony, is embraced by the woman whom she fears as the embodiment of that death. Together they perform a ritual, a ceremony of word and action, as they eat flowers and play the same childhood game the family had played on their journey in which they had recited the names of American states and cities, beginning each word with the last letter of the word before. It is a game which runs from Albuquerque to Zanzibar, a linguistic echo of the journey of

life from beginning to end, from the baby encountered on the road to the dying woman waiting for them at the end. Now, though, the places stretch across the world and culminate in the repetition of the word 'Paradise'. Child and old woman bounce up and down on what will be her deathbed, the circle closed, as woman becomes child and child woman (Olivia wearing Pony's glasses; Pony wearing Olivia's wig), in a place where the woman has created a construction identified as a ring of prayer.

Olivia's final memory, as she slips into death, is of a journey which had itself ended in a literal Zanzibar, albeit transformed in her mind by the intensity of the experience with which she associates it. At the age of twenty, having studied art in Paris, she had taken a train to the Sahara desert only to meet a man whose beauty entranced her and who had made love to her. From there they had journeyed together to Zanzibar. It is a memory she has carried with her and which even now redeems what seems the defeat of death. She tells the story to her young niece as a paradigm of life ('you'll do it too, you'll do it all, wait and see', p. 74), stilling the fear of a girl afraid of life because afraid of death.

Pony and Olivia bouncing on the bed offer a bizarre image, but in some ways a logical conclusion to the journey which is the play, a metaphor for Howe's celebration of life. The promise of the young children, the emotional blaze of youth, the faltering talent of middle age, the trauma of physiological change, the precipitate decline of old age are contained within the circle drawn by Olivia's art, as they are within that drawn by Tina Howe's. Her plays, indeed, are in some ways incantations, spells, mantras. The young Pony has elaborated a system of neurotic gestures designed to ward off the dark, to still her fear. It is tempting to say that Howe has done likewise and that her plays are these gestures. They certainly address anxieties, some of which derive from a specifically woman's point of view having to do with relationships, childlessness, the loss of fertility and hence of biological role. Some are more general and relate to the difficulty of making sense of a life characterised by decline. They are not, though, neurotic gestures, but metaphors.

In effect her plays are constructed of a series of images, tableaux in which she can still the very processes which are the cause of alarm. For other writers this might be the source of irony: witness the losing battles of Tennessee Williams's characters, the stasis to which they condemn themselves in an effort to deny the onward rush of time. For Howe, though, there is a grace available not least because in play after play she creates characters whose art mirrors her own. The potential for senti-

mentality here is obvious and, both in terms of language and action, she frequently succumbs to this temptation. Complex concerns, disturbing fears, profound anxieties are met with a lyrical language and a simple faith in natural process. Love is allowed authority, while magic, a non-rational sense of underlying harmony, proves an operative and affecting force. Against pain, despair and even terror she pitches images whose power lies in their very structure as they reconcile opposites, generate meaning out of conflicting fields of meaning.

What rescues her plays from this sentimental tendency is wit, her acute powers of observation with respect to individual psychology, the sheer originality of her stage metaphors, a persistent sense of irony, and a courage that takes her into the heart of experiences with which few if any other writers have chosen to engage, into the heart of experiences, indeed, which she herself was nervous to enter. As she has said of this play, 'I was writing about matters that were of such crushing urgency for me . . . It's very daring, it's very dark. It's all about my fears' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 275). However diverse and, indeed, bizarre her plays are, the fact remains that she is a deeply autobiographical writer not in terms of the details of her daily living (though her plays do reflect stages in her own life) but in so far as she offers audiences a spiritual account of her own journey in the conviction that it will relate to theirs.

She has commented on the fact that 'it's very tricky to be true to your darker self and still get laughs, to put it on its most vulgar level', but, she insists, she is, indeed, 'firmly wedded to the comic tradition' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 273). That self is often 'a rather dark femaleness and a female pain' that even now, she concedes, she has not been willing fully to engage. However, in *Approaching Zanzibar* she plainly comes close to doing this while also being concerned to celebrate male tenderness, creating a scene in which a man carries a young baby because 'to me nothing is more poignant than male tenderness' and 'if men aren't going to celebrate the tenderness of themselves, I'll do it for them' (p. 270).

In describing her impetus to write the play she has remarked that, 'inching towards fifty and starting to feel my mortality, I was desperate to give voice to this crisis from a female perspective'. Her experience was that audiences responded along gender lines, with the women being 'rhapsodic' and the men 'divided' (*Approaching Zanzibar*, p. x). There is no doubting that the principal figures are three generations of women and that the play ends with a celebration of the female principle as much as

with a celebration of the life for which that principle is made to stand. But the men in the play are also creative, if not noticeably 'new men' in the 1990s sense, though the dubiously named Randy comes close to being such. But as themselves artists, with their own power to create, they are not mere bystanders in a female ritual. Indeed the essence of the ritual which is the play is that they are joint creators of the art work which in the end has true significance, namely the children who will continue the journey. More surprisingly, Howe remarks that 'as always, I embraced the absurdists as models, playing loose with language and event. *Approaching Zanzibar* was the result' (p. x). It is hard to agree. We are a long way here from Beckett and Ionesco, or even from Genet. There is nothing about her loosely structured play that would substantiate such a claim. It has more in common with Thornton Wilder than the European playwrights she most admired. But if she was no longer the absurdist she believed in this play, she came much closer to being such with her next. As if to step back from the logic of her own career, which, for all its moments of magic, its occasional distortions of perspective, its kaleidoscopic patterning, had drifted away from that commitment to absurdism which she had once declared so forthrightly, almost perversely she followed *Approaching Zanzibar* with *One Shoe Off* (1993), a play distantly related to the disastrous *Birth and Afterbirth* of more than twenty years before.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it received what she herself described as universally hostile reviews, and by no means undeservedly. Taking two characters from the earlier play, Dinah and Leonard, it locates their disintegrating relationship in a collapsing environment. Their farmhouse in rural upstate New York is beginning to sink into the ground. Rooms 'are drifting into each other leaving mouldings, doorjams and window frames stranded' (*Approaching Zanzibar*, p. 145). The staircase disappears in mid-air and most of the upper walls have gone. Trees, grass and shrubbery have taken root inside the house and vegetables grow in the cupboards. The wind howls outside.

We have Howe's assurance that the play was 'about the theatre . . . as much as it was about survival and the meaning of love' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 275), two of her perennial concerns. Beyond that it was to be seen as 'an inner landscape, an absurdist piece about the randomness of life and the catastrophes and how one holds on' (p. 276), again a familiar setting and a still more familiar theme. What is less clear is how the play itself could be said to embody these issues or, if embodying them, how they could be said to compel the attention of

the audience. Rather as in Tennessee Williams's *Gnädige Fräulein*, the outlandish and grotesque characters, the arbitrary action and the heavily symbolic setting, seem like so many notes without a stave.

Once again the characters are artists of one kind or another. Two are actors, one a costume designer, one an editor. They come together for a party, while sharing almost nothing but a degree of celebrity and even forgetting one another's names. Not without its humour – the dress designer is unable to decide what clothes to wear and constantly appears in a different costume, the editor, whose business is words, loses control of language – it never quite becomes what Howe claims it to be. The arbitrary certainly rules, as the designer is injured when a mobile home causes mayhem on the highway, but it is hard to say that love is an operative factor. In truth nothing seems to hold these people together as their lives tumble downwards in some unstoppable spiral. It is, perhaps, a cry of pain but survival is no more than the source of irony. When Leonard says of his wife, 'You're like the cauliflower under our bed, fierce and tenacious' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 210), this unfortunate image is not a celebration of moral or even physical resolve but evidence of their blindness to the reality (if such a word is appropriate) of their situation. They may cling together at the end of the play, reciting a litany of catastrophes, but their relationship is no more than a theatrical gesture in the face of a raging storm. This is not *King Lear* challenging the universe but two people for whom performance has become everything. All they ask for is some relief. In sharp contrast to *Approaching Zanzibar*, the final tableau, as they hold one another and the wind slowly subsides, seems an image without substance.

In fact, and despite her often repeated remarks about the absurd, the best of Tina Howe's work owes relatively little to those writers for whom she professes such respect. Instead, the absurd seems to have acted as a catalyst, to have given her permission to break with conventional realism. It validated the stage images which became the basis for her aesthetic. Philosophically she inhabits an altogether different universe. Her plays take as their theme and dramatic strategy the reconciling of opposites. They are more concerned with celebration than irony, though that irony persists. Seeing herself as the possessor of an essentially European sensibility, and therefore somewhat baffled by the failure of her plays to find a significant audience in Europe, she is in fact quintessentially American in her optimism, her emphasis on redemption, her consecration of love, her admiration of resilience. She may acknowledge a tragic strain in human experience but rushes to staunch pity and fear with

comedy. Her theatre is a ceremony in which death is not denied but accepted and therefore transcended, not seen as the ultimate source of absurdity but the natural conclusion of a journey, although she is less disposed to confront it directly than find a correlative which denies its true force.

She deals in ritualised gestures, which is one reason why the artist features so centrally in her work. But the artist is also the bringer of order to contingency, resisting the slide towards dissolution, though doubts about such a presumption surface from time to time as she acknowledges the fragility of such constructions in the face of entropy. 'I seem to write about artists,' she has explained, 'because for me artists are the closest we come to heroes in our society . . . whether they're visual artists or poets or whatever' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 267). She sees the shapes constructed by artists as something more than the source of that absurdity which comes precisely from a doomed effort to find order in disorder, shape in chaos, form in the merely arbitrary, while acknowledging the neuroses, the fear, the desperation which lead to the creation of such art. Believing herself to be confronting harsh truths, she in fact stages moments of revelation that are moments of consolation. In play after play she justifies life to itself, accepting its passing cruelties but locating these against deeper rhythms to do with the generation of life and its necessary relinquishment. The truth is that most of her plays do not deal in Beckett's dark comedy, in Ionesco's satirical exuberance or even Genet's sexual subversions, nor, despite her announced enthusiasm for his work, does she deal in Pirandello's deconstruction of character, his reduction of the real to theatrical gesture. When Holly is buried in sand in *Coastal Disturbances* this is not the mark of a Beckett character abandoned to stasis, but a gesture of love. The endgame enacted by Olivia in *Approaching Zanzibar* is not that performed by blind Hamm and his slave Clov. It is part of a ceremony of renewal. In truth most of her characters end up, like Olivia, 'in Zanzibar, island of cloves' (*Approaching Zanzibar*, p. 74). And what could be more American than a playwright prepared to deny the force of death?

Her 1997 play, *Pride's Crossing*, like *Approaching Zanzibar*, is the story of a journey, but this journey is through time rather than space, taking its audience from 1917 to the present, stopping off in the 1920s, 1940s and 1960s. It is, Howe has explained, a 'memory play', and, indeed, we see the passing years through the memory of the central character, Mabel Bigelow, who once swam the English Channel, an accomplishment

which stands out in a life increasingly defined by disappointment and regret. It is not that she has succumbed to self-pity and despair. Far from it. Even at the age of ninety she shows signs of the rebellious spirit which once did battle with her equally strong commitment to propriety. But, infected with cancer, the last of a line ('the sediment at the bottom of the glass') and facing 'the dark flight down oblivion,'<sup>6</sup> she looks back over a life of triumph and inconsequence in an attempt to make sense of her life. Like Arthur Miller's Mr Peters, in *Mr Peters' Connections*, she tries to identify the plot of that life, to discover its subject for, with death fast approaching, it becomes more necessary than ever to decide what it might have amounted to.

Tom, in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, and Willy, in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, resist the past out of a sense of guilt and with an awareness of failure. They accuse themselves of betrayals, acknowledge, directly and indirectly, the human cost of pursuing an ideal, real or imagined. Mabel, too, is drawn to the past for motives other than nostalgia, for the fact is that the past contains the explanation for her present – the decline of her family no less than of herself, and perhaps beyond that the decline of a culture detached from its own past and hence from the source of its values. In so far as she is guilty of betrayal it is betrayal in the sense of turning her back on a life that burned so brightly, of rejecting love in the name of duty, of an ordered life.

*Pride's Crossing* is both a place and a subject. It is a place in that the central action occurs in the Massachusetts town of that name, and a subject in that the most important event in the life of the central character was itself a crossing – that of the English Channel. But beyond that there are other crossings, crucial moments of decision, transgressions of gender and social roles, while pride, sometimes verging on arrogant presumption, sometimes expressive of adherence to principle, is an animating force. It is a play in which Howe calls for actors to cross boundaries of gender and age. It is equally a play in which pride quite literally comes before a fall in a golden family touched with doom.

We first encounter Mabel in a darkened bedroom in the coachhouse (once the chauffeur's cottage) of the former Tidings estate. Wearing mismatched clothes, her hearing failing, her finances in disarray, and moving awkwardly with the aid of a walker, she is planning a Fourth of July croquet party of the kind her family had enjoyed in their heyday. She is joined by a fellow nonagenarian whose one-time love for her

<sup>6</sup> Tina Howe, Author's Note, *Pride's Crossing* (New York, 1998), p. 5.

seems to have survived the years, by her nurse-housekeeper and by that housekeeper's foul-mouthed and insolent son, an intrusion from the late twentieth century of which she is curiously tolerant. It is his insolence, however, that sends her back in memory to her own youth, a time more elegant and expansive if equally fraught with adolescent passion. The membrane between past and present is thin. It takes little more than a word, a gesture, a familiar mood to send Mabel into a past whose meaning could only become apparent with time.

There is a dreamlike quality to these transitions, and though the settings are described in considerable detail we have Howe's assurance that this 'does not mean one has to be a slave to reality,' since 'interpretation is all in the theater' (Author's Note, *Pride's Crossing*, p. 5). Indeed, she responded enthusiastically to director Jack O'Brien and designer Ralph Funicello's creation of 'a dreamscape of gauze panels and floating windows' for the Old Globe production, as she did to the decision to mime the eating of food and the playing of croquet. The Lincoln Centre production added images of clouds and water to time changes accomplished by lighting and sound, costume changes, meanwhile, being effected onstage, in full view of the audience, reflecting the fact that Mabel is, in effect, re-staging the past as a drama, presenting her own life as itself a form of theatre.

The Tidings are a WASP family, privileged, skimming across the surface of life. They have servants and spend their time on expensive hobbies. Mabel's father is a prize-winning yachtsman, her brother plays polo and becomes an Olympic diving champion, and this is a male-dominated world. Women are obliged to find their place on the periphery. *Pride's Crossing* is in part concerned with Mabel's efforts to challenge that male world as it is with her attempt to secure the love of her mother, herself a servant to values which exclude her, sustaining a system which gives her domestic authority in exchange for social power.

The great moment of her life is the Channel crossing, but this also marks the moment of a crucial failure of nerve as she turns her back on the person she loves, opting instead for a man who represents the world in which she has been raised. Offered a chance to cross the line, break free of her upbringing, she 'did the right thing'. She concedes too much. As she laments, she 'followed the rules' (p. 103) and missed the moment. The man she rejects is English and Jewish, a fellow swimmer. The man she accepts is a pure product of her own class, national identity, religion – stunningly attractive and deeply self-regarding. The house in which they live when they marry embodies the hermetic and suffocating values

of a group which lacks not physical daring but courage of a different kind, along with vision and values. There is, Howe explains in describing the set, 'something oppressive about the place. Heavy carpets cover the floor and brocade drapes obscure the windows. The room is filled with family heirlooms and antiques. Grim-faced ancestors stare down from oil paintings' (p. 76). Yet we are also told that this is 'like the Tidings house'. In other words, beneath the glitter, the game-playing, the brittle energy, both households are self-regarding. Mabel finds herself treated in the first as an amusing but aberrant child and in the second as a possession, in thrall to a man whose drunkenness and prejudice make him daily less supportable.

Her family live self-obsessed lives. For all their apparent communal-ity, the men are absorbed in their own concerns, the women no more than support systems. One brother dies of 'too much fame and too much drink' (p. 67); the other is a suicide. Her father dies at sea, sailing on his own. Just beneath the surface of this so civilised life, death is common currency. And now, at ninety, Mabel can count those who have died before her. Her mother is dead with a stroke, her one-time lover with cancer. The world is shrinking. The woman who once swam the Channel can now barely cross the room.

And yet *Pride's Crossing* is not, finally, a story of death. Preparing for her final crossing, Mabel is still able to draw on resources that have not dulled with age. Her imagination is still alive. She has the power to galvanise others, to communicate with the young and, in the final croquet game, to insist, at last, that everyone should break the rules: 'I'm sick to death of the rules' (p. 104). She also judges herself harshly, however. She admires her granddaughter Julia, who has married a Frenchman and settled in France. 'You stayed the course,' she tells her, 'you went the distance . . . but not me . . . I pulled myself together and turned back.' But Julia is not happy. Indeed she is 'swamped with sadness' (p. 103). Her own husband spends time away from her. Perhaps Mabel is wrong, then, in feeling that she made a mistake in not marrying the man she loved, in seeing her life thereafter as a coda, for the fact is that she does stay the course, go the distance.

The play ends as Mabel returns, in her mind, to the moment of her Channel swim at what appears also to be the moment of her death. In the midst of the anarchic croquet game she turns back to the moment her life changed, when the future was still undecided and she was on the verge of life. As the curtain falls so she dives into the water or, in the original production, into the arms of the other characters. Her journey

complete, she is reconciled to herself, to the ghosts of her past and to a life in which she has learned to live with the consequences of her actions. The young girl who trained so hard to make one crossing, now makes another, a final, definitional one.

There was, as Tina Howe explained, a young woman who swam the English Channel in 1926, a New Yorker named Gertrude Ederle. The play, however, was inspired not by her but by Howe's ninety-year-old Aunt Maddy, a woman who never left home, never married and never swam a stroke. So, as Howe not unreasonably asked, 'Where's the truth?' The answer lies in the fact that, as she confessed, for 'some time now I've wanted to write about the passion of old ladies. When men age,' she suggested,

they just get older, but women become more powerful. It's the female thing: that we bear children and nurture the family. As time passes, the membranes between what we *should* do and what we *want* to do get thinner and thinner. There's no rage like an old lady's rage, just as there's no tenderness like an old lady's tenderness.

As this century comes to a close, I wanted to celebrate the life of a woman who lived through most of it. I chose my Aunt Maddy because she grew up in a household where women were expected to live under the porch. It was a grand porch, but their place was definitely beneath it. With the field mice. Some women managed to scramble free, but most didn't, so this is a replay for my beloved aunt. This time she rises like a phoenix above the porch, house, shoreline and all. (Introduction, *Pride's Crossing*, p. viii)

This is the essence not only of *Pride's Crossing* but of Howe's drama, which does, indeed, thin the membrane between what we should do and what we want to do and which celebrates those women who do scramble free, at least in the imagination, who climb out from beneath the porch.

*Pride's Crossing* is a long way from those early plays in which Tina Howe committed herself to surreal images and relentless humour. It is, however, organically related to *Painting Churches*, *Coastal Disturbances* and *Approaching Zanzibar* in which characters struggle to come to terms with personal disappointments and approaching death. The humour is now more directly in the service of character and thematic concern. The 'chaos', 'lunatic climaxes', and 'flying language' of *Museum* and *The Art of Dining* have given way to a measured concern with those anxious to discover or impose some shape on the flux of experience, with those confronted with the logic of decline. As in her other plays of the 1980s and 1990s, she edges her characters towards an epiphany, a moment of

reconciliation, with death no less than with life. *Pride's Crossing* is not free of sentimentality but in the organic nature of its central metaphor, in its historic sweep and affecting protagonist, it is, in many ways, the most impressive work by a writer who, whatever her initial influences, has created her own distinctive style and identified her own enduring concerns.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Tony Kushner*

Tony Kushner's imagination has been shaped by a number of diverse and sometimes apparently conflicting forces. A Southern Jewish homosexual with Marxist leanings, he is drawn equally to a dialectical theatre, in which the politics of the right are engaged in the context of an unfolding history, and to a theatre of fantasy, in which the imagination becomes a primary resource. Radical politics impact on gay liberation, European aesthetics meet an American artistic tradition, realism collides with fantasy, history is brought into shattering proximity with the contemporary. His is an eclectic theatre, a grand kaleidoscope in which patterns form and re-form and different styles braid together to create startling images.

His is a political theatre, rational in its logical connections; it is also a theatre in which prescriptive politics are seen as destructive and the irrational the source of true insight. Deeply Brechtian, it confronts audiences with ineluctable facts, an analysis of historical process; at the same time it stages the lives of those who inhabit the interstices of history and discover in the personal the root of true meaning. It deploys an affecting lyricism, shaping experience into contingent form, and stages the splintering of such lyricism by forces which well up not only from the corrupting nature of power and bigotry but from a self whose depths at times seem beyond investigation or even imagination. Asked to list influences Kushner is liable to offer writers who scarcely seem natural bedfellows – Rilke, O'Neill, Brecht, Williams, Guare, Foreman, Fornes, Fierstein, Bond, Churchill, Hare, Ludlam. Somewhere in the background, meanwhile, are Marx, Trotsky and Benjamin but he also expresses his commitment to American liberalism. This is a man wandering through a snowstorm of influences, his face tilted back to the sky. Where others might see contradictions, he sees a kind of harmony, unlikely, perhaps, but real enough given his upbringing.

Though his exposure to Marx came late, a critique of capitalism had

been to hand in his religious background. As he has explained: 'Our family read from Haggadahs written by a New Deal Reform rabbinate which was unafraid to draw connections between Pharaonic and modern capitalist exploitations; between the exodus of Jews from Goshen and the journey towards civil rights for African-Americans; unafraid to make of the yearning which Jews have repeated for thousands of years a democratic dream of freedom for all peoples.'<sup>1</sup> Even the liberalism to which he was heir was, in his own words, 'spiced' with socialism and internationalism as his Jewishness was touched with a conviction that utopia would eventually arrive not in Jerusalem but America.

His progressivism makes him wish to resist tribalism, to 'seek out connection' (*Thinking*, p. 5); his homosexuality, to 'acknowledge the rights of other excluded groups and individuals'. His instincts are inclusive not exclusive, but this fact has created a degree of tension between himself and others in the gay movement for whom self-definition depended precisely on such exclusion. His is a political drama but one which weaves together Brechtian expressionism, narrative realism and gay fantasy. His is a work that emerges from tension and contradiction (in the Whitman sense).

As he has remarked, 'the only politics that can survive an encounter with this world, and still speak convincingly of freedom and justice and democracy, is a politics that can encompass both the harmonics and the dissonance. The fizzle, the rubbed raw, the unresolved, the fragile and the fiery and the dangerous' (*Thinking*, pp. 10–11), all of which he has identified as 'American things'. At the same time, in his first play he was to find his inspiration outside the country, pulling together different cultures and different times, discovering parallels, contrasts, metaphors, analogues between 1930s Germany and the America of the 1980s and 90s. His drama is centripetal, in its power to draw to the centre styles, subjects and ideas, and centrifugal in its ability to fling outward images, rhetorics, the detritus of history transformed into light. His plays seek to neutralise the occluded nature of an oppressive intolerance with a revitalised language and a rejuvenated sense of connectiveness. Theatre, for him, is an arena for debate, for exposing the mechanics of history, but equally a circus in which danger, display and sheer entertainment take a primary role.

He once, jokingly, offered the baking of lasagne as a metaphor for the creation of his plays, in part, at least, because of the sheer conflicting

<sup>1</sup> Tony Kushner, *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (London, 1995), p. 5.

richness of its ingredients and nature. This is the opposite of what Brecht used to call 'culinary' art, by which he meant that art in which the process of making is subordinated to an appreciation and consumption of the end product. Indeed, Kushner seems to take greater pleasure in itemising the contents and exploring this lasagne/drama than he does in anticipating its eventual enjoyment. His description is a remarkably accurate account if not of a play such as *A Bright Room Called Day*, then certainly of *Angels in America*. The lasagne, he insisted, should be:

garrulous, excessively, even suspiciously generous, promiscuous, flirtatious, insistent, persistent overwhelming exhaustive and exhausting . . . a balance between fluidity and solidity, between architecture and melting . . . something between a pie and a *mélange*, there are membranes but they are permeable, the layers must maintain their integrity and yet exist in an exciting dialectic tension to the molten oozy cheesy oily juices which they separate, the goo must almost but not quite completely successfully threaten the always-discernible-yet-imperiled imposed order . . . A good play I think should always feel as though it's only barely been rescued from the brink of chaos. (*Thinking*, p. 61)

Acknowledging that pretentiousness, grandiosity and portentousness (all elements of his work) could be seen as the tropes of fascism and demagoguery he nonetheless sees them as equally American, a characteristic noted in the American arts by de Tocqueville and equally observable in the great documents of American democracy and, of course, the rhetoric of those American writers whom Kushner most admires: Melville and Whitman. America has, after all, always oversold itself, whether it be via frontier humour or claims to millenarian grace. The origins of lasagne, therefore, might lie outside the country, but the origins of *Angels in America* were resolutely national, if not domestic.

Any argument that attempts to accommodate gay art and camp pretentiousness (and Kushner insists that 'Pretentiousness is Camp, it is Drag') to classical Americanism is a bold one, and not without its irony (Whitman notwithstanding), not least because camp contains its own ironic code (which, in one sense, might be said to deflate the pretension it seems to embrace). At the same time it is not one without some justification. Certainly Kushner's critique of contemporary American values tends to be conducted in terms of principles factored into the Great Experiment from its earliest days.

Intellectually, Kushner is constantly drawn to dualisms, to the tension that he sees as defining the nature of identity, but more significantly he is committed to the transcendence of those dualisms. In discussing the situation of the African-American in America, who had him- or herself always acted as a defining opposite, he significantly recalled a passage

from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*: 'Images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable – all the self-contradictory features of the self' (*Thinking*, p. 51). Just as the struggle to transform margin into centre provided the energy for political and social change so, within the psyche, it became a description of the process of self-creation while providing that torque which set his plays in motion.

Not the least of the colliding opposites in his work is that generated by his particular sexuality, to be solemnly defended and riotously celebrated. In a post-AIDS world the contradictions go deep, for as he has observed, 'no gay man can ever again speak about sex without everyone's thoughts, including his own, performing contrapuntal meditations on morbidity and mortality' (*Thinking*, p. 14). This tension, indeed, along with the others identified above, goes some way to defining the parameters of his theatre and the urgency that lies behind his plays.

And what of his socialism? That itself seems as eclectic as his art, an odd blend of Karl Marx and Oscar Wilde. Thus, though he has read Marx and Trotsky, what seems to have caught his attention most is Wilde's essay on 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. Indeed, he quotes Wilde's remark, from that essay, that 'One's regret . . . is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man is forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful and fascinating and delightful in him – in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living' (*Thinking*, pp. 31–2). While acknowledging the cogency of dialectical materialism and the force of arguments about the means of production and the reduction of the self to such, the gloss which he puts on Wilde's remarks seems to express more directly his sense of socialism as a redemptive force. 'Socialism, as an alternative to individualism politically and capitalism economically,' he has said, 'must surely have as its ultimate objective the restitution of the joy of living we may have lost when we first picked up a tool' (*Thinking*, p. 32). Looking into the future he sees a possible 'socialism of the skin'. Rather closer in time, however, is the possibility of creating a theatre which can in some degree reflect such an objective.

He explains his own interest in theatre as having been sparked by his mother, who was a talented amateur actress (his father was a conductor). He recalls her performances in *Death of a Salesman* and *Anne Frank* ('I think it has something to do with being a mother-defined gay man . . . and an identification with her participation').<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1996), p. 293.

Beyond that, he suspects that the theatre created an environment in which it was possible for him to handle, if not address or openly express, his homosexuality: 'I'm sure that the disguise of theatre, the doubleness, and all that slightly tawdry stuff interested me.' At the same time, and in spite of his own attempts at acting, the fact that the theatre drew gay men was disturbing to him since he was, in his own words, 'very closeted' having decided 'at a very early age that I would become heterosexual' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 293). Indeed, he has admitted to an early hatred of his fellow gays, denying in others what he would deny in himself, a contradiction that sent him into a therapy which, he has claimed, comes close to rivalling Woody Allen's for longevity.

He moved from Louisiana, where he had grown up 'in the culture of "genteel" post-integration bayou-county racism' (*Thinking*, p. 50), from which he nonetheless derived a belief in the efficacy of political action, to New York (his birthplace), because he believed it would be a place 'in which people of fantastically varied backgrounds could live, intimately, intricately mixed' (*Thinking*, p. 46). He sees the South, with its 'lively mixture of linguistic traditions' and ornate 'relationship to language', as having bequeathed him a useful tool while New York offered him a wider variety of experience. He arrived in 1974 and was once more drawn to theatre, from Broadway shows, often originating in England (*Absurd Person Singular*, *Equus*), to the experimental drama of the Performance Group and subsequently the Wooster Group, seeing productions of works by Richard Foreman, Lee Breuer, Spalding Gray and Joanne Akalitis. Two productions in particular were major influences on his later work: Richard Schechner's version of *Mother Courage* and Richard Foreman's of *The Threepenny Opera*. Of the latter he has said that it seemed to him to combine the visual sense of the plays he had seen with a narrative tradition with which he felt more comfortable. It also seemed to suggest the centrality of theatre itself. And, indeed, it was his reading of Brecht, together with an increasing political militancy, that led him to begin thinking of a career in the theatre.

Politically, he regarded himself as a liberal Zionist, only to discover that in New York those were often seen as antithetical positions. As a student he encountered Marx and Marxist theoreticians of literature. Indeed it was the reading of Walter Benjamin's *Understanding Brecht* that led him to start directing plays, beginning with Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, feeling that this would be easier than generating the texts himself. He applied to and was eventually accepted by the New York University

graduate school in directing, offering a brief Brecht play as his audition piece.

The attraction of Brecht, whose plays he was later to direct (*Mother Courage* at the University of New Hampshire, *The Good Woman of Setzuan* at the La Jolla Playhouse, plus *In the Jungle of Cities*) lay partly in what he saw as Brecht's 'multi-focal . . . multiple perspective'<sup>3</sup> and partly in his openness to popular forms of theatre, as well as his political engagement. In the 1980s, when Kushner was a graduate student at NYU, he co-founded a company called 3P Productions which later became the Heat and Light Company, taking his inspiration as much from such British groups as 7:84 and Monstrous Regiment as from Mabou Mines and the Wooster Group.

In 1984, having left New York University, Kushner went through what he called 'a very, very black time'. As Tom Szentgyorgi observed, 'a close relative had died; a good friend and collaborator was in a serious car accident; his theatre group, 3P (for the three P's of theater: poetry, politics, and popcorn), came apart; his mentor at NYU, Carl Weber, left to teach on the West Coast; and Ronald Reagan was reelected president'.<sup>4</sup> As Kushner himself remarked, 'the desolate political sphere mirrored in an exact and ugly way an equally desolate personal sphere'. It was in this mood that he began work on a play about 'Germans, refugee and otherwise, caught on the cusp of the historical catastrophe about to engulf them' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 13). The title derived from his mishearing of Agnes de Mille, on videotape, describing a new dance called 'A Bridegroom called Death'.

Kushner's first play, *A Bright Room Called Day*, produced initially by the Heat and Light Company at Theatre 22 in New York City, in 1985, and later at the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco (1987) and New York's Public Theatre in 1991, shows the impact of his various influences, but was, most specifically, a response to Brecht's *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*. It was, he has said, his attempt to confront Brecht and to engage with German subject matter. Beyond that, it was a struggle to find his own voice in the presence of a writer who threatened to subsume him. To Kushner it was both a bid to imitate and to transcend while its thematic concern with exile perhaps related Brecht's own experience to Kushner's more subtle sense of exclusion. In particular he wished to explore ways of dealing with political material, of engaging style and

<sup>3</sup> Carl Weber, 'I Always Go Back to Brecht: A Conversation with the Playwright Tony Kushner', in *The Brecht Year Book 20*, ed. John Willett (Madison, WI, 1995), p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Vorlicky, ed., *Tony Kushner in Conversation* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998), pp. 11–13.

diction in a way that differed from Brecht's. In other words, it was a significant rite of passage for a young playwright who wished to pay homage to a dominant influence but who also wished to find a way around this seemingly implacable figure.

Kushner's own explanation of the play is worth quoting at length:

There are moments in history when the fabric of everyday life unravels, and there is this unstable dynamism that allows for incredible social change in short periods of time . . . I think that Russia in 1917 was one of those times, Chile under Allende was one of those times. It's a moment when the ground and the sky . . . split apart, and there's a space, a revolutionary space . . . These spaces only exist for very limited periods of time and then somebody's going to get control. And what happens frequently is that the Left doesn't get control . . . That's what the play is about, that's what a 'bright room called day' is. That space. If the Left had not lost heart at a series of critical moments, I think Hitler might not have been able to take power, or consolidate his power. (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 4)

In many ways a startlingly original work, it is allusive and lyrical, displaying that mixture of sensual delight and the unpleasant that he had seen in *The Threepenny Opera*. Brecht, too, of course, had written plays that invoke the past as an analogy or parallel to the present (*Mother Courage, Galileo, The Days of the Commune*), preferring, indeed, to avoid addressing contemporary events directly, and this is what Kushner sets out to do here in a play which visits a moment in the past that he sees as offering a cautionary comment on his own times. Set partly at the time of the Weimar Republic of the early 1930s, and partly in a shifting present, it is designed never to have a definitive text or, therefore, a definitive production. Producers are instructed to contact the author so that new material, germane to the moment, can be added. It is, in that sense, an unfinished play in a permanent state of flux, a dialectical debate between the past and a moving present.

At the time of its initial composition Ronald Reagan constituted the contemporary point of reference, the parallel to past events being invoked for the warning it offered to an unjustifiably confident present. This later shifted to incorporate George Bush, as the Gulf War replaced Cold War politics with active military ventures. Yet while there are problems with such a strategy, more especially with its implicit and largely unquestioned assumptions about the present, *A Bright Room Called Day* offers a great deal more than a simple invitation to compare and contrast historical moments.

Not only is *A Bright Room Called Day* set partly in Europe, it is marked

by a European assumption about the significance of history and its relationship to the present. Indeed, it is prefaced by an historical note which outlines the facts of the Weimar Republic, whose imminent collapse provides the context for Kushner's drama. We are reminded that the Republic was a constitutional democracy, the first such assayed by Germany. It survived attempts by the German High Command to seize power, as well as attempted coups by the communists, in 1919, and the fascists, during the twenties. As right-wing parties grew in strength, forming unholy alliances, the left remained split, the Communist Party, in particular, refusing to cooperate with the Social-Democratic Party. By 1932, the time of one strand of the play, the Nazis had become the largest party in the Reichstag and though, as Kushner indicates, their power thereafter began to decline, they managed to secure the cooperation of the military, industrialists and Catholic centre parties in persuading President Hindenburg to appoint Hitler to the post of Chancellor.

If this prefatory note should create expectations of a straightforwardly realist historical drama, however, such is not forthcoming and two epigraphs indicate the direction in which it does move. One quotes Thomas Mann's observation that 'the Republic was aware of its own tediousness. The people wanted theatre.' The other is Ronald Reagan's instructive remark, from 1984, 'you'd be surprised how much being a good actor pays off'.<sup>5</sup> The play, divided into twenty-five scenes, a prologue and an epilogue, stages history less as a narrative than an unfolding theatrical event. Indeed, two of the characters are actresses, a third is a cinematographer. Projected slides indicate key information, linking scenes, offering commentary. Brecht is plainly not far in the background.

The opening speech is delivered by a character – Zillah Katz – described by Kushner as a contemporary Jewish woman in her thirties from the East Village, with anarcho-punk tendencies, who 'changes with the times, keeping her panic up-to-date, and has been doing so since her creation in deepest-midnight Reagan America'. It is through this character that new material is channelled, the extent of the revisions to be determined 'by how far we've come (or how much lower we've sunk)' (*Plays*, p. 12) since the circumstances of the last revisions (indeed several of the scenes discussed in the subsequent pages were deleted or amended in later texts). The purpose of the re-writes is to provide material 'drawing appropriate parallels between contemporary and

<sup>5</sup> Tony Kushner, *Plays by Tony Kushner* (New York, 1992).

historical monsters and their monstrous acts, regardless of how superficially outrageous such comparisons may seem', since to 'refuse to compare is to rob history of its power to inform present action' (*Plays*, p. 12).

That throw-away remark, however, highlights what a number of critics saw as one problem with the play. It is not simply that there is a massive disproportion between Nazism and American political conservatism (even crazed right-wing fringe groups, who adopted fascist rhetoric, never provoking state-sanctioned genocide), but that the play seems to assume the audience's concurrence in Zillah's interpretation of an American political culture that is never explored, dramatised or even explicated in the way that the Weimar Republic is. President Reagan failed to address himself to the issue of AIDS, developed a defence policy based on fantasy and was showing the first signs of Alzheimer's disease. President Bush launched a war in the Gulf. The mere statement of these facts is presumed to be enough to establish the basis if not for a parallel then at least for a comparison. Hitler, and the leaders of democratic America, are 'monsters'. But one side of this diptych is missing, one side of the scales is virtually empty. We are offered a detailed account of individual consciences and political ideologies attempting to address an unfolding history in Weimar. In contemporary America we are offered not even headline news but an invitation to accede to the playwright's, or, perhaps more correctly, his character's assumptions about the nature and meaning of contemporary events. And, indeed, that is the point. To what extent does Kushner embrace Zillah's analysis and rhetoric? The answer is not quite as clear as it might be. Sometimes Kushner has chosen to underline the gulf between his own position and that expressed by his character. On other occasions, however, he has chosen to identify with her viewpoint. He, like her, tends to be deliberately indiscriminate in his use of the word 'fascist' and, again like her, is willing to invoke the Holocaust as something more than an intimidating absolute standard.

As Zillah remarks, the 'problem is that we have a standard of what evil is, Hitler, the Holocaust – THE standard of absolute evil, and why? Because it's so stark. Most other instances of evil are more veiled . . . then everyone gets frantic as soon as you try to use the standard, nothing compares, nothing resembles.' The response of this anarcho-punk radical is to insist that 'an understanding of the second half of the twentieth century calls not for caution and moral circumspection but moral exuberance. Overstatement is your friend' (*Plays*, p. 50). As if to justify this

she asks whether Pat Buchanan, conservative candidate for the American presidency, would have felt out of place at a party thrown by Goering and whether President Reagan's disregard for those dying of AIDS distinguished him from Hitler simply because the numbers involved were less. As she remarks, 'none of these bastards looks like Hitler, they never will, not exactly, but I say as long as they look like they're playing in Mr Hitler's Neighborhood we got no reason to relax' (p. 51).

At this moment the gap between Zillah and Tony Kushner does not seem overlap, though he insists that Zillah is 'not me getting up on stage' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 15). Aware that the parallel between Hitler and Reagan 'just made people ballistic', particularly, and ironically, in London, he stressed that 'Zillah comprises about 6 pages out of a 130 page manuscript', objecting that 'virtually no separation was made between me and Zillah' and observing that 'she is full of contradictions and that she herself says to the audience that this is deliberately overstated, you need to overstate' (p. 41). Nonetheless, his statement that 'I firmly believe in using the Holocaust model, promiscuously', his insistence that 'we should be very liberal with likening people to Nazis' (p. 54), would seem to bring his own views and Zillah's closer than he seems anxious to admit. Indeed he has said that 'Ronald Reagan is a Nazi', adding only 'that is not to say that Reagan walks around in a black uniform. But he cynically manipulated an issue and allowed the situation to become more dangerous' (p. 54). Outrage, as Zillah suggests, justifies overstatement. The playwright's task in an age in crisis, it appears, is to resonate, to reverberate, to sloganise. This is the context in which his comments about an American tradition of portentousness become relevant.

How, then, could it be that this play is as compelling as it undoubtedly is? Because Kushner's comments lie outside the text, because the simplicities of his rhetoric do not invade the play except at the level of characters as bemused by their times as they are by their own conflicting motives. In *A Bright Room Called Day* he creates a work in which, whatever his own assumptions, judgement is still left in the hands of the audience. The moral uncertainties and equivocations of his characters, struggling to make sense of their own convictions, desperate to survive, morally, spiritually and literally, negate the absolutism concealed within Kushner's own comparatism. In that sense he is close kin equally to Bertolt Brecht and Edward Bond, whose work was prone to transcend the reductivism of their own pronouncements.

*A Bright Room Called Day* is a subtle exploration of the lives of individuals who reach for a language that can contain and express yearnings which may take political form but which reflect a more desperate utopianism. It is an account of those struggling to negotiate between internal needs and an external world which slowly begins to determine the parameters of that private realm. He took delight in the fact that it consisted of 'scenes showing daily life while the world is going to hell' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 13), and that is, indeed, part of its power. It takes place in a room that at first is an expression of stolid continuity, then the base for revolt, then a refuge and finally a cell. The choices are stark: exile, persecution and probable death, or invisibility built on a moral neutrality in the face of corrupting power. His characters are actors offered a series of roles and then told that those roles are in fact life choices whose implications must be pursued to their logical conclusion.

This is a parable, a cautionary story, a morality tale in which the Devil is at large, his power the greater for the banality of the form he chooses to adopt. It is arguable whether its power as metaphor, as analogue, as historical parallel, might have been the greater if Kushner had not risked the reductive gesture of nudging his audience to make specific connections, even if it was those connections that energised the play. The suggestion, in particular, that the American parallels can simply be updated from time to time, either in hope or despair, has a prosaic lumpiness about it, as if audiences were incapable of seeing their own connections. It is a tactic which risks turning a powerful allegory into a parochial gesture, localising a process whose implications cut deep into our notions of individual and group responsibility. Surely audiences are capable of decoding and applying the metaphor without having it earthed too precisely in the particularities of a given society, as in the substitution of an anti-Thatcher Zillah in the British production. After all, within the play the Devil becomes incarnate in Weimar Germany. Are we to presume that he then took a vacation until the election of Ronald Reagan? Moreover, if the play implies, in, one has to say, a very un-American way, that the past is unfinished business then its very openness would seem to militate against the closure implicit even in a constantly updated text so long as that text is, in its American component, so self-righteously assured as to the correct moral, political and social choices to be made. However, that is not where the play lives and breathes and Kushner goes a long way towards disarming such criticism by creating a figure – Zillah Katz – a Jewish woman in her thirties, who comes to 1990s Berlin in

order to pose a question, to herself and to history, about the past and its meaning to those in the present who still feel the reverberations of a distant explosion that once destroyed assumptions about human nature, social relations, private and public meaning.

The initial speech, like much of the play, is set out in free verse and offers a justification for invoking the past, in part following the Brechtian maxim: 'Don't start from the good old things but the bad new ones', except that the good old things are quickly shown to be under threat. The whole play is set in the apartment of Agnes Eggling, a character actress in the German film industry of the 1930s. In the 1990s it is occupied by Zillah Katz, who enters with a suitcase in her hand as we see a succession of slides of a Hitler rally in which everyone is offering the Nazi salute, with the exception of a single woman, a woman who turns out to be Agnes.

Zillah opens a photo history of the Third Reich, whose pictures we presume to be those projected, and shows it to the audience. Her brief speech is an acknowledgement of the inert nature of the past and the danger that it will become little more than 'A tombstone under which / the bodies are buried, out of sight, / under which / the warning voice of what happened / is silenced.' It concludes, however, with an assertion that is essentially Kushner's own justification for the play which follows: 'Time now to remember, to recall: dismantle the memorial, disinter the dead. / To call into the Now / other people, not my own; an other city, not my own, an other people, not mine. / History' (*Plays*, p. 15). The space between 'an' and 'other' suggests the gap which is to be closed by the play and by its methodology of weaving past and present together.

The second scene moves the action back to the beginning of 1932, the play covering the period from 1 January 1932 to 22 June 1933, by which time all the necessary legislative work for the establishment of the Third Reich had been completed. The characters consist of Gregor Bazwald (Baz), a homosexual working for the Berlin Institute for Human Sexuality, and hence at risk from Nazi policies, Paulinka Erdnuss, a young actress in the film industry, Annabella Gotchling, a communist graphic artist, and hence another potential victim, along with Rosa Malik and Emil Traum, also members of the Party. Other characters include Vealtninc Husz, a Hungarian exile, Gottfried Swetts, described as a 'handsome, blond, Aryan', who emerges as the Devil in his latest disguise, and Die Alte, dead twenty years, a strange figure who haunts the text, like a decaying Mother Courage.

The characters, gathered for New Year, toast their hostess, Agnes,

who, together with her solidly reassuring apartment, appears to be the guarantee of continuing safety. Thus, they drink to the ‘immovable tenant of this small, solid room: health, happiness, and relative safety . . . for many years to come . . .’ (p. 17). The irony, of course, derives from our knowledge of the future which they toast, a future that is our past. It is a play, therefore, which relies on our knowing the end of the story whose beginnings are here explored.

Agnes works in a film industry that seems to turn out little with any relevance to the events unfolding outside the studios. She turns to the Communist Party and is asked to stage an agit-prop sketch at a rally. Her friend Paulinka, meanwhile, a minor star in the same industry, who had once joined the Party for two weeks in case there was a revolution and they turned to film-making, is hooked on opium and spends her time in analysis, preferring to explore her own psyche rather than engaging the public world and certainly than rejoining the Communist Party (‘At least . . . I don’t have to call dreadful sweaty people I don’t like “comrade”’ (p. 21). She has, she insists, ‘an ego . . . a superego . . . an id – maybe two or three’ (p. 21), and suspects that she might join the Nazis if only they made better films.

The unfolding story, however, is immediately interrupted by a scene entitled, ‘First Interruption: Berlin 1990: Hysteria’, in which Zillah, who describes herself as ‘a hysterical rationalist’, explains the crisis that had sent her to Berlin from her East Village apartment. It ‘happened,’ she explains to a twenty-year-old young man who speaks no English and whom she has picked up, ‘at about 3:27 AM Election Night 1980’, when Ronald Reagan was elected and she decided to ‘break the chains of my middle-class epistemological predispositions, break the chains of Reason and Common Sense’ and, in the face of ‘the gooth re-election of Jesse Helms’ (p. 23), move to Berlin with no clear idea as to what she was looking for. Kushner has remarked that America lacks a true socialist tradition, its radicals in effect being anarchists, and Zillah plays something of that role in *A Bright Room Called Day*. She is a disruptive influence, a source of questions rather than answers, who enters the play as a constant reminder of another time and as an alienating device, disrupting an unwinding narrative whose realism (rooted in history) he chooses to disturb linguistically, structurally and in terms of characters who dislocate assumptions about rationality even in a play that seems to propose the existence of causality.

One of two symbolic figures in the play (the other being Swetts, the Devil) is Die Alte (the Old One) who, rather like the ghost in Edward

Bond's *Lear*, is a recurring presence sometimes acknowledged, when she is seen as an old woman, and sometimes no more than a spectre, a disturbing memory. On her first appearance she calls to mind a distant war, not for its cruelties but what seemed its glory. Entering the apartment through a window, dressed in a soiled nightgown, which could equally well be grave clothes, she sits beside the sleeping Agnes and pours her thoughts into her dream, shaping her memories into a poem whose lyricism reflects the beauty which, as a young woman, she had seen in a conflict whose blood is displaced on to her own once innocent body: 'I remember the day: a sky / so bright that beneath it/ every thought is drowned, save/ innocence. Summer/ but the sun's a chill apricot light,/ high up,/ a dense, brilliant haze – an immense day . . . / War was declared./ Which war, I don't remember./ We wore corsets then;/ rigid, with the tusks of whales;/ they pinched, and often/ bruises and blood. But/ this was a wonderful time./ I heard the snap of the flags/ crack in the wind, and the men marched past./ Something hot moved through me that day,/ up through the ribs of the corset –/ it was my heart' (p. 25). In a masterful speech, the denial of violence, the innocence of death, the celebration of militarism, are subverted and reincorporated through words that seem to move, like a current, against the flow of the sense, creating a counter-narrative: 'Drowned', 'chill', 'rigid', 'dense', 'pinches', 'bruises', 'blood', 'snap', 'crack', 'hot', 'through me', 'through the ribs', 'heart'. Indeed, the speech ends with a Beckettian lament, 'A wonderful time, not/ now . . . / Now. Hungry. Always. Never/ enough' (p. 25).

The following scene, set in June 1932, in which Baz and Gotchling report attending a Nazi rally and acknowledge that former communists have now switched their allegiance, echoes aspects of Die Alte's speech. The words 'bloody', 'drowning', and 'war' recur, while the two bring back a pennant which recalls the flags of that former war. But they can find no solidarity even amongst themselves to oppose the gathering forces, Baz seeing events as a consequence of sexual frustration, Gotchling as a momentary breach in working-class solidarity and Agnes rejecting notions of Hitler's militarism. Each, in their way, is as innocent as Die Alte had once been before history had undone her, exposed her spiritual collaboration with its mechanisms. The scene ends with a series of slides charting the Nazi Party's successes in the election of July, 1932 when they won 37 per cent of the popular vote, making them the majority party in parliament.

The Devil appears triumphant and, indeed, a Faustian element now

enters the play, Paulinka recalling a performance of *Faust* that anticipates the later scenes in the play in which they must each make their decisions as to whether to conclude Faustian pacts to enable them to survive and prosper under fascism. Meanwhile, the disassembling of Party unity is underscored as Agnes is criticised because her agit-prop sketch fails to conform to Party policies which themselves are riddled with contradictions. Despite a momentary recovery at the polls the forces of the left steadily lose ground against the forces of reaction.

The fragmenting alliance against the rising threat is paralleled by the fragmented mode of presentation, the shifting style, as apparently naturalistic scenes are disrupted not only by the projected slides, the appearance of *Die Alte* and the poetic interludes from another time, but by lighting shifts which isolate a character and, most spectacularly, by the arrival of the Devil himself, not Hitler, a mere agent, but the principal.

*Die Alte* reappears, this time engaging in conversation with Agnes, who takes her for no more than an old woman. She appears to beg for bread, the embodiment of the hunger that lies ahead, a warning of the threat which will invade the security of this apartment and the lives of all those who pass through it. The knocking of water pipes in the wall becomes an omen, a reminder of a childhood rhyme that will become an adult nightmare:

Just before I fall asleep,  
After God has heard my prayers,  
Things below begin to creep:  
The penny man is on the stairs. (p. 40)

Meanwhile another warning of the future intrudes in a scene between Zillah and her uncommunicative friend Roland, who speaks no English and whom she picked up in a bar, a man who for her is the embodiment of a Germany whose history contains a key to her own present. Borrowing a phrase from Gore Vidal (unacknowledged) she remarks that she could not live in 'the United States of Amnesia' in 'The Decade of the Great Communicator', because where Hitler had created a 'false history' (p. 41) President Reagan had stepped outside history altogether, into fantasy and dream 'because reality was becoming too damn ugly'. For her, his message to the world was 'FORGET EVERYTHING, FOLKS', that it was indeed possible to become divorced from 'History and Reality and Language'. Accordingly, she goes to Germany to 'reconnect with history' (p. 42), to seek out ghosts, to discover a place where the power of the past is so undeniable as to be inescapable.

Not the least of the ironies of the play, however, lies in the fact that the characters to whom we are introduced themselves inhabit fantasies. Not merely are several of them, like Reagan, actors, professional fantasists, but, even while inhabiting an historical moment that demands action, they respond to it with political theories, sexual paradigms, adolescent ideas that have no bearing on the brute reality which confronts them. Reagan's soothsayers (not invoked by Kushner) hardly differ from Marxist theoreticians, Reichian fantasists or careerists plotting their individual destinies blind to the fact that they inhabit an altogether more sinister world, which their own confusions, indeed, and those of the culture that they reflect, have conspired in creating. Against Hitler's invented history and fanciful, if lethal, racial theories they counterpose their own, no less muddled.

The inevitable question, however, not really addressed by Kushner, is what could be said to constitute history if its component parts are so completely infiltrated by unreality? Is the debate merely over the quality and effect of the fictions, the nature of the unfolding story? Death exists, to be sure, *Die Alte* haunting the play, and it is our knowledge of the deaths precipitated by such caustic fictions that gives history its substantive feel, but are the repeated dates which Kushner offers, the projected diary notes, the assembled facts to do with elections, votes cast, laws passed, sufficient to constitute, to nail down, the history he wishes to invoke and which Zillah is determined to uncover? Is history mere facticity? And if, on the contrary, it is a matter of choosing between good and bad fantasies, are ethics a product of aesthetics, or, as the Party would say, should aesthetics be a product of ethics or at least of a correct political analysis?

The real debate seems to have to do with inevitability. For Baz, 'Life is miserable. Or not. The sun shines, or it doesn't shine . . . on this planet, one is overwhelmed' (p. 45). For Agnes, it is a brief space between a dark sky and a dull ground. For a moment there is 'a small open space, a thin band of day' stretching 'across the rim of the world', a moment of grace before it closes shut. 'I'm overwhelmed,' she explains, 'I feel no connection, no kinship with most of the people I see. I watch them on the underground come and go and I think, "Are you a murderer? Are you?"' And there are so many people' (p. 45). For Gotchling, though, the 'times are what we make them' (p. 46). She complains of their 'elegant despair' (p. 47). For her, history has a momentum of its own. One either adds one's own energy to it or becomes its victim. Her model of progress, however, is challenged by the one-eyed Hungarian, Husz, who has

himself suffered at the hands of so-called progressive forces. He recalls travelling to the home of progress and discovering its fallibility. He is, he insists, still 'lying in the belly of Progress' (p. 47), and living its consequences. Having had one eye put out by progressives he sees an altogether different world.

It is as though Beckett were debating with Brecht. Yet it is Husz who, moving from prose to verse, is allowed an aria which seems to come closest to carrying the sense of the play, or that aspect of the play which envisions action unstained by irony. Acknowledging the approaching disaster, heralded by a 'howl, like a cow in a slaughterhouse', 'the dreadful day/ that's burning now/ in oil flames on the horizon', he acknowledges, too, the inadequacy of those, like the group gathered in this Berlin apartment, charged with addressing it: 'This age wanted heroes./ It got us instead: carefully constructed, but/ immobile./ Subtle, but/ unfit to take up/ the burden of the times.' In a Yeatsian lament he observes:

The best of us, lacking.  
 The most decent,  
 not decent enough.  
 The kindest,  
 too cruel,  
 the most loving  
 too full of hate,  
 the wisest,  
 too stupid  
 the fittest  
 unfit  
 to take up  
 the burden of the times

(pp. 48–9)

But the emphasis lies not on inadequacy, failure, a spirit incommensurate to the task in hand, but on the fact that the sound of advancing disaster is detected at all: 'Marvel that anyone heard it/ instead of wondering why nobody did anything' (p. 49). As Walter Benjamin remarked, in considering the work of Brecht's epic theatre, the epic dramatist will 'tend to emphasize not the great decisions which lie along the main line of history but the incommensurable and the singular'.<sup>6</sup>

In scene thirteen, which finishes the first act, the Devil comes among them, summoned by Husz to the sound of Mahler's Second Symphony. He takes the form of the blond Aryan Gottfried Swetts, ageless, distin-

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Mitchell, 'Introduction' to Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London, 1977), p. xii.

guished, an importer of Spanish novelties from Hamburg, the Devil incarnate, who rehearses the history of mankind through the ages. He has himself transmuted with time and is now, as he claims, so diffuse as to be undetectable.

The second act begins with the return of Die Alte, who joins with Agnes in singing of the penny man as, outside, the Reichstag burns and the final drama which marks the coming to power of the Nazis is played out. Paulinka, irritated that her Jewish psychiatrist has fled, is tempted to work for the new Nazi film industry but, after rescuing Husz from fascist thugs, leaves for Russia. Husz himself sets off for Chicago. Baz, who claims to have had a chance to kill Hitler but failed out of fear for his life, is arrested and intimidated before he, too, leaves (a slide announcing the opening of Dachau offering a reminder of the fate of homosexuals in the Reich). Gotchling, in turn, sets off for Switzerland. Slowly the stage empties of life. As Kushner observed, 'in a way the play is the story of the failure of these four people who are Agnes's friends . . . within the context of an entire social movement failing, that is. The collapse of Agnes's little coterie is in no way removable from the collapse of the German Communist Party, or the entire progressive movement for that matter' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 14).

Agnes alone stays, finally offering her home as a safe house for escaping Party members, and accepting the fate to which that may condemn her. And as the membrane that they believed separated them from the realities of the street begins to become permeable so, too, does that between past and present as Zillah feels the presence of Agnes and Agnes converses with Die Alte, time collapsing, bringing separate experiences together into the metaphor that constitutes the play. As Agnes observes, speaking of the vacuum left by those who have departed, 'It contracts, the empty spaces . . . collapse' (*Plays*, p. 83) The actors are finally forced to perform their lives with true conviction. As Paulinka observes, 'Frightening, isn't it? What an actor does. Assume the mantle of truth, of courage, of moral conviction, and wear it convincingly, no matter what sort of chaotic mess there is inside' (p. 83).

But there is a more profound irony at work than that occasioned by a life transformed into pure performance, an irony which necessitates that transformation. Beyond its account of past terrors never fully put to rest, of naive commitments and studious evasions, of indifference deepening to hostility and then to evil, *A Bright Room Called Day* engages an absurdity deeper than that created by history. As Zillah observes: 'We/ are in danger./ . . . when we're most thoroughly/ at home,/ . . . look/ for the

cracks/ where the seams don't meet,/ look where the walls/ have moved slightly apart/ try to see, stay awake,/ there isn't time for sleeping' (p. 85). Simultaneously a call for vigilance and warning of a more fundamental gap between the need for order and the reality of chaos, this would seem to show Kushner edging away from Brecht in the direction of Beckett, a shift underscored by Agnes when she observes that 'When God is good/ The hours go,/ But the world rolls on,/ Tumbrel-slow,/ And the driver sings/ A gallows-song:/ "The end is quick./ The way is long"' (p. 89). She lives, she explains, between nightmare and despair, exhaustion and the threat of death.

By the same token *Die Alte* survives in the face of horror, transfixed by a hope that will not surrender, clinging to life even if the cost of such be to close one's heart to others and thus be accused of complicity. The play ends with Agnes's incantation:

Club-foot  
Smell of sulphur.  
Yellow dog.  
No shadow.  
Welcome to Germany. (p. 90)

Zillah may still feel that there is a way out 'before the sky and the ground slam shut' (a phrase she seems magically to have picked up from Agnes) (p. 90), but that very momentary flash of light now seems little more than that which typified those fated to give birth astride the grave.

So, Brecht and Beckett do battle. Two interpretations of history are offered. One sees it as redeemed by the resister; one sees it as evidence of a more profound disjunction in experience. The play exists within this tension and something of its honesty, and indeed its poetry, comes from an acknowledgement of the power and authority of both interpretations. History may be susceptible to, and a product of, human agency, with the smallest gesture required to bear the weight of a transforming power (as a man's choice to mend a chair, in Bond's *Saved*, has to constitute the basis for a possible new society), but there is a containing irony within which such gestures must operate. There is a given which, like the AIDS epidemic, whose determining reality lies just below the surface of the play (politicians' failure to acknowledge it provoking the anger that engendered it), provides the context for a debate about moral commitment and political action.

Viewed retrospectively, the rise of the Third Reich is a completed act. No grit can be thrown into the machine. All rhetoric, all ideology, all per-

sonal sacrifices are powerless to break the carapace of time. Yet there are lessons to be learned. Brecht, shown a photograph of a Japanese earthquake in which a single building was left standing, chose, like the caption writer, to stress the single building which remained standing rather than the irony created by the survival of a lone structure. The caption read 'STEEL STOOD'. The characters in Kushner's play fail to stop the juggernaut. The assassin's bullet is never fired. One by one they flee. Never understanding the power they opposed, or the inadequacy of the weapons with which they thought to challenge it, they step aside. Only Agnes remains, to haunt the future with her grudging gesture, she and Die Alte, the spirit of those who, like Brecht's Mother Courage, stood and cheered on the forces that would destroy them. The battle between the collaborator and the resister is a constant.

In terms of the Third Reich, many died, a few survived. One such, like Kushner's Vealtmnc Husz, fled first to Denmark and then to America, where his plays continued to assert the power of the theatre to address issues of immediate political and social significance: Bertolt Brecht. And Brecht's influence is to be felt in terms of dramatic structure, both in *A Bright Room Called Day* and in the diptych of plays that finally made Kushner's reputation, *Angels in America*. The fragmented, episodic, collage-like quality was one that the writer known as the Augsburgur (Brecht's version of himself in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*) deployed: 'the Augsburgur cuts his plays up into a series of little independent playlets, so that the action progresses by jumps. He doesn't like scenes to slide imperceptibly into one another. So how does he cut, then, and from what points of view? He does it in a way that each individual scene can be given a title of historical or social historical or anthropological kind.'<sup>7</sup> The titles are abandoned in *Angels in America*, which nonetheless consists of twenty-six scenes, but present in *A Bright Room Called Day*, in which the unfolding story of fascism is explored for its historical, social and moral implications.

And there is no doubting that Kushner accepts a social historical role for his own theatre, despite the fact that he has said that 'I have even in the best of times only the shakiest faith in art, in the political power of the written word', and that 'in times of political extremity writing seems to me a luxury . . . what, my despair asks me at such times, is the use of writing?' (*Thinking*, p. 57). He does, however, finally reject an 'autistic' art which cannot breach the boundaries of its own literary concerns, so that

<sup>7</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (London, 1965), p. 75.

the fact that 'this effort is also doomed, because writing will always remain writing, doesn't mean that the ultimate struggle is doomed or that writing has no contribution to make to practical politics' (*Thinking*, p. 77). Indeed, as his career has progressed so he has shown ever less willingness to abandon a utopian strain in his thought.

What he set out to do, therefore, was to transcend writing by exploring the theatre's capacity to celebrate its own exuberance, its ability to expand possibilities, stylistically and politically. Had not Brecht himself called for a theatre as alive to its own methods as it was to the world beyond its doors, a theatre in which humour and theatricality were in themselves a legitimate response? We are working, Brecht observed,

with a very fine balance, making calculated movements, elegantly, without caring how the ground is crumbling beneath our feet. People might indeed object to our sitting here between bloody wars discussing, without any thought of escapism, the sort of theatrical matters that seem to owe their existence to man's need for distraction. Tomorrow all of us may go up in smoke. But we are concentrating on the theatre precisely because we wish to prepare a means of pursuing our affairs via the theatre too. We must not be led by the urgency of our situation to destroy the means we want to make use of . . . The surgeon who has heavy responsibilities needs the scalpel to lie lightly in his hands. The world is out of joint, certainly, and it will take powerful movements to manipulate it back again. But . . . A theatre that can't be laughed at is a theatre to be laughed at. (*The Messingkauf Dialogues*, pp. 94-5)

In a sense the two-part play with which he followed *A Bright Room Called Day* was designed essentially to address the same theme while identifying a different response. As Kushner explained before its opening, 'It's about people being trapped in systems that they didn't participate in creating . . . It's the reverse of *Bright Room*; the characters need to create their own myths to empower themselves. I think that's the whole point of liberation politics: to try to create new systems' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 16). He has described its origin as lying in a dream and in a need for consolation: 'Right after the first person that I had known closely died of AIDS, I had a dream of an angel crashing through somebody's ceiling. I finally figured out . . . that it comes from Flaubert's short story "A Simple Heart" . . . It's a great short story about a maid who dies and at the end of . . . this life of . . . unimaginable drudgery, is vouchsafed this vision which is this . . . slightly ludicrous, but also completely spectacular, celestial vision . . . I did it because I needed comfort' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 197).

A play which was by no means clear in Kushner's mind when he

launched on it and whose 'shaggy and strange' nature he wished to preserve, blurring motives, refusing rational development, *Angels in America* was a carnivalesque exploration of America in a time of plague, an exuberant, mythic fantasy in which images and ideas collided with a promiscuous energy. A play in which the angel of history seeks to inhibit change, it embraces change.

*Angels in America*, which followed his adaptation of Pierre Corneille's *The Illusion* (1988), is subtitled *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. The play is in two parts – *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* – the first of which was performed in a workshop production at the Mark Taper Forum, in May 1990. Its première took place a year later, with Britain's National Theatre staging the European première in January 1992. The première of the second part was presented at the Mark Taper Forum in November 1992, with the National Theatre production following a year later, in November 1993, and the Broadway production in the same month. The first play takes place between October 1985 and January 1986; the second between January 1986 and February 1990

Speaking the night after the play's British première, Kushner emphasised the importance of the subtitle and its linking of 'gay fantasia' with 'national themes': 'I felt that a lot of what you could identify as gay theater in America . . . in the late sixties and seventies was focused very extensively on domestic issues and relational issues. That was appropriate to its historical moment and to what was of concern to the community at that time, because the notion of gay liberation was relatively new. I think there's a shift in attention happening now, and *Angels* is an example of that' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 18).

*Millennium Approaches* tells a series of overlapping stories. Louis Ironson, a word processor working for New York's Second Circuit Court of Appeals, lives with his gay lover, Prior Walter, who is dying of AIDS and who is tended to by a former lover and drag queen. Joseph Pitt, chief clerk to Justice Theodore Wilson of the Federal Court of Appeals, Second Circuit, a suppressed homosexual, lives with his agoraphobic wife, Harper, who has a mild valium addiction and hallucinates a friend called Mr Lies, who appears to her as a travel agent but whose speech suggests that of a jazz musician. For political reasons Joseph is offered a job in Washington by Roy M. Cohn, who Kushner has called 'one of the most hateful men that ever lived, a tremendously evil man' (*Thinking*, p. 21), a New York lawyer and closet homosexual based squarely on the actual lawyer who worked with Senator Joseph McCarthy and helped secure the execution of Ethel Rosenberg, who also makes an appearance

in the play. But though the historical references are real enough, and the play engages serious issues about the nature of identity, moral responsibility, political and judicial corruption, the absence or presence of a deity, it is also a modern myth, a parable, and the cast list, accordingly, includes an angel, with steel-grey wings, along with apparitions from the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, forebears of the dying Prior Walter.

The play focusses on a series of couples, drawn together and thrust apart by their ambivalent feelings, alliances which form and collapse but which nonetheless seem to be at the heart of Kushner's concern. And, indeed, in the context of an acknowledgement of the help that he had himself received in the construction of his plays, Kushner has remarked that together

we organize the world for ourselves, or at least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it, refract it, grieve over its savagery and help each other to discern, amidst the gathering dark, paths of resistance, pockets of peace and places from whence hope may be plausibly expected. Marx was right: The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction. From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs. (*Thinking*, pp. 39–40)

The observation may have been offered as a graceful acknowledgement of those he assiduously lists at the beginning of the published version of the play, but it is also an accurate account of the way in which the play works and of the grace towards which it moves, the true angel who alights and who consists of something more than grey-silver wings.

The play moves through time and space, in his own words 'synthesizing disparate, seemingly unconnected things', as, in another sense, he had in his first play. But here the links are more complex, as he pulls together conflicting emotions and exposes a shadow world of unacknowledged need, suppressed truths and forgotten responsibilities. Power and vulnerability meet, each suffused with the opposite. Compassion and cruelty dance around each other. Desperation is lifted by humour, deepened by a coy inevitability. The real and the fantastic exchange places as though there were no gulf separating them. Male characters are played by women and vice versa. As he observed, 'the doubling for me is very important. I think it makes it into a community' (*Thinking*, p. 26). He also wished to identify 'the spectacular variety of human desire and . . . the ways in which desire creates human society' (*Thinking*, p. 154). Jew meets Mormon, black meets white, conservative confronts liberal. Set in the age of Ronald Reagan, himself an image, for many gay Americans, of something more than disregard and con-

tempt, *Millennium Approaches* fuses together comedy and tragedy as it traces links between public issues and private pain.

At its heart there is a dying man, Prior Walter ('a kind of a fabulously gay man'), and an acknowledgement of the price to be paid for love, paid by him and by Louis, broken by the agony of watching his lover slip away, and by what seems to him his own betrayal in deserting him. But this is a play of comedy as well as anger, of fantasy as well as cold fact. It begins at the graveside, as an orthodox Jew buries something more than an elderly Jewish woman from the Bronx Home for Aged Hebrews, for, as he implies, he is simultaneously burying history. It ends in a blaze of triumphal music as an angel visits the bedside of a dying man, filling the air with sound and colour while generating a pulse of anarchy and chaos. As in *A Bright Room Called Day*, Kushner feels obliged to throw a line back into the past not least because 'as Walter Benjamin wrote, you have to be constantly looking back at the rubble of history. The most dangerous thing is to become set upon some notion of the future that isn't rooted in the bleakest, most terrifying idea of what's piled up behind you' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 300). This was a lesson that he learned not only from Benjamin and Brecht but also from the British playwright Caryl Churchill, whose influence on *Millennium Approaches* was so great that he has confessed to feeling embarrassed when she saw it.

A crucial aspect of the politics of the play rests in the decision to locate gays at the heart of the machine, gays as villains no less than angels. Part of Roy Cohn's failure lies not only in his inability to acknowledge his connection with those who share his sensibility but his failure of solidarity with other victims. He trades connectiveness for power, a power which isolates him, cuts the thread that potentially links him with others, and connection is not merely the structural principle of *Millennium Approaches* but equally its theme. As Kushner has said, in an interview with David Savran, 'when I was writing *Bright Room* and reading the history of the collapse of the Weimar Republic, I realized that the key is the solidarity of the oppressed for the oppressed – being able to see the connecting lines – which is one of the things that AIDS has done, because it's made disenfranchisement incredibly clear across color and gender lines' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 302).

The play is set at a bleak time in terms of gay politics and liberal ideals. It is 1985 and not only is Ronald Reagan in power but his shaping of the Supreme Court seems likely to determine the nature of American society and its response to minorities and liberal causes for the

foreseeable future. The best that American liberalism could put up was, as Kushner contemptuously remarks, Walter Mondale, now a fast-fading memory. Meanwhile, Roy Cohn, in exulting in his own power, underscores the failure of the gay community to secure any purchase on the American system. The heyday of gay power lies ahead, beyond the time-scale of *Millennium Approaches*. It is, in the words of a political functionary, the 'end of Liberalism, the end of New Deal Socialism. The end of ipso facto humanism.'<sup>8</sup>

The battle is between this assertive, conservative absolutism and the inclusive vision of a Walt Whitman, the utopianism of an American project based on equality and variety, a promiscuous mixing of souls. No wonder, then, that sex should become a ruling metaphor as well as a central subject and that metaphors of flow, intermixing, transmutation should become the currency of a play which in itself refuses conventional limits, mixing different modes, allowing scenes to interpenetrate, as Kushner impregnates the body politic with antibodies that have the power to overwhelm a political virus which threatens to destroy what it claims to celebrate. Reagan represents law and order, a specious sense of moral fixity. Against this Kushner pitches not so much anarchy, which he distrusts politically, seeing Reagan's apparent faith in order as concealing a deeper anarchic and destructive impulse, as dualism, multiplicity.

His characters experience their own variousness. Boundaries dissolve. Belize, a black, gay drag queen, has no single constituency and derives his compassion precisely from that fact. Joe discovers another dimension to his sexuality. His wife is an agoraphobe who finds herself wandering the street. His mother is a strict Mormon who is converted to a broader church while not wholly abandoning her former self. Louis, meanwhile, is shaken out of his presumptions about himself. Character dissolves, resisting the very categories that had seemed essential to survival. On the other side of a politics of identity is a utopian pluralism for which the play offers not so much a model as a fantasy correlative, a vision. Treading a via Dolorosa, the characters step through pain to something barely imagined, hardly formed. *Millennium Approaches* is a play in which all the characters are winnowed and brought, if not to the doors of revelation, then at least to moments of self-perception. As the play's epigraph, from Stanley Kunitz, observes, 'In a murderous time/ the heart breaks and breaks/ and lives by breaking' (*Millennium Approaches*, p. 7), a distinct echo of Tennessee Williams.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (New York, 1993), p. 63.

Ironically, perhaps, Kushner, who seems to throw out so many challenges to American values, sees himself as squarely in the American grain, accepting its utopian ambitions, celebrating its potential for genuine democracy. The politics of difference for which he seems to stand are, he insists, a product of America's failure to realise its dream, a dream which is, at its best, little to do with material progress and everything to do with communality of purpose and spiritual endeavour. A politics of difference is a product of oppression as the love of power triumphs over a faith whose naivety and simplicity were its chief recommendations. The embodiment of that love of power in *Millennium Approaches* is Roy Cohn, who willingly sacrifices everything to its attainment. Louis, meanwhile, is the liberal, unsure of his alliances, uncertain of his identity. Joe is the conservative whose principles dissolve as the moral ground on which he stands begins to shift. Prior, dying, abandoned, is the embodiment of truths denied, of needs unaddressed, of the victim seeking to understand the inversion of his world and looking for some revelatory logic.

Kushner has explained that he 'started the play with an image of an angel crashing through a bedroom ceiling', and that he 'knew that this play would have a connection to American themes. So the title, *Angels in America*, came from that' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 311). It is a little difficult, however, to accept his assurance that this moment exposes the nature of base and superstructure in a capitalist economy, for he has argued that for 'five seconds, you are actually watching this thing swing down and saying, "It's an angel! I'm seeing an angel!" Then you're saying, "It's a woman in a silly wig and fly wire"', and that doubleness is the kind of consciousness that citizens of capitalism need to survive . . . the magic of the theater . . . speaks most powerfully to our current political conundrum, in that capitalism always seeks to erase the work behind the commodity form, the work that produced, the human labor that produced the effect' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, pp. 214–15). That aside, however, he saw the title as suggesting another American dimension: 'I think the title, as much as anything else, suggested Mormons, because the prototypical American angel is the angel Moroni' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 310).

Joe and his mother are Mormons, a fact that becomes more significant in the second of the two plays. But what seems to have mattered most to Kushner was that here was a faith that was indigenous, of America, as it had originally been a faith which abolished private property and developed a communitarian society. He had no particular interest in the Book

of Mormon (though a book becomes a key symbol carried by his visiting angel), recalling that Mark Twain referred to it as chloroform in print. What he found compelling was Joseph Smith's creation of a complete cosmology in America, his offering of a vision as a transforming event, and the fact that that vision was itself naive and disingenuous, 'so dumb . . . so American gothic' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 310). Mormonism suggested the possibility of re-invention, the American notion of creating your own mythology unconstrained by models from the past. Beyond that, and beyond the fact that Kushner had been involved in 'this six-month-long . . . flirtation with a Mormon missionary' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 310), which had led to his studying the doctrines and history of the religion, it was the utopianism of the project that appealed, a utopianism which in his mind linked a fundamental American conviction with socialist ideals of communality. Though itself innately conservative, Mormonism appealed precisely because of the simplicity of its beliefs, the clear contours of its cosmology – 'like Grandma Moses'. His was, after all, a play in part about redemption which itself required and created a complete cosmology, and in the figure of Joseph Pitt (an echo, perhaps, of Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism) he wished to create a conservative man capable of redemption, if not in either of the first two parts then in a projected third. Mormonism also appealed because, as he has said, the hallmark of Mormonism is that, like Judaism, which provides another strain of the play, 'what counts is what you do and whether you're righteous in your life'. This, he added, 'feels very American' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 310).

And this is a play that, at its heart, raises moral questions, even if the word 'moral' might not be the first to come to mind when presented with a work which deliberately stages the physical reality no less than the social and political implications of gay love. But this is one of the ironies floating in the background, for the very conservative forces for whom scatological language is offensive (Joe asks his boss, Roy Cohn, to moderate his language) are happy to endorse judicial corruption. Those who are distressed by open displays of love are all too happy to remain blind to its lethal consequences. Those who celebrate American values seem oblivious to the extent to which they daily betray them.

Beneath the surreal humour of both parts of *Angels in America*, beyond Kushner's evident delight in breaching theatrical and social decorum, is a play that asks questions about the nature and extent of our responsibility to ourselves and others, about identity, about the body and its

transcendence, about the relationship between love and desire and hence the limits and meaning of love, about the tragic gulf between need and fulfilment, about the reverse pressure that death exerts on life, about an America that announces itself as a utopia and then defers the utopian moment, much as Marxism had done, compromising the very future it invokes as the reason for its existence. In short, it is a serious play which begs the audience not to take it too seriously since its very confusions, its disorientations, its sometimes camp ostentation, are a part of the antidote it offers to the sombre regularity of those who prefer order to vitality.

Though it has a threatened death at its heart, as the signs of AIDS accumulate on the body of Prior Walter, it is a celebratory play. The weight of history is acknowledged, the future menaces, but epiphany not merely awaits, it is enacted: a black drag queen can feel sympathy for a corrupt and self-obsessed lawyer, death can be re-shaped to become a ceremony, redemption may lie on the other side of despair. The joy balances the pain of living. *Angels in America* is an attempt to create a language, theatrical no less than verbal, to express Kushner's vision of another America which might be born out of the blood and mucus of a tainted past. As he has remarked of *Perestroika*, in particular, it is a play about the difficulties of change. By the same token, however, it is about the possibility of change.

For Kushner, Louis ('The closest character to myself that I've written') (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 220) carries the biggest burden of the play. He has to deal both with his lover's illness and his own incapacity to deal with it: 'Louis wrestles with that particular angel and sometimes people are very upset by the choices he makes, but he's struggling tremendously with it.' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, pp. 26–7). That kind of tension becomes definitional in a work in which struggle is seen as equally demeaning and elevating. But if Louis is the focus of a moral dilemma, as he deserts the person he loves, unable to face the reality of his situation, Kushner was aware that behind his dilemma lay that of others confronted with those suffering from Alzheimer's or cancer. The issue was not AIDS but the limits of love and the fallibility of the self.

Nor is Louis the centre of the play, for the fact is that this is a work about a community under pressure, the gay community but also the community that is America. The play's characters are all, in one way or another, marginal but this seems to be a culture without a true centre. There were, however, two people who, to Kushner, seemed to know where they were, who had a clear sense of their situation even if, viewed objectively, they were invested with moral ambiguity. Thus Belize was to

be 'the ideological counterweight' to Roy Cohn, two people, 'one of the Left and one of the Right, who had a very clear moral compass . . . and who were not in theoretical, ethical crises' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 80).

To some degree uncomfortable about creating a black character, Kushner nonetheless needed a counterbalance to Cohn, not only ideologically but in terms of style, for the fact is that Belize embodies that sense of exuberant style which, for Kushner, becomes a value, the essence of what was to be pitched against the sterility and destructiveness not simply of the right but of those who deny their involvement in and responsibility to a wider community. Kushner worried, later, about making Belize a nurse, afraid of racial stereotyping, but in fact the profession precisely captures one aspect of that character's function in the play, which is to respond with generosity to those who themselves lack generosity, to show the possibility of forgiveness.

*Angels in America* presses exuberance in the direction of pretension and portentousness but Kushner insists on its legitimacy. Granting that 'overstatement, rhetoric and histrionics, grandiosity and portentousness' are 'the tropes of fascists and demagogues', he insists that they are equally American tropes to which he happily lays claim: 'when I began work on *Angels in America*, I felt that the outrageousness of the project I was attempting . . . [its] pretentiousness and grandiosity . . . was my birth-right as an American' (*Thinking*, p. 63). Accepting that pretentiousness 'is risky', that 'a vast, amorphous, self-generating anxiety comes with the equally vast and amorphous territory one has chosen to cover' (p. 65), he acknowledges his vulnerability to criticism. Pretentiousness, he suggests, is 'a form of hysteria that manifests itself . . . in a panicked strained effort towards the encyclopedic', but 'the joys . . . are more alluring than its humiliations are forbidding', in that it is, as Alexis de Tocqueville claimed, 'a profoundly democratic gesture . . . a Promethean, protean liberation of the imagination'. Pretentiousness, he insists, 'is Camp . . . perhaps this is why it's most resplendently at home in the theatre' (pp. 66–7). It is, he claims, a way of creating meta-narratives, legends, even in the face of the danger of such encompassing models of experience.

It should be obvious from this that, for Kushner, pretension is as much a favoured mode in his essays as in his plays, but he is undoubtedly correct in suggesting that the very idea of political theatre involves presumption, in his case deflated by a humour which mocks its own ambitions. As he insists, to 'make overtly political art you must, I think, always declare more than you can prove and say more than you can know' (p. 68). Acknowledging the existence of a more austere political theatre,

which he likens to matzo bread rather than lasagne, he opts nonetheless for 'sloppy and runny and voluptuous concoctions, worried all the while that the exigencies of our times require a sparer, more sinewy approach' (p. 69).

That other play is clearly present in *Angels in America*, which, at times, dispenses with display in favour of a bleak acknowledgement of the power of history or the literally deconstructive force of AIDS, but the essence of Kushner's achievement (and it is susceptible to the very complaints that he acknowledges can be directed at its encompassing ambition) is that he chooses to make his aesthetic the basis of the plays' ethics. Thus, attacked by Leo Bersani for writing a pretentious and muddled work which merely reassured Americans as to the moral sincerity of gays, he responded by accepting the first accusation as merely a description of his style and approach and the second as containing the essence of the claim he was indeed making, while rejecting only the motivation ascribed to him. He was at times, however, he accepted, what he called an 'assimilationist' (aesthetics and ethics thus potentially existing within a defining tension), by which he meant that he (and the plays) was not interested in an exclusionary definition of gays: 'I have long been guiltily aware,' he has said, 'of the extent to which my work and even my politics betray an assimilationist penchant for "the accumulated wisdom of culture", evident perhaps no place as clearly as in my ardent embrace of pretentiousness as my birthright as an American citizen' (*Thinking*, p. 70). After all, he had declared that his was an American project. Thus, whatever he might say, he was not trying to reassure America about anything, let alone how cosily familiar gays were. He was, however, arguing that there was a model of America, perhaps only at the Platonic level, which would regard exclusionary distinctions as inimical to the utopian proposition, announced and betrayed in the same moment, that all men are created equal. He celebrates difference (an anti-assimilationist emphasis on his gayness and the gay origins of his work) but, in his essays and plays alike, he also celebrates consanguinity, community, a rainbow alliance that accepts race, sexual preference, gender as constituent elements in a meta-narrative which only threatens those for whom the pursuit and possession of power require the denial of brotherhood.

*Angels in America* has its roots in many sources – political, visionary, aesthetic. It certainly owes something to the history of gay theatre, in particular to the exuberant images and camp display of Charles Ludlam, as it does to those plays which had addressed the impact of AIDS. As he himself has remarked, 'if the great antecedent form of gay theater was

theater of the ridiculous then the new theater that . . . all of us who are lesbian and gay working in theater now are creating is something that I'm calling "theater of the fabulous"' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 74). Explaining the concept, he identified 'the way in which people take hatred and transform it into some kind of style that . . . shows . . . the enormous power of the imagination to transform suffering into something powerful and great. For Jews, it's called *menschlikeit*, and for African Americans it used to be called soul and now I think for young African Americans it's called badness, and for gay people it's fabulousness' (p. 75).

Aesthetically, Kushner claims to have structured the play on Robert Altman's *Nashville*, thus making that director the preferred choice for a film version. Beyond that, perhaps the most powerful presence, here and elsewhere, is that of Walter Benjamin, whose name inspired that of the character Prior Walter. Not merely did Benjamin provide one door through which to enter the world of Bertolt Brecht but, more importantly, his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* is reflected in the messianic concerns, the angelic imagery and the force that Kushner chooses to give to history. It was Benjamin who remarked that to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise 'the way it really was'. To his mind it meant 'to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'.<sup>9</sup> *Angels in America* concerns such a moment of danger. Through the person of Roy Cohn, it links together the execution of Ethel Rosenberg, a callous disregard for those threatened by the plague of AIDS, and those judicial corruptions which reflect a closing down of moral and social possibilities. As was evident from *A Bright Room Called Day*, and is again evident here, the battleground is not only the present for, as Benjamin observed, 'only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins', adding that, 'this enemy has not ceased to be victorious' (*Illuminations*, p. 247). This is a passage to which Kushner has specifically referred and in Benjamin's essay it leads to another which makes plain a central image that Kushner deploys in *Angels in America* and which further elucidates his attitude to history. I quote this at length because it goes to the heart of his method, his imagery and his convictions. Thus, Benjamin recalled a Klee painting called the 'Angelus Novus', which shows an angel about to leave a scene which he is contemplating:

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London, 1992), p. 247.

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise . . . This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (*Illuminations*, p. 249)

Kushner invokes just such an angel, surrounded by wreckage, physical and metaphorical. Meanwhile, the first character to appear in *Perestroika* refers to an 'Inevident welter of fact, event, phenomenon, calamity',<sup>10</sup> and though he is referring immediately to the early signs of a collapsing empire (specifically the Soviet empire), a similar welter of confusion and detritus confronts all the characters, but more especially the angel for whom all time is simultaneous. As Kushner has said, confirming the relevance of Benjamin to his work, 'the most dangerous thing is to become set upon some notion of the future that isn't rooted in the bleakest, most terrifying idea of what's piled up behind you'. (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 300). The presence of angels, however, should not imply a genuine religious messianism which, as Benjamin argued, can only subsume history into its own ahistorical logic. The 'order of the profane', Benjamin insists, should be 'erected on the idea of happiness'.<sup>11</sup> No wonder, then, that the chief angel in Kushner's cosmology (joined, in *Perestroika*, by those representing other continents) should be the Angel of the Continental Principality of America, a country, after all, dedicated to the pursuit of happiness even while finding itself confronted by the opposite.

Kushner has said that '*Millennium* ends with wild fantasy. You don't know if that's the angel of death or the angel of deliverance, but it's gorgeous and it's fun. But *Perestroika* is about everybody finding their way back to reality, which is disappointing and small and hard' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 58). He named the play out of a belief that Gorbachev was going to bring about an age of democratic socialism. Urged to change its title when the experiment seemed to go awry, he refused on the grounds that whatever else he had done Gorbachev had made change irreversible. In that regard he stood at the other end of the spectrum to Roy Cohn who, like Reagan, had sought to contain and even reverse change.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Part Two: Perestroika* (New York, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), p. 312.

*Perestroika* is about progress. There is a wind blowing from the future, but it is a future that has to be constructed, a future compromised by present evil and suffering. The disassembled, the fragmented, the damaged, the marginal have to be drawn together. *Perestroika* is a fable which stages this centripetal move, a carnival of reconciliations which, like all carnivals, acknowledges the power of death but celebrates resurrection.

If *Angels in America* owes a debt to Benjamin, he was not, unlike Kushner, renowned for his sense of humour. However, by a real but unintended irony, the same year that saw the publication of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* also saw the publication of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* and his sense of the carnivalesque does pervade Kushner's plays, stylistically, thematically and in terms of their central ethic, itself constituting a value.

In introducing *Perestroika* Kushner insists that it is a comedy, both in the fact that it is laced with humour but also in the more classical sense that it deals in growth and resolution. It is, however, not a farce, the stakes being too high. Meanwhile its hybrid nature, blending styles, forms, influences, is itself an assertion of values. It is about the invention of the American utopia which, even in the midst of confusion, and with the clutter of history occluding a progressive flow, is glimpsed, if not realised. The final scene of *Perestroika*, before the epilogue, sees Harper on a plane to San Francisco (with Louis and Prior still visible in a hospital room and Joe alone in Brooklyn) seeing a vision of the dead, united now, transfigured and transfiguring. Her final words form a benediction and a prophecy: 'Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead. At least I think that's so' (*Perestroika*, p. 144). For Kushner, Harper is the embodiment of a possibly transforming imagination ('one of the thematic valences in the play is the question of imagination . . . where does the new come from?' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 81). In terms of her own story – that of a woman who loves the wrong man – 'the play is about . . . the devastation and a willingness to keep moving in the face of devastation' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner* p. 82).

In an epilogue, set in February 1990, Louis celebrates the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the fall of Ceauşescu; Hannah, Joe's mother, warns of the fate of Yugoslavia. Evil has not been banished but there is flux, a flux that can no longer be contained or explained by a single encompassing and deterministic theory. Prior celebrates the moment, still with AIDS but still alive. The angel that towers above them now is no longer the

angel of history but the Angel Bethesda that, according to myth, had caused water to flow from rock. It is a metaphor reminiscent of Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke*, and Williams's is one of many voices to be heard in *Angels in America*. It is also a metaphor fittingly celebrated by Prior, now reconciled to, but not living with, Louis, who looks to a transformed future. As he observes, 'This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die the secret deaths any more. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.' His final words are 'More Life' (*Perestroika*, p. 148) themselves a Hebrew blessing. Though pain recurs, the burden of history is never the same because those who choose to shoulder it have themselves been transformed by experience.

*Perestroika*, Kushner insisted, 'is essentially a comedy, in that issues are resolved, mostly peaceably, growth takes place and loss is, to a certain degree, countenanced'. It is not a farce because the issues are simply too significant. By the same token, however, he advised directors to eschew sentiment since the problems that the play engages – 'how to let go of the past, how to change and lose with grace, how to keep going in the face of overwhelming suffering' (*Perestroika*, pp. 8–9) – are fundamental challenges which are met, in *Perestroika*, with a mixture of good faith and bad, confused yearning and serious commitment. The questions posed in the opening scene by the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik – 'Are we doomed? . . . Will the Past release us? . . . Can we change? In time?' (*Perestroika*, p. 13) – are entirely serious and identify the struggle, on a personal and public level, at the heart of the play. Indeed Kushner concedes a perfectly coherent position to Joe, who collaborates with the right. Arguing with Louis, he insists that 'since you believe the world is perfectible you find it always unsatisfying. But you must reconcile yourself to its unperfectibility by being thoroughly *in* the world but not of it . . . it's the end of a nineteenth-century socialist romanticist conflation of government and society, law and Justice, idea and action, irreconcilables which only meet at some remote horizon, like parallels converging in infinity' (pp. 34–5). In the context of Gorbachev's perestroika this is by no means an implausible analysis, but not merely, as Louis points out, does this ignore the anti-libertarian thrust of the right but his assertion that the 'rhythm of history is conservative' (p. 35) denies the power of that epiphanic impulse which seems an ever-present possibility, that transformation, indeed, seemingly represented by perestroika. Such dialogues, however, tend to defer to nodal images, epiphanic moments –

descending angels, Belize's kaddish for Roy Cohn, the sexual yoking of ideological opposites. As Joe remarks, 'freedom is where we bleed into one another. Right and Left . . . finally all life can offer you in the face of these terrible decisions is that you can make the choices freely' (p. 37).

In like manner, Belize suggests that Heaven will be a place of 'racial impurity and gender confusion' (p. 37), Roy Cohn's idea of Hell but the redemption of a Republic ideologically, socially, racially and sexually fractured, and beyond that of what the Angel Asiatica identifies as a 'divided human consciousness' (p. 130), in a century of catastrophes. Prior, even *in extremis*, acknowledges the 'addiction to being alive', that 'we live past hope', but that 'if I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do' (p. 136). As is clear in *Perestroika*, he speaks for Kushner, as does Harper when she has a vision of a resurrected humanity and concludes that 'Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead' (p. 144).

Kushner insists that the ending should not be seen as sentimental. It is. It is, however, the sentimentality implicit in the utopian project itself, to which Kushner, for all his awareness of its dark side, is as wedded as any American. Indeed the play carries an epigraph from Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Because the soul is progressive  
it never quite repeats itself,  
but in every act attempts the production  
of a new and fairer whole. (*Perestroika*, p. 11)

In a play about loss, progress is a suspect proposition and Kushner is aware that 'even after the Holocaust the monsters are still among us' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 309), but he sets his face against the proposition that after Auschwitz poetry is no longer possible. To him, the poet is not only possible but necessary. Despite the seeming disorder of the plot, in particular of *Perestroika* (and Kushner has spoken of his own difficulty in keeping it under control), he is not a believer in stylistic or political anarchy. At a time when over-arching theories, which offer to explain history, are themselves part of the detritus of the past, the poem, the fable, the play, not merely have the power to give shape and form to seemingly random events and experiences, scattered through time and across individual sensibilities, they have the ability to stage that epiphanic experience of community which offers at least a sliver of the utopia towards which his own characters hesitantly advance.

Asked what he wanted audiences to derive from their experience of *Angels in America*, Kushner remarked that 'because the play is an epic . . . it doesn't really give you a single point to take home. I think that after people have spent three and a half or seven hours listening to . . . various kinds of gay people – and thinking about ways in which gay issues are not marginal, but central to the American political and cultural agenda, I hope that people will come away with a sense of comfort, a sense of curiosity, a sense of excitement' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 47). More specifically, he wished to write a play about AIDS which escaped the conventions of earlier plays. 'When I started work on *Millennium* in 1988', he has said, 'a lot of what I was reading and seeing about AIDS was using the illness as a dramatic device, a *Camille*-type model, a way of getting a guaranteed terrific finish. It was important to me to create a character with AIDS who was not passive, who did not die at the end, but whose illness was treated realistically' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 51). It was a play, then, which on both the private and public level conceded pathology but which responded by celebrating a resistant spirit. Indeed, Kushner has said that, 'it's terribly important that *Perestroika* ends with an epilogue, five years into the future, and that Prior is still alive. He's having a hard time. He's not necessarily going to be alive a lot longer. And yet he *could* be. It doesn't end with that' (p. 55). Quoting Harper's final speech, he says that 'I don't believe that, as human beings, we can do anything other than struggle to face loss with grace' (p. 61). The problem is not to deny the past but, finally, to let it go in the name of the future – and that requires an act of forgiveness, even with respect to the execrable Roy Cohn. The play, and indeed theatre more generally, was, to his mind, to do with 'the pessimism of the intellect, and the optimism of the will' (p. 73).

*Angels in America* is plainly utopian, as well as offering a critique of utopianism. That utopianism is balanced by an awareness of the politics which provoke it, a politics that can accommodate the 'millennial yearning' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 83) as easily as can popular culture ('Spielberg as front-runner for the Reagan counterrevolution' (p. 83)) but, while warning that 'you can't dissolve yourself in myth and mythic hopefulness', Kushner insists, and his plays imply, that 'you have to have utopian visions' but that the utopian 'has to be concrete-knowing hope, it has to be hope that has been filtered through the most lamentable conditions of real existence' (p. 83). The struggle is, indeed, 'to face loss. With grace' (p. 122).

*Angels in America* takes place in a carnivalistic space, of the kind Bakhtin

identified, in which hierarchies, norms and prohibitions are suspended and language liberated. Here the body becomes the focus and location of a subversive account of social forms and political structures. It partakes of the utopian, elevating the body to a principle of universality while stressing its physicality. For Bakhtin, the carnival spirit was future-oriented, stressing relationship to rather than difference from. In that sense it relates to another Bakhtinian concept relevant to Kushner's work, namely that of heteroglossia, which stresses the plurality of experience, along with the plurality of context for communication, and hence a kind of generosity and inclusiveness central to Kushner's social commitments and dramatic methods. For Bakhtin, the novel was the central genre, and exerted pressure on the other genres, which become 'permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody', resulting in a 'semantic open-handedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality'.<sup>12</sup> The proposition is suspect, Bakhtin proving curiously myopic with regard to theatre – itself a purely dialogic form – but the description does seem remarkably appropriate to *Angels in America*, which is itself a mixed form which exemplifies precisely the 'plastic possibilities' which Bakhtin thought reserved for the novel. Kushner's imagination brings together past, present and future, psychology, politics, sociology and metaphysics. It is the meeting point of genders, sexual difference, apparently conflicting models of morality and ideology. Humour, meanwhile, which Bakhtin saw as facilitating 'free, experimental fantasy' (*The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 23) through collapsing hierarchical distance, is surely evident in a work such as *Angels in America*, which brings metaphysical, political and sexual power together at the same moment, simultaneously exposing the reality of such power and its contingent and, finally, fragile nature. What is left in *Perestroika* is a compromise based on an acknowledged vulnerability.

The success of *Angels in America* was phenomenal. *Millennium Approaches* received multiple awards, including a Pulitzer Prize, a Tony Award and the New York Drama Critics Circle and Drama Desk Awards for Best Play. It was also voted Best New Play by the London Drama Critics Circle and received the *Evening Standard* Award for Best Play. *Perestroika* also received a Tony Award.

Kushner followed *Angels in America* with another, though more restrained, fable: *Slavs! (Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue*

<sup>12</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX, 1981), p. 7.

and *Happiness*), the second part of the title being taken from an essay called 'Walking Backwards into the Future', by Raymond Williams, which appears as a prologue. The play was first presented at the Humana Festival of New American Plays, at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, in March 1994. Later that same year it was produced by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, at the New York Theatre Workshop and the Hampstead Theatre in London. It retains one character from the previous play, in the form of the world's oldest living Bolshevik, Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, whose name is a clue to the style of a play that also features an apparatchik called Yegor Tremens Rodent and a high-ranking Politburo member, Serge Esmereldovich Upgobkin, along with two peasant women.

*Slavs!* is a contemplation of history and of the implications of the collapse of that model of social and political order which had offered itself as the central meta-story of the twentieth century: communism. Beyond that, it is concerned with the desire for some kind of cohesive principle behind the disintegration of purpose, the betrayal of ideals, the seeming arbitrariness of suffering.

Despite the humour implicit in the characters' names, Kushner once again warns against treating the play as a farce, though its comedy, particularly in the first act, is certainly broad. The prologue, set on the entrance steps of the Hall of the Soviets in the Kremlin, in March 1985, features two women cleaners, dressed as Babushkas, peasant women, discussing the ideological basis of Soviet history until, interrupted by the arrival of Politburo members, they revert to peasant behaviour, playing the role required of them in this supposedly egalitarian society.

One version of history is in process of being aborted; another is struggling to be born. The optimistic Upgobkin debates the meaning and substance of this parturition with the pessimistic Vassily Smukov. Meanwhile, the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik, whose name implies both antiquated and innocent, or at least naive, regrets the absence of a redeeming theory, an organising idea behind the impending disintegration of the Soviet Union and the swirl of events whose meaning seems unclear. Before the arrival of the Classic Texts (the major documents of Marxism), he proposes a primeval chaos, redeemed by a new vision of order expressed in a language whose code seemed to imply the hidden meaning which others had sought in religion. Against this, the reforming Gorbachev, he suggests, invokes only the vacuous shibboleths of capitalism pronounced by him and others anxious to join themselves to a new world order which has no order. Prelapsarianov is, significantly,

blind, while the optimistic Uggobkin has cataracts. Neither can see the future over which they argue. Both are blind to the models they embrace.

History has the advantage of appearing ordered, if only because its business seems complete, more especially since it can retrospectively be re-shaped to perform that conservative function. Now, however, even this apparently secure foundation is shaken. At this point Prelapsarianov dies, having convinced himself that man has been betrayed by God, who is in league with the enemies of Bolshevism. His death symbolises the end of a system which, like the AIDS virus (and the parallel, implicitly offered by the embittered apparatchik Popolitipov, hints at the wider implications of the play), has turned the body against itself. Illness, as Popolitipov helpfully remarks, 'is a metaphor' (*Plays*, p. 115). Shortly after this, Uggobkin, perhaps himself a version of Gorbachev, also dies, announcing the new like some Moses fated not to inhabit it.

The second act takes place in the guards' chamber of the Pan-Soviet Archives for the Study of Cerebro-Cephalognomical Historico-Biological Materialism, where the brains of dead Soviet leaders are stored in jars, watched over by a young woman in her twenties, Katherina Serafina Gleb, who has just begun a lesbian affair with a paediatric oncologist who embraces the heretical belief that people make their own history. For resisting the approaches of the egregious Popolitipov, not to mention her strange view of history, she, and her new friend, are subsequently exiled to Siberia, leaving behind this mausoleum of dead leaders who had offered themselves as gods. The act ends with the appearance of a young girl (who reappears at the beginning of the final act), the humanity created by these now absent gods who promised paradise but bequeathed suffering and pain.

The third act, which has an epigraph from Osip Mandelstam – 'I'm hanging on the tram strap/ of these terrible times,/ and I don't know why I'm alive' (*Plays*, p. 153) – is set in a medical facility in Talmenka, Siberia, in 1992, where children are dying from the effects of radiation. Rodent, the apparatchik, who has survived to serve under Yeltsin, is charged to report on these children. Vodya, the child who had appeared at the end of the previous act, stands silent, a reproach to the past. The cataracts that had affected the aged Politburo member are now evident in these children at the age of three. They are nuclear mutants, genetically damaged as a result of their parents' contamination by radiation released from nuclear explosions, accidents and materials recklessly stored. In other words, the play's mood and style change abruptly. Ideological debates, comic exchanges, knockabout humour falter in the

face of a catalogue of disasters, a simple listing of disregard and betrayal.

In a sense Kushner lays the child not only before the anonymous functionaries who betrayed the socialism they claimed to serve, but before history, a history which includes not only a Soviet Union sliding into chaos but a world that placed the maintenance of order before the lives of those that order was to preserve. So, the child's mother demands of Rodent, 'Take her to Yeltsin! Take her to Gorbachev! Take her to Gaidar! Take her to Clinton! YOU care for her! YOU did this! She's YOURS' (pp. 170–1). She is an accusation. She is a question. But the only answer forthcoming from the aptly named Rodent is the need for a new leader who will resist not only the United States, but Jews and the mongrelisation of Russia, who will support the building of a greater Serbia. The former communist has transmuted into a right-wing nationalist. It is a stance contemptuously dismissed by Vodya's mother, who reclaims her daughter and denounces a century of Russian imperialism, Soviet cruelties and the contempt of governments for their citizens. For the fact is that this play, for all its setting, is not simply an account of the failures of communism. It is another chapter in Kushner's continuing concern with the fate of utopian visions, with the simultaneous need for, and contradictions implicit within, a view of the future which involves transcendence, redemption, a triumph over chaos, suffering and cruelty, an order that is the product of human aspirations and progress rather than the subordinating system required to facilitate them.

Accordingly, the epilogue has an epigraph from Norberto Bobbio's 'The Upturned Utopia', which asks, 'Are the democracies that govern the world's richest countries capable of solving the problems that communism failed to solve?' (*Thinking*, p. 177). Conceding the failure of communism, Bobbio insists that the same problems that the communist utopia existed to solve have survived the collapse of that utopia and that it is thus not a defeat to be celebrated. Poverty and injustice remain. Nor has the kind of disregard documented by *Slavs!* been banished. For just as the child's mother had confronted those who caused the child's disease, so it is worth remembering that while 'in our world the two-thirds society rules and prospers without having anything to fear from the third of poor devils . . . it would be good to bear in mind that in the rest of the world, the two-thirds (or four-fifth or nine-tenths) society is on the other side' (*Plays*, p. 177).

The epilogue takes place in Heaven, which is described as being like a city after an earthquake (an echo of *Perestroika*'s suggestion that Heaven

is a version of San Francisco). Prelapsarianov and Uggobkin play cards, no clearer as to the nature of God or the future, which may, perhaps, be no more than two words for the same thing. They cannot bring themselves to look down on a world which continues to suffer, in Rwanda, Bosnia, Afghanistan and elsewhere. They are joined at last by Vodya, the young child, dead of cancer but now at last able to speak, as articulate and refined as the Babushkas had been before being silenced by the men who had sought to determine their futures; and it is worth noting that the only redemptive figure in the play is a woman, as a girl becomes the image of a body and spirit destroyed by those for whom history was the story of power and not people.

She raises the question of whether the collapse of communism, the apparent failure of the socialist dream, was evidence that progress will always defer to power, that millenarian visions will always occlude, cloud over with cataracts. She asks whether capitalism and its cruelties will inherit the earth, sustaining the very inequities that the utopian project had thought to address, the earlier assurance that the West would never expose its own citizens to radiation being offered as an ironic observation on its own failed utopianism. And, indeed, it is with her questions that the play ends, her final question being directed not at a failed Soviet Union but at a wider humanity. She concludes with a story about Lenin and the question he had posed to himself and to the world: 'What is to be done?' (*Plays*, p. 185). It remains the unanswered question which *Slavs!* exists to repeat, at the very moment of American triumphalism.

Does Kushner, then, see art as playing its role in answering that question? After all, among the brains in the Pan-Soviet Archives are those of several artists, and if art can serve the state perhaps it can also corrode the steel with which it binds its citizens, open the sclerotic arteries of compassion. As we saw above, he has only 'the shakiest faith in art, in the political power of the written word' (*Thinking*, p. 57), more particularly when political urgencies reassemble priorities. What art does possess, however, is the ability to pose questions. Art, of course, has its own utopianism, its own factitious, and therefore deceptive, order that in some senses he struggles to work against at the level of style, plot and language, exerting pressure on these in such a way as to undermine even the certainties which seem implicit in form, character and the grammar of experience. Art can, of course, also easily become the culinary product against which Brecht had warned, a commodity in the very marketplace it is designed to challenge, and the deluge of awards Kushner has received as a playwright do, perhaps, threaten to incorpo-

rate him into a system of power that he instinctively distrusts. But his is not an ideologically pure position. His politics, despite an announced respect for socialism, are liberal and inclusive, not doctrinaire and exclusive. Despite his distrust of utopianism, moreover, he acknowledges the generative power implicit in American millenarianism while insisting that the price to be paid for any model which displaces the resolution of present necessities into a distant future transforms the progressive into the deeply conservative. His drama exists within that tension.

There is another kind of utopianism in his work, however, and potentially a sentimentality. It is the utopianism of the body, which becomes the site of resolution, and the utopianism of love, which collapses history into a revelatory moment. Again, Kushner is scarcely unaware of the danger; and the presence, in his work, of AIDS, as physical reality and enduring metaphor, exposes the threat at the heart even of this form of utopianism. Nonetheless, utopianism of a kind is at the very centre of *Angels in America*, which does, after all, move towards resolution, a resolution in which Prior's body becomes the contested and finally the accepted locus of the drama, and love an operative principle once it has realigned itself to truth rather than custom, habit or convention.

In *Slavs!*, almost of necessity, given the open-ended nature of the debate (dialectics having collapsed, along with everything else, and hence synthesis ending up in the formaldehyde along with the decaying brains of politicians and artists), utopianism takes second place, being pressed aside by the sheer enormity of the chaos which is disproportionate to any private gesture asked to bear the weight of symbolic force. Nor is the body, in the form of the child, riddled with cancer and embraced by no one except an embittered mother, and for the most part inarticulate except in the mere fact of an ironic physical presence, able to offer resolution. All of which is to say that in some respects Kushner's vision seems to have darkened (the darkness of *A Bright Room Called Day* being lit by the historic resolution of one extreme form of fascism if not of fascism as a mode of thought and action). Humour remains in itself a counterforce, but it drains away as *Slavs!* advances. The baroque exuberance of *Angels in America*, which itself offers a form of grace, is dispersed and replaced by recitations of facts, enumerations of calamities, even humour having its limits. Indeed Kushner has spoken of what he sees as a 'gathering dark' ('Afterword', *Perestroika*, p. 158), not because the present day challenges the evils of the Holocaust, that disabling absolute, but because we inhabit a world in which history is not sealed off, so much finished business, but an unfolding story against which it is necessary for

the artist to continue to pitch his own stories, no matter how inadequate they might be. Even to the moment of death. And death was to lie at the centre of his next play, *Hydriotaphia or The Death of Dr Browne*, his fantasy account of the death of Sir Thomas Browne, a play which he had planned to write before starting *Angels in America*.

Speaking in 1995, he announced his intention of writing a series of plays about money, inspired by his work on *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. It is not clear that he was thinking of *Hydriotaphia*, but money (associated with death) certainly becomes one of the play's central concerns. Browne's own *Hydriotaphia or Urn-Burial* (1658) was inspired by the discovery, in Norfolk, of burial urns. Beginning with an account of burial practices through the ages it expands to a philosophical enquiry into the nature of life, death and the hereafter. The book starts with a prosaic account of the procedures accompanying death in various cultures and expands into a poetic contemplation of the insubstantiality of fame. Written at a time when 'simplicity flies away, and iniquity comes at long strides upon us',<sup>13</sup> it acknowledges the anonymity of those whose bones and ashes lay within the urns but recognised, too, that the dead, being sanctified by time, were freed of their faults and celebrated for the progress they were presumed to have heralded. As Browne observed, the living should 'mercifully preserve their bones, and pisse not upon their ashes' (*Works*, p. 133), a sentiment which may, perhaps, have provoked Kushner's portrait of Browne as a man incapable of performing his normal bodily functions – that, and Browne's reference to those other urns – Hippodrome Urns – used by the Romans in their theatrical performances to amplify the voices of the actors. Certainly Kushner's *Hydriotaphia* is neither understated nor lacking resonance.

For Browne, for whom all knowledge was 'enveloped in darkness', the finality of death has its own cautionary implications, not least to those who choose to contemplate it ('If we begin to die when we live, and long life be but a prolongation of death, our life is a sad composition' (*Works*, pp. 164–5). But he was aware that 'the long habit of living indisposeth us for dying; when Avarice makes us the sport of death; when even David grew politickly cruel; and *Solomon* could hardly be said to be the wisest of men' (p. 165). In Kushner's text Browne proves obdurately unwilling to relinquish his soul while avarice, cruelty and ignorance seem to turn his

<sup>13</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1978), p. 132.

final hours into a bedlam for which the formulation 'sad composition' seems hardly adequate.

*Hydriotaphia or The Death of Dr Browne*, which carries a copyright date of 1995 and was in its fourth draft by December 1997, concerns the death of the author of *Urn-Burial*. Set 'in Norfolk, England (sort of), April 3, 1667 (more or less)'<sup>14</sup> it is, as the opening stage note suggests, 'very long', while its costumes are 'not historically accurate', its aristocrats speaking 'standard American English' and its 'bumpkins', a 'made-up dialect . . . based on Yorkshire dialect, Brooklyn dialect and also on Crazy Kat'. Its characters, too, hint at the style of the piece, with Dr Browne's physician being named Dr Emile Schadenfreude, his pastor Dr Leviticus Dogwater and a gravedigger, Leonard Pumpkin. His 'amorous servant/laboratory assistant', meanwhile, wears a brass nose, his own having been eaten away by the clap (*Hydriotaphia*, pp. 3–4).

The action takes place in Browne's sickroom, itself scattered with the paraphernalia of science and literature. Death, in the form of 'an immensely fat man, dressed in Stuart-era finery', waits, impatiently, to claim him, while his soul, 'beautiful but soiled', lives behind the headboard of Browne's deathbed, anxious to be released from an already putrefying body, a 'casualty of his crisis of faith' (*Hydriotaphia*, p. 109). Both are constantly frustrated by his evident refusal to oblige.

Browne is subject to a series of medical horrors, from a mercury enema to a mechanical blood-letting involving a spigot and a bucket. For a man who in his own *Hydriotaphia* had spoken of the pleasures of eternal life – 'Christian annihilation' – as making death a welcome avenue to a new existence, he proves remarkably resistant to dying, while those who surround him seem fiercely attached to the material world and what it can offer in the way of sexual gratification and financial reward. His business partner lusts after his gold (derived from the Norfolk and London Limestone Company) and presumably left to his widow in his will, a will which Browne instructs his former Nanny to hide. Being deeply forgetful, however, she thrusts it into a chicken and absent-mindedly roasts it.

Three Ranters, meanwhile, displaced by Browne's quarry, declare that God's kingdom exists only on earth, and have a further animus against Browne in that his intellectual arrogance and human failings have combined to secure the execution of one of their number on a charge of witchcraft. To this unlikely company Kushner adds Browne's

<sup>14</sup> Tony Kushner, *Hydriotaphia or the Death of Dr Browne*, typescript (1998), p. 3.

sister, supposedly dead by drowning, who now returns as a combination nun and assassin to redeem her brother and locate his cash, as, in another sense, does his former lover, the immensely wealthy Dona Estralita, 'the very Zenith of European decadence and beauty', who disguises herself in order to be at his deathbed.

At the centre of this strange circus of disguised, crazed and malevolent people is Browne himself. As he faces a deeply humiliating death he is aware of the gap between imagination and fact, inspiration and achievement. He aspires to the transcendent but is immured in the mundane. His soul represents his poetry, his aspiration to knowledge and insight; his bloated body stands for the prosaic means to that transcendence, a means which appears to debase the end. He is a victim of irony but in that he is exemplary since the facts of mortality, which he has spent his life detailing, equally determine the parameters of his own experience. Indeed, Kushner stresses the physical degradation which now appears to define his life.

Bakhtin, in his book on Rabelais, identified what he called a 'grotesque realism', which implied 'degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract'. It is tempting to apply the term to *Hydriotaphia*, more especially since for Rabelais, according to Bakhtin, degradation 'digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one'.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in some ways the process identified here underlies *Angels in America* no less than *Hydriotaphia*.

Dame Dorothy, his wife, wishes to give their lands back to the people, restore the quarry to nature. However, Browne's retention of shit (he is suffering from terminal constipation) is a literal expression of Freudian anal retention. He accumulates and will release nothing. The poor freeze and starve while his eyes are fixed on intellectual concerns, on the amassing of wealth and the life hereafter. He is not immune to Dr Dogwater's Protestant credo: 'Work for Christ! Accumulate! Accumulate!' (*Hydriotaphia*, p. 131). The problem for Browne is that he is accumulating internally to the point of his imminent death.

The play has all the elements of a farce, with figures hiding under beds and behind curtains and with a would-be assassin reminiscent of a figure from an Inspector Cluzot movie. It is Hogarthian in its satire and ends with the house on fire, the quarry suffering a major collapse and Browne's soul inadvertently swallowing poison and dying while Dame

<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His Work*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (London, 1968), pp. 19,21.

Dorothy, Browne's sister and the Ranters plan to set sail for America, carrying with them, presumably, that same blend of spiritual and material ambition which they have already evidenced, that same faith in the hereafter radically modified by a concern for cash in the shorter term.

What links the various phases and moods of Kushner's drama is his determination that, while grieving over the savagery of the world, the cruelties of existence as well as manufactured pain, he should identify those 'paths of resistance, pockets of peace', and organise if not the world then 'our understanding of it' (p. 158). He shares with Benjamin the conviction, expressed in *Illuminations*, that 'there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'. His response to that fact, however, is, in Benjamin's words, 'to brush history against the grain' (*Illuminations*, p. 248). The sparks that fly through the air as he does this are the light that illuminates the threatening darkness, are the lights which, finally, constitute his drama. Theatre, Kushner insists, 'is as much a part of trash culture as it is high art . . . it's sort of sleazy'. It 'has to function as popular entertainment. Or at least the theater that I do'. It needs 'to have the jokes and it has to have the feathers and the mirrors and the smoke' (Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner*, p. 63). Kushner's theatre possesses them all. In abundance.

*Emily Mann*

Emily Mann is the author of plays which engage history through offering testimonies to the nature and crushing power of that history. Largely through the words of those who observed and suffered, she seeks to stage the reality of our century, alive to the ambiguity of the exercise and yet necessarily submitting to it. Hers is an uneasy art. She stares into the heart of darkness, aware that the light she seeks to shine there may falsify the profundity of that darkness and that the mere act of presentation may diminish the enormity of what she seeks to encompass. The result is an art whose own methodology is as fraught with moral complexities as the world which that methodology is designed to capture.

In Granada Television's documentary account of the Second World War, *The World at War*, a woman recounts the death of her family in a concentration camp. She sits on a chair and speaks directly into the camera. Her words are uninflected, her face expressionless. The film's director has done nothing but asked her to sit and testify. She could be a bystander recounting events she has happened upon. The effect is devastating. Much the same could be said of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, designed to record the details of the Holocaust. In an earlier television series, Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man*, Bronowski goes to the camp in which his family died. He wears the suit of a television presenter. There comes a moment when he walks into the mud and stands in the water at the edge of the camp, apparently careless of the fact that the water covers his shoes and the lower part of his trousers. He bends down and as he rises remarks that the mud he has gathered in his hands could contain the ashes of those he loved. The film's director chooses at this moment to present the scene in ultra slow motion, the water and mud appearing to float down like the ashes of the dead those years before. The artifice destroys the emotional impact. Suddenly truth is shielded by art. What was designed to amplify the stark facts of genocide transfers them from the realm of fact to that of aesthetics and the audience's

response becomes ambiguous. Facts and art coexist uneasily, while truth may be something quite apart.

Emily Mann, writer and director, is aware of this and yet, working in the theatre, has to exist on this very borderline between fact and art. She is drawn to allow those she interviews to speak their own truth and yet necessarily shapes their words. She creates a new context for the testimonies she stages, thereby changing the nature of those testimonies. Private conversation becomes public event, confidences are breached, and even though they are so with the sanction of those who offered them there is a subtle shift in pressure, moral no less than social.

By presenting, as she does, edited, shaped, transformed transcripts in a theatrical environment not merely is she removing them from the context in which her subjects lived, moved and had their being, a context, in other words, in which meaning sank roots deep into a familiar soil, she is relocating them in a theatre which has its own dynamics, its own social milieu, its own history. It is not merely that a conversation between two or three people differs from the same conversation overheard by those with whom the subjects might not have chosen to share their intimate and most troubling memories, but that the theatre is a social event, a paid entertainment with its own customary accoutrements, which include the whole business of ticket sales, pre-theatre dinner menus, reviews. Nobody ever reviewed the Holocaust. Suddenly the sensibility of the witness is discussed over the fruit juice and cornflakes as though it were the product of a playwright, anxious to please, as in part it obviously is. And behind this lie acknowledged debts to Brecht, an awareness of theatrical technique and audience-performer relationships learned from other 'productions', and other writers. For Mann's works are plays offered in production. We are not in a human rights court or at a war trial. And if the subjectivity of the speaker is crucial to understanding, to an emotional empathy, the writer has her own subjectivity, as does the director, the designer and the lighting engineer.

All this is to say no more than that a category such as 'documentary theatre', popular for a while in the 1960s, is misleading. It is to say no more than that the shaping of eye-witness accounts, personal memories and public history into art is no simple matter, theatrically or morally. Emily Mann's theatre lays no claim to objective truth, in the sense of offering a verifiable account of the Holocaust, of Vietnam or a murder trial. But even in offering the subjective truth of the lives of those whose experiences she draws upon, she deals in a complex world. The testimonies that she derives from personal interviews concentrate on those

aspects of her subjects' lives that she is anxious to address. The plays are thus metonymic. Indeed the lives are rendered metonymic. In some degree, of course, that is indeed true to their experiences, as single events cut so deeply that they do indeed become definitional. There is, nonetheless, a degree to which the shaping hand of the playwright is present even in the questions asked and hence in the answers elicited. She views the world through a frame of her own devising even as those to whom she speaks, and whose responses help to shape the play she would create, are invited to see their lives from a single perspective. It is not simply that the play is shaped out of a conversation. The conversation itself has a template.

The theatrical challenge, however, is in a sense no different from that confronting any other playwright. It is to give shape and form to the material, to develop character through language and action, to find a way to bridge the gap between the subjectivity of the character and the subjectivities of the audience. Emily Mann is no mere transcriber. Why else does she express admiration for David Mamet? She is as concerned for the rhythms of language, for the vividness of character and for the theatrical effectiveness of what she writes as she is for the personal truths which may move her but for which she must discover a dramatic correlative, a means of communicating to the audience. But she has a responsibility, in that sense, which goes beyond that which David Mamet would willingly accept.

Such theatre, moreover, derives part of its power precisely from what is not said but known. Behind the personal anecdote is a public history. Therein lies the metonymy. This is, after all, our route into the larger history, our means of decoding the cipher of the past. Personal testimony is an attempt to break through the implacable fact of an enormity whose sheer scale, as in the case of the Holocaust, seems to resist rational analysis, since the irrational can, by definition, never be explained.

For the writer, however, history may offer a free ride. No matter how authentically the subject's memories are conveyed, no matter how motivated the writer may be by a desire to retrieve what is lost, to memorialise those who have slipped anonymously into death, our knowledge of the fact of the Holocaust, its enormity, its countless private pains and collective despairs, is imported by the audience into their response to the play. What is external to the play (though access to that externality is opened up by what is contained within it) in part determines our reaction to it. Our awareness that we are dealing with fact rather than fiction freights our responses with pity, guilt, horror, despair which may or may

not be generated by the play in isolation. Audiences are confronted with a double truth: this really happened and this is being simulated. People died; an actress is pretending to be what she is not. This is fact; this is fiction.

Suddenly Diderot's paradox is something more than an intellectual debate; it has moral implications as the actress decides either to be moved by what she portrays, and thus approximate the feelings of the person she portrays the better to convey them, or to remain detached and find methods of appearing to be moved, not least because this performance has to be replicated. For what is theatre but repetition, through rehearsal and on to performance. In this context, however, the detachments of craft may come at the price of guilt at an inauthenticity which potentially threatens the quest for an authentic history. A work which sanctifies truth, and testimony as a route to that truth ('I was there. I saw it. Believe me'), may falter in the face of artifice required to communicate that truth ('I am pretending to be the person who was there').

It is not hard to move audiences. Yeats warned against sentimentality, by which he meant unearned emotion. For Poe, the ideal subject was the death of a beautiful young woman, a subject sure to stir pity and regret, a romantic affectation that stresses the evanescence of beauty and life alike, caught by an art which alone will not corrupt. How much more powerful, though, death which has the status of history, death which can indeed be represented as a slaughter of the innocents, death which can be thought to have contaminated the century and confirmed a deep flaw in human nature which leaves no one untouched. This electrical, emotional charge is available for anyone who fictively enters the death camps, and many a writer has attempted to surf on this wave (including myself in a novel called *Still Lives*, which raises many of the issues that I am apparently discussing with such detachment). Consider William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. The terrible dilemma at its centre gains a great deal of its emotional force from the fact that such things did happen. Yet it is difficult not to feel uneasy about this, as about an American television series which sought to communicate the experience of the Holocaust by turning it into soap opera, which has its own paintbox of sentimentalities.

It is true that such reservations are liable to dissolve when the author was there. Primo Levi spoke out of experiences so real that they eventually led him to suicide. Anne Frank recorded her daily life. We read that life as we do because we see it ironised by the fate that awaited her, a fate which we know and she only feared. We honour her because she told her

small truths which spoke a larger truth, thereby reminding us of what a lost life amounts to. Surely the transference of that account to the theatre does no violence to that principle. Well, a little. She wrote words on a page which we then read (though her father did intervene as editor). In the theatre we deal with a box of tricks. Writer, director, actress have at their disposal lights, sound, décor. They may choose to employ an actor whose own theatrical history carries with it certain assumptions which potentially bleed into the parts he or she plays. The audience, meanwhile, is not a single reader, alone, free of social inhibitions or coercive influences, but a collection of people subject to group dynamics and responsive to those moral and behavioural pressures which, for example, force an individual to his feet when the rest of the audience is intent on offering a standing ovation. And what is it we applaud when we reward Emily Mann's *Annulla, An Autobiography* if not a performance detached from the role reproduced and thus in some senses detached from the horrors and triumphs dramatised? What do we praise if not what Emily Mann has made of someone else's story?

Why preface a consideration of the work of Emily Mann in this way? Because these are all concerns which bear on what she has chosen to do, which is to create a drama of testimony in which she takes us on a journey into personal histories that in turn become the key if not to history itself then to events which otherwise exist somewhere between the neutrality of facts and the engagement of myth.

Emily Mann grew up at a time of social ferment. In 1966 she attended the University of Chicago Laboratory School and lived in the Hyde Park area. As she has recalled, the Black Panthers were ten blocks away and Elijah Muhammad lived three doors from her own house. The area was integrated but within two years, following riots across the country and the assassination of Martin Luther King, the move towards black separatism had begun to have its effect. Meanwhile, the Tet offensive in Vietnam intensified opposition to that war. She herself did participate in protest marches but has expressed her own suspicion of the emotionalism generated by mass action. The group to which she was drawn was less defined by political action or street demonstration than that constituted by the communalism of theatre.

Working first on props, make-up and design, she then moved to acting and then directing, which remains a principal activity. She directed her first play at the age of sixteen and wrote her first play at Harvard, in a playwriting seminar with William Alfred, though she abandoned writing

in favour of directing, which she began in her sophomore year. Following a temporary disillusionment with theatre, she moved to Minnesota, working at the Guthrie Theatre and studying at the University of Minnesota.

The key moment in her career, however, had come with her reading of documentary material assembled by her father for an oral history project, and then with a visit to Europe to study family history.

In her senior year at college she read transcripts gathered by her father for the American Jewish Committee's oral history project on the survivors of the camps. One interview, in particular, seized her imagination and stirred her feelings. A Czech woman, interviewed by her daughter, talked of a recurring dream that had haunted her in the camps, a dream of a ballerina dressed in white. This was a vision that had no correlative in her actual life but which served in some unaccountable way to sustain that life. At that point, Mann has explained, 'I thought, "I have to talk to people. I have to get it down, to have it in their own words"', because you could hear, from the page, the cadences and rhythms of the Czech woman, as opposed to those of her daughter who was American born. And both of them reaching out across a language barrier, as well as an experiential barrier. It was extraordinary.<sup>1</sup> What is fascinating about this account is that though she was moved by the simple account, with its striking image and its human resilience, what she found equally compelling was the attempt of someone to understand an alien experience, to bridge not only a gap between the generations but a gap of experience that could be filled only with words. Beyond that, she heard in the rhythms of speech something more than evidence of national origin. This broken dialogue was itself a sign both of dislocation and of a need to mend. For someone who as a writer and director would later express a distaste for the artifice of theatre, it also had the authority of truth. It was, anyway, an experience which inspired in her an interest in family documentary whose first fruit was *Annulla*.

In the summer of 1974 she interviewed Annulla Allen in London. Annulla was the aunt of her college room-mate. Mann herself had, as the play indicates (through the voice of a young woman who seems to represent the author), been intending to look for her grandmother's house in Poland but was persuaded instead to spend time with the woman who became the basis for the play. She was so impressed by the resulting transcript that she wished to turn it into a play. This desire, in turn, led to her

<sup>1</sup> David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York, 1988) p. 151.

decision to go to Minnesota and the Guthrie. By her own account it was seeing the actress Barbara Bryne perform there that made her feel that the project was possible and it was Bryne's enthusiasm on seeing the transcript which led to the play. An early version, *Annula Allen: Autobiography of a Survivor (A Monologue)*, directed by the author and starring Barbara Bryne, duly opened at the Guthrie Theatre's Guthrie 2, in 1977. In a revised form, *Annula, An Autobiography* was staged at the Repertory Theatre of St Louis in 1985, directed by Timothy Near, and in New York, at the New Theatre of Brooklyn in 1988, with Linda Hunt as Annula.

In a note Emily Mann indicates that 'for the most part' the words of the text are those spoken to her in that summer of 1974, 'and my own words told to Timothy Near over a decade later'.<sup>2</sup> The equivocation is necessary, understandable, but interesting. Anyone transcribing a tape knows full well that changes are required to make spontaneous speech fully coherent. The process of editing, meanwhile, represents something more than a shuffling of the deck. *Annula* is thus a testimony whose shape is determined partly by the events recalled, partly by the manner in which its subject chose to recall them, and partly by the writer who needs to shape them to the requirements of theatrical presentation. This is, in short, a play and not a dramatised tape recording. By the same token the Voice in the play is that of Emily Mann; it is also, however, a character with a dramatic function.

Emily Mann's own motivation, at least as later rationalised and given to the character in the play, is personal. The truth which she seeks is to serve a private as well as a public purpose. It is not testimony that she seeks but information. What she is looking for is a past that has been disassembled and a language in which, and with which, to address that past and unlock its secrets:

I needed to go to someone else's relatives in order to understand my own history because by this time my only living relative of that generation was my grandmother – my mother's mother – and she had almost no way to communicate complex ideas. She'd lost her language. Her first languages were Polish and Yiddish, but when she went to America she never spoke Polish again. My grandfather spoke English at work, but at home they spoke a kind of Kitchen Yiddish together – certainly not 'the language of ideas'. Her children first spoke Yiddish, but they wanted to become American, so as soon as they went to kindergarten, they only spoke English. So in the end, she read a Yiddish newspaper but spoke in broken Yiddish – half Yiddish. She had *no fluent language*. This isn't uncommon among immigrants of her generation. So I went to Annula, who had the language. (*Testimonies*, p. 10)

<sup>2</sup> Emily Mann, *Testimonies: Four Plays* (New York, 1987), p. 5.

And so a European story becomes an American story: not the revelation of suffering but the discovery of roots. The primary purpose of one woman's life is suddenly to throw light on the life and pre-history of another. An act of appropriation is undertaken and justified. The discontinuities of one woman's life (Mann's grandmother), and hence of those to whom she bequeaths those discontinuities, are to be resolved by a woman (Annulla) who is presumed to have the key to one experience only to reveal that she is the holder of the key to another. The disruptions, discontinuities and vacancies which she suffers, however, are, arguably, more profound than those afforded by expatriation while fluency may not give access to a truth that lies outside words or outside the capacity of words to recuperate. And that, of course, is the problem of testimony for language can never be adequate to experiences which defy comprehension and communication alike. The young woman of the play goes in search of one thing, hoping to complete the gaps in her own story, only to find herself confronted with other stories whose caesuras are more profound and terrifying.

Ironically, on her arrival in Annulla's Hampstead Heath flat, she finds herself confronted by a woman who tells her that her own life 'is in terrible disorder' (*Testimonies*, p. 8), and who has herself tried to bring shape to her life by writing a play, called *The Matriarchs*, still six hours long and in need of precisely that condensation which will confront Emily Mann. Indeed she confesses that the pages are unnumbered and that she has just dropped the manuscript so that it is in total disorder. Her putative play, however, is not in itself an account of her camp experiences but is designed to demonstrate that a global matriarchy will conquer evil, though on this evidence it seems unlikely to bring much order to the world. She seems less interested in the past, indeed, than in the future, which is ironic given Emily Mann's commitment to countering an American disregard for history.

Gore Vidal's references to the United States of Amnesia imply a contempt for history that he finds disturbing, but perhaps this disregard says no more than that America is an immigrant country with a vested interest in leaning into a future over which it has always asserted presumptive rights. Denying the past, or banishing it to pre-history, is the price of entry. Henry Ford may have been over-blunt in declaring history to be bunk but he had the sanction of national mythology on his side. America was a new beginning. The slate was wiped clean. When Arthur Miller went to Italy not long after the Second World War his father was bemused that he should wish to visit a continent they had been so glad to leave. It was a land of oppression. The Voice in *Annulla* recalls her

grandmother asking the same question of her and, indeed, her journey, and the play which it generated, constitute an engagement with the past, and more specifically the European past, which is, indeed, at odds with American notions of history as discarded experience. Of course a different kind of past has always proved attractive, a past composed of a sentimental nationalism, a myth of origins which sends American presidents looking for Irish forebears and members of the Daughters of the American Revolution for evidence that they sailed, with impeccable social origins, aboard the *Mayflower*. But the history explored in *Annulla* is of a different kind, while the past has more secrets than those offered by a genealogical chart.

Emily Mann, in the guise of the Voice, explains her own attachment to the past as in part a factor of being the daughter of an historian but also as a product of her Jewish identity. Indeed identity, for her, is entwined with a tradition that by definition offers a crucial link with the past. In a play which consists of a collage of stories, she thus has her own story to tell, in fact her own account of the Holocaust passed down from her grandmother to her mother, a story no less terrible but in some way now released by the stories of another.

This difference between European and American sensibilities is raised by *Annulla* herself, who in describing her family life relates it to that offered in Strindberg's theatre, a drama whose concern with tormented souls she believes to be at odds with American values, or at least alien to American actors. This is the reason, she assumes, why Goethe's *Faust* finds so few interpreters in America. O'Neill once suggested that his own failure to engage the American public had something to do with a tragic sensibility so at odds with American values, while Arthur Miller has been tempted by the same thought. *Annulla*, however, is precisely concerned with 'souls in torment', as it is with survivors. It is, in that sense, a European play as defined by *Annulla* herself. For if it goes back, horizontally, through time it also slices downwards, vertically, into extremes of human emotion, recalling moments when men and women were *in extremis*. *Annulla* goes on a journey into her own past but this is paralleled by the different journey on which the writer or, more properly, the Voice, goes, on being led back into the heart of darkness.

*Annulla*, by its very structure, poses questions about the nature and capacity of theatre to address and dramatise certain experiences and emotions, as its central character discusses the relationship between theatre and national identity. A play about a woman who writes a play which she believes will have an immediate impact on people's behaviour,

which is in turn shaped by another woman, Emily Mann, cannot help but raise questions about theatre itself, as about women's sensibilities. Indeed, *Annulla* is, by its nature, metatheatrical. Annulla is simultaneously a character and an historically located person whose existence, independent of the play, is offered as a sign of its authenticity. Yet this 'real' Annulla is herself a conscious creation, her identity problematic and deliberately vague. After all, her own survival as a Jew in Nazi-occupied Europe, and the survival of her husband, depended on the success with which she performed as an actress, presenting herself as what she was not, concealing her real identity, an identity already problematic.

For the truth is that she was also a product of that grand theatre which is European history. Born in L'vov in Galicia, which was first Austria then Poland and finally Russia, she spoke Polish and then German before Ukrainian, French and Ruthenian. The family then moved from Austria proper to Germany to Italy and then England. Along the way she picked up a handful of further languages. Who, then, was she? Those around her assumed she was Czech. She presented herself as being Aryan. She inhabited, and continues to inhabit, a necessary vagueness. Forgetful of her childhood days, raised in a country whose identity and language changed, she drew her vagueness around her as a protection. This woman, who once wanted to be an actress, became precisely that, necessarily concealing the pain she felt, her religion, her motives. She flirted with a German officer to get her way, became a coquette to protect her husband. She became a contradiction, a role player who faced the risk of losing herself in her roles if she was not to become merely a mosaic of them. She even chooses to forget her childhood because it was unpleasant. As she confesses, 'I was really ignorant of the horror that could befall me because I had to be' (*Testimonies*, p. 11).

Thus, though she asks 'how can people change if they don't know what happened. It is like in psychoanalysis. You must know what happened to you' (p. 10), she herself knows the advantages of oblivion, the necessity of forgetting which must contend in her own life with the necessity to remember. And *Annulla*, the play, is about the necessity of remembering. There is, thus, an element of cruelty in the naive Voice who urges Annulla to travel where she would rather not go, disperse the ignorance which had once offered her a limited protection, a dubious grace. There is, in other words, an element of cruelty in Emily Mann.

Annulla's husband had been arrested in 1938 on what came to be known as Kristallnacht. He was taken to Dachau from which, remarkably, she managed to secure his release in good health, the Germans

having experimented on him with antibiotics, at the time little known and therefore not to be tested on true Aryans. Her son, meanwhile, who had been visiting Sweden, was safe but separated from her, so that she came to the edge of insanity at this double separation. For her, however, this is the past. What is now of importance is not this history of pain but the play she has written, a play which she is convinced will change the world: 'if the women with their hearts would start thinking, we could change everything within a year' (p. 14).

The evidence of Annulla's own life, however, would seem to suggest otherwise. Her relationship even with other women is fraught. She regards that with her mother as having been destructive while her sister Anna, who she describes as 'gruesome', baffles her. Her friend Lydia, sister to Boris Pasternak, who also now lives in England, rejects her notion of a Women's Party. Meanwhile her own life is full of confusions and distractions. Throughout the play she busies herself preparing a chicken for the oven, making tea, taking telephone calls, listening to the radio.

The idea for the Women's Party, she explains, came to her in 1939. All these years later it is no more than so many thoughts gathered in an unpublished and unproduced play. Nor is she unaware of the fate of such utopian ideas, having lived with the consequences of such. Indeed the play itself, apparently, offers a catalogue of such failures, failures which extend to capitalism. Against this, however, she pitches her own utopianism: 'Men have strong feeling too, but they are violent. They should not be allowed to rule. A woman's *natural* instinct is loving . . . It will be clear when I have finished my play' (pp. 26-7).

But the play is unfinished, her utopianism unrealised, and it begins to seem that the fact that it is so is perhaps what keeps Annulla going, that and even a suspicion that if utopias contain their own negation the theatre itself is an imperfect mechanism for instituting change. She certainly speaks disparagingly of Brecht's *Artuo Ui*, not only because it turns Hitler into a gangster, an object of fun, but because Brecht had not lived out the war in Germany but established his home in Hollywood. For those who had remained there was nothing remotely funny about Hitler. The implication seems to be that theatre has to carry the force of the real, that it requires the authentication of experience, a requirement so demanding as to rule out most committed drama. And that, of course, raises a central question about Emily Mann's play.

Annulla, after all, may speak out of her own knowledge and experience of war; Emily Mann does not. Annulla objects to Brecht seeing

humour in a serious subject; but Emily Mann sees humour in Annulla. Meanwhile, Annulla's life, perhaps, sustains its integrity more fully precisely because she has not succeeded in translating it into art, thereby containing its variety, giving it an arbitrary shape and meaning, lifting it from a moral into an aesthetic realm.

Nor is Annulla's the only story to be told, for we learn that the woman who is the Voice had sought out the Polish village where her relatives had been humiliated and killed. The on-stage listener is thus not only an audience to Annulla's tale but herself the protagonist of another story. For this is an account of someone slowly learning who she is from exploring the past through those who embody it. Nor does she learn only from Annulla. She completes the pilgrimage that took her to Europe (in search of her family's origins) and though she discovers that the written records have been wholly expunged, the journey itself contains the meaning which she seeks. When she returns, it seems, she can understand something of the mother from whom she had previously felt alienated:

My mother looks more beautiful and more alive than she's ever looked. She said such an interesting thing to me. She said, 'I feel like I've finally figured out how to live and it's going to be over.' And I know what she means. I remember being with her at her mother's funeral. And the tears just welled up in her eyes. And she said, 'I can't believe it went by so fast.' She was putting her mother into the ground, and she remembered sitting in the kitchen and talking to her about – you know – baking bread; five years old, remembered the smell, remembered every single moment of it and all of a sudden fifty years had passed. Her mother's life was over. And she looked at me and said, 'There's no time.' (p. 29)

She who had been drawn to her father discovers another route to truth. She lives, after all, in her mother's garden. Some things pass more easily down the female side so that, ironically, perhaps Annulla's Women's Party already exists, a biological and experiential history whose meaning emerges over time, having slowly and invisibly infiltrated the mind and sensibility. The Voice's confession that 'I know what she means', re-establishes the link she thought broken, opens up an avenue into understanding.

At the end of the play she lists the family names on her mother's side while understanding, too, that the story told to her by Annulla is a part of her own story. As she remarks, 'There is a wonderful fairy tale about a young girl who loans her relatives to another young girl who doesn't have any' (p. 30). The link between them, however, is forged not only by a shared history but also through language as Annulla echoes the

mother's comments, remarking that the interview has 'gone by so fast'. She, however, resists the notion that 'There's no time', by insisting that 'I have so much time now . . . I write all the time. That is why I wake up every day' (p. 29).

The question, nonetheless, remains: is *Annulla* anything more than the edited transcript of a conversation which derives its power from the fact of historical suffering and personal trauma? Do Emily Mann's interventions as 'author' justify seeing the work as a play? After all, should we not require a more radical intervention by the imagination to distinguish mere recording of experience from a 'made' work? The questions are legitimate enough, though they in turn raise further questions about the relationship between art and the material which constitutes it, between the given and the constructed. Plot, after all, is frequently gifted to the writer by history or the small change of daily life while the final source for all writers is their own experience, not in the strictly autobiographical sense but to the degree that the imagined is a projection of the known. *Annulla*, in an early version, announced itself as the *Autobiography of a Survivor*. Its published version carries a Playwright's Note that 'for the most part' what we hear are Annulla's own words as told to the author, and the author's own words recalled ten years later. But note that this is a 'Playwright's' note. The claim, then, is to at least shared authorship. It is difficult to resist that claim. Annulla is a character. She exists within the limited and potentially limiting frame of the stage presentation. The mere brevity of the piece hints at an act of compression that involves a work carefully shaped to serve a purpose beyond the simple recording of personal experience or the elaboration of an historical moment. The Voice, meanwhile, suggests another element, another dramatic construction, a related, interlocking and yet tangential story which generates meaning from the energy which arcs between the two accounts, accounts consciously designed to release such energy.

It has been suggested that the force of what is in effect a monologue comes from its unmediated nature, but it is, of course, mediated, its claim to the status of art lying precisely in that mediation. Its rhythms are, admittedly, partly those of Annulla's own speech but they are also partly those shaped by Emily Mann. The juxtaposition of word and action, or, more properly, perhaps, since the 'real' Annulla had, like her dramatist counterpart, herself been engaged in preparing food during the interview, the choice of moments in which that juxtaposition would be underscored, is hers as is the counterpoint created by interjecting the Voice into the unfolding story. The irony of Mann creating a play out of

a situation in which another woman fails to create a play may be implicit in the situation but is also heightened by her choosing to retain Annulla's own comments about theatre.

Beyond this, the question of authorship has other resonances in a work in which Annulla makes plain her survival of multiple assaults on her identity and selfhood. The *mélange* of identities and languages which she had necessarily embraced had plainly threatened to fragment her, as had her enforced and voluntary moves. Her role as independent woman was constantly at risk because of acknowledged personal and familial responsibilities. And, most profoundly, she was potentially the victim of an historical attempt to annihilate her identity, her selfhood, her entire race on the part of those who offered her no fate beyond extermination. The single most important fact about her, therefore, is that she emerges from this process as the author of her own life, not the author of the play which she struggles so hard to complete.

The Voice, likewise, this refracted version of Emily Mann, comes to understand the extent to which she, too, is a survivor. By recording not only the experiences of this woman to whom she is genetically unrelated but also the details of her own journey backwards through the generations to the point at which an attempt was made to wipe them from the public record, she, too, becomes an author in a double sense, writing herself and herself writing. *Annulla* is thus, in some senses, about the very questions which its form appears to raise: authorship, the relationship between memory and truth, the power of theatre to contain, express, record, shape experience, the degree to which the real, re-forged, re-presented, still carries the force of that reality. But if it presents the shock of the real a question still remains: how far does the aesthetic presentation of that reality risk diminishing its impact or at least deflecting attention from fact on to form?

If the scale of the intervention of the author was unclear in *Annulla*, the same could hardly be said of the play which opened in October 1980, at Chicago's Goodman Studio Theatre before moving to the American Place Theatre in New York the following year as part of the Women's Project. *Still Life* is, as Emily Mann has explained, a play about violence in America. It is 'a "documentary" because it is a distillation of interviews I conducted' (*Testimonies*, p. 34) with three people in Minnesota in the summer of 1978. As she has said, 'I have been obsessed with violence in our country ever since I came of age in the 1960s. I have no answer to the questions I raise in the play but I think the questions are worth

asking. The play is a plea for examination and self-examination, an attempt at understanding our own violence and a hope that through understanding we can, as one of its central figures, Nadine, remarks, "come out on the other side" (p. 34).

The play, which concerns itself with the tortured memories of a Vietnam veteran, Mark, his abused wife, Cheryl, and respectful mistress, Nadine, was born when the 'real' Nadine saw a performance of *Annulla* and persuaded Emily Mann to meet a person who she characterised as the gentlest man she had ever known. The two accordingly met in a conference room at the Guthrie Theatre and, to Mann's horror, over several hours he spelled out details of atrocities in which he had been involved in Vietnam. At his suggestion she then met his heavily pregnant wife, only to discover that violence displayed in war had spilled over into domestic life. The gentlest man Nadine had ever known turned out to be a man who filled his wife with terror. The result was 140 hours of recordings, which, transcribed, resulted in an 800-page typescript. Nine months later Mann began to shape this into a play because 'I was feeling an incredible responsibility to these people. They'd given me their story and it was important to tell' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 154). It may have been their story but the fact is that *Still Life* is more completely a construction than *Annulla*.

Mann's first problem was to find what she called 'a theatrical voice for each person' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 154). Beyond that, she had to find a way of interweaving the separate accounts offered to her, a process which involved both a musical sense of harmony and dissonance, point and counterpoint, crescendo and diminuendo, and an awareness of irony, contrast and comparison. In other words *Still Life* is, as its title implies, a very self-conscious work of art, even while taking its subject supposedly directly from life. It is sculpted. It is a collage, a bricolage. Indeed the process of construction quite literally involved scissors and tape with the three monologues being brought into ever-closer proximity. By degrees, the 800-page transcript became ninety pages, this process having an effect on the language in which it was cast.

Thus an early version seemed to her to lack 'muscle'. It 'became a way to get information across, and the play began to seem like educational theater. The piece seemed very leaden; it didn't have any poetry, it didn't have any drive or electricity or tension in it. And it didn't have the traumatic effect'.<sup>3</sup> Distilled, however, the monologues, 'found their own

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, *Interviews With Contemporary Women Playwrights* (New York, 1987), p. 275.

rhythm, which was, in fact, iambic pentameter . . . I wanted to retain the actual rhythms of the way each person spoke, in real language, during the interviews.' She describes this as though it were merely immanent in the language of her subjects, stressing, like David Mamet, the iambic nature of English speech, yet at the same time she speaks of 'the dialogue I'd written' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 275), relating her own use of the iambic to Shakespeare's, and it is clear that the rhythms of *Still Life* are carefully worked for. It is equally clear, however, that *Still Life* is, for the most part, not written in iambics, any more than the British and Americans spend their lives obligingly echoing Shakespearean metrics.

Nonetheless, there is a powerful sense of the poetic in the play encouraged, to be sure, by Mann's decision to set the text out as verse, but also established by the shifting rhythms of speeches, by the careful shaping of language and emotion and by images generated out of juxtapositions. Sometimes those juxtapositions were implicit in the raw material with which she was working. She recalls, in particular, that it was Nadine and not Mark (who had served in the jungle of Vietnam) who referred to being 'in the jungle', as though his language had bled into hers, as she had allowed him to infiltrate her life and her values. Sometimes they were worked for as she experimented with the monologues.

The relationship between the fractured monologues is complex, as they appear to comment on each other, slowly creating meanings out of their interaction, out of their colliding stories. Sometimes the connection lies in a meaning generated out of juxtaposition, sometimes in a tonal similarity or contrast, sometimes in linguistic echoes, repetitions, ambiguities.

At times the last sentence delivered by one character seems to remark on the first delivered by another, as though they thereby passed meaning from one to the other, though for much of the play they speak not to one another but to the presumed audience. Thus, Mark indicates a projected slide of his foot, explaining that he had taken the picture in case he lost his foot in the war, commenting that, 'I wanted to remember what it looked like' (*Testimonies*, p. 40). When Cheryl begins the next speech by remarking: 'If I thought about this too much I'd go crazy' (p. 40), it appears to be a response to his remark, but the word 'this' is a free floating signifier, as is the word 'it' in the following sentence ('So I don't think about it much.'). Both words seem to relate to her sense of a vaguely recalled past, but the very weakness of the linguistic link, together with the close proximity to Mark's comment, makes it seem a response.

In the same speech she refers to the finality of divorce – 'it's over' –

and to the ubiquity of men like Mark – ‘It’s all over’ (meaning ‘everywhere’) – an internal rhyme which ties the two experiences of estrangement together. A minute later, Mann repeats the strategy as Cheryl once again remarks ‘I’m telling you – / if I thought about this I’d go crazy’ (p. 43), a statement now completely detached from any context so that it seems to refer even more closely to Mark’s preceding comment: ‘I would break both my son’s legs/before I let him go through it’ (p. 43). Meaning, in other words, is not to be so easily pinned down. Language itself has been infected, destabilised, rendered fluid.

What appear to be conversations are, in fact, no more than broken monologues forced to yield a meaning independent of the context of the separate speeches. It is possible to reconstruct a coherent narrative line by simply ignoring the intervening speeches by other characters but to attempt to do so is to realise what is thereby lost. For if the form of the play stresses precisely the gaps that exist between those most intimately connected, if it underlines the extent to which they are living parallel but separate lives in the same moment, it also generates instructive ironies, exposing a tension in society no less than in the lives of those who are so estranged from one another while feeling so close.

Sometimes the ironies which proliferate in the play are contained within a single speech. Nadine, for example, announces her loss of ego at the beginning of a speech of forty lines, thirteen of which begin with the word ‘I’ or ‘I’m’. Sometimes they are generated by contradictory statements brought into direct collision. Thus, Mark confesses that ‘I’ve . . . hurt my wife’, while Nadine immediately insists, ‘He is incredibly gentle’ (p. 43). And central to the play is the question of perspective. Mark is two different men to two different women. The discontinuities of the text are a reflection of the discontinuities of personality. We are told that the action takes place in a space that is ‘perhaps a trial room’ (p. 37), though who or what is on trial is unclear. The logic of the action suggests that it is Mark, murderer, wife-beater, but each of the characters could stand accused: Cheryl of complicity in her own suffering, Nadine of naivety, not to mention adultery. And beyond this lies the question of the war itself, of male values and a national fascination with violence. And since the audience is addressed directly, they become more than mere observers.

The voices are like three instruments which sometimes sound out in harmony, blending effortlessly, and sometimes create dissonances or, indeed, sound alone. Interestingly, in her production notes Emily Mann indicates that though ‘the rhythms are of real people’s speech’, they may

'have the same improvisation one finds with the best jazz musicians. The monologues should sometimes sound like extended riffs' (p. 25).

*Still Life* is a portrait of a society whose citizens share a trauma but very little else, a deeply uncommunal society vaguely aware of a secret with the power to erode still further its sense of a benign and coherent purpose. Mark seeks to confess in order to purge his sense of guilt and explain his violence. Cheryl, however, wishes to blot out the past as a box of horrors which, if opened, can do nothing but deepen her own sense of betrayal and alarm. Nadine, meanwhile, re-makes the world, drawing its sting, transforming it into a romantic and unthreatening place.

Mark (an artist and photographer) tries to find a correlative for his feelings in art, which becomes a means to contain the anarchy of his feelings, to fix his memories, a means to force others to 'listen'. Unable to 'talk' to his fellow veterans he reaches for some other means to address what concerns him, albeit in spasms of language, hesitant memories, aborted gestures. Some critics were to complain that such characters as these scarcely needed Vietnam to induce alienation, provoke violence or reduce themselves to passivity. They seemed innately inadequate, drawn to the very things that destroyed them. In one sense Emily Mann is unlikely to disagree. *Still Life* is an attempt not merely to explore the aftermath of Vietnam but to inhabit the male violence which Annulla had diagnosed as lying at the heart of human affairs. It is also an exploration of the curious acquiescence of women, their denials, their reconstruction of reality to suit emotional needs. Beyond that, it is an attempt, by Mann, to find her way into aspects of American culture that had always concerned and bemused her. If, on the one hand, then, she 'wanted to make people feel and experience the other side of the Vietnam War', she also acknowledged that 'the war, in many ways, is a metaphor for how we have to adjust throughout our lives'. If the 'violence on the battlefield' reflects and provokes 'the violence at home and in the bedrooms',<sup>4</sup> other traumas, other anxieties, displacements, betrayals were equally her concern in a play in which people struggle to come to terms with a life they can never quite understand or to which they can never finally reconcile themselves.

In a sense, then, the play serves some of the purposes that her character Mark finds in his art. It exists as a testimony, as a means of confronting the past and as a way of giving form to otherwise unfocussed

<sup>4</sup> Philip C. Kolin, 'Public Facts/Private Fictions in Emily Mann's Plays', in *Public Issues, Private Tensions: Contemporary American Drama*, ed. Matthew Charles Roudané (New York, 1993), p. 238.

anxieties. The emotional intensity and linguistic energy are contained and controlled by the form. As she has said,

I think what gives you perspective in *Still Life* is that rigorous form, the limitation of the actors not being able to look at each other except where specified. Having to keep it going, except where the pauses occur. That, in a way, frames it even more than the slides do. Often the slides wake you up because you're getting into this whole language riff and they're a shot of reality. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 155)

The violence, she insisted, was to be off-stage because she wished to avoid its seductive nature. Indeed, in some ways that was her subject: the seductiveness of force. Yet the images projected on the screen by Mark are themselves those of extreme violence. In that sense the violence is not kept off-stage and, indeed, it could be argued that by using them in the context of a play Mann could be said to be guilty of the very offence with which she charges others, and perhaps also of herself making Vietnam too completely the focus for more general concerns. After all, American violence was not born in Vietnam. Indeed, in some ways, as such films as *The Deerhunter* and *Apocalypse Now* underlined, Vietnam was simply the latest frontier. Whatever the truth of that, the audience is asked to confront its own reaction to the projected images as well as witnessing the consequences of violence on the characters.

In fact, despite the centrality of Vietnam, the play is laced with other acts of violence. Mark's friend from Vietnam is killed in a bank robbery. Cheryl's niece sees her brother shot in the head by his battered mother. The violence of a difficult childbirth is described. Nadine and her husband physically battle one another, a violence that is not without its seductiveness to them both ('I didn't know you cared that much' (*Testimonies*, p. 65)). Accordingly, Nadine's descriptions of her love affair with Mark are intercut with his confession of the pleasure to be derived from power and violence, as if the two experiences were similar. Indeed, he speaks of 'getting off on having all that power' (p. 59). Thus, while she remarks of the physiology of love that 'they're doing surveys now, medical research on this' (p. 59), the juxtaposition with Mark's comments seems to imply that the object of research is the sexual pleasure to be derived from violence. This ambiguity is sustained throughout a section of the play in which these apparently divergent experiences are intertwined linguistically. Thus, when Mark's comment that 'It's like the best dope you've ever had, the best sex you've ever had' (p. 59), is immediately followed by her insistence of a sexual experience, that 'It was like dying, / and it was the most beautiful feeling of my life' (p. 60), she puts

herself, by association, alongside those he has shot. At the same time, to protect herself from acknowledging the reality of his actions she shifts them from a literal to a metaphoric realm: 'Everything Mark did was justified./ We've all done it./ Murdered someone we loved, or ourselves' (p. 60).

The closest the play comes to finding an explanation if not for male violence then for the confused state in which men now find themselves lies in Nadine's belief that they are denied the roles they once had. They may be living with the trauma of a war that destroyed their values but they are also living with a shift in the substructure. They no longer know where they stand.

All they had left was being Provider.  
 And now with the economics, they're losing it all. . .  
 . . . We don't want them to be the Provider,  
 because we want to do that ourselves.  
 We don't want them to be heroes,  
 and we don't want them to be knights in shining armor, John Wayne –  
 so what's left for them to be, huh?  
 They were programmed to fuck  
 now they have to make love. . .  
 We don't like them in the old way any more.  
 And I don't think they like us, much.  
 Now that's a war, huh? (p. 71)

The play moves towards its climax with a long confession by Mark in which he recounts his brutal murder of a family in Vietnam. For a moment the swift intercutting of speeches is stilled and he speaks as to a psychiatrist or judge. At last what was suppressed spills out and he acknowledges both his guilt and the price he has paid. He is, he now admits, 'shell shocked' (p. 125). What follows is a litany. As Cheryl speaks, still in a broken monologue, of her belief that hers is a uniquely damaged generation, he recites the names of those of his friends who had died in Vietnam. It is a roll call, a verbal form of the Vietnam memorial, closing a chapter in American history as that had sought to do. But the gesture is unfinished, incomplete. Nadine, herself violent, still worries that her daughters 'will be walking down the street/ and get raped or mugged by someone who is angry or hungry' (p. 109). Meanwhile, a projected slide featuring a still life of hand grenade and fruit (extra food being the Marine Corps' response to those surviving heavy casualties) dominates the stage, the fly on the fruit assuming symbolic significance. For the first time the two women look at one another,

acknowledging their mutual presence, but whether this is a sign of a shared understanding or a mutual wariness is far from clear. It is, perhaps, though, their acknowledgement of the inevitability of the process that has finally brought them to this moment, an ambivalent moment as they stand balanced between a recovered past and an uncertain future.

Indeed the play's title is itself ambiguous. Mark, as an artist, is a creator of still lives, but his art tends to be a reminder of lives that have been stilled. The play itself, static, is a form of still life. It takes place in the suspended time that is the theatre's own. Its account of flawed love, compromised values, a vital world destroyed by violence, mirrors the final slide of the fruit, the fly and the hand grenade. But life continues. This remains what we must live with: this is still life. As Nadine remarks, 'The problem now is knowing what to do with what we know' (p. 106).

The substance of the play is constituted of found material. The move towards the confessional moment is something more than a decision by Mann to shape the experience. As she has explained:

It wasn't until the last day I met with Mark that he made his confession. I didn't know how I'd get from the confession to 'I'm alive, my friends aren't. This is a still life.' But I knew it wouldn't take a long time. I knew on some level that the women had heard the confession. Cheryl resists the truth as long as she can. She keeps on trying to keep him from telling it. And then she has to deal with it being out there. Nadine sort of knew he would confess. She could then put her own perspective on that. All three of them are trying to put it in perspective. But it's so awful and there's almost nothing you can say, except, 'Now that I know this, how can I live my life?' They each have their own survival covering. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, pp. 156–7)

Yet the play's form is designed to move towards this climactic end by slowly tightening the focus. The audience, no less than the two women, are liable to resist the detailed description of the massacre, as they will have recoiled from the violent and brutal images projected on the screen. In doing so they will be doing no less than the American public did on news of the massacre at My Lai. Yet the emotionalism of that ending is deliberately contained and controlled by the play's form. An admirer of Brecht, Mann wished to confront her audience but also to invite judgement.

At the end it is difficult to know how far the play is a result of the writer's interventions and to what extent the material generates its own power. On the one hand she explains that she chose the documentary form because she wished to ensure that the reality of the people and

events could not be denied. In other words, this is a work whose authority derives from its basis in fact, or at least from the veracity of the stories and accuracy of the memories of those who tell them. On the other hand it was, she explained, a 'personal document' in so far as it reflected her own concern with violence and registered her own shock on conducting the interviews that formed its basis. Either way, the words, she insists, are theirs. Would the word 'editor', then, be more accurate? These are, after all, as she insists, 'actual people describing actual events as they saw and understood them' (*Testimonies*, p. 34). Well, no, in that they are not actual people but actors portraying actual people, while in rearranging interview material not merely did she do what any editor would necessarily do, namely give shape and coherence to language which frequently contains redundancies, hesitations, confusions, but she shaped it into a rough verse form and created implicit dialogues where none existed. By juxtaposition and interleaving she generates meanings not present in the original statements, while by fragmenting otherwise continuous speeches she makes a statement about the discontinuities of experience and the intransitive nature of communication which may have been the substance but were not the actual experience of the interviews.

In other words, whatever Emily Mann says, after her interventions, which are substantial and the basis of her claim to be a playwright, she cannot invoke 'actual people describing actual events', as in some way offering validation. The play is its own validation. Mark, Cheryl and Nadine are characters. If there are people with the same names who spoke to her and later went to see the play, this is akin to Tennessee Williams's mother seeing *The Glass Menagerie*, based very closely on his own life and featuring, in effect, his mother, sister and himself. It is a play, moreover, with a thesis, not, as it happens, a thesis necessarily shared by its characters. It is, she insists, a play about violence in America. That suggests a perspective far wider than that which concerns those whom she offers as evidence for her thesis. They are concerned with the immediacies of their own lives, in which violence is a significant element but which only Nadine offers to explain in terms of a broader causality.

*Still Life* is a play. Far more than in *Annulla*, and whatever she says, Emily Mann made it. Whatever their roots in another sphere, she constructed its characters. They are the products not only of their language but of how that language is used, not only of the experiences and emotions which they recount but the context and manner in which those experiences and emotions are recounted. Her formalisation of language

in verse lifts it above the literal and immediate. Her shaping of rhythms, her orchestration of voices, her direction and control of tonalities, make this her own composition, susceptible to criticism and worthy of praise. This is a still life of her own painting. She determined on the use of slides and the context of their showing. She determined the path of the neural networks which form the play's narrative structure and she identified and located the synapses whose firing was equally at her own behest.

Its strengths lie precisely in the creation of a whole cloth, patterned and coherent, out of vivid pieces of material. Its weakness lies in the very particularity of the perspective that she allows herself. She has the insights and narrowness of vision of a generation for whom Vietnam was a unique instance of America's betrayal of its values. The fact is that it was not. Violence is, indeed, as American as apple pie and its atrocities did not begin in South-East Asia. The play, meanwhile, touches on, but does not explore with any sophistication, the question of a gendered response to experience. It carries over from *Annulla* the conviction that war is a pure product of male aggression. The contrasting reaction of the two women, however, suggests the difficulty of sustaining a model which nonetheless seems to be tentatively advanced. But this, Emily Mann might well object, is because she was limited by, as well as benefitting from, the sensibility and awareness of those who were her raw material. True, but she has made those informants into characters and has imposed her own construction on monologues which she has contrived to give the appearance of dialogues. *Still Life* is not a transcript. It is a play of genuine force and originality which while inviting judgement of the actions and views of its characters, and of the culture which produced them, also invites judgements of its own methodology and thematic assertions.

Emily Mann found it difficult to place *Still Life*, being turned down by a number of theatres. Eventually staged at the Goodman Studio Theatre, it went on to win six Obie Awards.

Her next play, *Execution of Justice*, was commissioned by San Francisco's Eureka Theatre in 1982 and developed in collaboration with its dramaturg, Oskar Eustis, its artistic director, Anthony Taccone, and the company's actors. It received its première at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1984 and opened on Broadway in 1986.

The play focusses on the double murder of San Francisco's mayor, George Moscone, and city supervisor (councilman) Harvey Milk, by Dan White, a Vietnam veteran, ex-police officer and fireman.

Disgruntled by the mayor's refusal to rescind his proffered resignation, and bitter at what he took to be his fellow supervisor's connivance in this, he shot both men. Though there was no dispute over the crime he was found guilty only of voluntary manslaughter and received a sentence of less than eight years. News of the sentence was greeted with riots as the police moved into the gay area in a triumphalist mood and citizens of San Francisco burned police cars and stormed City Hall. It was clear that more had been at stake than the guilt or otherwise of one man, clear, too, that the phrase 'execution of justice', which Mann took for her title, had acquired a deeply ambiguous meaning. Justice had plainly been executed, in the sense that all legal requirements had been fulfilled, but it had also been executed in the sense that it had been effectively killed off, neutralised. In the end White served only just over five years of his sentence before being released. He committed suicide a year later, some time after Mann's play, in what the playwright saw as effectively the last act of a drama, an inevitable conclusion to the theatre in which he had played a central role.

Significant enough in its own right, the crime took on added significance because Harvey Milk was a declared homosexual, representing an area of the city favoured by homosexuals, while White had made clear his homophobia. The defence, meanwhile, chose to base their case on their client's virtues as an American male – star sportsman, soldier, policeman and firefighter – insisting that his actions were patently at odds with his background. His crime, therefore, could only have been the result of depression, a momentary aberration and, most bizarrely, of too great an ingestion of junk food – what became known as the 'Twinkie defence'.

The play was based on the trial transcript, interviews, reportage and what Emily Mann somewhat mysteriously calls 'the street' (*Testimonies*, p. 149), by which she seems to mean general opinion. It also involved the use of film clips. Unlike her earlier work, it called for a large cast. It could, she suggested, be performed by 'as few as 18 actors' (p. 148), a note likely to send a chill down the spine of most budget-conscious artistic directors. To her mind its connection with her earlier work lay in the fact that this, too, was a study of a traumatised community. It also rested on documentary material, though among the characters are what she calls 'uncalled witnesses' (p. 147), who were, she remarked, an amalgamation of real and imaginary people. And though these latter were themselves the embodiment of views and attitudes she encountered in her research, for the first time she was openly creating characters. Indeed her model

for these uncalled witnesses was theatrical. As she explained, 'the chorus of uncalled witnesses came in late. I don't think I would have come to that breakthrough if I had not recently directed *Oedipus*. I realized that the chorus was the community that had been affected by the characters and their actions.' This was to be her primary means of resisting what she called 'the old Perry Mason Fifties realism idea of the courtroom drama' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 279), a drama that relied on the natural tensions of the courtroom, on revelations, sudden confessions, but more especially the notion that the crime and its solution constituted the whole *raison d'être* of the performance.

She wished to trace the connection between this act of violence and the immediate political and wider cultural context. She, in common with many other observers, saw in the tactics of the defence, the attitude of the jury, the response of the media, and the mood both of the homosexual community and the broader society, a clue to tensions and assumptions that transcended the immediate crime and even the revelations of the courtroom. Explaining what seemed to her a baffling response, she invoked the figure of Oliver North, a man who had confessed to violating his oath and committing a series of crimes but who emerged as an all-American hero, seriously promoted as a possible presidential candidate. 'I was playing with how the media made Dan White', she explained, and beyond that with the dynamics of the trial in which defence and prosecution present alternative scenarios, dramas, in which they stage what are in effect plays whose protagonists are the accused/the defendant. As she further explained:

the courtroom and the theatre are almost identical. So many good actors and good playwrights know that the first way to hit an audience is emotionally . . . That's what they were doing in the court. What I came to understand writing and directing *Execution* was the power of the courtroom as theatre. You put the defendant in a blue suit and people like him, you put him a brown suit, they don't . . . They're dressing for the camera. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 156)

And what is true in a literal sense of the costume in which the actor/defender dresses is true equally of the psychological and social clothes in which he is dressed by the defence. The job of the prosecution is to clothe him in a different way, to cast him in a different drama, locate him in a different model of society.

At the heart of the play lies the trial but, of course, the image of the trial had been implicit in the earlier plays, had been implicit, indeed, in the very notion of what Mann herself chose to call a 'theatre of testimony'. But this literal trial is presented in the context of the wider com-

munity while its realism is stylistically subverted. Indeed the play text is at first reminiscent of a film script. The opening stage direction calls for establishing shots of San Francisco to the accompaniment of 'Hot, fast, music' (*Testimonies*, p. 151). The taped voice of Dianne Feinstein, Moscone's successor as mayor, is swiftly followed by crowd reaction. The action switches to a church. A crucifix fades up on the screen; a shaft of light shines down through the gloom. A church window illuminates. Hyper-realistic sounds of worshippers mix with echoing footsteps and hard breathing as Mary Ann White approaches her husband. He confesses to her in a single sentence. The action cuts to the Clerk of the Court who announces the occasion of the trial, again a single sentence. The amplified sound of a gavel echoes as a light change leads to a speech by a cop, delivered as Sister Boom Boom, a nun in drag, enters on high heels.

This is all a long way from the simplicity of *Annulla. Execution of Justice* is layered. Mann's interventions are clearer. Brechtian titles are projected. Again certain speeches are presented in a form of verse. Trial scenes are intercut with news reports, projected stills, video clips, political speeches, sound cues, music. Despite her expressed wish, in talking of *Still Life*, to avoid presenting violence as opposed to describing it, or presenting still images of it, we are here shown police violence. As a stage direction simply but eloquently states: 'Violence on stage' (*Testimonies*, p. 241). There are on-stage explosions. Language alone evidently seems inadequate. The first act ends with the announcement of a recess in the trial which is simultaneously the announcement of an interval, stage time and actual time coming together, reinforcing the connection between trial and play. The second act begins with a stage direction which reads: 'Audience enters', thus incorporating the audience in the drama. The play ends with the same cinematic element that had introduced it ('long pause. Audio: Hyper-realistic sounds of high heels on marble. Mumbled Hail Mary. Rustle of an embrace. Sister Boom Boom enters. Taunts police. Police raise riot shields. Blackout. Screen: 'Execution of Justice'. Gavel echoes' (p. 246).

Yet if Mann intervenes more frequently and more directly than in previous works, this play includes more documentary material than before. Dialogue is taken directly from the trial transcript, from a film called *The Times of Harvey Milk* by Robert Epstein and Richard Schmeichen and from the political will left by Harvey Milk, as well as from interviews of the kind used in her previous work.

Whatever her intention, *Execution of Justice* in fact deploys the very

mechanisms Mann seems to distrust. If the media is accused of shaping responses to the trial and its participants, she does much the same, using similar methods. She not only deploys what are essentially filmic and video techniques, but uses film and television themselves. Her editing of the trial serves a purpose no less predetermined than that for which she holds the press responsible. Alarmed by the defence lawyers' emotional strategies, she employs just such strategies herself, including sobbing friends, funeral music, dolefully extinguished candles. Encomiums designed by lawyers to sanctify Dan White are offered by Mann to sanctify his victim. *Execution of Justice* becomes the case for the prosecution which, the play makes clear, she believes was never effectively put before the jury, just as her constitution of a theatre audience likely to be predisposed to accept her conclusions is her attempt to reconstitute the jury or, more directly, to stack it in just the way she suggests that the original jury had been stacked.

On the other hand, the play opens with an articulate speech by a policeman in which he identifies what seems to him to be the corruption of the city by a collusion between liberal politics and homosexual excesses:

Take a guy out of his sling – fist-fucked to death –  
 they say it's mutual consent, it ain't murder,  
 and I pull this disgusting mess down, take him to the morgue,  
 I mean, my wife asks me, 'Hey, how was your day?'  
 I can't even tell her.

I wash my hands before I can even look at my kids. (*Testimonies*, p. 153)

Intercut with this, we are presented with an extreme version of the homosexuality which alarms him. William Kleb has described the moment in the original Louisville production thus: 'As the cop speaks, another figure appears, dressed in the nun's habit with grotesque white make-up and spike heels. The audience receives an ice-cold blessing. The voice is male . . . A naked leg appears; the black habit splits open, exposing a slender white male body, a jock strap, a garter belt, a red stone in the navel. The pose is defiant.'<sup>5</sup> What is, effectively, a prologue presents us immediately with the two extremes represented in the case and in the community. Their confrontation, before the play gets under way, crystallises an argument that sinks below the surface in the courtroom battle. The audience, in other words, is made to confront its own prejudices. The multiple viewpoints of the text meet the multiple viewpoints

<sup>5</sup> William Kleb, 'You, the Jury: Emily Mann's *Execution of Justice*', *Theatre* 16 (1984), p. 56.

of the audience, a pluralism of perspective which, to Mann's mind, provided the subtext of a play which rejected the notion of a homogeneous political and social gay community along with the idea of a society genuinely sharing the values, assumptions and myths so frequently presented as defining American identity. Perhaps here she was reflecting the work of her father, Professor of American history at the University of Chicago, one of whose books was entitled, *The One and the Many: Reflections on the American Identity*.

Mann herself has commented on the liberal conundrum which the play presents, particularly with respect to the death penalty, supported by the murderer and opposed by his victims, supported by conservatives and opposed by those liberals who now found themselves in favour of it, or at least applauding White's later suicide as completing the work of the court. She was aware of the anger which the trial precipitated: 'He got off under the liberal system and then he had to take his own life. Often against one's will one can find real sympathy for White, which is very disturbing. And often he'll make you face the prejudice that you hoped you'd be free of' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 149).

The play was commissioned just four years after the events that inspired it and by a theatre in the city in which those events took place. Dan White was not, at that time, either released or dead. It was a play, then, that not only had an immediate context but an immediate function. In a city divided and bemused by both the crime and the judicial response, it was an effort to re-play the past, to re-stage it, this time with all the evidence (admissible and inadmissible in court) available and presented to audiences invited to arrive at their own judgement. Its literal participants become characters, the murders, and their social and legal consequences, symbols in a drama shaped by Mann.

Somewhat akin to the Federal Theatre Living Newspaper plays of the 1930s, it was to be an assemblage of documentary material designed to present a particular point of view. Since the question of who committed the crime was not at issue, the subject became the prejudices of a society that could, through its legal procedures, apparently sanction murder so long as the victim was seen as in some way aberrant to mainstream values and the perpetrator an embodiment of those values. The facts of the killings were not disputed. The trial ostensibly turned on the state of mind of the murderer. For Mann, however, as for those for whom she became in effect a spokesman, it was not his state of mind but the state of society that was a principal concern.

And what is true of *Execution of Judgement* is true, too, of Mann's 1996

play, *Greensboro*, which recalls the killing, in 1979, in Greensboro, North Carolina, of five members of the Communist Workers' Party who were demonstrating against the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party. Caught on video, this was nonetheless a crime that went unpunished, not least because of the collusion of members of the police department. The Playwright's Notes state unequivocally that 'this is a documentary' (*Testimonies*, p. 253), but this should not be taken as implying a stance of detachment, of objectivity. Mann offers thanks to the author of a doctoral dissertation entitled 'Survivors of the Greensboro Massacre', and subtitles her play 'A Requiem', a mass for the dead. And, indeed, what are we to expect of a work which documents a racist attack? Scarcely moral neutrality. Yet there is an ambiguity about her assertion that 'All of the play's characters are real people' (p. 257). Real, one is bound to ask, in what way? The mere act of placing them on stage, taking command of their speech, determining those aspects of their experience, personality, relationships to dramatise, choosing how, when and with whom to juxtapose their actions or utterances, is a process of invention. They are real in that they had a verifiable existence and may have spoken the words attributed to them but that is the starting point not the destination. Clearly she has moved a long way from the young woman who set out simply to record. She ceased being an oral historian the moment she introduced the Voice into *Annulla. Greensboro*, whatever its social and moral utility, is a play, although the motivation for its creation is probably best summed up by the Reverend Nelson Johnson, significantly described as 'a survivor', when he says, 'Something happened in Greensboro, North Carolina I think you should know about' (p. 259). For this is the essence of Mann's work. Hers is a theatre of survivors testifying to the lives of those who did not survive and documenting the reasons why such lives were lost. In a culture suspicious of the past she is determined that memory should survive. Like Arthur Miller she believes that the past is holy. Yet there is something disingenuous about her description of the response she hopes to provoke. Speaking of *Execution of Justice*, but with equal relevance to *Greensboro*, she has said that:

The audience needs the exposition, they need information in order to be able to make judgements and to be able to fully experience the piece. You cannot make judgements without that information. And my plays are *about* asking the audience to face that information, and to actively question it. That is the form and content of *Execution of Justice*. It is a trial. The audience is the jury . . . But, finally, the audience must have a visceral reaction to the *play*. (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 277)

A jury, then, is asked to decide on fact and responsibility yet it is simultaneously invited to have a visceral reaction, and this contradiction is real enough in *Greensboro*. Certainly the visceral element is powerful and worked for in a play which concludes, or nearly so, with a service of dedication and a moving hymn, and opens with an affecting spiritual, 'So Hard to Get Along', sung by the whole company with the exception of three named characters, all Klansmen. That division is continued in a text in which the speeches of all those characters representing the black community are identified by use of a first name while those representing the white racists are identified by use of a last. Hence, speeches by the Reverend Nelson Johnson are signalled by use of the name Nelson while those by the Klansman and police informer Edward Dawson are signalled by use of the name Dawson. Invisible to the audience, this reflects Mann's own sense of estrangement from those whose reality she insists upon.

We learn something of the history and personal lives of the victims; the perpetrators of the crime remain more of an enigma. Yet she has one of her characters warn that 'once there are categories of people who do not qualify as having full human stature – whether they are gays or communists or black people or whoever they are – I mean, once you can separate humanity that way . . . you can do anything to people' (*Testimonies*, p. 277). Should the list, one wonders, be extended to include police officers, Nazis, Klansmen, not because they are victims but because the real horror of the concentration camp, of brutal murder, of racist attacks, lies in the fact that they were and are perpetrated by people like ourselves? In the former Yugoslavia friendly neighbours turned into rapists and murderers overnight. The subsequent attachment of labels did nothing to protect us from the more disturbing truth which was that they were individuals with private lives, with hopes, dreams, pains of their own.

My quibble with *Greensboro* is that it does not cut deeper, that it settles for addressing the question of justice and hence evades the more disturbing truth about human nature which the system of justice can barely begin to acknowledge, a truth that Arthur Miller did address in *After the Fall*, in which it was the protagonist's affinity with, rather than distance from, the cruelties of the Holocaust that appalled. If it be argued that Emily Mann's objectives here are deliberately more limited, having to do with recalling what is too easily forgotten, offering the human details behind fading headlines, this is to ignore, for example, her deliberate attempt to identify the parallels between Klan activities in the 1930s and

events in Nazi Germany (one of those injured is the son of a woman who herself survived the Holocaust, escaping from a train on its way to Treblinka). An account of dogs dragging Jews through the streets is placed beside an account of Klansmen dragging black men and women from their houses. The parallel is invited by the involvement of the American Nazi Party in the events at Greensboro, but, beyond that, such a juxtaposition implies the persistence of cruelty across time and across cultures, an issue unresolved by trials.

Perhaps her boldest move was to allow so much space to David Duke, former Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan and former Representative of the State of Louisiana. Duke's articulateness contrasts with the barely literate evidence offered by some of the Klansmen whose inarticulateness might otherwise seem to reduce bigotry to a question of education. Duke secured 40 per cent of the vote when he ran for Governor and 45 per cent when he ran for Senator. His casuistry is skilfully concealed. Plausible, attractive, he appropriates to the white race the role of victim. He is the evidence that the Klansmen are not alone, that behind their simple-minded violence lies a depth of prejudice easily tapped by those with the necessary skills.

The play ends on a hopeful note. Some kind of *rapprochement* is achieved between the Klan and its victims while if justice is not done the process seems to be under way. In the context of the play, however, with its evidence of violence and of a deeply entrenched racism, it is hard to see this as dramatically convincing, and there is a distinction to be made between the historical record and what is theatrically plausible. Indeed there is a genuine risk of sentimentality as a choir sings: 'Behind every dark cloud there's a silver lining, and behind each rainstorm there's a bright new dawning' (*Testimonies*, p. 324), and the Reverend Nelson announces that 'Suffering doesn't last always' (p. 327). The risk is that the play, in invoking the Holocaust, makes such encomiums seem trite. Nonetheless, it has a power that does indeed come in part from the force of the real, from acknowledging suffering and injustice which the theatre is invoked not only to address but in some respects to rectify by offering retrospective testimony.

Her 1995 play, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*, had scarcely lacked this sense of uplift and celebration: what it did lack was the political edge that was to characterise *Greensboro* less than a year later. The story of Sadie and Bessie Delany (daughters to a man born in slavery), who have experienced the pains and triumphs of a hundred years of suffering and achievement, this adaptation of a book by the

Delany sisters found a natural home on Broadway. Once again based on direct testimony – this time already shaped into literary form if not dialogue – the play was widely praised for its affecting and affectionate portrait of those who had triumphed over history. Witnesses to post-bellum racism, the vitality of the Harlem Renaissance, the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement and the disregard of 1980s America, the sisters emerge as paradoxically insulated from the events they describe, their characters already genetically determined and shaped by upbringing. Theirs are atypical lives and that fact inevitably creates a certain irony as they are offered as commentators, observers, actors in a national drama. Their narrative, like the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, constitutes their claim to autonomy, to a full responsibility for their actions and identities, at odds with the presumptions of a racist society. But their very achievement threatens their status as exemplars and to some degree their authority.

Neither has married, neither suffered violence or real privation. They seem oddly immune to natural processes (both are over a hundred). By the same token, besides shaping dialogue out of narrative Mann has little scope for invention, little opportunity to explore ambiguity or irony.

The play's title – *Having Our Say* – is both an accurate expression of the Delany sisters' claim to possession of their own lives and of Mann's methodology as a playwright. The play itself, however, sentimentally appealing, emotionally and even socially reassuring, could hardly be said to offer much more than a gentle ride through an historical theme park in which the sharp realities of prejudice, violence and cruelty – highlighted by *Greensboro* – have been rendered anodyne by protagonists who present a century of suffering as little more than an entertaining tale to while away an evening as they prepare an ambrosia cake. Whatever its success, Mann's real achievement as a playwright lay elsewhere.

The power of Emily Mann's plays lies in part in her subject matter, in the knowledge that behind her characters lie people whose experiences compel attention. It lies in part in her skilful blending of documentary and invented material, in her orchestration of diverse elements to tell a story which addresses public issues through the lives of those who suffered, individually and collectively. And in all her plays she is concerned with the fact that while we suffer individually we frequently do so because we are part of a group. It is that tension which compels her attention. The challenge which she faced was to create plays (which have become increasingly epic in scope and methodology), which manage to

respect the integrity of that individual self while acknowledging that we live, and sometimes die, as part of something larger, an affiliation which may or may not be central to our sense of ourselves.

If at times she seems to accept rather too readily the free emotional ride offered by a funeral, a trial, a therapeutic confession, if she knows rather too well the power of music or ironic juxtaposition, if her thumb is, at times, rather too evidently on the scales, if she fails always to ask herself what she means by the reality of her characters, she nonetheless has managed to find a way of addressing issues and celebrating lives which too easily disappear in the wake of time.

She has suggested that part of her attraction to the form in which she works may have been 'to do with being female. Women,' she explained, 'sit around and talk to each other about their memories of traumatic, devastating events in their lives. Even women who don't know each other well!! . . . We often see the pain in one another and then we talk about it . . . Most of what I know about human experience comes from listening.' Her achievement is to turn listening into story-telling, not simply, as she claimed, to offer the audience 'the same experience I had as a listener' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 281), though that is, perhaps, what she set out to do in *Annulla*, but to turn those stories into something else, a record, a celebration, an indictment, a memorial, and, finally, a drama.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Richard Nelson*

One of the mysteries of academic studies of modern American theatre, my own included, is their almost complete disregard for the work of Richard Nelson. In part, perhaps, this is because his more recent work has tended to be performed first in England. In part, though, it may reflect the difficulty of placing him. Not only has much of his energy gone into adaptations of European plays but his own work seems heterogeneous, including brief and apparently enigmatic fables (*Bal*, *The Return of Pinocchio*), epic drama (*Rip Van Winkle* or ‘*The Works*’) and what appears to be Broadway comedy (*An American Comedy*). But beneath this variety is a playwright who, for all his eclecticism (and the influence of Bertolt Brecht, Edward Bond, Sam Shepard, Dario Fo and Caryl Churchill, along with Shakespeare and Molière, among others, seems evident), has a clear social and theatrical stance.

Richard Nelson is a moralist, a political writer, a satirist, a teacher but not a polemicist. Once tempted by the ministry, he is inclined to see a certain Calvinism in his approach to work, certainly in his early plays, a belief that the sheer strenuousness of effort is its own reward (a view expressed by the principal character in *Rip Van Winkle* or ‘*The Works*’), that art is its own justification. But, at the same time, he believes that to speak in the world is to become involved in the world and he has acknowledged pinning a quotation from Plutarch over his desk: ‘Politics is not like an ocean voyage, something to be gotten over with. It is a way of life.’<sup>1</sup> He is also, however, centrally concerned with the relationship between theatre and experience, in a number of his plays exploring the theatrical metaphor, or making theatre itself, its methods and assumptions, a primary subject, in an early play called *Jungle Coup* (1978) transforming a jungle setting into a theatre and having the central character address the audience directly.

<sup>1</sup> David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York, 1988), p. 175.

Had his career started a decade earlier, he might have adopted a more programmatic stance, but liberal and radical presumptions about social change had collapsed by the mid 1970s so that his career corresponded with a deeply conservative period in American history. As he has remarked, 'The liberal movement fell apart because it said that if we do this, then we'll get that result. And when it didn't happen, everything crumbled. What needs to be infused is the sense that it matters daily what we do – politically, morally, socially. We matter' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 175). It is not difficult to hear the would-be minister in those observations. Acting out, as he has said, 'is a commitment' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 172). It follows that theatre does not have to be *about* political issues; politics are immanent in theatre and, indeed, in language, politics in the sense of a moral view. The point is not to transform society along particular lines, to have a goal which is served by art, which thus becomes subservient, a means, serving an ultimate cause, but to acknowledge the fact that writing not only exists within a moral context, not only expresses and engages a moral point of view, but is itself an action with moral consequences. Meanwhile the structure of his plays reflects a conviction about the fluidity, the openness, the unresolved nature of experience.

There is an enemy. It is not imperialism or capitalism as such but a reductive view of human experience which sees it, no less than art, as simply a means. That may lead to protesting against wars or challenging materialism but not in the name of Marxism, anarchism, or any other formulaic mechanism for organising society or responding to human needs. It is simply a logical, though contested, consequence of acknowledging the dedication of language and art to communication, to engaging values, and Nelson has been as fascinated with language and the processes of art as he has been with exploring the nature of American society.

Politically, his enemy is cynicism, more especially with respect to the power of art to engage its own times, not least because cynicism constitutes an essentially conservative position. It denies the possibility of change. And since theatre itself is heavily invested in transformations, it follows that a number of his plays have concerned themselves with writing and the manner in which it bears on the reality it offers to audiences and readers. As he has said, 'A hidden agenda in all of my work is that it is about art – its value, purpose and function . . . The plays are efforts at being involved in society and at questioning values. What am I doing? How am I making things matter or not matter?' (Savran, *In Their*

*Own Words*, p. 173). Indeed the I which creates is itself explored, the impulse to write itself potentially involving an arrogant expropriation of experience. Far from writing out of the kind of confidence that typified much 1960s drama, therefore, he chooses to explore the ambiguous impulses which drive the writer no less than the culture within which he operates. Thus *Conjuring an Event*, ostensibly a play about the arrogance of the press, examines the manner in which the writer constitutes the world with which he or she chooses to engage.

Scarcely less important is the fact that Nelson is a comic writer, with a talent equally for quick-fire humour, farcical interplay and caustic irony. That humour is a value. It implies a viewpoint, an attitude. At the same time it underlines the fact that, serious though he can be, he is not solemn or portentous, even about his own craft. Thus, *Some Americans Abroad*, for example, is both a satirical account of his fellow Americans and an acknowledgement that theatre can be simultaneously elevated to cultural icon and relegated to marginal activity.

Theatricality, however, is central to his work, not least because he was shaped by a decade, the 1960s, in which society, and particularly American society, was self-consciously theatricalised. Politics were quite literally acted out on the street, with mass demonstrations and marches, often carefully choreographed. The mock-heroic drama of gathering together to elevate the Pentagon was a comic gesture making a serious point. Frequently these events were joined by theatre companies. On the East Coast the Living Theatre deliberately breached the boundary between the theatre and the street. On the West Coast the San Francisco Mime Troupe performed its political dramas in a public park. The solemnities of justice were meanwhile transformed into a theatrical event when Abbie Hoffman decided to turn courtroom procedures into low farce.

Nelson's plays are full of actors, directors, writers as he debates with himself questions not merely of political utility and social effect but of authenticity. Writers are, of course, liars, producing texts as suspect as those generated by Christopher Columbus in *Columbus and the Discovery of Japan*. Actors simulate feelings, persuading us of the truth of their simulations. How far, then, is a moral or political stance possible in a hall of mirrors? And, by displaying projected signs, Brecht-like, as he does in virtually all of his plays, he reminds us that we are, indeed, participating in a constructed event, as those plays, in turn, remind us of the theatrical dimensions of what we choose to regard as everyday life. For his characters are often caught self-consciously constructing the selves which

they choose to project as authentic signs. The two central characters in *Two Shakespearean Actors*, his play about the nineteenth-century actors William Charles Macready and Edwin Forrest, never cease to be actors even when they step off the stage. How far, he asks, here and elsewhere in his work, are we, then, any more than actors primarily concerned to adapt our performances to the shifting audiences we encounter? Such a concern is certainly at the centre of *The Vienna Notes*, in which a politician carefully shapes not only his account of events but the events themselves to serve the personality he wishes to construct.

Richard Nelson's interest in theatre began early. His mother had been a dancer and, living outside New York, from an early age he was exposed to the stage, mostly gravitating to musicals. When the family moved to Detroit he attended the Fisher Theatre, a Broadway try-out venue. At university he began writing plays, fourteen in four years, producing them in a variety of places. Several won prizes. A travel grant on graduation took him to England. On his return, in 1973, he moved to Philadelphia where, together with others, he formed a theatre company, working with Philadelphia's public radio station.

Early in his career he had a particular interest in exploring the relationship between public events and their reporting, the way in which a supposed reality is constructed, and since such a concern necessarily involves an acknowledgement of the constructed nature of theatre, there was, from the start, a metatheatrical aspect to his work.

His start in professional theatre came partly as a result of the contemporary popularity of documentary theatre, and in particular of Daniel Berrigan's *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*. It was this that led those at the Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum to select one of Nelson's plays for laboratory performance. *The Killing of Yablonski* is based on the murder, just outside of Pittsburgh, of Jock Yablonski, his wife and daughter. Nelson covered the trial, for murder, of Tony Boyle, head of the United Mine Workers Union.

*The Trial of Yablonski* is, however, not documentary theatre. Indeed it, and his later work, casts doubt on the very notion that theatre can recuperate fact or that fact and meaning are synonymous. The writer himself becomes a problematic figure whose motives colour the reality he presumes to present. This is particularly clear in the second work produced by the Mark Taper Forum, *Conjuring an Event*. Staged in 1978, it is a satire on the hubris of the reporter, no longer content to report the news or make claims for journalism as a new literary form but working, as the title implies, to generate events. It is not even a case of the journalist

turning mere events into news but summoning events into being, creating them out of nothing.

The central character, Charlie, wants to breach boundaries, transcend frontiers, extend limits. Appropriately, he is himself a borderline schizophrenic with a tenuous grasp on reality, occupying a strange world in which characters transform, explosions rend the air and invisible crowds cheer and applaud. He wants to be the rock star of journalism, a shaman revealing hidden truths, a necromancer, an alchemist turning lead into gold. His aim is 'absolute depth-reporting'.<sup>2</sup> Facts and figures are for those who 'play it safe'. He derides those who stand outside the scene they report. The essence is to look out from within. For his part, he is in training, sharpening his instincts. His skills at sniffing out a story are honed by practising on foodstuffs and objects laid before him. He breathes in the air, looking to transform a mere odour into substance as he will create a story out of nothing more substantial than his own desire.

At first he fails but there comes a moment when he achieves a breakthrough, offering a Whitmanesque list of objects, turning the banal into a kind of poetry, a hint at what he hopes to achieve through his writing. But it slips away.

Charlie's brother, meanwhile, also in the significantly named Pen and Pencil Club where the action takes place, tries to sell Charlie's book to a publisher called Sleeves, himself a one-time journalist from the age of Ring Lardner, Ben Hecht and Dorothy Parker, a time now long gone. When he learns of Charlie's experiments, however, he runs out 'scared shitless' (*An American Comedy and Other Plays*, p. 140) at the thought of such a radical revisioning.

In the second act a minor figure from the first act, himself something of a phantom, returns, dressed now as a 1930s reporter. He reminds Charlie that others had sought the same grail as himself, turning themselves into the real object of their attention, from Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe through to Gay Talese, whose sexual adventuring was presented as reportage, people who 'fell into their involvement acts' (*An American Comedy and Other Plays*, p. 160). The reporter's confessional reveals the self-doubt which leads to the assertion of self: 'I confess I have fed off other folks' actions. Their wrongs, scandals, joys, hardships, triumphs'. Confession, though, is followed by assertion: 'The Reporter has more range than a Beverly Sills ever had. More gusto than an H.H.H. ever had . . . More rhythm than Otis ever

<sup>2</sup> Richard Nelson, *An American Comedy and Other Plays* (New York, 1984), p. 140.

had, more draw than Jagger ever had, more power than Billy Graham ever had!' (p. 167). But this reporter transcends even this, intoning to himself: 'You are the leader-man. Way ahead of the field. Avant-garde . . . You're the connection. You determine what's big by where you play' (p. 163).

Under pressure he fragments into two personalities. He comes to feel that events only occur because he is to report them, that the world is kinetic energy that will only be released at his command. 'I break my neck getting to a fire and the fire it waits for me. I interview the candidate and the candidate, he questions me . . . I discover the scandal and the world discovers me' (p. 169). It is not difficult to fill in the blanks. On one level Nelson is plainly satirising a wholly recognisable process whereby the reporter not only feels himself superior to the event but feels the event to be justified only because he or she has condescended to report it. Beyond that, however, is a fascination with the notion that reality is only what we agree to describe as such, what we are prepared to concede to be of true significance.

At the height of his megalomania Charlie asks to see those who applaud him and the house lights go up to reveal the audience. Beyond the implicit accusation that the power claimed by such as Charlie can only exist if readers are prepared to endorse it, is a self-reflexive acknowledgement that the playwright, too, absorbs experience, particularly the author of such a play as *The Killing of Yablonski*, and derives his reputation from claiming that experience as his own: 'I consume them all and repackage them under my label' (p. 171).

The play ends on a note of apocalypse as all experience is drawn into the reporter, who becomes the god worshipped by an invisible crowd. The final word, heard amidst explosions, is 'Me', a word that resonated in the 1970s which, following the communalism apotheosised by the 1960s, narrowed the focus to the self.

There are echoes here of the early imagistic plays of Sam Shepard, of the characters from *The Tooth of Crime*, performed at London's Open Space Theatre in the year Nelson spent in Manchester. A realistic setting encloses non-realistic characters. Language is shaped into neurotic arias.

The following year saw two plays that reflected his concern with the manner in which the real is constituted and the egotism of a decade in which public issues had given way to private concerns: *The Vienna Notes* and *Bal*. *The Vienna Notes* dramatises an attempt on the life of a US Senator, visiting Vienna. But this is not a crime story. The fact is that the Senator spends much of his time dictating his memoirs to a secretary

and since he does this as events unfold it is possible to see the gap which opens up between what happens and what is reported as happening, as he seeks to shape reality to serve what seem to him to be the purposes of art. Indeed, little by little his account begins to have such authority that those involved adjust their behaviour to serve the memoir. The insecure socialite who accompanies the Senator slowly turns into an actress, performing at his behest, even adjusting her response to her husband's death when this seems insufficiently moving or appropriate. She looks to him for approval of her 'performance'. He and his secretary applaud when she meets their expectations by affecting a particularly moving, if calculated, moment.

The Senator, meanwhile, models his own account on the clichés of popular fiction, becoming, in effect, a product of his own invention. When they face death they debate among themselves the aesthetic quality of their chosen last words. The play, which begins with another memoir, as a hotel porter is paid to recount a past incident, ends in similar style as he offers a dramatic account of the events we have just witnessed and the Senator's secretary presents a similar memoir of a political campaign.

On one level the play is a reminder of the fictive nature of what we take to be actual and substantial, a dramatisation of the suspect nature of history and of the events and personalities we believe ourselves to know. As Nelson has said,

The politics of personality are the politics of our time. Political personalities (which are the characters created by the performance of public figures) are more important to us than are political acts . . . The notion of HISTORY has become what the notion of HEAVEN once was. Whereas a public figure may have once sought 'his place in Heaven', now he seeks 'his place in History'. And just as one once struggled for his soul's immortality by doing good works, one now struggles for the immortality of his characters in History by attempting to create as good, exciting, and empathetic a personality as he can.<sup>3</sup>

*The Vienna Notes* is, appropriately, not a realistic play, since the status and nature of the real are precisely up for debate. Nor is this a play solely about the politics of a time in which personality substitutes for identity. Inevitably, it also raises questions about acting and theatre, as it does about those who choose language over experience. When the Senator asks himself (theatrically) about the virtues of 'a life down on paper when there is a life here that breathes' (*The Vienna Notes*, p. 87), it is not

<sup>3</sup> Richard Nelson, *The Vienna Notes*, in *Word Plays: An Anthology of New American Drama* (New York, 1980), p. 102.

without relevance to the playwright who creates him, particularly to one who, like Nelson, wishes to engage with the political world.

Nelson reminds us that there is nothing inherently false about acting, that 'drama, or the dramatic, lies in our veins' (*The Vienna Notes*, p. 102). It is endemic to communication. In that sense theatre is continuous with experience, life being invaded with fiction and fiction with life. *The Vienna Notes* is, he has insisted, 'a play which in part is about performance and self-expression and audience reaction' (p. 102), all of which apply equally to daily life and to the special circumstances which constitute theatre. In that sense it is a play about authenticity, about the problem of knowing truth. In a theatrical context it engages the paradox debated by Denis Diderot, concerned as to whether truth can best be approached through dissembling.

Art, whether it be that of the playwright or the actor, is, by its nature, crafted. It offers a simulacrum. Its truths are compounded of fictions. Its tears are false, and tears are shed in this play. Yet we have Nelson's reminder that acting is not inherently false and, perhaps more surprisingly, that, in this play, 'The Senator . . . never lies about what he feels or what he is experiencing. The emotions he expresses do in fact exist within him. His concern is never to find a "better emotion", only to find a better way of expressing his emotions' (*The Vienna Notes*, p. 102). But that, too, is the essence of theatre, whose aim is to find the most effective way of communicating emotion. In life, no matter what Nelson implies, such an act of calculation is taken for a sign of inauthenticity since it implies a distance between feeling and action, which casts doubt on the depth of the feeling. A mother whose child is run over does not calculate how best to express her feelings. The actor in a play does and must. Yet, Nelson might say, the manner in which the mother responds may itself be shaped by a lifetime of performance which ensures that questions of authenticity no longer have real meaning, as that mother may have become the person she has created, since, at some level, we have all become what we have created.

Diderot's paradox, therefore, whatever Diderot may have thought (since he believed that the actor could remove his or her greasepaint and return home, authentic once again), applies with equal force beyond the stage door. And in so far as this is true then theatre becomes less of a special circumstance and the dilemma of the writer or actor no more than an expression of a dilemma which confronts us all. *The Vienna Notes* is, thus, a metatheatrical piece. It is in part a play about play-making, a myth about myth-making, a fiction about the construction of fictions.

But it is also a play about the theatrical dimension of experience, the degree to which the authentic is already a construction, the ethical formed as well as expressed by the aesthetic, genuine responses shaped by formula, personal biographies and histories sculpted to match familiar patterns.

Nelson's next play, *Bal*, is also an exploration of the so-called 'me decade'. First presented by the Williamstown Second Company, in 1979, it was produced at the Goodman Theatre, with Gregory Mosher directing, the following year. *Bal*, a man in his thirties, about whom we learn almost nothing, is little more than an embodiment of egotism, a character to whom others are drawn for no apparent reason beyond an unaccountable charisma unrelated to genuine human qualities. He is, as Nelson has said, 'totally grotesque'. He uses and abuses people to serve his own ends, disregarding their feelings, denying them their reality. To Nelson 'the play is saying, "You take what we're seeing to the extreme and this is what you get." It's not fatalistic because it is engaging an audience with the assumption that one can actually change' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 176). It is, in other words, an oblique parable, an account of a man who acknowledges no social or moral responsibility. In ten brief scenes, themselves further divided into scene fragments, it presents a man whose life is as discontinuous as the play which stages that life.

Nelson followed this study of an imperial self with, if not a study of an imperial culture, then at least an altogether more epic work, one in which he chose to address the nature of his own times by exploring the nature and fate of American utopianism, a utopianism marked by internal contradiction. Using a familiar American story (itself derived from a German original), set at the time of the birth of the American Republic, he staged the collapse of an apparent idyll into violence and a divisive ambition.

*Rip Van Winkle or 'The Works'* (1981) is a long way from Washington Irving's tale of an unyielding human nature and the ironies of history. In Irving's story Rip falls under the enchanted spell of magical figures in the Catskill Mountains and sleeps for twenty years, only to awake and discover that while George III has been replaced by George Washington, in other respects the world, and those who people it, have remained much what they were, besides suffering the effects of ageing. Nelson retains the magical interlude (shortening it to fifteen years) but otherwise introduces radical changes. What he takes from the story is an interest in the transformations of American society. As he remarked, 'it was a

wonderful story from which to express a sense of disorientation, a sense of things changing. It seemed almost a natural myth through which to come to terms with my feelings about the last twenty or so years in the life of this country.<sup>4</sup> Fittingly, the action of the first part of the play is observed by a surveyor, set to map the territory (essentially Nelson's objective), for, as he explains, the problem with maps is that 'things keep changing'.

The play takes place in a valley most of whose land had once been owned by Rip Van Winkle, although everyone, including himself, assumes that he has signed it over to Hans Derrick, who operates what is referred to as 'the works', a factory whose object of manufacture is left vague. In fact the document was not a sale but a mortgage and since the value of the land (thanks to the construction of the works) now exceeds the loan, Rip is rich. Knowing nothing of this, however, and being illiterate he comes close to being tricked into signing away his rights but, before he can do so, wanders into the hills and falls into an enchanted sleep. When he awakes he learns the truth, reclaims the land and turns the valley back into farmland. However, a drought precipitates a crisis, exacerbating an already deteriorating situation. Rip and Derrick are killed. The play ends with the death of Rip's daughter and her husband.

The Revolution, which exists in the background of Irving's tale, remains central here, too. Indeed, Derrick, whatever he may manufacture, sides with the rebel militia, the works themselves having been erected without the permission of the British authorities. Nonetheless, his patriotism is flavoured with commercialism. Even this early in the history of the new Republic, it seems, the business of America is business.

The scale of *Rip Van Winkle* is considerable. The cast list identifies forty-five characters. It is deliberately epic in scope. Set immediately before and after the Revolutionary War, it appears to comment not only on the values of eighteenth-century American society but on those of a contemporary world in which another kind of revolution had seemed under way, that of the 1960s. What is at stake, though, is less the conflict between an agrarian and an industrial society than the ability of the individual to retain a grasp on experience, on his or her own identity, in a society undergoing change, a society in which individual freedom is challenged by corporate thinking.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Nelson, 'Rip Van Winkle Our Contemporary: An Interview with Richard Nelson', *Theater* 13,2 (Spring 1982), p.6.

Nelson has no wish to celebrate a rural idyll (though there were those in the 1960s who did). Indeed farmers, in this play, are as prone to violence as those they oppose and can be idle as well as industrious. What concerns him is a conflict at the heart of American mythology. On the one hand, this is a society which maintains a myth of individualism and apotheosises abstract freedom, often overlaid with a powerful nostalgia for a pre-urban existence. On the other, it proposes a material drive, a celebration of achievement.

Nelson wrote the play looking back over two decades that included the communitarianism of the hippie revolution, urban riots, Vietnam and the conservative reaction of the 1970s; a period of flux which in many ways embodied the conflicting forces in American society. An essentially agrarian dream came up against the reality of urban decay; peace and love were confronted with domestic and foreign violence. Private dramas were increasingly enacted within a public theatre.

Philip Roth has spoken of the difficulty faced by the writer of fiction in the 1960s, when events appeared more fantastical than any contrived by the imagination. One response by novelists was to create a fiction that was itself invaded by the fantastic (Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller). In the cinema, Francis Ford Coppola captured the grotesqueries of Vietnam by turning to a blend of the gothic and the surreal in *Apocalypse Now*. David Rabe did much the same in the theatre. In *Rip Van Winkle*, Nelson reaches back to a familiar story and then destabilises it, rather as the supposed certainties of American society were disturbed by the sudden collapse of a presumed consensus. He does this not merely by turning the relatively straightforward ironies of Washington's tale into a much broader analysis of social change but by pressing the fairy tale element in the direction of something more surreal.

Nelson has acknowledged a fascination with classical drama and it is tempting to see elements of Shakespeare in a play whose central character is touched with a madness which contains true insight and who ultimately surrenders his land and his power; a play, too, in which there is what amounts to a fool (in the form of a shepherd), albeit a lethal one whose foolishness is genuine. But if this is Shakespearian it is Shakespeare refracted through Edward Bond, though without Bond's dogmatic politics. Indeed, if Nelson offers a critique of American society it is a moral rather than a political one. *Rip* certainly seems to have something of Bond's austere vision as the play ends with the death of its principal characters and the off-stage death of those who might be thought to contain the promise of the future. However, these deaths seem

strangely unrelated to social and political events. The latter are killed by a natural disaster, while the others are destroyed by a man whose grasp on reality is tenuous. Yet we are plainly to believe that options are running out, that in a context in which rumour and fantasy substitute for reality, pragmatism replaces values and the individual sensibility defers to the corporate mind, people are vulnerable to the sheer contingency of experience.

The overwhelming mood of *Rip* is one of uncertainty and flux. The only constancy, indeed, is the inevitability of change, no matter how Rip himself tries to fix the world in place, no matter how much he yearns for another time, works to root men in an unyielding earth. Nor are things what they appear. Identities are uncertain, documents misrepresented; men are mistakenly killed, actions are misinterpreted. People are demonised, reduced to role or stereotype. Rip's character itself transforms radically, as does that of the man who originally seeks to cheat him but eventually shares his attraction to the land. A man's face is cut off with a knife, a physical manifestation of a basic theme, mutability, as of the vulnerability of the self. Indeed the word 'face' is repeated, as are other words in a text whose language is carefully calculated, a text in which rhythm and reiteration are key devices.

The play covers a period of thirty years, forty-five if we include Rip's fifteen-year sleep. Rip and Gretchen, we are told, marry on the night Hendrick Hudson and his crew appear. Fifteen years later Rip falls asleep under their spell. The final scene takes place fifteen years later, on the eve of their next appearance. The wheel turns and as it does, so changes occur. Rip is transformed from loving husband to amiable drunkard to earnest agrarian. Derrick changes from callous industrialist to goat-herder/hermit. America, meanwhile, is transformed from would-be nation to a violent state in which contending versions of the real collide.

Of course, an element of this irony was present in Irving's original, as the face of George III on the town's inn sign is replaced by that of George Washington as if all that has changed is the complexion of power rather than the thing itself. But in Nelson's play power itself dissolves; transformations are radical. When external pressure is applied social role and moral character prove uncertain. Indeed this uncertainty cuts deep. As in a Shakespeare play there is a metaphysics to social dislocation. Here, at one moment the land turns to dust, the next it is a quagmire, swallowing those who thought the ground at least secure.

*Rip Van Winkle* concerns itself with the fundamental problem of

reading the world, with functioning at all when the known and the given are subject to radical change. In this play Rip becomes more than the butt of a social joke or the bewildered victim of magic. The magical interlude remains, a radical caesura in experience, but the plight of those who struggle to make sense of change is more profound than would be occasioned by the simple passage of time.

Nelson has said that *Rip Van Winkle*, and much of his other work, is 'about Idealism, both in the social sense and the philosophical sense of the word' ('Rip Van Winkle Our Contemporary', p. 7). In this play that idealism takes the form of a Jeffersonian agrarianism, Rip himself coming to feel that an interaction with the natural world is a fate if not a source of grace. Derrick, meanwhile, seems to see in 'the works', the industrial plant that he runs, an image of the future, albeit one in which the division of labour and capital reflects a disconnection of the individual from the soil and of individual from individual. Rip's celebration of farming, however, has nothing of Thoreau's sense of the restorative quality of nature. It is no more than an expression of his hostility to the new and his submission to what he takes to be the human condition. He reacts against those who would 'rather eat promises of better things to come than drink the sweat off their lips which comes from making things better'.<sup>5</sup> In advocating subsistence farming he evidences a deep Calvinism believing that 'affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble spout from the ground; but man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward' (*Rip Van Winkle*, p. 51).

The irony which Nelson seeks to explore is the fact that the ideal contains its own corruption: the dream of tomorrow compromises today while nostalgia for innocence may destroy the possibility of progress. The ghostly crew who play nine pins in the hills (ten pins in Nelson's version), and who are responsible for Rip's enchanted sleep, are a reminder that the original settlers handed down a curse along with a blessing.

Nelson has said that the 'play as a whole is about work, or better yet, about effort, struggle, the individual's need or desire for toil' ('Rip Van Winkle Our Contemporary', p. 7). At first sight this seems a curious remark, given the fact that, in the first part of the play at least, the central character does his best to avoid work. But Rip changes as a result of his fifteen-year sleep, struggling to find his way back to what he believes to be the founding ideal of his society, the Puritan ethic. It is an attempt which seems doomed to fail in that he now lives in a society unsure of its

<sup>5</sup> Richard Nelson, *Rip Van Winkle or 'The Works'*, *Theater* 13,2 (Spring 1982), p. 52.

direction or principles. And if that is the case in post-revolutionary America, for Nelson it is even more true of his own society for, as he has said,

in a society such as ours which is constantly changing, where goals appear and disappear in years, months, days, in a society which in my view has cracked, where few people seem to know what they or we are working for or even working to prevent, where all hope and vision which must be the engine of change has been tarnished if not buried, in such a society the question of work, of involvement seems to me to be at the heart of 'things'. ('Rip Van Winkle Our Contemporary', p. 7)

The last part of that sentence does not necessarily follow logically from the analysis which precedes it, and there is a risk that the polarity dramatised by the play – between working the land and working with a machine, the organic and the inorganic – will falsify a crisis more profound than one turning on the nature of work itself. And, indeed, though the plot seems to be driven by a dispute over different forms of labour, the play portrays an anxiety much deeper than can be encompassed by a choice of this kind.

It is true that *Rip Van Winkle* does not present a simple conflict between a soulless technology and a redemptive nature. Derrick is, in Nelson's view, 'first and foremost . . . an individual who through his great labor and effort and will' builds 'something he strongly believes must be built'. But things change and by the third part of the play 'what we have is the death of the individual, or personal responsibility' ('Rip Van Winkle Our Contemporary', p. 7). In other words, Nelson seems to be endorsing the idea of American individualism while lamenting its eclipse and also its corruption as it becomes no more than the justification of a material aggrandisement devoid of social obligations. It is in this context that he recalls Greg Mosher telephoning him on election night, 1980, to suggest that 'now we enter Part III of *Rip Van Winkle*' ('Rip Van Winkle Our Contemporary', p. 8). Business values were, once again, to be American values and hard-headed asocial individualism to be reconstituted as a value. And, though Nelson was hardly to know it, the 1980s would see a triumph for individualism, an insistence on the reality of the dream and the death of a social ethos. This is a play, then, which, despite its eighteenth-century setting, is offered as a self-conscious comment on the 1960s and 1970s. A wealthy manufacturer's son rebels against his father and turns into a revolutionary, denouncing the evils of commerce. A war veteran returns and fits uneasily back into a world in which he feels out of place, a world in which people behave as if the war had never happened.

Nor were the transformations that lie at the heart of the play restricted to character and plot. The style of the play itself changes radically. It is, Nelson has said, 'a non-naturalistic play', which retains 'psychological truth' ('*Rip Van Winkle Our Contemporary*', p. 8). For much of the time it is a comedy, indeed almost a farce. The mood, however, changes in the last scenes, deepening towards tragedy. Not merely does a failure to read the world aright now lead to death rather than simple confusion but nature itself colludes by turning an apparently fructifying rain storm, which ends the drought that has precipitated a degree of anarchy, into the cause of an ironic accident. The gap of understanding between the generations, between husband and wife, or neighbours, now becomes something altogether more alarming and painful. Early in the play it was the cause of amusement; at the end it is the cause of despair.

Derrick tells the story of a man with a beast trapped within his ribs who relies on the strength and drive of the beast to pull him across a field in order to rescue a suffering dog. Once there, however, the beast eats the dog. The moral seems to be that the same force which drives one forward may be the source of destruction. Rip offers his own comment: 'Fantasy and dreams have no home in the breast of a hard-working man . . . work may not save our harvest, but it will show what kind of men we are' (*Rip Van Winkle or 'The Works'*, p. 55). What is in contention is precisely what Nelson has made reference to in interview:

It seems to me that there is both a wondrous and horrific conflict in the American psyche where on the one hand this country was founded on (and still pays lip service to) a work ethic; it was not what one achieved but how hard one worked to achieve it that mattered. Success (in spiritual terms) was determined by the extent of one's effort and not by one's achievement. We pay emotional homage to the lonely farmer or frontiersman who cracks rocks and works until his backbone breaks and say – 'that is what an American is', while at the same time we take pride in saying – 'only America could have put a man on the moon in ten years'. ('*Rip Van Winkle Our Contemporary*', p. 7)

To be told that a play set at the time of the Revolution is in some sense about the moon-landing might seem somewhat strained. It is the essence of the play, however, that it explores precisely this division at the heart of the American dream between spiritual and material achievement, between work as grace and work as means, between sturdy independence and a cruel competitiveness or coercive homogeneity ('what's good for the valley, is good for everyone', (*Rip Van Winkle or 'The Works'*, p. 56)), between a yearning for some transcending achievement and a

boastful boosterism. America was built on the presumption that it was discontinuous with the past, that it emerged out of a radical caesura in experience. The laws of time were to be suspended, as in the myth of Hendrick Hudson. It was possible to be reborn, transformed. The irony, however, lay in the one unavoidable continuity, that of human nature. The violence necessary to secure freedom becomes the violence which threatens freedom. The play begins and ends with characters sinking into the mud.

Nelson is not a solemn polemicist. Indeed, he has the ability to satirise those who are. Speaking of Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*, which he adapted for André Serban, he remarked that, 'it's like going behind the woodshed during slavery to make fun. It's a release, it states the obvious condition. Stating the obvious in an entertaining way . . . is a worthwhile function of the theatre' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 169). He has made essentially the same point about Brecht's *St Joan of the Stockyards* and *Arturo Ui*: they 'can be so much fun that it's not going to change anybody's beliefs. Theatre can make one feel not so alone. It doesn't necessarily have to change one's life' (p. 169). Much of *Rip Van Winkle* is a blend of comedy, farce and absurdist paradox, while edging towards something more akin to a sense of the tragedy at the heart of experience. With his next play, however, he chose, as the title indicates, to set up camp almost entirely in the comic mode.

Indeed, in *An American Comedy* (1983), set in 1935, and a pastiche of 1930s comedy, he satirises those who adopt a fashionable commitment. In this play, and beyond the obvious references to George S. Kaufman, he gives every sign of going head to head with the Neil Simon of *The Sunshine Boys*, in which two vaudevillians who have fallen out are to be brought back together for a final performance. Here, the two principals, Max and George, are a Broadway comedy writing duo on board a transatlantic liner who are expected to come up with a new hit. This seems increasingly unlikely, however, since one of them has been converted to communism and is determined to write a worthy consciousness-raising drama for the enlightened working class.

Like Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, which Nelson also adapted, *An American Comedy* relies on the techniques of farce, as well as of Broadway comedy, but unlike Max, his newly committed playwright, he was under no illusions that his play, or, indeed, his adaptation of Fo's play, would find a working-class audience. Indeed Max's commitment is paper-thin, no more than a series of postures, slogans and pieties, ridi-

culed by the playwright no less than by his fellow writer, George, for whom the idea of 'one single writer wilfully accepting poverty could become that chink in the armor . . . that break in solidarity' which could lead to 'the destruction of Art in America as we know it today!' The glue which binds 'all artists in America together' (*An American Comedy*, p. 39) is money.

Interestingly, in criticising a Lincoln Centre production of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *Front Page*, he confessed to feeling 'really distraught' because 'it's a play whose cynicism is focused on racism and on grotesque, ugly political manipulations. But it was treated as "Ha ha, isn't it funny the way the world is?"' He laments that 'questions of morality were not addressed in that production' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 172). The truth is that questions of morality were scarcely in the forefront of the original production either, which was supervised by the less than morally engaged Jed Harris, though the director was George S. Kaufman (perhaps a model for one of the characters in *An American Comedy*), a man who was equally capable, as a writer, of creating (with Morrie Ryskind) *Animal Crackers*, for the Marx Brothers, and the committed drama, *Of Thee I Sing*. The interesting aspect of Nelson's remark lies in what he chooses to see as the essence of a play more usually seen as a classic American comedy. In fact, *An American Comedy* is susceptible of precisely the same analysis, though he saw it as an attempt to forge a mythological style while being 'a very ironic play', a fact which, he regretted, none of the critics of the Mark Taper Forum production perceived, preferring to regard it, somewhat surprisingly, 'as straight-on serious' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 166).

It is true that between the laughs Nelson threads not merely Max's naive and ultimately self-serving version of Marxism but also an account of the inequities of America, as well as the cynicism of theatre. It is true, too, that Max is allowed to reply to George's taunt that 'a play has never gotten anyone to change the sheets let alone the world', by saying that 'maybe I won't change the world with my plays, but I'm damn well going to try to change it with my life' (*An American Comedy*, p. 49), but otherwise virtually everything in the play serves the comedy. There is, though, perhaps, a residue. When Max says that 'If I were a Negro today I don't know how I'd keep myself from burning the whole damn country down!' (p. 50) it may be a set-up for a gag but there is a trace element left behind, just as Nelson's fable, *The Return of Pinocchio*, which opened at the Open Space Theatre in 1983, following a workshop production the previous year at the Bay Area Playwrights Festival, addressed genuine aspects of

American society in the caricatures and distortions offered by its central character, who steps out of fairy tale and popular culture.

Nelson has said that *Pinocchio* was influenced by his work on the classics, being a play about a mythological character, which tries to offer 'a simple picture for a complicated society' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 166). It, together with *Bal* and *Rip Van Winkle*, bears the marks of his work on Goldoni's *Il Campiello*, Brecht's *The Wedding* and *In The Jungle of Cities* and Erdman's *The Suicide*. An account of Pinocchio's return to Italy, after the Second World War, it dramatises a rich American's response to the poverty and moral confusion that he finds. Scattering dollars, he fails to read the world in which he moves. Instead he outlines the principles of the American dream, inadvertently revealing the corruption at its heart. An immigrant himself, he now treats the Italians like children, justifying the contempt which he expresses and rhapsodising the American way while, apparently, slitting the throat of the person he regards as taking advantage of him. The play ends with a serviceman on a train reading a murder mystery, an ironic comment on the American taste for a purging violence.

The play has a comic-book style. Each scene has a projected title, visible throughout, which creates an ironic commentary on the action. When Pinocchio tries to offer his idealised portrait of America as a melting-pot in which people live in peace and help one another become successful, the title indicates 'THE ALPHABET'. When his money is stolen and he works in a bar to pay off his debt and protect the reputation of the free enterprise system, the title reads 'AMERICAN MILLIONAIRES'. As Nelson has said of the use of such projected titles here and in subsequent plays, 'the way those signs are presented is very important to me because they're a voice, a character in the play'. They become the basis of a conversation between the action and the interpolated comment. 'It's also,' he has suggested, 'a metaphor for the relationship between your heart and your mind, between the emotion and trying to find its meaning . . . It's the difference between relating individually and socially to a situation' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, pp. 166–7).

He acknowledges the influence of Brecht, not merely in the sense of a borrowed technique but with respect to his belief that theatre can be a forum, an arena for debate. He finds in Brecht a justification for the theatrical parable, for emotion contained within a structure which gives something more than a private dimension to that emotion. He also, and revealingly, speaks of discovering the humour in Brecht's work, through

the production of *In The Jungle of Cities* staged at the Brooklyn Academy of Music where he was Literary Manager. But Brecht has always sat uneasily in America and Nelson, too, has had his difficulties, both with regard to productions and critical response. *The Return of Pinocchio* was attacked in Seattle, when The Empty Space staged it, and again in New York. Its oblique approach proved difficult to understand but, beyond that, he was writing a political play which in effect attacked the orthodoxies of the day, orthodoxies which celebrated American values and resisted what was seen as political theatre. This, at least, was Nelson's own explanation. In 1986 he suggested that American audiences, and those in the media who guided them, having lived through the 1960s, were now alienated from politics. It is not a wholly convincing view, since David Mamet's caustic account of American values and Sam Shepherd's ambivalent portraits of an America 'crashing into the sea', were scarcely without a political dimension. The real difficulty, perhaps, lay in the form rather than the substance, in an alienated style which some found alienating.

Nelson has spoken of himself as politically 'an unrepentant product of the 1960s', living on into a period in which that was regarded as 'a very great sin'.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, he felt himself in some respects alienated, marginalised. By 1983, when he started writing *Between East and West* and *Principia Scriptoriae*, he was 'a writer with a string of critically unsuccessful plays', ('Introduction', *Principia Scriptoriae*, p. ix), well able to sympathise with the characters in those plays who were displaced, exiled. He had been successful with adaptations, which he had undertaken for pragmatic reasons (they gave access to major stages in a way that his own work did not, and put food on the table) but from which he had learned a great deal. But in terms of his original work, productions in Los Angeles and New York had not yet offered him the breakthrough for which he looked.

It was an adaptation, however, that, along with two other events, gave a certain impetus to his new plays. In November 1983, he was commissioned to write an adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (working from a literal translation) for the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. It was a project that made him read Chekhov anew and discover in his work elements that seemed to have a particular application to someone suddenly aware of contradictions and ambiguities in his own life. At the time he was having to come to terms with his own mother's impending death

<sup>6</sup> Richard Nelson, 'Introduction', *Principia Scriptoriae with Between East and West* (London, 1991), p. ix.

from cancer while being simultaneously enthused by the birth of his first child. In other words pain and pleasure were coinciding. In Chekhov he found an echo of his state of mind, 'a voice pulsing with humor, irony, confusion, contradiction, and passion for life and for the pain of life' ('Introduction', p. viii).

For Nelson, the two plays from this period marked a watershed. They were, as he has noted, the first of his plays to be performed in England, a country that was to become increasingly important to him. He was also aware that 'artistically too I was changing, or rather had no choice but to change' ('Introduction', p. viii). The result was two plays that explored people out of their element, struggling to make sense of a new situation. The fact that both are concerned with the situation of the artist, shapers, interpreters of experience (theatre director and actress, in *Between East and West*; writers, in *Principia Scriptoriae*), shows that, watershed or not, there were continuities as well as disjunctions in his work. Both, for example, like *Rip Van Winkle*, are concerned with change. But the sense of exile, or what he has called 'betweenness', was new, unless Rip's return to his own country could be described as such.

*Between East and West* (1985) explores the dilemma of a theatre/film director and his actress wife who have escaped from Czechoslovakia and now struggle to make sense of their decision and their new situation in New York. They have to rebuild their careers in a world they cannot claim as their own, whose language they speak imperfectly, and whose signs they read only with difficulty. From being stars they are reduced to mendicants, admired, perhaps, for their stance, but scarcely courted for their talents. The director, Gregor, however, is eventually hired to direct a production of *Three Sisters*, apparently at the Hartford stage, a play not without its relevance since it is about a sense of exile, while Erna, the actress, now has to undertake a role in which she had previously excelled, but in a language in which her accented English undermines something of the poetry of the piece. At the end of the play Gregor telephones his wife, who has returned to Czechoslovakia, but finds himself speaking to her sister, confessing that the production had not been a success. It was regarded, he explains, as 'too European'. He feels nostalgia for the place that gave real meaning to his life, but seems, grudgingly, to accept the need to move on.

The public world, which created their private dilemma, intrudes in the form of television newscasts which detail the tensions of the Cold War. They have exchanged countries and secured a freedom not available to them in their old home but they still exist within history. Nor is

the artistic trade an equal one. Gone are the resources available to them at home. Gone, too, is the sense that art has a crucial role, that its meanings impact on a social situation. The criticism of a production of a European play as 'too European' suggests something of the values of the theatre in which Gregor will now have to function.

As in his earlier work, Nelson continues to use alienating devices. Each scene has a projected title whose ironies provide a comment on the action (the title 'THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY' accompanies Erna's declaration that she will scrub floors to keep them alive; 'GOING PLACES', is projected over a scene in which Erna learns English with such American phrases as 'SHE . . . WILL GO TO THE REFRIGERATOR . . . WE WILL GO . . . HOME', the last, of course, an ironic comment on her own nostalgia for a lost home). The scenes are also played out of chronological order, a dramatic reflection of their own confusion.

*Between East and West*, indeed, is a play of comic confusions and misreadings, of people stranded not only between countries but between meanings. A space has opened up between husband and wife as it has between them and the place where their lives had seemingly had real significance, between their inner experiences and the language available to express those experiences. But such gaps already existed. When they recall their arrival at their new apartment, their memories do not match. Separation and exile, then, are not only a product of place. We all inhabit separate countries. Though we appear to perform in the same play we interpret it differently, hear speeches in a different way, become so many characters engaging one another on the surface while retaining separate selves, locked securely away, too securely away. Gregor and Erna are enthusiastic for their new life, but apprehensive of it; glad to have escaped but regretful at what they have left behind. The Cold War rhetoric of the East has been exchanged for the Cold War rhetoric of the West. It is not a language in which they wish to be fluent but language itself presents them with difficulties as meanings seem to slide around disturbingly.

*Principia Scriptoriae* (1986), whose title Nelson came to regret for its pretentiousness, was, to his mind, a companion piece to *Between East and West*. The play, which has two timescales – 1970 and 1985 – is set in an unnamed Latin American country. The first six (and final one) of ten scenes concern two writers who find themselves imprisoned, one, Ernesto, a native of the country, the other, Bill, an American, who speaks no Spanish, his linguistic bafflement mirroring his political ignorance. Neither appears to know the cause of his arrest and neither, at first,

appears particularly apprehensive. For Bill, indeed, it seems partly an adventure, further fuel to his naive and vague revolutionary enthusiasm. He recalls a political demonstration against Lyndon Johnson and looks forward confidently to a transformed American political system, in his arrogance patronising a man who, we learn, is faced with a more tangible political oppression than his northern neighbour. He also, ironically, relies on the very American power he challenges to protect him in his prison cell.

Bill is a backpack revolutionary, as happy to offer his views on a country he has known for only one week as he is to sum up the English on the basis of a college trip. Anxious to show solidarity with a people he knew nothing about, he chose this country rather than Cuba because the cost of living was lower and he could fly standby from Kennedy Airport. In other words, the play begins almost as a comedy. The stakes do not seem high. But as it proceeds so the temperature rises. The two are tortured and face possible death. Now they have to acknowledge that there are principles and concerns which transcend the self. They are forced to consider the question and meaning of sacrifice as, later, they must confront the possibility and necessity of forgiveness. Entering the play, as we do, in the middle of a conversation, we, the audience, are as unaware of the real issues as, certainly, is Bill. We, too, are liable to misread the text of his experiences and hence are carried along with him on a logic which is only revealed by degrees. Ernest Hemingway was fond of describing his style in terms of an iceberg, seven-eighths of which is below the water, and which can only be inferred from what is visible. Much the same could be said of the work of Richard Nelson, particularly in this play. Despite the brute facts of blood and pain to which we are exposed, he works by understatement, by implication.

The opening scene is deliberately confusing, though not without its humour. In the American production Nelson was invited to cut the first few pages. He refused. In the English production his director, David Jones, slowed it down, allowing the audience to orient themselves. The structure stayed, and the structure is vital to the play, but the humour was released, a humour which makes what follows more painful, more disturbing, for when the two men are shown after being tortured it seems as if we have entered another play, just as the two characters realise that they are in a drama which differs fundamentally from that in which they had presumed they were acting. A comedy of misunderstandings gives way to something quite other.

Ernesto also has his naiveties. Told that his father, a lawyer and jour-

nalist, has met with Manuel Rosa, the country's poet turned ambassador to Franco's Spain, he cannot accept it. But the essence of the play does not lie in a radical critique of South American politics. The country remains unnamed. The clash between right and left is not in itself the subject. It is, in Nelson's words, a play about fathers.

The "fathers," he explains, 'would be not only Bill's and Ernesto's literal fathers, those misunderstanding and misunderstood creatures referred to often in the first act, but also the literary fathers, the writers of Act II, along with the "mentors" discussed, and in one case even translated, by the "sons" in Act I' ('Introduction', *Principia Scriptoriae*, p. xi). The fact is that as they lie injured in their cell, in the first act, the two young men discuss literature. Bill travels with a translation of the Old English poem, *The Seafarer*, while they debate the contradiction between Ezra Pound's reactionary politics and his transcendent poetry, paralleled by the contradiction equally apparent in the work of Manuel Rosa. As writers, in other words, they wrestle with the contradictions of literature. Beyond that, however, Nelson sees the play as being concerned with 'myself as father interacting with myself as son' ('Introduction', p. xi), in the sense that he now juxtaposes the young Bill and Ernesto with older versions of themselves as the play moves forward in time.

The next three scenes of the play, set some years later, concern a delegation of writers to that same Latin American country, who demand the release of Manuel Rosa, held in prison by the now left-wing government. In their own way they are as naive as Bill and Ernesto had been, and these two now appear, apparently on opposite sides of this discussion.

Re-reading the play in 1991, Nelson said that, 'I find fathers who are there to give protection, comfort and courage to the "sons", and who inevitably disappoint: be they the literary fathers of Act II, who though decent and well-meaning are unable to find any solutions in a world they now recognise as complicated and even solutionless; or the real fathers who maybe are not what they seemed to their sons to be; Ezra Pound who can be brilliant at one thing and despicable at another' ('Introduction', pp. xi-xii). As with so many other Nelson plays *Principia Scriptoriae* is in part about writing, about the capacity or otherwise of the writer to function in or understand the world in which he is involved and from which he is detached. He claims and is granted a special role. When, as in this play, he is imprisoned, others come to his defence on the grounds that he in some senses embodies both a necessary freedom and a moral conscience. Yet, as here, writers are as capable of naivety,

of betrayal, of wrong-headedness as anyone. Like anyone else they change over time while being baffled by change. They are as guilty of egotism and manipulation as those they claim the right to castigate, as liable to misjudge motives, misunderstand intentions. Thus Nelson tells the story of his own production of Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, whose failure on Broadway led to his denunciation by Fo, a man whose work he greatly admired and whom he had thought of as one of his own literary fathers.

*Principia Scriptoriae* is, in some senses, Nelson's debate with himself. It is an acknowledgement of the fallibility of the writer. It is a confession that writing is not free of the manipulative power which it offers to criticise, that it often claims a suspect privilege, that a good writer may be a poor reader of his times, that today's self-evident truth may be tomorrow's self-evident falsity. Like many of his other plays, this is full of writers, none of whom can finally claim an exemplary insight into themselves any more than into the world they offer to engage. Of the texts invoked only *The Seafarer*, anonymous, seems to clear a space around itself, to rise above a debate about political and literary contamination. And yet the right-wing Pound and the left-wing Lorca are conceded to meet somewhere, at a point where language endeavours to contain and express feelings which seem to defy expression. Thus, when Bill and Ernesto, together, recite a line from *The Seafarer* – 'no kinsman can comfort a desolate man' – they touch on literature's potential to engage feelings that make its other functions seem if not more trivial then at least more ambivalent. As Bill and Ernesto face what they believe will be their death (their guards stage a mock execution) Bill describes the plot of his less than convincing novel. He does so, however, still confident that writers are immune. Literature, in other words, is consolation and self-deceit.

At the end of the play Bill and Ernesto are separated rather than drawn together by experience. Though both writers, they have gone in different directions. History has broken their solidarity, buried the shared moments. Now they serve different political positions. Yet, in the penultimate scene, as they sit on the porch of Ernesto's house, they face a joint disappointment. Once they suffered torture together. Now their only solidarity seems to lie in a shared disillusionment. The power of this simple scene, however, lies in truths that are felt rather than articulated. Indeed the words they utter essentially deny feelings which have an integrity of their own. 'The things we thought,' says Bill. 'We were stupid.' 'Right,' agrees Ernesto. 'Right. We were.' But between the word

'thought' and the word 'We' in Bill's speech, and between the reiterated word 'Right', in Ernesto's, Nelson indicates '(Beat)' (*Principia Scriptoriae*, p. 54). Both speeches break along the fracture line of those beats. Perhaps that is what he meant when he said that 'the building block on which everything is based, is not the word or dialogue but people'.<sup>7</sup>

With his next play, *Sensibility and Sense*, Nelson chose to engage history in another way. Set in the Adirondack Mountains, New York, it once again operates on two timescales: 1937 and 1986. As usual in Nelson's work, projected titles locate the action, on this occasion indicating the time of day. In the first scene Marianne, President Emeritus of Bryn Mawr, and Edward, a couple in their seventies, await the arrival of Elinor, once a friend and now the object of a planned law suit. Fellow radicals in the 1930s, they now contest that past, writing their own histories, levelling their own accusations, serving their own psychological needs in a present apparently so different from their past. Marianne has suffered from an illness that makes her physically dependent on her husband but she has lost none of the aggression which fifty years before had made her a radical. Again Nelson writes about change and continuity.

The second scene takes us back to that time when all three had stayed in the same lakeside home of a wealthy man who worked in 'defence', and whose support they had come to solicit for a radical magazine called the *Leftist Review*. Founded by members of the Communist Party, it is now, in their view, their own to do with as they wish. Accordingly, they have decided to 'go with history', to escape the boundaries of ideology, and publish only those things to their own taste or, as they prefer to say, in line with their own consciences and beliefs, a grand schema which Marianne mocks as well as embraces.

For Edward, their old beliefs had foundered on the fact of the Third Reich. Old certainties could no longer be sustained in the face of historic change. On the other hand there is something too pat about the speeches he rehearses for the millionaire who never turns up to hear them. For Elinor it is the existence of slums, of hunger and deprived children in New York that drives her, except that there is also a detachment in her invocation of the suffering masses which sits awkwardly with their mission to solicit money from the rich. Rationalisation follows rationalisation until we slowly discover that such public passions are not only rooted in private experiences but defer to them.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Nelson and David Jones, *Making Plays: The Writer-Director Relationship in the Theatre Today* (London, 1995), p. 65.

And so the action switches back and forth in time, different actors playing the young versions of those who meet as septuagenarians in the 1980s. It is, however, not simply a matter of contrasting youthful idealism with the cynicism of old age. Their ambivalence was already apparent in the 1930s. Again, the ideal itself seems contaminated. There is a self-evident gulf between abstract commitment and personal motive. The speeches they practise, for the man they expect to subsidise their venture, have no roots in experience. They invoke the Jews and the poor but are not of them. They speak of ideals while compromising them. When, in a scene set in 1937, a young woman called Thérèse enters, well-dressed and attractive, they assume she is no more than the mistress of the man they, too, are prepared to seduce, a rich girl, lacking commitment, only to discover that she has served on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. For her part, she suspects that the two women might be actresses, and in a sense she is not wrong, for they are performers. Meanwhile, she has no illusions about the man they hope will fund their magazines, seeing him as seeking to conceal his greed through association with supposed idealists.

Back in the 1980s we discover that beneath the level of political debate, the financial manoeuvring, the discussion of history, other forces were at play. For Elinor and Edward had been married and divorced before he married Marianne, a fact that has evidently left him somewhat confused, as he gives one an affectionate bite which was actually an intimacy he used to share with the other. Indeed, sexual intrigue seems to have been as potent a fact as any of the issues they liked to believe motivated them.

Past and present now begin to intertwine as Nelson allows the two timescales to blur, the older Marianne and Elinor existing within the same frame as the younger versions of themselves, the action switching between them, sometimes with one seeming to comment on the other. The continuities and discontinuities of history, it seems, are generated by something other than the dynamics of class, at least in the context of these characters who once believed themselves to be drawn together by political beliefs. Indeed the radical politics and attitudes of Elinor and Marianne appear in essence to be a by-product of their personal lives, one being the daughter of a chauffeur, the other of a suicide. They purport to despise the rich because they were not of them.

*Sensibility and Sense* is a comment on changing times and changing loyalties, on the need for self-justification represented as dispassionate judgement, on the subjective nature of history and the uses to which we

put one another. Elinor's memoir places her at centre stage while Marianne's rejection of it in part, at least, expresses an irritation at being required to play a supporting role in someone else's drama. A shift in time, in perspective, in beliefs, retrospectively changes the past, reconstructing it to serve present purposes. History thus becomes a form of fiction. Meanwhile, below the surface, other forces are directing the characters as self becomes the key to actions themselves available for misrepresentation by others.

Yet the play is not without its sentimentalities. Beneath their jealousies, Elinor and Marianne remain friends. Their judgements are not as dissimilar as they appear. They require one another to validate their memories, even as they contest the nature of the past which seems to contain the essential meaning of their lives, no matter what has happened since. They share secrets and need the continuing battles, the rivalry, which enlivened their lives in 1937 and do again in 1986. They accuse one another of selling out quite as if there were a faith to have been abandoned, the very accusation giving substance to what in truth never really existed. They did not change history but history seems to have given a resonance to their lives.

The merging of time in *Sensibility and Sense* generates meanings that would not have been unlocked in quite the same way by a sequential narrative. The confrontation between the characters' younger and older selves creates assonances and dissonances that are part of the music of time. History, meanwhile, stands as something less than implacable. There is a history out there, constructed by genocidal tyrants, class conflict and economic forces; but there is another history built out of sexual, emotional, intellectual needs and the stories we construct to contain and explain them.

Still another version of history is on offer in *Roots in Water*, a play first performed in August 1988, at the River Arts Repertory in Woodstock, New York, and then, in a somewhat different version, on BBC Radio in 1989. Set between 1976 and 1988, it is composed of twelve thematically related scenes in which no character appears more than once. What ties these scenes together is a sense of an interaction between public and private events, sometimes direct and traumatic, sometimes no more than nostalgia for a time whose brutality has been muted, transformed into style or callow regret. It is a play about decline, loss, regret, betrayal. It is a play about a war, already over by the time of the first scene, retreating steadily into the past and yet in some way present even when it is no

more than a memory, no more, apparently, than a momentary disturbance in time.

The opening scene is a monologue, or a dialogue involving an unseen woman. Once again a title is projected, in this case along with a date. Here it is: '1976 FLYER'. The subject, Buster, is an airman flying relief supplies into an unspecified Far-Eastern country. A Vietnam veteran, he is plainly still suffering from the trauma not only of the war but of the loss of his native wife, whom he has abandoned and betrayed. He has convinced himself that by feeding the nation he may in some way be feeding her. Contempt and love are fused together until he can no longer tell the difference. Living on the edge, overloading his plane, he tries to drive out a guilt which is destroying him as he has played his role in destroying others. He is a man barely in control, a man for whom the ghosts of the past haunt and dominate the present.

The following scene features a Congressman and his speechwriter in Bangkok in 1977. The Congressman has no conception of the world in which he is moving. Everything has to be related to his American experience. Meanwhile the speech, whose delivery he practises, is an apparently heartfelt lament over the consequences of the war, a confession of complicity delivered with a stirring fluency. However, when he tries to describe what he has seen to his wife, who telephones from the States, his language breaks down, his assurance faltering, his banal comments about the weather suddenly exposed as a means of holding at bay feelings that are better expressed by his inarticulate attempts to communicate with his wife than by the fluent regrets he offers in a speech which is, anyway, not his own.

Each subsequent scene of *Roots in Water* moves the action on by a year, pulling it ever further away from the detonation whose impact nonetheless continues to register, though with ever-decreasing force and in an ever more oblique form. Now the characters discuss the war at one remove, beginning to doubt the rightness of their past behaviour or to see it through the lens of the present. Who, for example, is to blame for the situation in Cambodia: those who pursued the war or those who protested it? Did this prove or disprove the domino theory which had suggested that Vietnam was to be the first of a succession of communist victories? And anyway are such discussions really about Vietnam or about the need to justify oneself to oneself, the need, indeed, to be in the right regardless of the topic in hand?

By 1979 an apparent 1960s survivor, encountered in a European hostel, turns out to be a Wall Street banker whose comments about El

Salvador are evidently no more than a bid to square 1970s and 1980s greed with the style but not the content of radicalism. By 1980 the issue has become the environment and 1981 the nuclear freeze, though for the couple at the heart of this scene this is simply a commitment without meaning, a cause that costs them nothing, a liberal stance having more to do with style than substance, as the man wears a stolen nuclear freeze button which means nothing to him, a sign without a signifier, a design accessory.

The 1982 section is headed 'CIVIL RIGHTS' and takes place on a train in which a man sits with his son and recalls the Civil Rights Movement in which he had almost but not quite played a part, while terrified of the black area through which they are currently passing. The 1983 scene – 'BUYING A HOUSE' – deals with the increasingly difficult relationships between men and women, as two women look back to their college days while acknowledging that in some way the gains they have made have left them feeling discontented.

By 1984 the issues have become smoking and Central America, the former commanding rather more attention than the latter as the characters recall faint memories of the Kent State killings and debate whether smoking might be easier in a revolutionary Central American state. A year later and the political has all but disappeared as a couple debate whether a T-shirt with 'USA' on it might not imply a nationalism close to fascism, a linguistic game with no purpose, a faint echo of an issue which has lost all meaning with time.

The play continues with a section called 'THE CHERRY ORCHARD', in which a family meet to divide up property after their mother's death from cancer while considering an opportunist malpractice suit against the doctor, or a class action suit against the tobacco companies. One by one their prejudices are revealed, as is the lack of the very love which they have ostensibly met together to celebrate. By degrees their conversation devolves into a political argument as they debate what has become of America. Yesterday's causes have declined into today's bigotry and anger as they themselves become a microcosm of the country whose dissolution they deplore. The play ends in 1988, with a section ironically called 'THANKSGIVING', in which the subject is the collapse of relationships and the rootlessness of those involved.

*Roots in Water* is like a series of snapshots which animate as they riffle past, offering twelve moments from an entropic history. It is not simply, however, a portrait of America's plunge into privatism, though yesterday's passions are seen as losing their edge, public issues devolving into

private concerns. It is not even that these are characters living in the aftermath of trauma, though the first scene does date from the year following the final withdrawal from Vietnam. It is that this is a culture for which history has no substance. It lacks a language to engage with tragedy, to describe politics or account for social relationships, other than that provided by myths of self-development. It privileges feeling over thought and rhetoric over communication. This is a society with its roots in water. It is temporary. It lacks any leverage on events because history is no more than a backdrop for psychodramas. It is a society without a centre. Even the ceremony which celebrates its founding, the birth of a communal ideal, is tainted, an occasion which underlines its centrifugal tendencies. The pursuit of happiness is littered with compromised ideals and broken relationships. There is no heart to the American enterprise, no true location for the City on the Hill. In the words of the final speech: 'We live, but there's nowhere to settle.'<sup>8</sup> *Roots in Water* is a sequence of twelve songs, each separate, each in some way a lament.

In 1989 and 1990 Nelson wrote two plays for the Royal Shakespeare Company which could scarcely have had more appropriate subjects or settings for such a company. The first, *Some Americans Abroad*, is a comedy about an American university group on a summer theatre course in Britain, a course that takes them to the theatre twenty-seven times and which, unsurprisingly, leaves them somewhat confused as to the finer points of individual productions. The scenes are set in the well-known stopping-off places for such groups, from the buffet of the Lyttelton Theatre, at the National, to the tourist haunts of Stratford-Upon-Avon. Perhaps Nelson had Peter Brook's remarks in mind when he observed that, 'the curse of Stratford is that it is always full. People applaud the worst performances just as they applaud the best'.<sup>9</sup> Certainly this group is either unsophisticated and undemanding or pretentious and pedantically scholarly. At first sight a slight work, *Some Americans Abroad* explores the sexual and departmental politics of a group of faculty members and their students, none of whom shows much interest in the ostensible subject of their studies.

Supposedly sophisticated readers of texts, they turn contemporary political drama and Shakespearean plays, alike, into little more than supper table chat or academic fodder, the background noise to a life of inconsequence. For a writer such as Nelson, whose plays have been con-

<sup>8</sup> Richard Nelson, *Roots in Water* (New York, 1991), p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration 1946-1987* (London, 1988), p. 53.

cerned with the relationship between art and the public world, it is a two-edged comedy, mocking his own pretensions as much as the consumerist mentality of Americans who divide their time between fast food and slow theatre. Another play about displaced people, not quite in touch with the society in which they move, skimming the surface of an unexamined life, *Some Americans Abroad* offers a comic account of an experience whose ironies bite deeper elsewhere in his work. Nonetheless, this is a play about a contained group of people whose private pains either never quite break surface or are dismissed as inconsequential. There is, in other words, a current which runs counter to the comedy of manners with which we are apparently confronted. Indeed Nelson himself has spoken of aiming at a Chekhovian drama rather than a satire, Chekhov himself identifying *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Seagull* (another play with the theatre at its heart) as comedies. The problem is that his characters come rather too close to stereotype to justify such a description. Broken marriages, failed careers, frustrated hopes, damaging accusations, are too functional in terms of plot and humour for their human consequences to be engaged.

The second of the two plays is more substantial. *Two Shakespearean Actors* (1990), which Nelson has called a history play about time and compression of time, stages the conflict between the English actor William Charles Macready and the American Edwin Forrest, both of whom decided to perform *Macbeth* on the same night in May 1849. The resultant rivalry led to a famous and disastrous riot that left thirty-four people dead. As in *Some Americans Abroad* this transatlantic element enables him to dramatise differences in cultural values and perceptions, this time without reducing the American characters to caricature. It also raises questions about the authenticity of art of a kind he had touched on earlier in his career. Macready believes that his responsibility is to the text; Forrest looks for authentication in life, visiting asylums the better to play King Lear. The contrast is more apparent than real, however, since Forrest's physical approach to acting is in fact accompanied by a concern for subtle nuances of language. Nonetheless their differing approaches are highlighted when Nelson stages part of *Macbeth*, jumping from one production to another, to considerable comic effect.

But along with this debate goes another one to do with the authentication of a culture. The America which Forrest inhabits is in process of self-consciously creating itself, shaping the image which it wishes to endorse as a true account of its emerging identity. Forrest's strenuousness as an actor fits well into that image, as, in another sense, the actor's

skills reflect the protean nature of an America whose identity is in a constant state of flux. The theatre was, indeed, heavily invested in the process of myth-making in which American society was itself engaged. One of Forrest's most famous roles, enacted here, is that of the Indian chief *Metamora*. The Indians, it seems, can be incorporated at the level of culture while rejected at the level of political action. Thus, in the excerpt included in Nelson's play, Forrest, as *Metamora*, inveighs against the falseness of the white man in a play which is itself a falsification of the Indian. This play is, in turn, incorporated into Nelson's own constructed account in which the truth value, or otherwise, of acting is a central concern. Nelson, in other words, builds a hall of mirrors in which questions of authenticity become deeply problematic. *Two Shakespearean Actors*, it becomes clear, is something more than Richard Nelson's *Trelawny of the Wells*.

America believed itself to have the manifest destiny of enacting its fate in full view of an international audience. It described itself, in other words, in terms of a theatrical event, meriting applause or disapprobation. It staged its national drama and shaped its performance. The theatricalised environment of the 1960s, which Nelson comments on in *Principia Scriptoriae*, was in fact already built into the American experience and, to some degree, into all experience. The fact is that the riot which terminates Macready's performance of *Macbeth* is no less theatrical than what appears on stage, that Forrest, in his private life, enacts a comic farce, as he tries to maintain a wife and a mistress in the same company, and that the dramatic conflict between Macready and Forrest is conducted with the same ironic wit and calculation as the dramas in which they both perform.

Behind the play, in other words, appears to lie the central Shakespearean conceit that the stage is not merely a metaphor but a paradigm for human activity. On the other hand, it ends with the two actors rehearsing while outside people are dying and being wounded. When Forrest says, in the final line of the play, 'I'm away from all these troubles here',<sup>10</sup> he touches on an anxiety not unfamiliar to Brecht but which goes beyond the simple irony of art being a retreat from life. George Steiner has spoken of the danger that the cry from the page will blot out the cry from the street. The real fear, then, is that we may be more moved by the artifice of art than the unadorned reality of experience, that feeling may take its cue from aesthetic codes and the real lose its edge,

<sup>10</sup> Richard Nelson, *Two Shakespearean Actors* (London, 1990), p. 103.

its primacy. For a writer such as Nelson, committed equally to theatre and to the need to acknowledge the demands of the public world, the paradox is particularly disturbing.

Macready and Forrest are arrogant and self-centred. The deceits they practise are not restricted to the stage. They speak of serving truth but dissemble in their private no less than their public lives. They take pleasure in stories of those who place their art before their own needs (gallantly performing while bereaved or injured) while plotting their careers with little concern for those they employ and whose own needs are of no interest to them. Outside the texts which they declaim they are prone to become forgetful and inarticulate. Thus Forrest, in conversation with Macready, observes: 'I am serious. I think what one must do – What the battle finally is about. For us. You need to –. With your hands out – keeping it all away' (*Two Shakespearean Actors*, p. 51), while Macready responds, 'what an actor does – I believe – is thus: philosophically speaking – I haven't studied enough philosophy –. I'd like to study much more, but –. Well – People like us who are busy *doing* –! But, as I was saying, the art of the actor –. What was I going to say? I was about to say something that was very clear' (p. 53). Language deserts them. They become figures of fun. And yet as they declaim lines from *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Lear*, on an empty stage, costumed only in an odd assortment of clothes, they have the power to move and be moved. There is, it seems, a truth in theatre that transcends the circumstances of its creation and the agents of its communication.

And what are we to make of Nelson's remark that this is a history play about time and compression of time? The fact is that theatrical time is itself factitious. His speeded-up version of *Macbeth*, which rushes through the text in a matter of minutes as he cuts rapidly between the rival productions, serves not merely to reflect his own collapsing of time in stepping backwards 150 years, but also the nature of theatrical time itself.

Nelson has remarked that *Some Americans Abroad* and *Two Shakespearean Actors* are about a contained community, an insular group, and the sight of Forrest and Macready discussing the nature of theatre and being moved to tears by language while, outside the walls of the theatre, thirty-four people are dead and Forrest's wife has just deserted him, is a statement about the hermetic nature of theatre. Nelson has also insisted that a central concern of his work is how art could be said to relate to life. This scene suggests just how complex that relationship is. As he has explained:

I wrote the play so that at the end there was nothing on stage. And I wanted that nothing to be real because I wanted it to be a bare but real stage. I also wanted to play with the stage. In the *Macbeth* rehearsal scene in the play there's a trap door that the porter comes out of. I purposely wrote a scene in the second act in an attic with people entering up by the stairs which should be the same trap. I was hoping to convey to a designer my playfulness in terms of the creation of the play. (*Making Plays*, p. 83)

In other words, scenes set outside the theatre are to be suffused with theatricality while the final scene, played on a bare stage, in which the 'nothing' that it contained was to be 'real', is to be voided of the theatrical. The paradigmatic nature of theatre derives from the fact that the membrane between art and life is permeable, that each contains elements of the other. Art may speak a truth which social life denies or conceals: social life may shape itself into artificial codes and forms. Both Macready and Forrest are capable of contaminating their performances with artifice as they do their private lives, but they are equally capable, on occasion, of discovering truths which transcend the circumstances of their articulation.

In *Two Shakespearean Actors* Nelson deals in different levels of fiction, of which time is one, as he does in his next play, which begins with an off-stage production and which explores a voyage of discovery which begins and ends with a fiction.

*Columbus and the Discovery of Japan* was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican Theatre, in July 1994, fittingly 500 years after the voyage which provides its setting. It presents Columbus as a confidence trickster, or, more accurately perhaps, a man who imports into life the skills of the theatre, which itself deals in confidence tricks. He is a kind of playwright, who writes his own text, an actor, who performs in his own fantasy, a director and stage manager, who builds his set, auditions his cast and stages the drama, more interested in his own career than any transcendent purpose. He invents a map, supposedly given to him by a man who is equally his invention. He then persuades investors to give substance to his fantasies. To his amazement he finally reaches his destination, if not quite the one for which he set out. It is hard not to see this as a displaced account of Nelson's own experience of theatre, except that it is doubtful that he would cast himself in the role of charlatan.

Indeed Nelson has said that 'writing . . . truly is a voyage. What you end up with is not at all what you think you're going to end up with when

you begin . . . your self-worth is defined by how you handle what you begin with on that journey' (*Making Plays*, p. 65). His Columbus is a man who longs for order. He admires artists and writers for their ability to see beyond the flux of events, the anarchy of experience, to impose their own structure on the world. As a map-maker, an inventor and then discoverer of countries, he tries to do the same thing. Thus he admires poetry for its shape, only regretting that, 'if only what we saw – was like what we read. The neatness of things. The clarity'. What he admires, and in his own way tries to emulate, is 'the ambition. The need!'<sup>11</sup>

Of course the fiction that he creates does not correspond with reality. As he observes, 'the more beautiful, the more involved the drawings on a map – the less useful it is. And this is a lesson of life as well – the artistic urge, isn't it, it's often simply the urge to disguise what we don't know' (*Columbus*, p. 15). This is certainly true of him as he sets out for Japan and finds himself somewhere else, in the way that Nelson described the fate of his own plays. His fictions are commandeered by others for purposes of their own, equally, of course, the fate of plays. With his eyes fixed on the prize he is blind to his own egotism and to the cruelties of the public world in which Jews are persecuted and expelled. The anxiety evident in *Two Shakespearean Actors* is echoed here as fiction displaces the real. But this fiction also shapes the real, just as, potentially, do the fictions of art. And this latter paradox fascinates Nelson as much as does the former.

In many ways *Columbus* is, indeed, Nelson's portrait of himself. In fact he has admitted as much: 'Oh, it's about me', he has said, in the context of a discussion of the play, though with relevance to all his work. Certainly he is in the position of Columbus in having to excite other people with his inventions. Beyond that, however, his concern as a writer to gain possession of the world by describing it, to bring order from the chaos of experience, is one that his Columbus would recognise: 'If you say, "The world to me looks so messy. You can't get a straight answer about anything and nothing seems to be honest or clear or direct." And then by trying to reorganize the world and recreate it you can feel purged and cleaned and helped, and you can feel pretty good. It's like a drug' (*Making Plays*, p. 77). His Columbus would not have dissented, but then neither would Macready and Forrest.

In many ways America – as Platonic paradigm – was itself such a functional fiction. It offered the opportunity to begin with a new map of

<sup>11</sup> Richard Nelson, *Columbus and the Discovery of Japan* (London, 1992), p. 108.

human experience. As Columbus observes in addressing his crews in Palos harbour,

It is a rare opportunity indeed – for any of us to find in life an opportunity to begin again. To start at a beginning, and breathe the clear air of futures to come, and leave behind the fog of our pasts . . . Each man on this voyage has the ability to shed his skins and begin anew, and to be what we wish ourselves to be! . . . Let us all be new men! Born today! (*Columbus*, pp. 73–4)

But this clear statement of America's promise is tainted by something more than Columbus's ironic cry for them to press on 'to Japan!' or by its historic connection with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. For the fact is that in search of a new Eden, this reconstituted self deceives, betrays, abandons. The power of the idea, the force of the fiction, blinds Columbus to the erosion of his moral being. Greed and self-concern corrupt the dream before it is realised.

*Columbus and the Discovery of Japan* thus stands as Nelson's lament for a failed utopia as perhaps for the false consolations of fiction. America was a fiction, required to bear the weight of spiritual need and material ambition. It was not and could not be the place inscribed on Columbus's false map or imprinted on the minds and imaginations of those who sought either gold or new beginnings. Its pursuit, however, the quest for its alchemical power, revealed the force of the need that would summon it into being and in turn confer on it a significance which would taunt those thereafter who struggled to realise its fictive force, to justify the metaphor out of which it was born.

Speaking in 1986, Nelson saw his career as shifting overseas. Seeing the American theatre under increasing economic strain and in some ways failing to fulfil its own earlier promise, he felt his own opportunities drying up. Making a living became increasingly difficult. Beyond that, however, he saw a theatre which no longer engaged the concerns that interested him: 'I see the theatre reflecting a society in which we are not articulating moral concerns and in which the only goal appreciated by our peers is success. There was a time when we agreed that theatre had to be about something, when we had to find out what it should be about' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 172). That time, he felt, had gone. Increasingly the critical and financial climate seemed hostile. England, by contrast, offered 'success and attention and comfort' (p. 173). It also offered, in the form of the Royal Shakespeare Company, a company that could undertake large-scale work, requiring significant numbers of

actors. It must be doubted whether *Two Shakespearean Actors* or *Columbus and the Discovery of Japan* would have secured stages in the United States, at least initially.

By the same token he was aware of the dangers of the British theatre and, indeed, of the British. If its theatre risked becoming little more than a stop on the tourist trail, frequented by Americans whom he satirised as cultural consumers, looking for theatrical collectables, going on theatrical safaris, he was also aware of, and, in *New England* (1994), satirised, British condescension towards America and Americans.

*New England* (a play, incidentally, in which he abandoned his habit of projecting titles above the action), set in western Connecticut, brings together a group of British expatriates, including, perhaps inevitably, a teacher of theatre. The suicide of the patriarch necessitates a family reunion at which the inadequacy of all their lives is exposed. They are deeply lonely and disappointed people for whom America was to have been a solution. The only thing that unites them now is vague nostalgia for a country they had anyway despised and contempt for the country in which they find themselves. They have stored up anecdotes about American naivety, gullibility, crassness, while imagining that their own cultural resources lift them above those to whom they so readily condescend. In a sense this is an echo of the misunderstandings and self-justifications that had characterised Macready and Forrest in Nelson's earlier play. Blind to their own weaknesses, they project their disappointment on to others.

These are a people, disappointed in life, whose apparent assurance is quickly exposed as a sham. In the very first scene, indeed, the play's central figure, Harry, seemingly at ease and relaxing to music by Debussy, commits suicide in front of the woman who, apparently, loves him. Those who quickly assemble for his funeral are no more secure, quickly revealing the inadequacies, the brittle confidence of their lives. Alice, the dead man's lover, knew little of the wife who had rejected him and died only a few months before. Paul, his son, has married a manipulative but deeply neurotic and paranoid woman. One of his sisters plans marriage to a man she despises. Broken and damaged relationships abound. What is lacking is love or even the semblance of real affection. Even the dead man's twin brother – played by the same actor – swiftly seduces the distraught Alice, looking for something absent from his life. Closed off from one another, bemused by a culture that seems crude and unresponsive, intimidated by a power to which they have no

real access, like Harry they fear that 'the barbarians are sweeping over us'.<sup>12</sup> Yet there is little evidence of the culture which they believe is their defence against a society typified by what Nelson, in a stage direction, describes as the 'junk' played by radio stations – a *mélange* of pop music and commercials – or what they believe to be the meretricious products of Hollywood, despite the fact that one of them is employed by the movie industry.

These are people who have lost touch with who they are and what they believe. Detached from their origins, they offer a parody of themselves and their national identity. Unable to understand the world in which they find themselves they are equally incapable of understanding one another. Harry's children know nothing of what led to their parents' break-up, nothing of the true cause of their father's death (seemingly caring little to discover it). They prepare to scatter his ashes before scattering themselves across an America to which they can no more lay claim than they can to the country they rejected or the lives from which they are profoundly alienated.

Once again Nelson chooses to focus on exiles who significantly fail to read the world in which they find themselves. All are concerned in some way or another with literature, as teachers, publishers, script readers. Apparently it gives them no special insight, unlocks no human understanding that enables them to see life through other eyes than their own. In that sense the irony of the play reaches out to include its author, for whom writing has a function in the world but who has seen theatre move consistently towards the margin in the time he has been writing, who has seen a faith in the possibility of change in his own society largely disappear. If he is right in saying that the hidden agenda of his work is the value, function and purpose of art, his confidence can hardly have grown with time. In his screenplay of *Ethan Frome* he dramatises the life of a man who is frozen into inaction, a man whose life suggests the impossibility of resisting such stasis.

His plays are, he insists, 'efforts at being involved in society and questioning its values' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 173), and that is as true of *New England* as it was, in a different sense, of *The Trial of Yablonski*. They cover a wide range of subjects, styles, approaches, from two-character pieces to works requiring a full complement of RSC actors, while consistently exploring the function and meaning of theatre itself. Perhaps it is the range of his work, and his decision, in the last ten years

<sup>12</sup> Richard Nelson, *New England* (London, 1994), p. 57.

or so, to base himself more securely in the English theatre that has led to the critical disregard he has suffered. But, ironically, he has remained more loyal to certain 1960s American assumptions about drama and its functions than most other writers, while being influenced by Europeans. Indeed, in 1991 he collaborated with the Russian playwright, politician and journalist Alexander Gelman to produce *Misha's Party*, an ironic comedy which takes place during the attempted coup in Moscow in that same year. It opened in London in 1993 and Moscow in 1995.

The collaboration was not made easier by the fact that neither writer spoke the other's language, but, for both, events on the street were to be less subject than circumstance. In fact, for all the resonance of political events, of an unfolding history, what interested both writers was to explore generational gulfs, the question of what can and cannot be communicated of lives which themselves contain their own mysteries.

Set in the Ukraine Hotel, Moscow, overlooking the Russian White House, centre of resistance during the failed August coup, the play focusses on Mikhail, who chooses to celebrate his sixtieth birthday by bringing together his first two wives and his current fiancée.

Russia has already changed and continues to do so. Mikhail's second wife now lives in New York while her taxi driver husband claims to have written the screenplay for a western, albeit one whose iconography and geography are, as befits a New York taxi driver, somewhat insecure. This is a country falling apart but in that it merely reflects private lives which themselves seem to lack all coherence, grace and integrity.

Outside, the coup edges towards its explosive conclusion. Inside, the party follows a similar trajectory. Meanwhile, Mary, an American woman, awaits the return, from the dangerous streets, of her teenage granddaughter, who has been conducting an affair with a married American businessman. America, it seems, is scarcely insulated from the collapse of order and morality.

Political chaos, in other words, seems reflected in lives which all seem to contain their fair share of anarchy. Nor, since Mikhail had failed to warn any of his guests of the presence of the others, is that anarchy contained within the sensibility of those who seem so locked up in their own concerns. Mikhail and his daughter meet as strangers; Mary shares nothing with her granddaughter, beyond a certain truculence. This is a world in which relationships seem no more secure than does the society in which they are conducted.

To Nelson, *Misha's Party* confirmed a development in his work that had begun earlier. 'My work,' he explained, 'has been moving towards

looking at a world where there are large events which are not created and controlled by individuals, a world where there are no *great* individuals controlling *great* events, but where there are *great* events and there are lots of individuals. The relationship between the two', he insists, 'is fascinating. It's at the centre of how I see the world and how I see my future work' (*Making Plays*, p. 144). He wished, as a consequence, to work with large casts, 'to get more and more people into my plays' (p. 155), but not simply out of a desire to deal with the interaction between public and private history. He wished to hear 'the music' which comes from gathering numbers of people on stage. It follows from this that, writing in 1995, he saw his future as lying with companies that could offer him such possibilities, which in turn was an indication that he saw his future, at least in part, in terms of Europe. His plays have often been set outside of America – in Spain, England, Latin America – and more recently staged outside of America, but this is no longer unusual – Arthur Miller and David Mamet both staging world premières of their work in Britain. In some senses a theatrically displaced person, he often writes about displaced people, but this, too, is increasingly a common experience, indeed, paradoxically, it may be a fact which brings people together, that and the theatre itself, which continues to act as paradigm and metaphor and perhaps never more so, in terms of contemporary theatre, than in the work of Richard Nelson.

In 1996, Nelson returned to America for the setting of *The General from America*, a play produced, nonetheless, once again by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and bearing out his remarks about great events in which the principal characters themselves lack greatness, though, since the play features George Washington, Benedict Arnold and Major André, all heroes and villains depending on your perspective, it is hard at first to see how that could be said to be true and how they could be said to lack command over circumstances. But just as his Columbus had stumbled through a life in which self-interest was translated into heroic gesture through a series of errors and chance events, so, here, the drama of rebellion and betrayal follows a script determined as much by fate as by intention, as the principal characters find themselves playing roles at odds with their nature and historic intents. Once again, the play requires a considerable cast, as private dramas are enacted within an epic context, and once again the theatrical metaphor proves central to a text in which characters are fully aware of their parts in an unfolding national drama.

Benedict Arnold, a hero of the Revolution, a general, and Military

Governor of Philadelphia, finds himself the victim of accusations of graft and profiteering. Though these have some substance, in the context of a war in which he has sacrificed much of his own wealth this strikes him as no more than a minor and justifiable recompense. He expects the support of Washington. He, however, is forced to play a political part of his own. Desperate to hold together a shaky alliance of feuding factions, he condemns Arnold while offering him a sop by making him commander of the military fort of West Point. Unable to accept so public a humiliation, Arnold now plans to betray the fort and Washington to the British, convincing himself that he is right to do so, that this is both a logical and moral action.

Accordingly, he conspires with Major John André to defect to the British side and offers to identify the weakness of the fort which he commands. By a series of errors, misunderstandings and chance encounters the project fails. He escapes but André is executed. Arnold is then joined in exile by his wife, who had been forced to denounce him, and dies many years later, despised by both the British and the Americans, an exile for whom high endeavour and loyal service had given way to compromise and betrayal, the latter the more significant in that the betrayal was less of country (which treated him unjustly and was itself abandoning old loyalties) than of his own self-image, belief in his own integrity.

These events, however, have their place not only in the historical lexicon but in theatrical history, and that in a double sense. For not only did William Dunlap, long regarded as the 'father of American drama', write a play called *André*, about the capture and execution of the British spy, a play first staged in 1798 (when America was about to pass the Anti-Sedition Act), but André was himself deeply involved in theatre. At a time when the theatre was banned by the Continental Congress (though Washington's own enthusiasm seems not to have been blunted), the British and the Loyalists persisted. In Boston, Burgoyne turned Faneuil Hall into a theatre and staged propaganda works, while New York and Philadelphia featured a range of productions. Major André acted as scene painter, artistic assistant and, occasionally, actor, alongside his military responsibilities. Theatre, therefore, became part of the battle being fought, for the Congress believed that theatrical entertainments could only divert people from their defence of liberty. Accordingly, in 1778 Congress repeated its warnings and threatened to dismiss anyone holding public office if they so much as attended a theatre. André had been a prime mover behind the performance of a play, or spectacle, called *Mischianza*, a work, starring soldiers, which celebrated the

achievements of their retiring commander, Howe. Though he left his command under something of a shadow, the extravaganza (André designed the tickets and prepared the costumes) both praised him, and in its very opulence, showed its contempt for the rebels. This was known territory to Richard Nelson who, in 1986, had edited a volume called *Strictly Dishonorable and Other Lost American Plays* and was familiar with American theatrical history.

*The General from America* begins with the public drama of an execution, in 1779, of a man charged with Loyalist sympathies and with corresponding with the enemy. The action then cuts to a theatrical performance at which André reads a poem called 'The Frantic Lover' as a young woman slowly removes her clothes. Looking on is Sir Henry Clinton, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in North America, but also the most successful theatrical manager in America. The severe drama of life and death is thus contrasted with the erotic drama staged for the benefit of the soldiers. Theatre and politics are fused together. The play-acting of André, who, in the conspiracy, is known as Mr Anderson, has its more serious counterpart in the play-acting of Arnold, and this in a play in which uniforms and costumes can be easily exchanged or, indeed, as we have seen, removed. The matter of Arnold's possible defection, under the guise of Mr Monk, is discussed in what is, effectively, the wings of a 'theatre', as André is about to go on stage in *She Stoops to Conquer*. Nor do the deceptions stop there, for in Nelson's play Sir Henry Clinton is drawn to André for sexual reasons, his imperious manner concealing a private need.

History, then, is not presented here as the product of heroic individuals in command of events, or even of themselves, but as a product of chance, pride masquerading as morality, private jealousies, sexual proclivities, serendipity, imperfect calculation and of a deceit which goes deep into the self. History is a form of improvisational theatre in which people play those roles which they think most likely to secure their objectives. Thus, Arnold uses his wife as a seductress to win his opponents to his side as Washington presents one face to his friend and another to those who bid him to deny that friend. False names and false faces abound.

Nor is America itself what it would present itself as being. The President of Pennsylvania, Joseph Reed, who accuses Arnold of betraying the principles of the Revolution, himself launches an assault on the freedom of the press ('An overflow of liberty'<sup>13</sup>) and oversees the

<sup>13</sup> Richard Nelson, *The General from America* (New York, 1996), p. 14.

hanging of a man for corruption while seizing the property of those he kills. The United States is divided, trade triumphs over principle, Washington bows to pragmatism. Even Arnold, who sacrifices property and sustains wounds in the cause, is, indeed, as charged, a profiteer. In other words, the battle for freedom is conducted by those in thrall to ambition and greed and prepared to betray in small ways and great. Where, then, does the right lie? History has made its judgement, but history validates those who attain power.

André, who plays a minor part in *Richard III*, plays a minor part, too, in the historical process. A clerk, raised to significance by a commander besotted with his charms, he proves inadequate to the role he assumes in a plot which was to have been epic in scope and perhaps tragic in outcome. In fact it devolves into farce, as he runs barefoot from two soldiers, themselves little more than thieves and present at his rendezvous with Arnold by chance. His death, reported as heroic, is perhaps the best performance he manages in a life dedicated to masquerade. Arnold, meanwhile, lives out his life in England, his honour compromised, embittered at his financial losses, an emblem of betrayal to a country he had once served and which itself has been exposed as counting the cost of liberty in terms of money no less than lives. Beyond that, the misplaced moral certainty of those who eventually celebrate his death casts a doubtful shadow forwards to our own time: 'May this be a lesson for all traitors. That God watches over America . . . How comforting it is too, in times like our own when daily the world looms diffuse and vague, to be reminded of a simple unassailable truth: there is justice. There is right and wrong. There is good – and there is evil. (*Beat*) God bless America!' (*The General from America*, p. 91). In a play that has exposed the moral ambiguities which attended the birth of the Republic (the confusions of purpose and action, the arbitrariness of fate), such a speech suggests not merely a pervasive irony but, more alarmingly, a Manichaean desire to render history and experience in polarised terms. Such a desire prepares the ground for a future in which once again politics will become a morality play, and people and countries be perceived not for what they are but for the roles they can play.

*The General from America* is itself a morality play, except that it portrays a world in which morality is uncertain, and the self a series of performed gestures. It stages a national drama but does so in such a way as to underline the degree to which plot and character are plastic, protean, subject to forces outside the control of those who struggle to discover themselves in the roles they are offered by fate or forced to play by psychological or

social pressures which they do not command. Heroes and villains are constructions. So, too, is history.

Nelson seems, in his more recent work, to have acknowledged his ambiguous position as an American writer whose work is better known and perhaps better received in England. He explores a relationship whose ambiguities, ironies and misunderstandings generate a drama that is sometimes the root of comedy or farce and sometimes the basis of an almost tragic perception. That *The General from America* should be first performed by a company with the word Royal in its title (it was staged at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon) merely serves to underline the anomalous nature of his position.

His next play, *Goodnight Children Everywhere*, stands in contrast to the historical sweep of *The General from America*, though the pressure of history is present in that it concerns a family broken apart by war and now reassembled, after the hiatus of evacuation, to discover that the world has changed. With the death of their parents, the children, scattered abroad, have been forced to grow up quickly. Reunited as young adults, they struggle with a sexuality which is as disorienting as their time away from one another had been. Compromises have been effected, the crude bargain which exchanges sex for protection effected. So intense is the feeling between brother and sister that it crosses the boundary into incest, but just as the society in which they now find themselves struggles to re-establish normality, so they, too, have to move on, surrendering the relationships that have sustained them in their period of exile.

Once again it is a play with a transatlantic dimension. The young boy, who has grown into a man in his years away, has just returned from Canada. But here that world is no more than the dream from which he has awakened as he comes back to find his parents' roles usurped by others. *Goodnight Children Everywhere* (whose title comes from a popular song) is an affecting study of loss, of that transition from innocence to experience which involves the surrender of some essential and unquestioning sense of security. Paradoxically, in the end it is loss itself which holds together those who are otherwise driven apart by the implacable realities of time and the arbitrary nature of experience.

*Goodnight Children Everywhere*, like many of Nelson's plays, works by understatement and indirection. A current flows whose presence is only detectable by the momentary disturbance it causes on an otherwise placid surface. As in *New England*, a glance, a joke, a reminiscence, an

ambiguous gesture hints at feelings that only make their way into language in this coded fashion. Tension is apparent, its true source rather less so, and here, as elsewhere, he is prone to enter a scene at a mid point, creating initial confusion. The audience must construct the past from the clues on offer, project the future by following the logic of revealed character. As he has said,

where a scene begins is profoundly important in my work. Very often a great deal of action has happened just before the scene and in the scene certain things are being played out. It's an element of my thinking that there are no beginnings, there are no ends, which is the same notion as there are no simple solutions, there are no answers. The world is a fluid place. So a dramaturgy, a structure, where things begin in the middle is a reaffirmation of the fluidity of how I see things. (*Making Plays*, p. 148)

As he makes plain, the structure of his plays reflects his sense of a mutable and undetermined existence. In that sense there is a link between his early plays, in which he focusses on those who construct the reality they choose to inhabit, and those later ones in which his characters struggle to shape contingency to their purposes or betray the loyalties to which they ostensibly submit. Such characters, after all, enter a story already under way in that they exist in a social and political environment with a momentum of its own.

Richard Nelson has, for much of his recent career, been an American in London, tuning in to the tensions and myths of both countries with ever-greater acuity. He is simultaneously an insider and an outsider, often playing different values and assumptions against one another. But his achievement as a writer is only incidentally a product of this double commitment. That lies in the subtleties of plays which frequently work by inference and understatement, which register psychological and social tensions by indirection. The politics of his early work – still in evidence in terms of the setting of a number of his plays – is now more clearly revealed as rooted in a sense of moral concern. His characters may play public roles, lay claim to historic significance, but they fail or succeed not on that level but at the point where their lives render up the meaning they seek. One man lays claim to a continent while betraying his integrity, another appears content to place a pistol to his head. Still another walks away from the woman to whom he is fatally drawn. These are not lives which neatly resolve themselves or readily render up their inner purpose. They are lives, however, whose contradictions are the stuff of drama.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Marsha Norman*

Emily Mann speaks of the tendency of women to sit around and talk to each other about their memories of devastating events in their lives. Sometimes, she suggests, it is family members, touching on exposed wounds, sometimes it is 'perfect strangers . . . [who] sit and talk like other people talking about the weather or sports, except that it's about their divorce . . . We often see the pain in one another and then we talk about it.'<sup>1</sup> Though Louisville-born Marsha Norman hesitates to see herself as specifically a woman playwright it would, on the face of it, be hard to find a better description of aspects of her plays from *Getting Out* through to *night Mother*. For not only does she find in dialogue between women a way of opening up channels to emotional needs and anxieties but she is aware of the degree to which theatre itself depends on dialogue, a dialogue not restricted to the stage.

Describing the nature of the playwright's relationship to the community, she observes that 'you can really see it when writers' work is part of a continuing dialogue', regretting only that 'the audience is no longer in touch with that dialogue' because 'you can't write out of a tradition that the audience knows – unless you write TV plays'.<sup>2</sup> However, as *Third and Oak: The Pool Hall* makes plain, men, too, are part of this community and as such are no less vulnerable, no less capable of revealing themselves and their fears, than are women. For somewhere beneath the apparent banalities of conversations which seem no more than ways of passing the time, of filling the silence, are emotional truths which bruise the language and expose hidden tensions and anxieties.

Though for the most part she has chosen to focus on women Norman does not buy into the notion that they are uniquely sensitive, distinctively vulnerable. They may, as this play makes apparent, find different eti-

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* (New York, 1987), p. 281.

<sup>2</sup> David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York, 1988), p. 181.

quettes, different ways of concealing painful truths or offering hesitant gestures of support, but they confront the same absurdities, inhabit the same bewildering social and psychological worlds, express the same sense of loss, look for the same possibility of connection. They, too, are actors offered roles they find difficult to invest with true conviction while aware that such meaning as they can generate may only come from those who respond to their lines, who exist within the same stories.

Marsha Norman grew up in Louisville, the daughter of a Methodist fundamentalist who excluded radio and television from the family home and kept her daughter apart from other children. As a result, and not untypically, she created an imaginary friend, pluralising herself for comfort, engaging in conversations with herself. She became a talented musician and considered studying composition at the Juilliard, later claiming that her sense of rhythm was musically rather than linguistically based. Curiously, the fundamentalism did not extend to books or the theatre. Thus she recalls, in particular, seeing a production of *The Glass Menagerie* and, later, the 'really violent early work of Peter Shaffer, things like *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, and also *J.B.*, *Macbird*, pieces that have a wild-haired theatricality'. These, she insists,

were the ones that really moved me. Particularly those about people in search of unseeable parts of themselves. I realize now that it's no accident that *Getting Out* is about an attempted reconciliation between an earlier, violent self and a current passive, withdrawn self. It seemed to me that the theatre was the place to examine that isolation which was the primary quality of my life. It was mine not only by birth and early childhood, but it's something that I have sought to maintain, not in an arrogant way, but because it seems to me that I belong off by myself. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 181)

Marsha Norman majored in philosophy at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta, where she attended the Pocket Theatre and Theatre Atlanta. Despite her enthusiasm, however, she never considered the theatre as a career and after graduation went back to Louisville to marry and undertake a master's degree. She then worked first in a mental hospital and then for the state arts commission, two probably not entirely unrelated activities. She later became involved in children's television in Louisville, a city in which there was also a significant theatre, finally turning to drama at the behest of Jon Jory of the Actors Theatre of Louisville, famous for its annual new plays festival.

Norman might well have begun her career, like Emily Mann, as a writer of documentary drama. Certainly Jory offered to commission her

to develop a play from a series of interviews about busing, then a significant political and social issue. But though she was later to make use of interview material, along with her ear for natural dialogue, she rejected his proposal and, at his suggestion, developed another project. As she explained, he urged her to 'find some moment when I had been frightened physically, in real danger' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 181). The suggestion brought to mind a young girl she had known ten years earlier at the Central State Hospital, a girl who had lacked all control, all fear and all inhibitions. She had gone on to serve time for murder. For Norman, though, the attraction lay not so much in her violence as in the dilemma of an individual finally unable to walk away from the consequences of her actions. Released from prison, would she be released from the sensibility that placed her there? How would she function when the literal coercions of institutional life gave way to the more subtle coercions of her own divided self?

Her contact with the girl had been brief and apparently devoid of genuine communication: 'I only had an hour's worth of conversation with her in the entire time I knew her. And that was mainly saying "Don't destroy the furniture" to her, and her saying "Fuck you!" to me . . . That was the entire content of our relationship' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 337). The question was how such a person could find her way out of the trap in which she found herself, a trap in part a product of social circumstance and in part the result of her own seemingly innate aggression. Beyond that was the question of how such a sensibility was to be presented dramatically. Explaining the genesis of the form of the play, and its roots in her conception of character and action, she insisted that:

What you need is a form that will contain the story. With *Getting Out* . . . I knew I wanted to write about this woman who'd just gotten out of prison, but I realized that it's not enough to write about her, you have to know who she was. Well, as soon as you say that sentence, you have the form: put the other person on stage. So you have this amazingly stable little triangle with the two of them and the point of reconciliation. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 185)

In other words, the alternative possibilities confronting the protagonist are to be dramatised by dividing that protagonist in two. That device, not in itself novel (O'Neill attempted something similar with the use of masks in *The Great God Brown*), is the source of *Getting Out's* very considerable power.

She was, however, faced with a problem in that when she undertook research she discovered that those kept in long-term solitary confinement tend to come out cold, passive and withdrawn. As she has

said, 'I realized I had a problem. I wanted to write a hostile girl who didn't care what you did to her. But how could I write a hostile girl, if the girl who came out of prison was perfectly tame? The solution to this problem was the beginning of my life in the theatre. I would have to put them *both* on stage – Arlie, the girl she had been, and Arlene, the woman she had become in captivity – and the play would uncover the relationship between them.' It would also, however, reveal something else for, as she observed, 'I wasn't writing about Arlie, I was writing about myself. I would realize that all of us are frequently mistaken for someone we used to be.'<sup>3</sup>

The play is set in a one-room apartment in a run-down section of Louisville. Next to it, connected by a catwalk and stairways, is a prison cell. The curtains of the apartment conceal the bars on a single window which imply that this, too, is a cell and the woman who lives in it no less imprisoned than the younger version of herself who is seen in the prison and at other moments of her life. A note tells us that Arlie, as opposed to Arlene (a thin, drawn woman who has just emerged from an eight-year prison sentence for murder), is the 'violent kid' Arlene had been before her last stretch in prison. She is Arlene's memory of herself, summoned into existence, as Norman explains, 'by fears, needs and even simple word cues'.<sup>4</sup> The role of these memories, these former selves, varies. Their chief characteristic, however, is persistence. They cannot be escaped. They are one more evidence of her entrapment, within her own past and her own sensibility, no less than within the constraints that class and poverty place around her.

For five minutes before the curtain rises a loudspeaker broadcasts a series of announcements of an institutional kind, their exact provenance being unclear. When the curtain rises there is a black-out on stage as we hear the warden's voice itemise Arlene's offences and announce her rehabilitation and release. When the light rises, however, it is not on this supposedly reformed character but on her earlier self, Arlie, who tells a story which reveals her violence and cruelty as a child. The play then proceeds to construct a portrait of Arlie/Arlene which serves to explain both her violence and her chilling detachment from her actions.

The scene then cuts to Arlene's entrance into the seedy apartment which is either her destination or the limbo through which she will pass on her way to further degradation. She is accompanied by a former prison guard, Bennie, who has romantic and sexual designs on her. Her

<sup>3</sup> Marsha Norman, *Marsha Norman: Collected Plays* (Lyme, NH, 1998), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Marsha Norman, *Getting Out* (New York, 1979), p. 6.

future is in the balance. The logic of her life, as it is slowly revealed, suggests further decline, but she fights to identify another possibility. She clearly has to reject Bennie, who represents continued exploitation and imprisonment, but the dramatic conflict in *Getting Out* is not that between Arlene and those who seek to control and shape her destiny, but that within her own sensibility. From the beginning the two selves coexist, past and present being intertwined as Norman interweaves timescales and events, exploring and exposing the forces that created the violent and self-destructive Arlie, and helped to shape the older Arlene, bewildered, uncertain, but desperate to take control of her own life.

Arlie, we slowly learn, had been sexually abused by her violent father, a man who had also physically abused her mother. That mother, in response, had turned to other men. Her maternal instincts survive only in the form of sporadic gestures. She now arrives at the apartment to welcome Arlene but her attempts to brighten that apartment have the air of pathos. She is acting out a role she no longer understands. Indeed, when Arlene suggests that she might visit her she is rebuffed by a woman who, ironically, explains that she cannot afford to have negative influences in the family home. Empty of real affection, her mother has in fact presided over a family of children each of whom has turned to criminality ('Pat, stealin . . . Candy screwin since day one, Pete cuttin up ol Mac at the grocery, June sellin dope like it was Girl Scout cookies') (*Getting Out*, p. 25).

Arlie, like her younger sister, had turned to prostitution, love, in her experience, being no more than a word for brief encounters with a cash value. She is the mother of a child by her pimp, Carl, and has that child taken from her. The child is the light towards which she stumbles, the redemption which she convinces herself may give her life the meaning it lacks. It seems no more than an illusion but it is what has brought her to this moment in which she contemplates her life and struggles to decide on her future.

The brilliance of the play, and this is one of the most impressive debuts by an American playwright, lies in its structure as Arlene's two selves are brought together, exposing the nature of her experience, implicitly debating its meaning and presenting the struggle of a woman to transcend and transform her own identity. As Arlene says, 'Arlie girl landed herself in prison. Arlene is out' (*Getting Out*, p. 11), a distinction which is without meaning when she utters it at the beginning of the play but which acquires meaning as it proceeds.

Arlie (the former self) lives defensively. Inducted into a life of corrupt

love and brutality, she responds in kind, damaging herself in the process. Her own hardness is a shell to protect herself from further injury but it also betrays her. The physical entrapment of the Pine Ridge Correctional Institute is merely an outward image of the more profound imprisonment of Arlene within Arlie, as genuine needs and natural affections are smothered by a paranoia which is not without its rational basis and which is therefore scarcely paranoia at all. There comes a moment, indeed, when she punctures herself repeatedly with a fork as if she were trying to release the person within. The blood in which she bathes is evidence of the redemption she seeks, a redemption to which she is ostensibly led by a prison chaplain who tells her of the blood of Christ. He gives her a picture which she carries with her on her eventual release. But the chaplain, too, deserts her, being transferred to another prison without telling her. Despite the picture, then, redemption, finally, can only come from herself. Not merely must she escape Arlie; she must also reconcile herself to her.

The two selves occupy the same space, walk the same stage, but show no awareness of one another until the final scene. Their continued coexistence, indeed, is evidence that, whatever her hopes for a transformed future, Arlene has yet to lay the ghosts of the past, that, indeed, there is no chance of her doing so until she has confronted them. The play is thus an extended act of confession, an attempt at expiation. It is a psychotherapeutic session in which the individual is regressed in search of an initiating trauma, and such a trauma is waiting there, though she has spent her life to date denying it.

The interaction between the two selves is crucial and is used in a number of different ways by Norman, as the prison experience also mirrors events in her earlier life. Thus, memories of prison violence blend into memories of her father's violence. Past and present are brought together, prompted by word cues, by associative fears, subtle echoes and reverberations. So, her mother's remark that she should have been beaten, as her father had suggested, provokes thoughts of her abuse at her father's hands, which in turn summons Arlie into existence, repeating denials of sexual molestation at her father's hands, a central truth which she desperately represses. When her mother remarks of a closet that it is 'Filthy dirty' (p. 19), this phrase in itself is sufficient to trigger further recall of youthful anguish, Arlie curling into a ball as if both to protect herself from assault and to contain the secret which is slowly fracturing her psyche. What Arlene still cannot tell her mother in the present spills out in her mind and is externalised in the form of

Arlie's desperate denials in the past. At the same moment, memories of prison guards seeking sexual favours by offering chewing gum recall her father's habit of doing the same.

Arlene may insist to her mother that 'They don't call me Arlie no more. It's Arlene now' (p. 21), as if she had escaped her former self, but at the same instant Arlie is seen rummaging through her mother's purse. That moment comes from a past (a past which breaks through into the present, an objectified memory) in which she had been caught by the school principal with the money in her hand, but this early in the play it is by no means certain that this side of Arlene's character has been laid to rest, that she is herself not tempted to repeat the past.

Though she appears anxious to return to her mother, Arlene plainly needs to leave behind all those who represent her past and, indeed, the play consists of her slow shedding of those who had tried to shape and control her, along with the self they had shaped. As Norman herself has said, in a sense reversing the process of the play, 'There comes a moment . . . when we have to release our parents from our expectations'.<sup>5</sup> In fact Arlene had few expectations and those that she had have long since failed to be realised. Thus while she looked to her mother for protection, for a role model, for comfort, instead that mother had condoned her abuse, taken her along when she conducted empty affairs and is happy now to expel her from the family home. Though Norman has said that 'one of the problems for daughters and sons is that you come into life with an unpayable debt, the mortgage of all time' (Brater, ed., *Feminine Focus*, p. 256) Arlene has to discharge a debt that in fact she can hardly be said to owe. Yet she has come close to replicating the mother to whom she still feels if not a sense of obligation then a sense of vague attachment. And how could she not since she wishes to claim her own rights as a mother, despite being responsible for the breach with her child, despite being, in her turn, a dangerous and destructive model?

The fact remains that if she is to re-invent herself, become the protagonist of another drama of her own construction, she has to free herself of her author, the mother who seems effectively to have written her life for her, determining, by her disregard, her denial, her self-absorption, the direction she was to take. Her mother accuses her of 'playin', acting out sexual roles in the prison, of 'actin' worse with every passing day, when in fact she has been desperately trying to discover her true self.

Arlene is unable to talk to her mother about the things which most

<sup>5</sup> Enoch Brater, ed., *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights* (Oxford, 1989), p. 256.

concern her, not least because that mother chooses to deny the reality of the pain her daughter suffers. Norman herself recalls that her own mother 'had a very serious code about what you could and could not say. You particularly could not say anything that was in the least angry or that had any conflict in it at all' (Brater, ed., *Feminine Focus*, pp. 256–7). In a sense, then, her plays, in addressing those very topics – anger and conflict – themselves represent a release from that silence and denial which she had herself experienced. Arlene, likewise, has to articulate her own inner conflict until she can finally, in the last scene, acknowledge the existence of Arlie and, implicitly, enter into a dialogue with her.

The various aspects of Arlene's life are knitted together by a series of linguistic echoes or by having Arlie occupy the same space as Arlene. Thus her school principal promises her peanut butter and chili if she will behave, as her father had brought chili and jelly doughnuts home to placate her pregnant mother. Her mother, filling a bucket of water, says, 'I'm waitin' (*Getting Out*, p. 27) (for the water) while Arlie, immediately, though in another timescale, says 'I'm waitin' (p. 27) (for her lover, Carl). Arlene lights a cigarette; Arlie steals the pack. Her mother complains that Arlene is skinny and her hair a mess only for Arlie to defend her mother against precisely the same attack (while a moment later denouncing her 'ugly hair').

The mention of hair in turn triggers another memory for Arlene, a memory which throws light on another aspect of her character. For in recalling that her mother used to cut hair she admits that she had herself taken beauty classes in prison, quite as if that mother had in some sense remained a model, or perhaps as if she wished to be in a position to rectify this flaw in her mother's, and her, appearance. However, this is a skill that can lead nowhere since ex-prisoners cannot be licensed as beauticians. There is, in other words, no utility in this model, no way of wiping away this memory of humiliation, any more than could her sister who, we learn, had stolen wigs, prompted, presumably, by the same sense of shame and embarrassment, by the same desire to cover up an embarrassing truth.

And so it continues throughout the play, with Norman weaving a complex pattern linking past and present, mother and daughter and the two parts of Arlene's sensibility. A scene between Arlie and a doctor, in which she admits to beating another girl because she suggested the existence of an incestuous relationship between Arlie and her father, is played out as her mother sweeps the floor, remarking that, if left to herself, she is likely to sweep the dust under the bed, this being precisely

what she has done with her memories. In memory, the doctor tells Arlie to take off her hat at the same moment that her mother discovers Bennie's hat on the bed in Arlene's apartment, and in anticipation of Carl, her pimp, recalling a hat chosen for him by Arlie.

To watch the play is to see a tapestry being sewn, a collage constructed. Like Emily Mann, Marsha Norman constructs the play like a quilt. Indeed the second act begins with a loudspeaker announcement which calls on the inmates to cooperate in creating a quilt 'from scraps of material' and from 'cutting up' clothes, an announcement which is itself a part of the intricate pattern of the play.

The play is full of authority figures: the school principal, a doctor, a warden, prison guards, a clergyman, a pimp, all in one way or another controlling Arlie's life. These are not, however, all men, and interpretations of the play which see it as an assault on patriarchy seem wayward. The fact is that Arlie/Arlene is a victim of more than male sexual aggression, though her father's sexual abuse is clearly what sends her spinning into moral confusion as she suffers the consequences of her own and others' denial of its reality, while her vulnerability attracts men who are anxious to take advantage of such a damaged sensibility. But beyond this she is presented as someone whose principal struggle is to resist the pathological role in which she is cast, who needs to see herself as something more than a victim, more than the deterministic product of environment and heredity.

Nor are the authority figures all conspiring to destroy her. The school principal at first resists the idea that she should be consigned to a special unit; the doctor makes some effort to understand her, the warden is not without sympathy; the chaplain offers her such hope as she has. Even Bennie, the former guard, is motivated by confused feelings of sexual aggression and romantic need. He plays Mitch to Arlene's Blanche DuBois. He is a blundering man whose own loneliness makes him vulnerable, acting out a romantic role he is ill-suited to perform. Carl, to be sure, does exploit her but she colludes, happily bearing his child, believing that this will give her what she lacks: consolation, love, control over another person. He and she are drawn together by a shared weakness concealed beneath a hard exterior.

The fact is, though, that she must leave such people behind. They represent a former life. She has to close the door on them all and find a solution to her life on her own, though Ruby, who lives in the same building and shares a criminal past, points her in one possible direction. The choice which confronts her is a stark one, that between the promise of

relative luxury as a prostitute and the certainty of relative poverty as a dish washer in a nearby restaurant. Neither action would seem to represent escape. As she says to Ruby, 'Outside? Honey I'll either be *inside* this apartment or inside some kitchen sweatin over the sink. Outside's where you get to do what you want, not where you gotta do some shit job jus so's you can eat worse than you did in prison' (*Getting Out*, p. 60). The fact is, though, that she has already escaped, already made her decision in transforming Arlie into Arlene. She got out long before leaving prison. She had already begun the process of laying Arlie to rest, a process, however, which is not without pain, so that we are told that she is '*Grieving for this lost self*' (p. 62). The play ends with the beginnings of a relationship between Arlene and Ruby and with Arlene remembering, no longer with pure regret, the life she has lived and the self to which she must finally bid farewell.

Arlene's struggle for autonomy offers something more than the account of victory over determinisms, a woman's fight for a right to her own life. This is not simply a study of the pathology of child abuse or the struggles of the underclass nor, though it is the chaplain who sets her on her course to recovery, does conversion have anything to do with religion. In the end it is Arlene herself who discovers in herself the strength to break the logic of her own decline. Forging a new language, as she adopts a new name, she allows that language to shape her consciousness. Her final act of violence is directed against herself as she bears the stigmata which are the mark of her own redemption.

The voices which begin both acts, and which echo in the darkness, prescribe the limits of a world which she will finally not accept. And though the room to which she retreats seems at first no more than an extension of the cell which has defined the limits of her freedom, her struggle to go out through the door represents her first entry into a world of possibility as, in Norman's later play *'night Mother*, it represents a wilful surrender of life which we must read as an embracing of life. In Ibsen's *The Doll's House* the slamming of the door of the family home marked the moment of a woman's autonomy. For Virginia Woolf a room of one's own signified the necessary condition for freedom. So here, this dingy one-room apartment must be made to represent a way-station on a journey to self-realisation as Arlene puts behind her memories of another house, of containing cells, constraining solitary confinements and of her mother's closet in which she had once been trapped. Only now, perhaps, can she truly be said to be getting out, and though at the play's end both Arlie and Arlene are seen standing 'as Mama did, one

hand on her hip' (*Getting Out*, p. 65), the last line – 'Aw shoot' – represents the language of the reconstructed Arlene, not the foul-mouthed Arlie, as the stage direction indicates that the lights dim on her 'fond smile', and as she accepts the woman whose action she mirrors but whose sensibility she has at last transcended.

Norman has spoken of what seems to her to be a Southern element in her work.

We share the notion that you cannot escape your family. You can't escape where you were born, who you were born to and what you've inherited. This is a southern version of fate . . . Your family is going to hunt you down . . . Whatever you have done since you left does not matter to them. Our writing is absolutely linked to this problem of how do you change when the perceptions of the people around you don't change. How do you know who you are when you are made up of these people that you *despise*? How do you move at all with all these people hanging onto you? (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 183)

This is essentially Arlene's problem. She has changed but those around her choose to see her in the same way. She cannot escape her mother, only understand her for what she is and what she wishes to make of her daughter. And beyond this, perhaps, *Getting Out* is, indeed, not without its significance in terms of the region in which it is set. For Tennessee Williams the South was a place where the past retained a destructive hold on the present, freezing everything in place. It was built on denial, on a refusal to acknowledge its own history of violence. For William Faulkner a reflexive sexuality, contained within the family, became an image of a society that had no desire to open itself to a new life, a symbol of moral anarchy and social stasis. So it is here. It is not Arlene alone who is trapped, contained and defined by the past, held in an hermetic space, assaulted by those who should have protected and released her. Beyond her is a family which seems dedicated to replicating its own moral failings, repeating history, and beyond that a society which appears to do likewise. She seems on the verge of getting out; the rest of those we encounter remain what they were, with the exception of Ruby, whose own decision makes Arlene's more possible.

At the same time Norman has expressed concern that too close an identification with its Southern setting might run the risk of limiting its applicability: 'If I were writing *Getting Out* today, you would probably not be able to tell where it was taking place. As it is, it's very specific. What I want to present is the theatrical equivalent of *Once upon a time* . . . which lifts you off the stage and sends you back into yourself for reference points' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 337). Her fear is that the asso-

ciations conjured up by the South might distort and limit both its appeal and its relevance. It is a strange and unnecessary fear.

*Getting Out* is a powerful, disturbing and moving work whose significance transcends its setting and whose form reflects its content. It won the George Oppenheimer Award and the Outer Circle Critics Award for best new playwright.

Marsha Norman's next piece, *Third and Oak: The Laundromat* (1978), first produced by the Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1978 and then by the Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York in the following year, is a subtle character study in which a central theme of women's theatre is explored: loss. Two women meet in a laundromat. One, Alberta, is carefully dressed and punctilious in her behaviour. Her laundry basket is neat. She checks the cleanliness of the washing machines. The other, Deedee, is, Norman indicates, 'a wreck', with her clothes bundled up in a man's shirt. At first their conversation is hesitant, at least on Alberta's part. She seems to prefer her privacy. But, unused to laundromats, she finds herself being offered advice and is drawn into an apparently aimless dialogue. By degrees, however, that dialogue begins to expose hidden truths and suppressed fears. The two women begin to build up a picture of their absent husbands, Deedee's apparently working a double shift at a truck factory, Alberta's supposedly out of town on business, though she is less willing to offer details of her private life, deflecting questions as long as possible. They share the same last name and, though from different social worlds, it slowly emerges that they share something else as well. Both husbands have deserted them, one by death, the other by philandering.

Deedee offers information about herself and slowly teases information out of Alberta, some of it, as we eventually learn, a desperate invention. We learn that Alberta had been a teacher, abandoning her career partly because, it seems, she was intimidated by her pupils, and partly to nurse her sick mother. We learn that she had wanted but not had children. Moment by moment her reserve is stripped away and the underlying pain of her life exposed. Deedee, meanwhile, two years married, rhapsodises about her husband, a high school sweetheart, but confesses that she, too, lacks the children she desires. He pours their money into drag racing, leaving her with no more than fantasies of the life she had once dreamed of. Alberta is quietly clever, Deedee confessedly ignorant. Whenever Deedee's probing gets close to the truth she would avoid, Alberta deflects her with a question as Deedee simulates a cheerfulness which becomes progressively thinner.

By degrees the disappointments and disillusionments of their lives force their way to the surface, never quite directly addressed, evident only in the interstices of their exchanges. It is increasingly clear that neither really read their husbands correctly, neither really had the intimacy for which they yearned and which they claim. They have filled the spaces in their lives with stories, consoled themselves with fantasies, constructing myths which they separately inhabit.

Deedee, indeed, confesses to being drawn to a black disc jockey whose radio show she hears in the small hours of the morning, a fact which itself underlines her solitariness. It is that show which opens *Third and Oak: The Laundromat* as the DJ signs off, ironically, by playing 'Stand By Your Man'. This character also forms the bridge into the play's companion piece, *Third and Oak: The Pool Hall*, played together with the first play in the Actors Theatre production. Indeed, when the two are played in tandem Norman provides an extra scene not in the published version of the first work. For the moment, though, the play ends as the two women hesitantly confess what they have tried so hard to conceal, that the men they are standing by are no longer there. Even now, though, they try to shore up their crumbling stories, Deedee, in particular, seeking to retain some vestige of pride: 'You think he just didn't come home, is that it? You think I was over there waitin' and waitin' in my new nightgown and when the late show went off I turned on the radio and ate a whole pint of chocolate ice cream, and when the radio went off I couldn't stand it any more so I grabbed up all these clothes, dirty or not and got outta there so he wouldn't come in and find me cryin' . . . Well, (*Firmly*) I wasn't cryin.'<sup>6</sup> The last phrase provides a dying fall.

Alberta, meanwhile, can only approach the fact of her husband's death obliquely, by recalling the death of her aunt's pet rabbit, an occasion when she 'cried for a week'. Yet, she tells us, 'I haven't cried in forty years' (*The Laundromat*, p. 19). So, her husband's death prompted no tears. At the same time she cannot bring herself to let the air out of a beach ball because it still contains his breath. Her grief is delayed. As befits her character, it is contained. The conversation is the equivalent of letting the air out of the redundant, but treasured, beach ball. The quality of their loneliness differs. For Deedee it is crushing. She buys herself a mirror so that the reflection will give her a companion. For Alberta, it is a necessary privacy. She pulls her solitariness around her as if she could thereby preserve something that would be lost if exposed to the world.

<sup>6</sup> Marsha Norman, *Third and Oak: The Laundromat* (New York, 1980), pp. 18–20.

Both women, however, slowly discover a mutuality which cuts across class and radically different experiences. On the neutral territory of the laundromat they are able to speak to one another and to themselves, facing truths they have struggled to keep out of mind. The clothes they carry, meanwhile, symbolise all too well the absent men, one a disordered heap, the other a neat bundle with a single garment bearing the stain of death. These are two women, waiting out their lives, dreaming that someone will re-enter those lives and suffuse them with meaning. This is a downtown *Waiting for Godot*.

It is not that women invariably offer one another such support and consolation. Deedee's relation with her mother, it transpires, is disastrous, though she is as lonely as her daughter ('she don't say two words while I'm there') (*The Laundromat*, p. 20). But Deedee and Alberta, meeting in the dead time of night, itself a no man's land, do find some consolation. Earlier in the play they try to remember the names of the dwarfs in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, significantly forgetting one. Later they recall: Happy. Both have significantly changed. A light comes on in Deedee's apartment, signifying the return of her wayward husband but instead of rushing back she stays: 'To tell you the truth, I'm ready for a little peace and quiet'.<sup>7</sup> Alberta, meanwhile, feels that she may soon be able to give her dead husband's clothes away, to close the book on the past and move on. Neither has solved her problems, which cut too deep for glib conclusions, but each has changed through being able to share her fears. The play's dialogue gradually simplifies, as it does in the concluding scene of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and for much the same reason. As in that play, the illusions have faded and there is a redemption, of sorts, in confronting the truth.

DEEDEE: Mrs. Johnson? (*Hesitantly*)

ALBERTA: Alberta.

DEEDEE: Alberta.

ALBERTA: Yes?

DEEDEE: I'm really lonely.

ALBERTA: I know.

DEEDEE: How can you stand it?

ALBERTA: I can't. (*Pauses.*) But I have to, just the same.

DEEDEE: How do I . . . how do you do that?

ALBERTA: I don't know. You call me if you think of something. (*Gives her a small kiss on the forehead.*)

DEEDEE: I don't have your number. (*Asking for it.*) (*The Laundromat*, p. 26)

<sup>7</sup> Marsha Norman, *Third and Oak: The Laundromat* (New York, 1985), p. 26.

She does not give it to her. A further stage direction tells us that Deedee is 'Trying to reach across the space to her' (p. 26), but the gesture is never completed. Deedee is left, instead, holding a bottle of Dr Pepper. The nature of the balance between despair and consolation, solitariness and a sense of shared pain, has changed, but the balance is still there.

*Third and Oak: Laundromat* has all the subtlety of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. As with that play, the audience is asked to reconstruct past events from small clues, incremental changes, and though the women are in the foreground Marsha Norman slowly builds a portrait of the absent men. What is not there is as important as what is, and it could scarcely be otherwise in a play in which absence is the central fact. Inconsequential chatter becomes the mechanism for exposing the hidden, lies become the means for revealing truths. It is the very evasions deployed by these two lonely and desperate women which lay the trail towards the very centre of their concerns. And if it be objected that the portrait of women which emerges from the play is essentially negative, in that both suppose that their lives derive their purpose from the men who have left them, what emerges with equal force is their ability to offer understanding and compassion to one another, to prepare to emerge from the isolation to which they had imagined themselves condemned.

The bridging scene which Marsha Norman wrote to enable the two plays to be performed in tandem is only five pages long but has a strange impact on the first play into which it is inserted. In this new version the two women are interrupted by the arrival of Shooter, the radio DJ, who carries a duffle-bag of clothes into the laundromat. Not merely is the crucial intimacy between the two women disturbed, the rhythm of their developing relationship disrupted, but their characters, together with their relationship, are changed. Deedee becomes dominant while the prim Alberta proves surprisingly knowing, acknowledging the sexual nature of Shooter's language. Deedee accuses her of being racist, taking an aggressive stance at odds with that in the earlier play ('If that was a white DJ comin' in here, you'd still be talkin' to him . . . People don't trust each other just because they're some other color from them . . . It just makes you sick, doesn't it. The thought of me and Shooter over there after you go home' (*The Pool Hall*, p. 37)). Both seem to step out of role. The scene is necessary only in so far as it provides the motivation for Deedee to enter the action of the second play, carrying the laundry he has left behind, but her appearance there has already been sufficiently motivated, the two plays in reality requiring no further connection than that provided by Norman's elucidation of character.

*Third and Oak: The Pool Hall* constitutes a counterpoint to the first play. Where that had offered an insight into the relationship between two women, and into their individual sensibilities, this explores the relationship between two men. Beyond that, however, it implies a wider male community. Once again Norman successfully invokes characters who never appear but are a felt presence.

Shooter is the son of a pool player who committed suicide when he began to lose his skill. He had been one of three friends, the other two being Willie, owner of the pool hall and a character in the play, and George, crippled and dying, whose daughter is married to the young Shooter (who borrows his name from the father he wishes to emulate). Willie behaves like a substitute father to the young Shooter, admonishing him for not going home to his wife, chiding him for his debts. By degrees we learn of the network of obligation and love which holds these men together. Willie and George had paid the bills associated with Shooter's birth and contributed to the family expenses, while Willie had arranged for his father's funeral. Shooter himself, in turn, has bought a motorised wheelchair for George while Willie is about to sell his pool hall to pay for George's hospital treatment. They are to be buried together.

The pool hall is small and seedy. The men who frequent it seem discontented and their lives aimless. Things are running down. Death and retirement threaten. Shooter himself has pointless affairs and despite his public success at the radio station is drawn back to this place in the early hours of the morning. What lifts them above their circumstances is precisely their relationship to one another. As in the first part of this double bill, beneath the apparently inconsequential chatter and the ritual fencing, is a human truth which slowly makes itself apparent. The language, indeed, is primarily a way of keeping what Norman, in a stage direction, calls a sense of 'complete emotional panic' (*The Pool Hall*, p. 17) at bay. Willie senses the pain which lies behind Shooter's assured front as he in turn himself detects something of Willie's despair at an entropic life. With one friend dead and another dying he now faces life alone. Their conversation, revealing though it is, is a means of blanking out what silence will expose.

Willie refuses to play pool with Shooter, in part because he disapproves of his behaviour and in part because he cannot reconcile himself to the death of his friend. Shooter's appropriation of his father's name and his desire to match him at the table are the source of pain. The game which ends the play, therefore, marks a crucial moment of

reconciliation, not only between Willie and Shooter but between Willie and his memories, between Willie and himself.

The arrival of Deedee is as disruptive as Shooter's appearance had been in the first play. She breaks the emerging connection between the two men. Unaware of what she is intruding on, she responds flirtatiously to Shooter in the presence of the very man who had warned Shooter against such behaviour. Shooter, indeed, carelessly reveals what Willie believed was confidential to the two of them. Eventually, Deedee is driven out by Willie, though with Shooter's acquiescence. It is a crucial moment as, perhaps, is her remark, shortly before she leaves, in which she recalls having once seen a freak of nature, a mouse with three heads. 'They said it . . . only had one heart. That's what killed them, it, the mouse' (*The Pool Hall*, p. 24). Much the same, it seems, could be said of the three friends, incapable of surviving because joined so securely together by their affection for one another, by the heart. Her expulsion, however, leaves her more alone than she had been before. The men, in contrast, forge a final alliance as Shooter accepts his obligations, in doing so finally earning his right to replace his father. The play ends with Willie and Shooter playing a game of pool and echoing the words of Shooter's father.

The two parts of *Third and Oak* explore the differing perceptions and needs of men and women but equally their shared sense of abandonment and loss. Expressed in different ways, in a different language, their sense of loneliness and despair nonetheless pulls them together. Norman's skill in this naturalistic diptych is to construct out of seemingly banal conversations a credible social and psychological reality. Through the imperfect communication of those who try to evade as much as facilitate contact, she dramatises both the intense privacies and the urgent need for connection on the part of those who find themselves ever more fearful of passing time, ever more conscious of the collapse of hope and the erosion of relationships. In her own mind, 'these two plays are about the same thing: why we lie to protect ourselves when we could tell the truth and be saved . . . And though each act is frequently performed by itself, I prefer that the two acts be seen together. Rather like the right foot following the left' (*Collected Plays*, p. 60).

Norman followed *Third and Oak* with a play whose only performance was 'a total disaster'<sup>8</sup> and which she therefore refused to publish until 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Marsha Norman, *Four Plays by Marsha Norman* (New York, 1988).

*Circus Valentine*, produced in Louisville in 1979, features a young trapeze artist who in speaking of her craft – ‘It’s all Time, see, and learning how to fall’ (Marsha Norman, *Collected Plays*, p. 124) – expressed Norman’s own views since, as she has explained, ‘That is what I think about life . . . because as soon as you know you can survive a fall, what is there to be afraid of? People who are afraid they will not survive a fall, consequently don’t take the necessary risks. *Can’t* take them. And live with this terrible fear of falling’ (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 332). It was an ironic observation in view of the play’s fate, though perhaps her persistence in the face of disaster equally demonstrates the extent to which she embraced her own conviction, though it has to be said that her next play, *The Holdup*, as viewed by the critics, saw her foot slip from the high wire once again.

Though a catastrophic failure, *Circus Valentine* is, in fact, a play of some subtlety about a circus, sliding towards disaster, which finally collapses when the manager uses all their financial resources to pay for an operation to separate the Siamese twins who are their main attraction: ‘I wasn’t about to be the reason they stayed together . . . I don’t know how I thought we’d get out of this. I didn’t think about it. It didn’t seem important. What I did for them, that seems important. I think it’s the only important thing I ever did’ (*Collected Plays*, p. 156). The plug is pulled by the owner of the shopping mall where they are to perform, a man who sees the twins as their only commercial product. As the manager’s wife comments: ‘you’re the freak, mister’ (p. 156).

The play ends as a trapeze artist is talked out of attempting a triple somersault as a final gesture before the circus closes. As her sister remarks, ‘It’s either die or go on.’ For her they are ‘pretty much the same thing’ (p. 161), but, unlike Jessie in *night Mother*, she decides to go on.

*Circus Valentine* does not deserve its twenty-year absence from the American theatre. It is not quite Norman’s triple somersault but it is a work of some distinction. Her portrait of a group of individuals struggling to sustain a failing enterprise while retaining both dignity and humanity has a metaphoric force the more powerful for its inventiveness. They fight to generate poetry out of the prosaic nature of their circumstances, attempt more than they can achieve, desperately fight to maintain a sense of order that is disintegrating in front of them. They acquiesce in the twins’ desire for normality while regarding that supposed normality as deeply suspect. They live with risk because it is the essence of their identities, sustain a dream of possibility in the face

of a dismaying reality. Even in the context of a failing circus in an anonymous small town they battle to retain their integrity and refuse to allow failure to define their lives.

Norman's next play, *The Holdup*, based in part on her own family history, was something of a shock. Presented in April 1983, by the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, it is set around a cookshack belonging to a wheat-threshing crew working a field in New Mexico in 1914, and features an ageing outlaw, two brothers, members of the wheat-threshing crew and a one-time madame of a frontier establishment. A comedy, it involves the shooting of one of the brothers, raised, like Stephen Crane's Swede in 'The Blue Hotel', on stories of frontier violence, the coming of age of the other and an impending marriage between the outlaw and the madame. Genuinely funny, it was nonetheless not well received. Norman's own explanation for this was that it failed to conform to the model most critics had of her. Identified early as the Lillian Hellman of her generation, she was supposed to write intense family dramas. *The Holdup* simply did not fit. But she was equally dismayed by the inability of critics to register the humour in those plays which were supposedly serious and, in fact, there are no Norman plays in which humour – as defensive tactic, deliberate distraction or simply a means of dealing with pain – is not a tactic deployed by the characters and a strategy adopted by the playwright.

*The Holdup*, apart from anything else, is about characters who are trapped by history and by their own self-images. Each, in fact or fancy, is the protagonist of a story, performing roles which carry ever less conviction. Time is slowly undoing their lives, negating what they believe to be the truth of those lives. A gunfighter, who has lived into the age of motor cars and aircraft, struggles to act out what he imagines to be his role, like the central figure in another Stephen Crane story, 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky'. A young man raised on fictions of the West dies when he tries to breathe life into those fictions. A woman seeks to marry herself to both past and present. Another young man escapes one myth but is drifting towards another at the play's end as he abandons the myth of the West for the supposed glories of the First World War.

There is no hold-up, in the conventional sense, but each character struggles to hold up a model of action to which he can subscribe. For Norman, however, beyond the pleasure of writing a comedy, the importance of *The Holdup* lay less in its subject matter than in its solution to a technical problem:

it was the first play in which I contained the action. In that way it was a technical exercise. These people are going camping and we're drawing a circle around them and nobody can get in or out, and what happens happens because of what these people are. There aren't any doors to open or phones to ring. It's no accident that *'night Mother* came next because once you learn how to do it, you can set a play in the middle of the living room and tell the set designer not to put the doors in . . . The critics don't understand that when they attack a play like *The Holdup*, what is at stake, in effect, is *'night Mother*. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 184)

*'night Mother*, originally produced by the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1982, ran for eleven months on Broadway, opening in March 1983. It, too, was in essence a conversation between two people, a mother and daughter, exposing aspects of their past and probing their sense of abandonment. This time, however, the stakes are higher. It is literally a matter of life and death as the mother, Thelma, struggles desperately to stop her daughter, Jessie, from committing suicide, a decision which she announces within minutes of the play beginning.

It would be hard to imagine a purer dramatic structure. The play takes place in real time, the clocks on stage beginning at 'about 8.15', hardly coincidentally the approximate time of curtain up, and running throughout the play. The dramatic conflict is embodied in the simple need of Jessie to step through the door of her bedroom and shoot herself and the equal and opposite need of her mother to prevent her doing so. This in turn makes the set a reflection of the central action. Thus the door to the bedroom, according to the Author's Note, 'should be, in fact, the focal point of the entire set and the lighting should make it disappear completely at times and draw the entire set into it at others. It is a point of both threat and promise. It is an ordinary door that opens onto absolute nothingness. That door is the point of all the action and the utmost care should be given its design and construction.'<sup>9</sup> The very rhythm of the play, then, is echoed by lighting cues which transform the function of the set, seeming at times to remove the immediate threat and at other times to bring it to the fore.

The battle is, in the end, an unequal one but that only becomes apparent retrospectively as the audience is slowly made privy to information which makes such a judgement possible. Jessie is in her late thirties, early forties, her mother twenty years older. The daughter finds life painful and disturbing, the mother straightforward. For one it is a mystery, for

<sup>9</sup> Marsha Norman, *'night Mother* (New York, 1983), p. 6.

the other, apparently, simply the given, to be accommodated. Thelma adjusts to problems, settling for what she can get. She fills her time eating junk food, watching television, talking. Though she feels her age, she simply paces herself. Jessie has spent much of her life in a kind of fog. An epileptic, she comes and goes, relying on medication to discover temporary equanimity. Along the way her marriage has collapsed and her son turned to crime. For her mother the world is as it appears to be. It is reassuringly solid, disappointments being factored into an existence whose ups and downs she takes with good spirit. For Jessie, it is simply insufficient to justify its continuance.

For a year drugs have given her stability and an intellectual clarity which far from reconciling her to her fate has brought her to the decision which drives the play. As Norman tells us in a note on the characters, 'It is only in the last year that Jessie has gained control of her mind and body, and tonight, she is determined to hold onto that control' (*night Mother*, p. 4). That notion of control, however, central to the play and to Norman, is necessarily ambiguous because of the apparent self-destructiveness which it serves. Anorexics, it is presumed, starve themselves to death not only because their personal perception of themselves is so at odds with their physical reality but because this is the one area in their lives where they feel they have control. Feeling themselves failures in so many other respects, this, at least, is an area where they determine their own fate. There are hints of anorexia here. Certainly Jessie has lost weight. The play is not, however, a pathological study, no matter how many clinical details are slowly released to us. What is central is the extent to which a woman decides her own fate.

Why, she asks herself, would she choose simply to wait out her time when life seems to offer nothing but a narcotised stasis, or spiralling decline. Until this moment she has been the victim of her own physiology, of her medication, of her husband's needs and desires, of her mother's misguided and unfocussed love, of her son's wayward behaviour. Once she had felt someone's love, a grace offered without demands, as her father gave her tokens of his affection. But he had died. Thereafter she had largely withdrawn, preferring not to talk, offering the world an ironic response which is largely misread by those around her. Rescued by her mother from her failed marriage, she has slid easily into the role which that mother had prepared for her, assuming responsibility for a woman who was perfectly capable but believed that affecting incapacity might give her daughter a role. Now she draws a line.

Norman has spoken of the relationship between mother and daughter as one seldom explored in American drama and of the paucity of works which place a woman, actively determining the action, at the centre. This, logically, she sees as related to the relative paucity, until comparatively recent times, of women dramatists. It is worth quoting her comments in this respect at some length, not least because they go to the heart of *'night Mother*.

The sudden appearance of women playwrights in America and elsewhere she relates to a changing self-image: 'the appearance of significant women dramatists in significant numbers now is a reflection of a change in women's attitudes towards themselves. It is a sudden understanding that they can be, and indeed are, the central characters in their own lives.' To the objection that women novelists seem never to have doubted this centrality she responds by saying that while this notion is 'absolutely required for writing for the theatre' it is 'not required for novels' because 'you can indeed be an observer and write glorious novels, in which women may or may not be the central characters' but 'the notion of an *active* central character is required for the theatre' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 338).

It is, I think, a little difficult to follow this logic, not least because it is not logical. Since the premise is that the key change is a 'sudden understanding' on the part of women that they are the central characters in their own lives, the fact that women novelists from Jane Austen to Doris Lessing have never shown the slightest doubt that they are such prime movers, would suggest that it is genre and not gender which is the key determinant (though the fact that the fictional tradition in America, as opposed to Britain, has been so determinedly male might have led to this otherwise suspect generalisation). In purely genre terms the observation is also somewhat dubious. Could Willy Loman, for example, really be said to be the *active* central character of *Death of a Salesman*, rather than the man who has chosen to believe that he is, finally, powerless to intervene in his own life? Who is the active central character in *The Iceman Cometh*, *Waiting for Godot*, *American Buffalo*? Perhaps the word 'active' contains nuances which go beyond a mere question of determining one's own actions and defining one's life. What is undeniable is that the social role, and hence self-perception, of women has changed and that women have historically played a minor role in the history of playwriting. It is equally undeniable that, no doubt as a consequence, the relationship between mothers and daughters has remained largely unexplored territory and Marsha Norman not merely maps out that territory in *'night*

*Mother*, thereby dramatising its centrality to the culture, but offers a cogent and fascinating explanation of the nature and meaning of that relationship:

The mother–daughter relationship . . . is one of the world's great mysteries; it has confused and confounded men and women for centuries and centuries, and yet it has *not* been perceived to have critical impact on either the life of the family or the survival of the family. Whereas the man's ability to earn money, his success out in the world, his conflict with his father – those are all things that have been seen as directly influencing the survival of the family. Part of what we have begun to do, *because* of the increasing voice of women in the world, is redefine survival. What it means is the ability to carry on your life in such a way that it fulfils and satisfies you. With this new definition of survival, *Mother* looms large. What you hope for your life, how you define the various parameters of what's possible for you, these are all things with which *Mother* is connected. She is the absolute source of self-respect and self-image and curiosity and energy. In fact, *Mother* is where 'going on' comes from. Producing, Making Money, Making Your Way are all things that Dad has historically taken care of. But going on, that business of 'Here we are; yet another day with yet another mess to clean up' is Mom. (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, pp. 338–9)

It is in this sense that Jessie, in *'night Mother*, could be said to be concerned with her survival, even at the moment she is planning her own death. It is never a question of realising the American dream, embracing the fantasies, realising the myths of American society that concerns her. She is not a failed utopian forced to measure her life against models of perfection in material, sexual or psychological terms. She is overwhelmed by a sense of failure, to be sure, but not because she has internalised social values or believes that she has fallen short of some ideal of private and public behaviour. She is a woman who has woken up to the fact that she is living a life without true meaning or purpose and has the power to end such a pointless existence, thereby paying herself the respect of believing that she is at least the author of her own fate. She is jealous of no one, offers no blame, accepts full responsibility and in doing so, for the first time, asks herself the meaning of survival if it is no more than continued existence.

Nor is it only a matter of the meaning, shape and survival of the family that is at stake because what Jessie asks herself is far more fundamental than that. What she demands to know of herself is the point of the life she is living and how she can justify such a life. *'night Mother* goes far beyond offering a critique of American society, indeed far beyond the question of a woman's relationship to her mother. It asks the most fundamental of questions: what is our life worth and how may we justify its

continuance? But at the same time it is most assuredly not a study of a suicide. It is the study of a life.

The play begins as Jessie gathers the equipment necessary for her suicide, from towels and plastic sheeting to a gun and ammunition. Chekhov's dictum that a gun introduced in the first act must be discharged in the third hovers in the background. At first she suggests that the gun is for protection, as in a sense it is, but within a few minutes has confessed to its real purpose, even giving a deadline of a couple of hours for its use. Suddenly the stage clocks assume a dramatic function and the space between theatrical and real time collapses.

Though Jessie claims the decision to be a rational one, a logical conclusion to a life that has lost its true meaning, there are disturbing glimpses of another motivation. To begin with she is on medication, which has given her an apparent sense of clarity and equanimity. If she is 'herself', then, she is so by virtue of chemical intervention, though there are hints of an obsessive behaviour not touched by her medicine. She has a notepad in her pocket which contains a checklist, a countdown to annihilation. She is, she explains, 'cold all the time', and longs for the 'dark and quiet' of death, a place where 'nobody can get me . . . Dead is everybody and everything I ever knew, gone. Dead is dead quiet' (*'night Mother*, p. 16). She likens herself to Jesus, whom she suddenly perceives as a suicide ('I didn't know I thought that') (p. 17).

She is disturbed by her brother, Dawson, because he 'just calls me Jess like he knows who he's talking to' (p. 19), thereby robbing her of her own life, quite as if she were a native terrified that a photographer will rob her of her soul. She is alarmed by her family because 'they know too much . . . They know things about you, and they learned it before you had a chance to say whether you wanted them to know it or not . . . it don't belong to them, it belongs to you, only they got it' (p. 19). Yet though the language is that of the paranoid, the skill of the play lies in the degree to which Norman slowly establishes the coherence of Jessie's decision, not, perhaps, as judged by anyone but herself, but a coherence which makes perfect sense to someone who has seen no purpose in a life composed of contingency and serendipity. Her fits, involuntary actions, are a symbol of her lack of control, her inability, to date, to affect her life or determine her fate. Her suicide is to be both a sign and primary evidence that she is in control. She will finally determine the shape of her life by deciding its ultimate parameter. This woman, who is losing her hair, is afraid to leave the house, has lost husband and son, discovers, as she thinks, a means of finding peace and

finally speaking her name with confidence by becoming her own nemesis.

There is, of course, also a powerful element of despair in her decision. As she confesses, if she thought she could save her son from his destructive habits she would stay her hand, yet he is not the cause of her resolution. Her reason is at once simpler and more complicated: 'I'm just not having a very good time and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse. I'm tired. I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used' (p. 22). For her mother this can only mean the failure of family life, the disintegration of personal ties. But for Jessie her statement expands outwards to a wider community. Beyond this house on a country road is a social and political world which menaces individuals who have no more control over their fate than she does. Her lament is over the decline of something greater than the life of a disappointed and sick woman on the edge of society. Her mother's remark that she is simply feeling sorry for herself is accurate on one level but cannot reach deep enough to touch the truth which really disturbs her. The death which exists on the other side of the bedroom door does not await Jessie alone. It is a common fate, the ultimate proof that nobody controls their own destiny. The question thus becomes not why suicide but why not suicide. This, after all, was exactly the question which Albert Camus saw as being posed by the absurdity of the conditions of our existence.

As Jessie remarks, drawing on the image of travelling on a crowded and uncomfortable bus, 'Well, I can get off right now if I want to, because even if I ride 50 more years and get off then, it's the same place when I step down to it. Whenever I feel like it, I can get off. As soon as I've had enough, it's my stop. I've had enough' (p. 24). To commit suicide is to accept the logic of the absurd but in some small way to triumph over it. Consciousness is all. Her mother spends her own time waiting for the end, doing crochet work, eating candy, watching television, filling the air with empty conversation. Is her response better or worse than Jessie's? Her suggestion that Jessie should buy new dishes, rearrange the furniture, merely underlines the pointlessness of her own strategy.

Yet in another way Jessie is, of course, a special case. As she admits, 'I've never been around people my whole life except when I went to the hospital' (p. 26). With the exception of a single occasion, she has never had a job. But almost everything we learn in the play underlines the extent to which such dubious consolations fail to get to the core of experience. Her mother and father were strangers to one another while she herself is estranged from husband and son. She realises that her father's

job had finally added up to nothing but a set of books effectively wiped clean at the moment of his death. Her own justification for her action, therefore, is something more than the lament of a physically and psychologically damaged young woman aghast at the pointlessness of her life: 'I can't do anything . . . about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it. Shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there's nothing on I want to listen to. It's all I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it. And it's going to stop. And I'm going to stop it' (p. 26).

The irony is that at the very moment she laments the gap which opens up between people she discovers a real relationship with her mother. For once, that mother lays aside the trivia with which she distracts herself, ceases playing the role into which she has fallen, and fights for her daughter's life with every weapon to hand. She tries to throw up a linguistic barricade between Jessie and the door through which she is determined to pass. She tells entertaining stories about a mad neighbour, offers confessions, makes urgent appeals, even tries to shock her with details of her husband's infidelity. For a brief while this person who believes that 'there's just not that much *to* things that I could ever see' (p. 30) finds a purpose in her own life – to save her daughter.

Indeed, while our eyes are fixed on the issue of Jessie's survival our peripheral vision is watching another woman's life coalesce in front of us. For, by degrees, Norman paints a portrait of a woman who was once married to a man she neither loved nor understood, a man with whom she shared a few words and little else. Beneath her apparent fussy ordinariness is a woman who has herself lived an empty life, seen the death of her husband, the lingering suffering of her daughter and the decline of her grandson. Though Jessie treats her as an amiable incompetent, who must be protected from her own inadequacy, she has lived not only without the love of her husband but also, in large part, without the love of a daughter who forged an alliance with that husband to which she had never been party. She has, with such cunning as she can contrive, nonetheless sought to find ways of giving purpose to her daughter's life and though she is intellectually inadequate, and, perhaps, saved from the anguish which Jessie feels because of her lack of a sense of irony, nonetheless she emerges from *'night Mother* with a dignity and courage that the woman whom we first see reaching for an illicit cookie seemed to lack.

If the play is about the redemption through suicide of one woman, it is about the survival of another. Both show heroism. Mama's philosophy – 'Things happen. You do what you can about them and see what

happens next' (p. 39) – is not without its logic or morality. Moments before her daughter's death, indeed, this woman, who until now has appeared content to drift through life, unquestioningly, can be described as '*nearly unconscious from the emotional devastation . . . so far beyond what is known as pain that she is virtually unreachable*' (p. 52). For the first time in her life she knows what she is living for and though she will be frustrated in her attempts to save Jessie, Jessie, perhaps, may have saved her in so far as she has lured her back into the world. As an Albee character remarks, consciousness is pain and Jessie's mother has been brought to full consciousness.

She is also not without her perceptions. She suggests to Jessie that she would not be contemplating death had her father still been alive. And there is a sense in which we need to regard Jessie's clear statements of motivation with care. Certainly, if her mother is correct her decision rests, in a sense, on a failed love affair. That love, however, had had little to do with her husband, nor yet her son, from whom she seems strangely detached. The most significant loss she has suffered seems to be that of her father.

Norman may remark on the centrality of the relationship between mother and daughter in this play but she also sketches a moving portrait of that between father and daughter. He is visible only in so far as he is summoned into existence by those who believe they are talking about something else. He is, theatrically speaking, marginal. He exists only in the contested memories of two women, is reconstructed only linguistically, which is ironic given his silence, but he is a real force if only because he seems to have been the still point in Jessie's life, the meaningful silence which she now believes she can only find in death. Jessie tries to distract her mother, to pretend that her enquiries about her father are inspired by nothing more than curiosity, but a few moments later she returns to her questioning, as if he were indeed the gravitational pull of her universe and this a love story after all.

She claims to have loved her husband, Cecil, who abandoned her first for another woman and then for another life, and the force of her declaration seems to carry conviction. He was a man who built things and in the end, it seems, could not bear to see them collapse, opting to leave rather than live with dissolution. Her son, Ricky, meanwhile is a male version of herself who 'knows not to trust anybody' (p. 40), and who is looking for revenge on the world. It is her mother, though, who has literally been there to catch her since her first fit at the age of five, something she reveals to Jessie only now. She is not the woman Jessie took her

for or the woman Marsha Norman allows us to believe her to be for much of the play. She had not told her husband about Jessie's fits, simply leaving him to draw his own conclusions, protecting him thereby from knowledge of his own fits which were so brief that he failed to register them, not least because they wiped his short term memory. In other words she had borne a double burden, watching them, as she now recalls, switching 'on and off like lightbulbs some nights' (p. 46). It is she who must now bear the burden of Jessie's death, no matter how much her daughter tries to relieve her of a sense of responsibility.

For Jessie, her death is a response to loss. It is not the loss of her father, her husband or son, however. As she explains:

It's somebody I lost, all right, it's my own self. Who I never was. Or who I was and never got there. Somebody I waited for and never came. And never will . . . I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it. Me . . . who might have made a difference to me . . . I'm not going to show up, so there's no reason to stay, except to keep you company, and that's . . . not reason enough because I'm not . . . very good company. (p. 50)

She is her own Godot.

For those, frequently feminist critics, who objected that *'night Mother* is a story of defeat, of a woman who cannot stand reality and who instead of changing it, ends it, Norman herself insists that it is:

by my own definitions of these words, a play of nearly total triumph. Jessie is able to get what she feels she needs. That is not a despairing act. It may look despairing from the outside, but it has cost her everything she has. If Jessie says it's worth it, then it is . . . Jessie has taken an action on her own behalf that for her is the final test of all that she has been . . . I think that the question the play asks is, 'What does it take to survive? What does it take to save your life?' Now Jessie's answer is 'It takes killing myself.' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, pp. 339–40)

For the mother, Norman suggests, survival is a matter of habit, of accepting one's marginality and finding meaning in the details of daily life. For Jessie this is not survival. It is existence without meaning. She opts for non-existence with meaning. Pulling the trigger enables her retrospectively to establish the logic which led to the act. It thus becomes an existential action. It is also the only thing she has to offer to her mother. As Norman remarks, 'Knowing is the most profound kind of love, giving someone the gift of knowledge about yourself.'<sup>10</sup>

There is, though, surely a sense in which Norman does less than

<sup>10</sup> Janet Brown, *Taking Centre Stage: Feminism in Contemporary US Drama* (Metuchen, NJ, 1991), p. 73.

justice to her own character in suggesting that Mama has settled for no more than routine. Such an account anyway sits awkwardly beside her own announced wish to place in the room of a would-be suicide 'somebody who cares deeply, wildly, madly, who will fight this person to the death to save her own life', in 'a gladiator contest where the point is to keep the person alive'. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 185). Mama may not be a gladiator but she fights with such strength as she possesses and what we learn of her life makes her considerably more than a woman who believes that life begins and ends with the *TV Guide*.

Somewhat mysteriously, Marsha Norman has spoken of writing *'night Mother* as a treacherous act, though who is being betrayed is not immediately obvious unless, like *Getting Out*, it has its origins close to home; and indeed she has admitted that there have been a number of suicides in her family, as she has also confessed that the mother in *Getting Out* shares some characteristics with her own mother, if only her obsession with cleanliness. Her solution to this feeling of guilt seems to lie in a concentration on form. She has spoken of the play being written in sonata form and though there are, necessarily, no act divisions, no intervals to relieve the building tension, there are three clear movements, as the characters reach a moment of intensity and then relieve that tension for a moment. The first comes just under a third of the way through, the second a little over two-thirds through, though there are minor crescendoes and diminuendos. Within this movement the two voices are subtly orchestrated, the principal theme reasserting itself after each variation. The prevailing key, meanwhile, is a minor one.

Norman has also seen the play as a ritual, a requiem mass for the soul of the departed, a suggestion which reinforces her insistence that Jessie's is not a meaningless death, not a surrender to absurdity. Seen thus, the towels which she gathers are part of the ritual. They are also, however, domestic items, along with many others that Jessie assembles and refers to, and which are suddenly charged with significance. Just as such trivia proved the key to social meaning in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, building a portrait of an absent woman, so here they are both threat and explanation.

For some feminist critics this domestic space was in essence a statement, on Norman's part, about the role of women in society. As Linda Kintz explained, if that is quite the word, 'Norman's *'night Mother* stages the space of women's worthless domestic work and its aesthetic invisibility, initially foregrounding the spacial or organizational role of architecture in a set representing an isolated middle-class or lower-middle-class

house in the United States.' Commenting on the prevalence of consumer products she further remarks that the 'mythical "uniqueness" of the American notion of individuality is, at least, in the marketing of individuality, paradoxically very homogeneous'.<sup>11</sup> It is a little difficult to deconstruct this but Linda Kintz, who otherwise offers a sensitive reading of Norman's work, seems to be stressing women's marginalisation in an apparently homogeneous society and suggesting that this offers a clue to Jessie's and Thelma's separate but connected dilemmas, forgetting, for the moment surely, just how marginal the men invoked in the play have surely been.

It is certainly true that neither holds a job and that both inhabit an exclusively domestic space. It is true, too, that they appear to inhabit a society in which the factors which seem common are less organic than manufactured. In other words, in a society whose chief characteristic seems to be domestic disharmony and social dislocation it is consumer goods and television programmes that provide the lingua franca, that appear to offer a bogus sense of shared values. Jessie invokes such products, however, partly to distract her mother from the impending crisis and partly because she believes that she is no more than she appears to be. Unaware of how deep her pain goes, precisely because they have not shared knowledge of one another, she believes that the gulf she leaves behind can indeed be filled with compacted trivia. As we have seen, in this she is surely wrong.

Thelma and Jessie are women and it would be absurd to suggest that this fact has nothing to do with their dilemma, no relevance to their feelings of inadequacy or marginality, to the desperation which finally breaks surface. They have, at least in their own minds, been betrayed. But they have not primarily been betrayed by men. Thelma never loved her husband, never understood his vulnerability or the love he expressed so obliquely to his daughter. Jessie did love hers but asked for more than he could give. The betrayal goes far deeper than that and to suggest as much is surely not to earn the opprobrium directed (for example, by Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Ann Arbor, 1988) at those male critics who affected to find universal implications in this drama featuring two women. The implication of the clocks which tick away real time on the stage, for example, are hardly likely to be lost on an audience as aware as those they watch that their own lives are relentlessly running down and that the doorway to oblivion awaits them no less than Jessie.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Kintz, *The Subject's Tragedy: Political Poetics, Feminist Theory, and Drama* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1992), p. 207.

Indeed the only one symbolically to walk through that door in the play, until the final moment, is a man, Jessie's father and Thelma's husband, a man no less detached from the imperatives of the American dream than the women. The next, it seems likely, will be Jessie's son, already rushing towards oblivion.

Not the least of Norman's accomplishments in *'night Mother* is the skill with which she deploys the details of human communication. Thelma and Jessie alike try to distract, delay, defer what seems like the inevitable by invoking trivia. Jessie assembles a list of small tasks and insignificant products as a way of structuring these last two hours of her life, as a means of occupying her mother's mind and keeping herself calm. She presents her mother with a box of presents, themselves without real value, as a way of making herself present when she has gone and hence softening the fact of her imminent absence. Thelma busies herself with fussing over details, making hot chocolate, for example, which both of them hate, as a way of prevaricating. Jessie gathers the necessary props for her final drama; Thelma seeks to deny them to her, while endeavouring to throw everything, no matter how insignificant, in her path. And what is true of these material objects is true, too, of language. The words they use are a way of not addressing what matters most to them. It is static designed to blot out the truth. Thelma is Scheherazade, spinning stories to keep not herself but another alive. At the same time such trivia, material and linguistic, say something about the nature of their lives, built, as they have been, from the small change of life.

*'night Mother* is, indeed, in part a love story. Jessie chooses to shoot herself with her father's gun, and if not with that then with her husband's. These were the two men she loved, the two men who might have saved her had they not left, abandoned her in their different ways. There is no irony in the choice. The man who saw her into life, and perhaps tainted her blood with the seeds of epilepsy, now ushers her out. At the same time, Thelma, ostensibly disengaged, separated from her daughter by a sense of guilt and mutual incomprehension, finds herself deeply committed to saving her. Suddenly the link is re-established if only to be broken again. If she fights to save her, is that not out of a sense of love; if, finally, and against her will, she lets her go, is that also not love? Her last words to her daughter, now deaf to them as a shot rings out, are 'Forgive me. I thought you were mine' (*'night Mother*, p. 58), the words of a mother whose love requires that she accept what her love would urge her to reject, the severing of a vital cord. The terror is that the bridegroom to whom she thus relinquishes her daughter is death. It

is the bridegroom she has chosen but love determines that the mother will resist such a choice.

For Norman, though, Jessie is not the only one liberated by the evening, not the only one who for whom meaning comes as a grace. Thelma's life is equally transformed. The new connection between mother and daughter offers an epiphany. 'Basically', Norman explains:

it is a moment when two people are willing to go as far as they can with each other . . . After a lifetime of missing this daughter, of somehow just living in the same space, they finally had a moment when they actually lived together, when the issues of their lives were standing there with them, in silent witness of their meeting. This is exactly the kind of meeting the theater can document, can present and preserve. (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 329)

It is, incidentally, the kind of meeting she had witnessed all those years before in the concluding moments of a production of *The Glass Menagerie*. Thelma's life is transformed. She 'has something that is securely hers . . . She has a holy object' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 329). The mass is ended, the ritual complete. She can now, perhaps, at last, go in peace.

Marsha Norman followed the critical and popular success of *night Mother* with a work that, in her own words, did not seem to get through to the audience, though, to her own mind, it contained 'the most gorgeous writing' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 192). She has explained that she wrote *Traveler in the Dark* (1984) 'because I was very confused about the relationship between me and my mind. I had always thought being smart was some kind of protection. But it isn't, really, and I had just learned, or rather, just accepted that. What I felt as I sat down to write was that all my mind did on most days, was make things worse' (*Collected Plays*, p. 222). *Traveler in the Dark* is, in some senses, a play about faith, religious and secular, about the urge to protect oneself and others from knowledge, about the relations between the generations, about the stories we tell ourselves and others.

It was, she confessed, a complex piece 'and a real step for me in terms of risk. I wrote the play to find out whether it was possible to write a sympathetic smart person for the American stage' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 326). This, in turn, meant that the play would necessarily present articulate people in a theatrical context not necessarily conducive to such work. As she remarked, 'I'm interested in what it takes to support that talk. The answer is not to get rid of the talk, but rather to find something that is sturdy enough to hold it up' (p. 326). The play was

not a success which, to her mind, meant that 'people are not used to listening with the kind of seriousness this play requires. It's just not American.' Complaints that it was 'too smart', 'too clever', were, to her, evidence that American audiences believe 'they have a *right* . . . to go on an emotional journey' (p. 327), that they resist the effort required to follow sophisticated exchanges of language and complex intellectual arguments. It is hard to agree.

The fact is that in *Traveler in the Dark* language does indeed detach itself from an emotional core not merely because its central character is a surgeon, who necessarily detaches himself for professional reasons, extrapolating from this a suspect philosophy, but because Norman creates a play in which her intellectual concerns themselves become detached from characters in whom we must fully believe if the debate in which they engage is to have any genuine force. There is a difference, after all, between a free emotional journey and a play whose own clinical clarity risks alienating the audience from ideas which must be rooted in individual sensibilities if they are to have any conviction. There is a difference between 'gorgeous writing' and credible dialogue. Consider, for example, these remarks which Sam, the surgeon, makes to his wife on the death of his nurse, Mavis, whom he has been unable to save from terminal cancer:

all the faith in the world wouldn't save her. Won't save any of us. Won't do a thing except make fools of us. Give us tests we cannot pass. Bring us to our knees, but not in prayer – in absolute submission to accident, to the arbitrary assignment of unbearable pain, and the everyday occurrence of meaningless death. Only then can we believe . . . that love blazes across a black sky like a comet but never returns . . . and that time, like a desert wind, blows while I sleep, and erases the path I walked to here, and erases the path that leads on. (*Four Plays*, p. 198)

You could offer prizes for a wife's likely reply to this but 'Oh, Sam . . . Oh, sweet baby', is not likely to come close. The speech is thematically significant, eloquent, lyrical, everything, indeed, but believable. Ironically, given Norman's comments about audiences' demands for emotion, the one defence for this passage might be the emotional pressure which generates it. Even so, and even given Sam's supposed intellectual superiority to those around him, such a speech smells of the library and not of life.

And what is true of this speech, and indeed, far too many others, is true, too, of the play itself. Characters obligingly spell out the philosophical implications of their remarks. The stage is studded with symbolic

features, and when these do not suffice, others are brought in (including a geode whose mystery, like that of life itself, must remain hidden inside). This is Tennessee Williams on a bad day. Even the debate between a minister and a surgeon, father and son, besides signalling all too overtly a central theme, is conducted in an arch manner. All those qualities which distinguished her earlier plays – an acute ear for colloquial speech, a credible and moving sensitivity to family relationships, an ability to engage profound issues obliquely but powerfully, a sense of the rhythms not only of speech but of emotions and thought – desert her here. It is tempting to feel that the play, perhaps, has a special significance to her, given her upbringing in a fundamentalist home, that blinds her to its weakness.

The play turns on the question of faith. Sam, as the child of a minister, had become a Christian but abandoned his faith when he became convinced of its speciousness. The ease with which he sees through one of his father's magic tricks offers him a clue to a different kind of deceit. But if there is no redemption available in the next life there is in this. He becomes a surgeon, becomes, that is, his own god, able to save the body but equally willing to confront people with the fact of their mortality. In a similar way he distrusts the fairy tales told to children, and that he had once told to his dying mother, as if they had the power to neutralise reality. Accordingly, he directs his own son away from nursery rhymes (deconstructing Humpty Dumpty as a tale of inevitable death and the Princess and the Frog as a deceitful suggestion that it is possible to transform the base facts of existence) and towards *The Call of the Wild* and an account of the Donner Party, pioneers turned cannibals. The message is clear: people will do anything to survive but reality has the last bite.

Believing himself to be acting out the logic he has identified, Sam proposes leaving his wife, thinking that his son will feel better for news of his impending divorce. But this is no more than evidence of the egotism that he has substituted for his lost faith. Insisting to his son that 'God is not in control and hasn't been in control for some time' (*Four Plays*, p. 183), and that things 'just happen', he thinks to live out the absurdity he believes himself to believe in. The irony is that this, too, is a kind of faith, a belief which has taken over his life as profoundly as his earlier conversion had briefly done. It is, however, in the context of the play, a destructive faith, and the play, essentially, is concerned with bringing him back if not to a faith in God then to an acceptance of mystery. The man who has spent his professional life laying bare the mysteries of the human body, exposing it as no more than a machine which may be repaired or

abandoned, eventually finds himself led back to a belief if not in the ineffable then in the intangible and irrational fact of human relationships and of a need which can finally not be satisfied by a pragmatic struggle with the consequences of fate.

Despite his apparent equanimity concerning life and death Sam has been disturbed by his failure to save his own nurse. He is disturbed again, however, when he discovers that there were aspects of this woman that he had never understood. When his son presents him with a geode that his mother had stored away it is Sam who stops him cracking it open to see the crystals, in order to preserve its mystery. The play ends with him reconciled to his family, his profession and to life itself. His final words take the form of a recitation of one of the very nursery rhymes he had earlier despised. His father offers the first line: 'As yon bright and tiny spark'. He completes it, thereby completing his reconciliation to his father and to creation: 'Guides the traveler in the dark/Though I know not what you are/Twinkle, twinkle little star' (p. 204).

It is a whimsical ending whose sentimentality goes beyond the need to balance his earlier cynicism. Indeed, if anything it makes cynicism seem infinitely preferable. The humbling of this 'brilliant loner', this 'world famous surgeon', by nothing much more than a series of banal revelations is hard to accept, but, then, he never really amounts to much more than an odd mixture of scepticism and sentiment, speaking a language which is by turns arch and effusive. Indeed Norman's approach to character in this play differs radically from that in her earlier work. Glory, Sam's wife, we are told, is 'a lovely woman', and she never becomes much more than that. The character notes indicate that 'nobody understands how on earth she has stayed married to Sam for all these years' (p. 161), and to a large degree that remains true at the end of the play. Certainly the audience is left in considerable doubt. For much of the time she is reduced to the role of audience herself. Her husband's insufferable arrogance, his cruelty, his self-righteousness, his neglect, demand that we know more than we are permitted of this woman who has tolerated him for so long. By the same token, his twelve-year-old son is precocious beyond belief and his country preacher father a little too close to stereotype for credibility.

Reviews were negative: 'Jack Kroll called me the "crisis laureate",' she noted. 'And an LA critic's review was so vicious as to make me decide to stop writing for four years. Why did they hate it? I don't know . . . maybe because it talks about faith, and faith is something we don't talk about in the theatre, or maybe because the main character is a smart rich doctor

who isn't happy, and critics don't care about that' (*Collected Plays*, p. 222). For my taste, *Traveler in the Dark* is an experiment that fails, but what are experiments about that do not envisage the possibility of failure? Her earlier plays established her as an original voice in the American theatre, a writer capable of dramatising the lives of those who 'are just out there wildly and desperately alone, trying to figure out where they are from, who they are', and 'does anybody matter' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 190). She does with her plays what the young boy in *Traveler in the Dark* struggles to do by reading to his dying grandmother. She offers stories as a way of making sense of anxiety and pain, as a way, finally, of facilitating survival, and *Traveler in the Dark* is about survival.

Norman's next plays were both comedies. *Sarah and Abraham*, first presented as a workshop production at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, in 1992, is a comedy about the biblical story of Sarah, Abraham and Hagar. Staged as the production of an improvisatory theatre company, it develops ironic parallels between the emerging action of the play and the private lives of the actors.

The part of Sarah is played by the star of the company, albeit a company resolutely stranded in the provinces; Abraham by her less talented and habitually unfaithful husband. They are joined by a former member of the company who briefly returns from a successful career in Hollywood and who now has an affair with the actor playing Abraham, who himself is for once allowed a major role. The director, meanwhile, has an affair with the young woman academic who scripts the production and with the star of his show, possibly thereby becoming responsible for her pregnancy.

The skill of the play lies in the way in which this unlikely company slowly improvises the story, incorporating their own scarcely concealed passions and ambitions while inadvertently solving the question of why the biblical Sarah had apparently willingly ceded her husband to her servant Hagar. Vaguely reminiscent of Alan Ayckbourn's *A Chorus of Disapproval*, *Sarah and Abraham* is a comedy verging on farce which makes few gestures towards credibility. The positive reviews which the company secures, along with a New York transfer and movie deal, are hard to square with what seems a production of stunning banality, until you recall Hollywood's occasional forays into biblical epics, born out of a desire to appropriate to meretricious pap the ethical and spiritual imprimatur of Holy Writ. Nobody's motives are pure in this production, dedication to craft and the higher purposes of art foundering on a

combination of lust, envy and not quite blind ambition. On the other hand the story that they so patently parody is not itself without its mysteries, as a man explains that his abandonment of his wife for an attractive young woman was a result of divine instruction while the wife enthusiastically encourages his adultery.

Hardly a major work, *Sarah and Abraham* is a reminder of Norman's comic skills if also of the byways she is happy to stroll down from time to time.

*Loving Daniel Boone* (1992) is also not untouched with whimsy. Set in part in a Kentucky museum and in part in the frontier Kentucky of 1778, it is, in her words, 'about heroes, dead and alive' (*Collected Plays*, p. 332). Flo, a museum cleaning woman, has discovered that she can slip into the past by way of a Daniel Boone exhibit. Depressed with a life which seems drained of purpose and adventure, she falls in love with the frontiersman, a relationship doomed by more than the two-century difference. Meanwhile, a relationship with one man, in the present, is fatally flawed by his deceit and with another by the fact that the man she admires (the museum's director) is gay. When a third appears, in the form of Hilly, who is required to undertake community service in the museum having mildly vandalised Boone's statue, she is disinclined to respond to him. When they all travel back in time, however, and together defend the fort at Boonsboro against the Indians, she discovers that heroes are not only a product of the past, though it was the search for such that drove her back there.

Flo contrasts the vivid nature of history with the mundane facts of her own life and times. Dead heroes from the eighteenth century seem preferable to those whose lives seem without purpose or direction: 'Everybody I see *here* is dead. Dead people walk in the streets. Dead people askin' me how I am. If I have to spend my life with dead people, I'd rather be back there, where the dead people did things' (p. 342).

Hilly has lost his wife in a drunken car crash and is himself drifting but, as she discovers when he joins her in the past, his spirit is alive and heroism in part a product of circumstance and perspective. She is even able to credit it to her former lover who repairs cars because, at whatever level, his life could be said to make a difference.

Boone, by contrast, is in endless retreat, from his wife, from the civilisation that he despises but whose expansion he facilitates. His heroism is another word for disinterest and detachment, even from his own life. He warns Hilly to act 'or else you'll wind up like me, always wondrin' where everything went' (p. 373). Flo, likewise, had started her time-

travelling because 'there was nobody in the world I wanted to see. Nobody I wanted to call. And nobody I wanted to call me . . . like we'd had our chance . . . and we blew it. Like we'd already decided it wasn't going to work, so why go on with it. Like it was just easier to give up. Nobody ever blames you for giving up anymore' (p. 384).

It is a curious speech from the author of *'night Mother*, in which a similar sense of entropy and alienation had led to suicide. In that play, to step into another world had meant death. In the comic setting of *Loving Daniel Boone* it means life. It is as if Marsha Norman wishes to offer another possibility, a grace not available to Jessie, whose sense of abandonment, whose awareness of failure, could only be redeemed by an act so total as to forge its own desperate meaning. Her heroism consisted of wilfully taking her own life. Flo's consists of accepting it back again, her own imagination having created its possibilities as the empty lives of others had created the necessity to reach out again, in hope.

*Loving Daniel Boone* is a comedy, an ambiguous gesture towards the State of Kentucky where Norman was born and raised. Like *Sarah and Abraham* is it well crafted and exuberantly imagined. What it lacks, however, is the sheer dramatic power of her earlier plays, where desperation could never be calmed with a sentimental gesture nor neutralised by wit.

There is, however, perhaps another dimension to *Loving Daniel Boone*, to do with Marsha Norman's sense of the function and purpose of art, for Flo, in effect, undertakes the artist's journey beyond the confines of her own time and place. Speaking in 1995, Norman insisted that, 'the purpose of art, is to express what we have in common, the life that we have in common, the life we could live in common if we could just escape our skin, our time, and the particularities of our experience'. For Flo, this means stepping into an Indian teepee, performing a simple rite. For Norman, 'art is our only way out, our only way in, our only way back to where we really live – in our senses, in our bodies, in our connections with each other . . . those with whom we have shared a victory, a defeat, or a purpose – regardless of whether we have shared a house or a bed, or even a century' (*Collected Plays*, p. 396). This could be seen as a description of *Loving Daniel Boone* but it is also a description of all her work, indeed, as she implies, of all art.

Her remarks, however, had a special significance and a special occasion. Although delivered to a conference on 'Connections in the Arts', they recalled an occasion which she had shared with a friend who had subsequently, and unaccountably, killed himself. It was one of the experiences that contributed to *'night Mother*, one of the paradoxes that would

never really be resolved, for like the mother in that play she was helpless to change a decision she would never understand or even fully condone, despite her effort to invest Jessie's suicide with a transcendent meaning. The act of writing, in other words, was an attempt to understand. It was a belated and still somewhat baffled blessing offered to a friend who had gone beyond her help. It was not a lifeline that could pull her friend or her character back from the brink. Both were locked in a logic impervious to appeal. But it was an effort to re-establish an emotional and imaginative connection which meant that at least at this level, and in retrospect, the connecting thread had not entirely snapped and that thus their solitariness was not as total as it must have seemed. It is the power of art, and certainly the power of Norman's best work, that it offers the consolation of meaning and, through the transfiguring power of the imagination, a sense of connection with those whose experiences might otherwise seem too remote from ourselves.

This was very much a conviction at the heart of her next play, *Trudy Blue*, whose revisions, preparatory to a planned Off-Broadway production, were still under way in February 1998. This stages the realities and fantasies facing Ginger, a woman confronted with the fact of her imminent death. A writer, she seeks to contain and shape her fears, anxieties and hopes into containable form, but fiction and fact coexist, bleed into one another. Thus, though an Author's Note instructs that the production 'MUST clearly distinguish between events taking place in Ginger's imagination or in her past, and events actually occurring on the day of the play',<sup>12</sup> in fact the membrane separating the different realms seems more permeable than this would suggest. Indeed a further note indicates that though the action of the play takes place in a single day, 'the events and conversations around the play are drawn from many days, both past and future, and many states of consciousness, waking or not' (*Trudy Blue*, p. 2).

As she writes her novel so she both projects an alternative reality and allows her present dilemma to register indirectly, her fictions being acted out not least because they assume an increasing authority. Again as Norman points out, 'the imaginary or remembered scenes must not . . . be dreamy or slow. The separation of the two worlds is more physical than emotional. Ginger's memories and her imagination have just as much if not more effect on her than the actual events of her life. It's just that no one else can see them. The past is not over' (p. 2).

<sup>12</sup> Marsha Norman, *Trudy Blue*, typescript, 1998, p. 2.

Misdiagnosed following a bout of pneumonia, Ginger is first told that she is free of cancer and then that she has an inoperable tumour, a sequence reprised in her memory, and, indeed, for much of the time we see the world through a blend of memories and invention. Thus, to still her panic she summons a Swami into being who instructs her in the techniques of relaxation and acceptance when necessity requires such a consoling presence. In like manner, she creates a lover in her fiction who will offer the passion which seems to have drained from her life.

From the point of view of the audience such distinctions are by no means clear at first. There is a mystery to be penetrated, just as there is, on another level, for Ginger, who struggles to make sense of her situation. The status of the various characters and their roles in Ginger's developing drama seems problematic, as does the state of mind of her husband, Don, who himself seems bemused, lacking in perception, understanding and compassion, precisely because we see the world, in large part, through her eyes. Meanwhile, she also suffers from deafness and this introduces another level of distortion.

There are moments when we seem to have passed beyond the death of the central character as her young daughter, Beth, supplies memories of her mother to an editor apparently gathering information for a eulogy. Certainly the past tense begins to infiltrate their language. The play, indeed, ostensibly ends with Ginger's death and the publication of her final novel, named for its protagonist, Trudy Blue, herself in some senses an embodiment of her creator. Trudy Blue, Ginger explains, is herself 'off the leash' (p. 52).

In some senses *Trudy Blue* is Ginger's conversation with herself. In that regard, and others, it resembles Arthur Miller's 1998 play, *Mr Peters' Connections*. This, which opened in May 1998, focussed on a man confronting death and therefore confronting life. As he approaches the end of his life he summons into his mind those who have been closest to him, desperate to discover the purpose of his existence, the meaning of his existence, indeed of existence itself. The passion, the urgency, of his early years have faded and along with that a sense of purpose, direction, form. With impending death it becomes increasingly urgent to understand what his life might have amounted to. He is, in effect, talking to himself. In Norman's play, Beth, talking to her dead grandmother, asks, 'So I'm talking to myself here?' only to be told 'it runs in the family' (*Trudy Blue*, p. 75).

In Miller's play, Mr Peters comes to realise that there is more than one form of death, that indifference, boredom, a failure, in short, to live life

to the full, anticipate the implacable and seemingly deconstructive fact of death. Much the same conviction lies at the heart of *Trudy Blue*. Indeed, in a key speech, Ginger observes that:

I think after a certain point, people put these huge sections of their lives on auto . . . Like there's this big switchboard and people go through and . . . (*Mimes flipping switches*) this is my family, and this is where I live, and this is what I do, and this is what I eat, and these are the people I have lunch with, and these are the books I read, and this is my radio station, and here's what I think about this and this and this. And they don't think about it any more. So they never try anything else. (*Trudy Blue*, p. 36)

When a friend objects that, 'if you know you like something, why should you try something else?' Ginger replies, 'Because if you don't, then all you are is comfortable. Is that what we're doing here, trying to get comfortable? . . . Say you actually *got* comfortable. *Then* what would you do? Go to sleep? Die? What?' (p. 36).

Describing her novel, Ginger remarks that it is 'about this girl named Trudy Blue who's sort of a detective or like a spy' (p. 37). She suggests that *Trudy* is looking for pleasure, hence the affair at its heart. But the real meaning Ginger tries to penetrate is that of her own life. Her career as a novelist seems to be an extension of the fantasies she had as a child, her desire to live what she calls 'her other life' (p. 37). And when she doubts the legitimacy or utility of such inventions, of the creation of a factitious happiness, order, safety, the lover she projects as 'a wish . . . A longing. A need' (p. 82), literally the man of her dreams, reassures her. Nonetheless, she seeks further reassurance that the connections between people have a consequence, make a difference, and that her existence thus has a purpose.

Ginger does not pursue pleasure but happiness, which makes hers in part a national quest. She feels unloved and alone and therefore generates the fantasies that will address that feeling. Beyond that, however, what she really responds to is a fear of inconsequence and a fear of death and the implications with which that implacable fact floods life. What she fails to understand until the final moments is that consolation and meaning have always been within her grasp. Just as Miller's Mr Peters comes to understand that the meaning of his life lay in part in his connections with other people, in the connection between past and present, and in a realisation that life's meaning lies in part in the intensity with which it is experienced, so Norman's Ginger comes to a similar realisation: 'Just this morning I realized that what happens, the closeness I was looking for my whole life, wasn't something I could get hold of and hang

onto. It was already there. It was . . . what I was made of . . . You're asking me what you should do? . . . Sing' (*Trudy Blue*, p. 106).

*Trudy Blue* is a journey towards grace, but that grace already exists. It merely has to be acknowledged and claimed. In *Getting Out* Norman had split her character into two and then edged those two selves towards a moment of reconciliation. In *Trudy Blue* there are, in effect, multiple selves, some a product of social or familial roles (friend, wife, mother), others a product of an imagination which peoples the world with projections of private need. But this, too, ends on a note of reconciliation. *Trudy Blue* is Ginger, as her husband is also a version of her invented lover. Actors enact multiple roles in the play as, in another sense, they do in life.

Every writer is familiar with the ambiguities involved in the generation of fictions, conscious that each character has a tenuous and often unfathomable connection with the real, each fiction a connection with the facticity it offers to transcend. Fiction proposes a coherence, a pattern, a shape to experience not always observable in the seeming contingencies of daily life, or seemingly denied by the disabling fact of death. What else is fiction designed to do but deny that ultimate deconstructive spasm? And yet for Ginger, and behind her, Norman, its essence is that it leads back to the life whose absurdities, whose traumas, whose distressing abandonments it was designed so arbitrarily to address, finding in the very details of personal relationships, and even in the imaginative enterprise of dream, fantasy, fiction, a celebratory core to existence. Fiction and the real are not contrary concepts. They are each intimately involved with the other. They are both the song which celebrates life, each justifying the other, each fully invested in the other.

## CHAPTER 7

### *David Rabe*

‘There are times,’ wrote Peter Brook, ‘when I am nauseated by the theatre, when its artificiality appals me, although at the very same moment I recognize that its formality is its strength.’ He was speaking in the context of a play inspired by a distant war in which his own country allegedly had no direct involvement. He, and others, however, ‘quite suddenly felt that Vietnam was more powerful, more acute, more insistent a situation than any drama that already existed between covers’.<sup>1</sup>

It is notable that one of the first plays about Vietnam (*US*, 1966) was staged not in the United States, and not by a politically radical theatre company, but in England, and by a state-subsidised theatre whose reputation was built on productions of Elizabethan drama, though, under Brook, the Royal Shakespeare Company was in the middle of a period of experimentation in part inspired by the theories of Antonin Artaud. Admittedly, the Open Theatre’s Joseph Chaikin was in England for the performance (the Open Theatre which produced Megan Terry’s *Viet Rock*). Admittedly, too, in that same year, the director of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, R.G. Davis, writing in the *Tulane Drama Review*, called for the creation of what he called ‘Guerrilla Theatre’. The same issue of this journal included a one-page proposed play called *Kill Viet Cong*, in which a man, apparently a member of the audience, is invited to shoot a Viet Cong soldier.<sup>2</sup> But at that stage the American theatre was only just beginning to respond to the developing war, with the Bread and Puppet Theatre joining public rallies, and the Living Theatre drawing on images from Vietnam in *Paradise Now* (1968) and *Commune* (1970).

Davis begins his article by quoting Freud’s observation that ‘Art is almost always harmless and beneficent; it does not seek to be anything else but an illusion. Save in the case of a few people who are, one might

<sup>1</sup> Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration 1946–1987* (London, 1988), p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> R. G. Davis, ‘Guerrilla Theatre’, *Tulane Drama Review*, 10.4 (Summer 1966), p. 153.

say, obsessed by art, it never dares to make any attacks on the realm of reality' ('Guerrilla Theatre', p. 130). He accuses the American theatre in particular of lacking such an obsession, before outlining plans which sound remarkably like a defence of the Mime Troupe's own mode of operations. Within two years he was personally inviting audiences to take to the streets with guns. It was, nonetheless, Peter Brook's production of *US*, followed by the film version, which arguably had the greatest impact.

For Brook:

all theatre as we know it fails to touch the issues that can most powerfully concern actors and audiences at the actual moment when they meet. For common sense is outraged by the supposition that old wars in old words are more living than new ones, that ancient atrocities make civilized after-dinner fare, whilst current atrocities are not worthy of attention. (Brook, *The Shifting Point*, p. 61)

But his doubts went deeper than a conviction that theatre avoids the contemporary, that while operating in the present tense it deploys the language and methodology of the past. He feared that 'No work of art has yet made a better man', indeed that 'the more barbaric the people the more they appear to appreciate the arts' (p. 53). These last remarks are taken from what he chose to call his 'Manifesto for the Sixties', and are clearly not as absolutist as they seem, since he then set himself to create a series of productions which sought, as he explained, to 'make us lose our balance', to 'help us see better' (p. 54). Nor was he offering a critique of Shakespeare, for example, but of what the theatre had chosen to make of Shakespeare. As he observed, 'the dead man moves, we stay still . . . It is not the Shakespearean method that interests us. It is the Shakespearean ambition. The ambition to question people and society in action, in relation to human existence' (p. 55).

It was that ambition which lay behind the production of *US*. A group of twenty-five actors, working with a number of writers, spent several months exploring the Vietnamese situation. The play itself emerged from a fifteen-week rehearsal period. Brook had no interest in a Theatre of Fact, believing documentaries to be the business of other media (in that he contrasted with the German author Peter Weiss, whose 1968 play, *Discourse on Vietnam*, set out to offer what was in effect a politically committed history of Vietnam from pre-Christian times to the present). His aim was not propaganda, though he was later accused of this in the United States. He wished to confront the audience with the gap between the horrors of Vietnam and ordinary life, an objective which

culminated, at the end of the production, when ‘all pretences of play-acting ceased and actor and audience together paused, at a moment when they and Vietnam were looking one another in the face’ (Brook, *The Shifting Point*, p. 63). This moment was not offered as an accusation or reproach, though there were those who took it as such, but as an opportunity, for actors and audience alike, to question where they stood in relation to what they had seen.

There is, perhaps, a deal of naivety here, not least in the notion that the actors could lay aside all pretence of play-acting. Indeed, in that protracted period of silence (ten or fifteen minutes) the audience was itself turned into so many actors, performing for the benefit of those who surrounded them and even for themselves. What is interesting is Brook’s attempt to find some way in which subject matter as powerful as he wished to present could be communicated. Elsewhere in the piece a butterfly was supposedly set alight, inspiring a familiar British response, since for the British animals are liable to come somewhere above man in the chain of being. And though this was doubtless part of Brook’s calculation, as audiences were asked to confront the discrepancy between their immediate alarm for the insect (in fact made of paper) and their more distant concern for those dying, or immolating themselves in Vietnam (in the film version a monk in Vietnam and a Quaker in Washington are seen burning themselves to death), even for those less naive the gesture was potentially distracting as technical questions momentarily displaced moral ones. Such moments, though, were designed to create what elsewhere he has referred to as ‘an acid burn’ (*The Shifting Point*, p. 54), for he believes that it is not enough to state ideas, they have to be burnt into the memory, whether that idea is Mother Courage drawing her cart or two tramps under a tree.

The play’s ambiguous title was designed to bring home to British audiences their own responsibility for events supposedly that of others. Even after stage and film versions, however, Brook could not convince himself that theatre had the power to shift the course of history.

It is said that *The Marriage of Figaro* launched the French Revolution, but I don’t believe it. I don’t believe that plays and films and works of art operate this way. Goya’s *Disasters of War* and Picasso’s *Guernica* have always seemed the great models, yet they achieved no practical results. Perhaps we do ourselves a great disservice in pitching the question so falsely. Will this act of protest stop the killing? we ask, knowing that it won’t, yet half hoping that in a miraculous way it might. Then it doesn’t, and we feel cheated. Is the act, then, worth making? Is there a choice? (*The Shifting Point*, p. 208)

That last question is clearly rhetorical, for he believes, and says, that 'truth is a radical remedy' (p. 210), while aware that truth is not so easily recuperated. But there is a more profound problem having to do with the consequence of shifting experience from the moral to the aesthetic sphere. *US* took its place in the RSC and Peter Brook's exploration of theatrical possibilities. It followed his production of the *Marat/Sade* (1964) and preceded his radical revisioning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970). It bears the marks of his exposure to Artaud. The theatre, after all, has its own logic and procedures, its own imperatives, casuistries and honesties. And in common with the other arts it has the greatest difficulty in approaching extreme situations, though Brook himself called precisely for a theatre of extremes. Vietnam posed such a problem to the dramatist but then so, too, did the Holocaust. Where is the commanding play about the Second World War?

It is not hard to see the attraction of the Theatre of Fact. It has the virtue if not of unmediated fact, since the writer becomes an editor, then at least of apparently reducing aesthetic contamination. But it surrenders other possibilities which depend precisely on distorting the literal, on plunging down into fractured psyches. Like Peter Weiss's play it is drawn to the epic, to historicity, chronicity. Even allowing for the powerful authenticity that is a product of testimony, however, it necessarily abjures visions, dreams, nightmares, the inexpressible trauma. It denies itself the communicative power of fantasy, of a theatre in which language may work against action, character be problematic, truth be a product not of verifiable event but wilful distortion. This was a sacrifice that a playwright who grew up in Dubuque, Iowa, was not prepared to make, a man who had traded an ambition to be a professional football player for graduate training in theatre at Villanova and who, on dropping out, had been drafted to Vietnam.

When Peter Brook was staging *US* in London, creating metaphors out of burning butterflies, David Rabe was serving in a hospital support unit at Long Binh or working as a guard, clerk, driver or construction worker. For a time, like the protagonist of *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, he tried to secure a transfer to a combat unit. He was not, in other words, a reluctant soldier. As he later explained, 'like Pavlo . . . at the time I was drafted, unless you were fairly politically astute, there was no war. It didn't exist. It was about to exist in a big way, but it didn't.'<sup>3</sup> He was drafted in 1965 and served in 1966. He tried to keep a journal but failed,

<sup>3</sup> Eric Schroeder, ed., *Vietnam: We've All Been There* (Westport, CT, 1992), p. 197.

too aware of the gap between available language and the experience he wanted to describe: 'I was acutely aware, and in a way that makes writing impossible, of the existence of language as mere symbol.'<sup>4</sup> Unable precisely to capture the sound of cannon, the dust that fell from the tent-folds, 'in an utterly visceral way, I detested any lesser endeavor. The events around me, huge and continual, were the things obsessing me' (*Basic Training*, p. xvii). His attempts to write 'resulted in a kind of double vision that made everything too intense'.<sup>5</sup> To transmute disturbing events into language was to do violence to both: 'not only to see the dead and crippled, the bodies, beggars, lepers, but to replay in your skull their desperation and the implications of their pain'. This 'seemed a lunatic journey' (p. xvii). Even his letters, he has confessed, grew more prosaic and fraudulent.

Rabe was born, in 1940, in Dubuque, Iowa, of Catholic parents. Both in high school and at university (first Loras College in Iowa and then, after 1962, Villanova in Pennsylvania), he had a reputation as a budding writer, in 1963 one of his plays, *Bridges*, receiving a workshop production. He was drafted at the age of twenty-five, having flirted with the idea of becoming a conscientious objector. At the time, though, he regarded the war as a just cause. Once there, he responded ambiguously. In his invaluable study of Rabe's stage history,<sup>6</sup> Philip C. Kolin draws attention to his remark in a *Newsweek* interview in which he explained his refusal to accept a leadership role: 'I turned down the job of squad leader because I was willing to go along with the system, but not enforce it' (Kolin, *David Rabe*, p. 9). He saw no combat, though initially wishing to do so. As he explained, 'I had wanted to go on the line. After two months I changed my mind. It took about two months for a lot of things to start going sour – a lot of attitudes I went over with' (p. 9). Attached to a hospital unit, he began to see the consequences of combat: 'truckloads of human limbs and piles of green uniforms. The impact was terrific on anyone who was over there' (p. 10).

On his return, like the protagonist of Hemingway's 'Soldier's Home', he found it difficult to function: 'Coming home was traumatic, finding business going on as usual. For a while I couldn't talk to anyone who hadn't been over there' (p. 11). This was the mood he later captured in *Sticks and Bones*, in which the normality of home becomes its own kind of nightmare, an affront, a wilful blindness.

<sup>4</sup> David Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel and Sticks and Bones* (New York, 1978), p. xvi.

<sup>5</sup> David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York, 1988), p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Philip C. Kolin, *David Rabe: A Stage History and a Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (New York, 1988).

He briefly returned to graduate school before leaving again, this time to become a reporter. He had been home for six months before he thought of drawing on his Vietnam experiences. Having failed to write a journal he turned not to drama but the novel, regarding theatre as 'lightweight, all fluff and metaphor, spangle, posture, and glitter crammed into a form as rigid as any machine geared to reproduce the shape of itself endlessly'. Theatrical form, he felt, seemed artificial 'beyond what was necessary' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. xiii). Ironically, it was precisely the artifice, the self-referentiality, the metaphor that ultimately resolved his problem.

In 1970 he was in New Haven as a reporter for the *New Haven Register*. As Barnett Kellman, who later directed a version of *The Orphan*, has pointed out, at that time Bobby Seale and six other defendants were on trial for murder in that city, Yale University was temporarily closed and a so-called Revolutionary Congress was called. The year before had been marked by riots, the Manson killings in California and news of the My Lai massacre. Rabe felt himself ambivalently placed, unable to sympathise with the war but equally repelled by those who protested it without knowing of its reality. In an article on draft resisters, quoted by Kolin, he described them as having 'the rage of duped and frustrated love . . . in them, the will to vengeance of the scared child' (Kolin, *David Rabe*, p. 15). Asked to review two studies of the My Lai massacre, he produced an unlikely *mélange* of review, dream, diary and vision:

I am twenty-nine. It is Monday. May. Spring. There is a pencil. Dusk. In my dream, where I matter, I have conversations with cats, trees, stones, other people, and we agree upon things. I ask atoms what they are. I tell them that knowing what I know is not good enough. I must know what I do not know . . . There's more that I must write. More that points the way to the rim of a gun barrel. The tip of a muzzle. The tip of the lead that lies packed in powder. I'll go to the editor – tell him the point of these books is bullets. . . . I want to do a review to hurt people. The design, I'll yell, should be bullets!<sup>7</sup>

Whatever its impact on the editor of the *New Haven Register*, the piece reveals Rabe's stylistic solution to the problem of integrating his Vietnam experience into his work. He turned his back on realism.

He had begun work on his plays in 1967. An early version of what was to become *The Orphan* was produced at Villanova University, in Philadelphia, in 1968, under the title *The Bones of Birds*. *The Basic Training of Pawlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones* were largely finished by 1971, by

<sup>7</sup> Barnett Kellman, 'David Rabe: *The Orphan*, a Peripatetic Work in Progress', *Theatre Quarterly* 7,25 (Spring 1977), p. 73.

which time he had also completed a further draft of *The Orphan* and part of *Streamers*. His problem was that, on his return to America, he found himself at first in a society that seemed to have no interest in Vietnam ('Everybody seemed totally removed from the war') and then in one in which the reality of the war disappeared in the issue of the war rather than its reality ('People were interested in simplifications, in the *debate* about the war rather than in the experience of the war itself') (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 193). The fact was that he had no interest in writing a polemical work. As he explained in 1973:

The writing I did in college was dominated by an urge to interpret the world to itself, to give the world a sermon that would bring it back to its truest self, for I thought then (and I did indeed believe it) that the history and exact nature of both mankind and the world were known, universal, eternal. I no longer write from that urge (though I'm sure some of it lingers) but try to start instead from the wish to discover. (*Basic Training*, p. xi)

Though his reputation was, for many years, based on what came to be known as his Vietnam trilogy, Rabe was not a writer of protest plays, not a polemicist rallying people to the cause in the way that R.G. Davis had proposed. His was not guerilla theatre, except in so far as he waged war on ignorance and denial. The plays he wrote were attempts to understand, to find a form and a language in which he could explore an experience that he had found impossible to penetrate or express when its reality was part of his daily life.

*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, effectively the first of not a trilogy but a quartet of plays inspired by his experience of the war and its aftermath, and which was initially rejected by many of America's regional and experimental theatres, though going on to win an Obie Award, concerns the induction of a young man into the army and his brief time in Vietnam. It is not realistic, though the documentary impulse was a powerful presence in the first act which went into rehearsal at Joe Papp's Public Theatre, not least because Rabe still felt the pressure to report that had led him to attempt a journal back in Vietnam. At first Papp urged him to break down the play's linear nature. Rabe resisted, partly, he has explained, because he had already finished a draft of *The Orphan*, which dealt in fantasy and theatricality, and hence felt the need for *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* to sink its roots more securely into realism: 'It would be the base from which I moved outward with other work. I felt *Pavlo*, the first written, had to be a play that was primarily about people. Therefore I wanted it done in the theatrical form in which dramatic characters had the best chance of appearing as simply people'

(*Basic Training*, pp. xiv–xv). In the course of rehearsals, however, he came to accept the logic of Papp's suggestions, the impressionism of the second act infiltrating the first, the stylistic gulf being closed.

The set is described as a space whose floor consists of slats laid out, appropriately, with a military precision. It is dominated by the drill sergeant's tower, from which he instructs the recruits. It is 'stark and realistic' (*Basic Training*, p. 7), an unassailable fact, in contrast to action which is, at times, dreamlike, surreal. In this space, itself a kind of stage, all of whose elements are to have 'some military tone to them, some echo of basic training' (p. 7), private and public dramas are enacted. The army is, in effect, teaching Pavlo and the other recruits to act. He is trained in voice, language, movement. He is costumed and given a part to play in a drama not of his own devising. The theatricality that Rabe had initially resisted becomes a central mechanism.

Though the play was carefully constructed, and then reconstructed in rehearsal, it gives the impression of feelings and perceptions even now not fully under control. Discipline and anarchy do battle. Violence is acted out but its meaning remains in some sense opaque to its central character, Pavlo. He is no less bemused by the world in which he moves than is the ordered country which unleashes, and is the victim of, disorder. The play is a montage of moments which never quite come together to form a coherent picture, at least not for the man who struggles to make sense of such alien experiences. He is like Saul Bellow's dangling man, welcoming regimentation as a relief from alienation. He looks for meaning in the role he is given, but finds none as the world disintegrates around him. A fellow soldier is dismantled, like Nathanael West's Lemuel Pitkin, losing limbs and his will to live. Pavlo himself looks for a coherence in his life that never comes. He exists in a space that can be invaded at any moment by elements over which he has no control. Never marching to a different drummer, he is an agent and not a principal. He fails to forge relationships with others which go beyond immediate and self-limiting physical needs. He has no private system of morality to counterpose to the contingency of the world through which he moves. Life, for him, is no more than a defence of the self, with no perception of what that self might be.

Pavlo Hummel himself appears to be an innocent, exposed to the brutalities and injustices of the world, a Woyzeck, wandering through an alien world, though his ignorance of Vietnam was shared by Rabe at the time of his drafting: 'Like in this scene fairly early in *Pavlo*, I remember a sergeant talking about Vietnam, and we were all saying, "What?

Where? What's he talking about?"' (Schroeder, ed., *Vietnam*, p. 198). But Pavlo's innocence is closer to naivety. As his brother suggests, he is 'weird . . . a . . . myth-maker . . . a goddamn cartoon' (*Basic Training*, pp. 68–9). He lies, steals, is incompetent, contemptuous of others. There is, in other words, no pure America corrupted by war in this play, no true innocence to be violated. Pavlo is an orphan estranged from his mother, incapable of making relationships. The army offers him the companionship he has failed to find elsewhere, a role that has evaded him, a myth he can inhabit. But it also represents the chance of extinction for which his mother believes him to be searching.

Rabe himself has said that, 'if the character of Pavlo Hummel does not have a certain eagerness and wide-eyed spontaneity, along with a true, real and complete inability to grasp the implications of what he does, the play will not work as it can. Pavlo is in fact lost. He has, for a long time, no idea that he is lost. His own perceptions define the world' (*Basic Training*, p. 110). In one sense, indeed, it is tempting to say that Vietnam is almost an irrelevance. Certainly, taken outside the immediate context of the 1970s and read through the caustic ironies of Rabe's later play, *Hurlyburly*, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* seems to offer a portrait not just of a country deformed by war but an America deeply at odds with itself, a society in which the shaping order of myth seems preferable to the anarchy which otherwise seems to prevail. Certainly here, and in his later plays, loss seems a central theme, as if something had disappeared from America long before the Vietnam war: some cohesiveness, some sense of meaning beyond self-gratification.

Pavlo Hummel is an extreme case but he shares with his culture an attraction for fantasy and a consoling sense of community, less real than an expression of need. His own arrogant chauvinism has its reflection in the wider society, with its misogyny and its racism. Seen thus, Vietnam merely acts as a special case, a metaphor for a deeper sense of alienation and estrangement. At the same time, war raises the stakes. Under its pressure both society and the individual are forced to define themselves.

The play runs time backwards, in so far as it starts with Hummel's death. He is killed, it later transpires, by a fellow soldier in a Vietnamese brothel. From the beginning, therefore, order is inverted, abstract principles subordinated to more basic instincts. He then springs back to life, summoned by Ardell, a black soldier, 'his uniform strangely unreal', as well it might be since he drifts in and out of the action, a mentor, chorus, phantasm. He is a guide, a commentator, simultaneously real and a

product of myth, an angel of death summoned into existence by Pavlo's need. He is a device for pulling together discrete incidents, as are the military drills which punctuate the action.

The second act is more brutally direct than the first. Sergeant Brisbey, who has lost both legs and an arm to a landmine, begs Pavlo to kill him. A young private is tortured to death by Viet Cong who remind him that American bombers had killed their own friends. Pavlo shoots a Vietnamese farmer and is himself knifed. He learns certain truths: 'we tear. We rip apart . . . we tear' (*Basic Training*, p. 97). As Ardell insists, 'the knowledge comin', baby. I'm talkin' about what your kidney know, not your fuckin' fool's head . . . We melt; we tear and rip apart' (p. 96). Pavlo learns his own vulnerability and that of others but still, and in contradiction, clings to the idea of his own final invulnerability, to the belief that killing can neutralise killing. He never learns the truth that Ardell offers: 'When you shot into his head, you hit into your own head, fool!' (p. 101). As Rabe has said, 'It is Pavlo's body that changes. His physical efficiency, even his mental efficiency increases, but insight never comes . . . he will learn only that he is lost, not how, why, or even where. His talent is for leaping into the fire' (*Basic Training*, p. 110). And not him alone, in that these comments might be extended to America.

But the play is not primarily offered as such an indictment. This is not a play that explores political motives. It does not offer an indictment beyond that which it directs at those who choose to be blind to events and the meaning of those events. As Pavlo's body is carried to be laid in an aluminium coffin, Ardell intones an epitaph that underscores not so much Pavlo's failure of understanding as that of those back in America, from his mother and brother to his one-time girlfriend, Joanna:

Finally he get shipped home, and his mother cry a lot, and his brother get so damn depressed about it all. And Joanna, she read his name in the paper, she let out this little gasp and say to her husband across the table, 'Jesus, Jimmy, I used to go with that boy. Oh, damn that war, why can't we have peace? I think I'll call his mother.' Ain't it some kind of world? . . . what you think of the cause? What you think of gettin' your ass blown clean off a freedom's frontier? . . . And what you think a all the 'folks back home', sayin' you a victim . . . you a animal . . . you a fool? (*Basic Training*, p. 107)

The play ends with the coffin, on an empty stage, 'in real light' (p. 109). That reality, though, is never apparent to Pavlo.

Ardell's final speech reflected Rabe's own position. As he has said,

Even though the plays were part of a political movement, in them I was trying to express what I thought. I was saying: You can do what you want about the

war. But don't lie about it. Don't pretend that it's good, or it becomes uglier than it is. Don't pretend it's heroic. Don't pretend that everybody who goes over there is a monster or a hero. Most of the kids didn't know anything about what was going on. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 204)

Pavlo's unawareness was that of many of those who went to Vietnam and even more of those who stayed behind.

*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* is about the difficulty of understanding the world, of finding a language that can explain it, of knowing how other people's lives connect with our own, of relating events to the meaning of those events, of acknowledging our power to act and our responsibility for so acting. It is a play about Vietnam but, as *Hurlyburly* would show, estrangement, alienation and a callous disregard for the other were not a product of a distant war. Indeed, looking back from the late 1980s, Rabe remarked that, 'There was in those plays a social consciousness of some kind. But . . . I think the plays refuse to be as simple as the social necessities would dictate. I guess I don't think that David Mamet would be any bleaker in his view of social development than I am' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 204).

Rabe finished the first draft of the play in 1968, the year of the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the year, in other words, that Americans became aware that the war could be lost, as Viet Cong troops invaded the embassy compound in Saigon. It was the year before Lieutenant Calley and his company undermined the idealistic rhetoric applied to the war by slaughtering men, women and children at My Lai, though Rabe was later anxious to insist that the play, in origin, had preceded these events. But though Rabe's play was not a protest work contemporary audiences would unavoidably have experienced it through their awareness of those unfolding events.

*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* was staged at the Public Theatre in 1971. Six months later his second play, *Sticks and Bones*, also opened at the Public, though an earlier draft had been staged at Villanova in 1969. It transferred to Broadway in March of the following year. This is a play that also comes, in part, out of Rabe's own bafflement at the American response to Vietnam. Though his tour was relatively uneventful, on his return, after a brief period, he began to be disturbed by the response of those around him: 'it was like going to Mars. Because what you walked into was this unbelievable incomprehension and indifference that you just simply couldn't fathom. You thought you were going home, and you came back to something else' (Schroeder, ed., *Vietnam*, p. 201).

*Sticks and Bones* is an account of the return of a Vietnam veteran.

Blinded in the war, he comes back to a family that is conventional to the point of parody. Indeed, the characters are based on figures from a popular radio and television comedy which ran for twenty years.

Desperate to sustain their own version of normality, they try to ignore his blindness, his bizarre behaviour and what they take to be the virus of an alien experience. Against the anarchy that enters their home they try to pitch the trivia of daily routine, a *Saturday Evening Post* version of the American way. Indeed we are told that the house in which the action is set seems to 'belong in the gloss of an advertisement'. It is, according to the stage directions, the 'family home' (*Basic Training*, p. 120), but both those terms prove problematic as an American family falls apart and home is the site of anxiety, violence and callousness. Yet a surface equanimity is maintained. Nothing is too painful that it cannot be eased away by a bowl of ice cream and hot fudge or exorcised by religion. But if this family prays together it manifestly does not stay together. It is blown apart by the inconvenient presence of a family member who no longer recognises his role, who intrudes ideas, values and anxieties at odds with a bland existence, and whose language leads them into depths they would rather not probe. In the end their desire to blot him out is taken to its logical conclusion as they encourage his suicide.

In one sense there is something familiar about this portrait of a family destroying itself, with distant echoes of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and closer ones from Albee's *The American Dream*. The parents in this play, as in Albee's, reject their son because he fails any longer to give satisfaction, to conform to the model of behaviour they expect. He is, as Rabe has indicated, 'no longer lovable', so they no longer love him. He damages their self-image as a happy family, denies those aspects of themselves that they believe to be of value. He undermines the very idea of the family itself, a central icon of their society and the origin of their belief that role and personal meaning are directly related.

Beyond O'Neill and Albee, there appears to be a reference to another classic play that takes the family as a central icon, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. David Rabe has acknowledged his admiration for Miller, particularly for *After the Fall* and *A View from the Bridge*, citing his moral complexity, rather than his technique or his dramatic construction. In fact, though, it is tempting to see something of the fluidity of construction of *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* as coming precisely from *After the Fall*. But *Sticks and Bones*, perhaps, takes us back to his earlier classic, for here is a play about a family with two sons, one an empty-headed hedonist, the other anguished, with a touch of the poet. Here, too, as in

Miller's play, is a drama in which a version of the American dream is exposed under the pressure of needs that cannot be fully acknowledged, in the face of realities so at odds with familiar pieties. Indeed, Harriet is given a speech reminiscent of Linda Loman's when she says, 'Ohh, it's so good to hear men's voices in the house again, my two favorite men in all the world – it's what I live for really' (*Basic Training*, p. 202). ('It was so thrilling to see them leaving together. I can't get over the smell of shaving lotion in this house!'<sup>8</sup>) Linda tries to maintain a facade, to deny her fear, but where she has resources of her own and is motivated by love, in Rabe's play love is no more than a word. Harriet has no substance. She builds a wall of denial and calls it a home. Ozzie, meanwhile, has something of Willy Loman's desire to leave his mark on the world, to find some material correlative for his need for personal meaning: 'I keep having this notion of wanting some . . . thing . . . some material thing, and I've built it. And then there's this feeling I'm of value, that I'm on my way . . . and I'm going to come to something eventually, some kind of an achievement' (*Basic Training*, p. 167).

If Miller was an influence then so, too, was Ionesco, whose use of language Rabe found compelling. As in *The Bald Prima Donna*, words are detached from context and lexical function, language is a shield against meaning. The family exchange banalities in a parody of sociality ('Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad/ Hi, Rick!/ Hi, Mom./ Hi, Rick./ Hi, Dad' (*Basic Training*, p. 147). As in the work of Ionesco and Albee, everything is made explicit. Characters describe their feelings, often at length. Yet little of this communicates. Indeed, part of the play's effect comes from the disjunction between what is said and how the other characters respond. As Rabe remarks in an Author's Note, 'David throws a yelling, screaming tantrum over his feelings of isolation and Harriet confidently, cheerfully offers Ezy Sleep sleeping pills in full faith that this will solve his problem. The actors,' he instructs, 'must not physically ignore things . . . The point is not that they do not physically see or hear, but that they psychologically ignore' (p. 225). Only by ignoring what they see, as David reveals the horrors he has experienced and recalls the Vietnamese girl he had loved and abandoned, can they sustain their sense of the world.

The play begins with a framing scene. On a dark stage a number of slides are projected. The slides include pictures of Ozzie and Harriet at the age of eight or nine. In the darkness a man, a woman and two children comment on the photographs, the last two clearly being Ozzie's

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Miller, *The Portable Arthur Miller* (New York, 1995), p. 72.

grandchildren. We learn that Ozzie's brother had died of scarlet fever, an intrusion of death never mentioned in the rest of the play. The woman then comments on another slide, identifying David as though he were not known to her. The implication is that those hidden in the darkness are Rick (David's younger brother) and his wife and children, the next generation American family. The slide of David, in effect a flash forward to the final moment of the play, shows him with 'a stricken look'. This is followed by another, which animates into the first scene of a play in which Rick spends much of his time taking photographs (capturing a reality in which he does not wish to involve himself) and a television set flickers upstage, projecting its images. The implication is that images on a screen, photographs, can never express the reality of the experiences or the people they purport to present. The picture of David is interpreted by one of the children as 'somebody sick'. It takes the length of the play to understand what that 'sickness' consists of.

At the beginning of the play Harriet and Ozzie exchange sentimental memories of the son who is now to return to them, memories, though, tainted with menace (he had locked himself in an icebox and fallen from a tree), and anything but reassuring ('He was a mean . . . foul-tempered little baby' (p. 126)). Ozzie's response to the return of his son is to become defensive about his own failure to serve in the military, and to boast about his own exploits, achievements no more significant than outrunning a bowling ball or beating a friend in a race. In other words, the fear, anxiety, self-regard that are to emerge later in the play are all present in the first minutes.

Rabe has denied any influence from Pinter while, curiously, indicating that 'I tried to graft certain things on because he was popular and his techniques are very seductive' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 197). Failing to get his plays produced, Rabe had, pragmatically, studied the techniques of those who did, and it is certainly very tempting to see more than an echo of Pinter in this homecoming. A door opens and a man enters, who by his very presence threatens an equanimity which is itself illusory. Violence is, for the most part, immanent rather than enacted, though David strikes out with his white stick, as in *The Caretaker*, for example, a knife is wielded though not used. As in Pinter's work, power shifts between the characters who, on occasion, are permitted extended speeches, oblique accounts of a past itself compacted with menace.

Here, a knock at the door heralds the entrance of David and a sergeant major, the latter offering a Pinteresque blend of politeness and aggression as he delivers David like an express package. Indeed, his

language is that of a delivery man: 'I got trucks out there backed up for blocks. Other boys I got to get on to Chicago, and some of them to Denver and Cleveland, Reno, New Orleans, Boston, Trenton, Watts, Atlanta . . . their backs broken, their brains jellied, their insides turned into garbage . . . I got deliveries to make all across this country' (*Basic Training*, pp. 131–2). Harriet responds to the shock of seeing her blind son by insisting that his blindness is no more than a product of his tiredness following a long trip. She offers cake and coffee. Ricky takes a photograph. But someone else comes through the door with David, a Vietnamese girl, invisible to Harriet and the others, the girl whom David carries in his mind and whom he reproaches himself for abandoning.

The family find it more difficult to accept that David has had a liaison with a Vietnamese woman than that he is blind or has been involved in extremes of violence (interestingly, in his introduction to the play Rabe stresses the depth of Vietnamese racism, underlining the degree to which the play is more than an attack on American attitudes). For him, she is the source of a poetry in his life: 'there was this girl with hands and hair like wings. There were candles above the net of gauze under which we lay. Lizards. Cannon could be heard. A girl to weigh no more than dust' (pp. 143–4). A stage direction indicates that 'the poetry is like a thing possessing him' (p. 144). It is what lifts him above the banality of his home and the horrors of the war. For his parents, however, the thought of such miscegenation is an affront, a threat to their notions of normality. They can only deal with it by reconstituting it linguistically. Where David inhabits poetry they inhabit prose. By using a reductive language they accommodate the threat, transforming the relationship into nothing more than a soldier's response to biological need: 'what you mean is you whored around a lot . . . You banged some whores . . . had some intercourse . . . you shackled up with. I mean hit on . . . Dicked . . . you pronged it, right? . . . I mean it's like going to the bathroom. All glands and secretions . . . You screwed it. A yellow whore . . . You screwed some yellow fucking whore!' (p. 144). Beyond the family need to deny what threatens them lies an assertion of the extent to which language constructs the reality it purports to describe. As Rabe has said, 'the fundamental conflict is about how to talk about experience. The family want to use clichés. David wants to use poetry. The clichés are reductive and poetry is expansive' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 205).

The war itself, of course, was fought on the linguistic no less than the military level, with an array of pejorative terms for an enemy that could thus be eliminated with fewer moral qualms. But in some ways this was

slightly beside the point. Indeed, for Rabe, the immediate realities of Vietnam made the play more difficult to stage. It had, he pointed out, been staged first (at least in an early version) at Villanova in 1969, before My Lai. Events had moved on. Thus, speaking of Jeff Bleckner's Public Theatre production, he observed that,

maybe nobody during that period could have made it work the way I think it should. I think it should be made really, really funny – grotesque and funny in an aggressive way. At the time, audience and actors wanted to participate in the moral issues and so the theatrical nature of the piece couldn't quite emerge. The cartoonish, grotesque and poetic have to collide in a theatrical way (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 199).

The problem became even greater when CBS television recorded the play. Its transmission was scheduled for a few weeks after the return of prisoners of war. Rabe himself was afraid that this special circumstance, accompanied by an outburst of patriotism, might make it difficult to understand the state of mind of the returned veteran. Nonetheless he was eager to proceed. CBS, however, withdrew and the play was not transmitted as scheduled.

The fact is that *Sticks and Bones*, despite its ostensible subject matter, is not simply concerned with Vietnam. Interestingly, Joe Papp himself once remarked that, 'the actors treated it as a serious play. They all still think that it's a play about Vietnam.'<sup>9</sup> As if to confirm this, Rabe responded to an unauthorised Russian production of his play, under the title *As Brother is to Brother*, by writing to the director to deny their interpretation of the play as an account of a specifically American dilemma:

The play is about you and your people, or it is about nothing. If you do not find yourself in it, either you lie or it does. If you find only the United States in it, then you fail to see it or fail to see yourselves . . . If I lived in Russia, I would have written it about Russia, but I live here. There is little that I like or dislike about this country that I do not find in myself. (Little, *Enter Joseph Papp*, p. 203)

That last remark is especially interesting in that it proposes an ambivalence which transcends an analysis of the play that turns either on the notion that it is an anti-war play, or the idea that it offers a simple satire of American values of the kind evident in Albee's *The American Dream*. Vietnam does lie at its centre. We are offered a brutally direct description of the murder of two people and the killing of a child in the womb. David resists his mother's suggestion that he should 'just be happy' (*Basic*

<sup>9</sup> Stuart W. Little, *Enter Joseph Papp: In Search of a New American Theater* (New York, 1974), p. 150.

*Training*, p. 163), by asking whether it should be possible to drown an old man in a ditch and then 'head on home to go in and out of doors and drive cars and sing sometimes' (p. 163), the last a reference to his brother. His final observation in this speech, however, though relating directly to this ironic contrast, leads the play in another direction, Vietnam becoming an image for a more profound alienation. For if the suffering of others never really cuts us to the quick, if we can pass on, then 'We are hoboos! We make signs in the dark. You know yours. I understand my own. We share . . . coffee' (p. 163).

This is a key speech in a play that takes the Vietnam experience as a spring-board, a play about egotism, about the space between people, about loss, about the gap between our actions and the responsibility that we are prepared to accept for those actions, about the desire for a coherent and reassuring world, about the authority of language, the ambivalence of motives, the fragility of memory, the tenuousness of relationships, the power of myth, the fear of the new, the urgency with which we deny what disturbs us. When Harriet is faced with the fact of David's Vietnamese lover, she vomits; Ozzie, described as 'like a man in deep water looking for something to keep him afloat' (p. 145), seizes a pack of cigarettes and speaks in the language of the commercials which have helped to define his notion of reality ('The filter's granulated. It's an off-product of corn husks. I light up – I feel I'm on a ship at sea' (pp. 145–6). He retreats from the painful business of relationships into a world of images, signs with no signifiers.

A similar occlusion of meaning is apparent when David has a film projected for the family, a film that in fact shows nothing at all. Their situation, thus gathered together, sharing nothing and understanding nothing of one another, is offered as an image of their lives. As David remarks, he is 'a blind man in a room . . . in a house in the dark, raising nothing in a gesture of no meaning toward two voices who are not speaking . . . of a certain . . . incredible . . . connection!' (p. 162). Connection is the key. It is the principal absence in a play in which absence (the absence of Zung, the Vietnamese girl, of love, concern, hope) is tangible. For Ozzie, that absence extends to himself: 'There's no evidence in the world of me, no sign or trace, as if everything I've ever done were no more than smoke. My life has closed over me like water' (p. 193). He is 'lonely', void, unable to reach out, unconvinced that to do so will give him what he has lost.

Not only is there no connection between the members of the family, there is no connection between individuals and their own self-image,

their own remembered youth. Thus we discover that there was a time when Ozzie's life had been suffused with poetry, when, still young, he was confident about his own future and not yet defined by social role ('I was nobody's goddamn father and nobody's goddamn husband! I was myself!' (p. 150)). Those days have gone. This is now a world which lacks any connective tissue. Vietnam is simply a reminder of what appears a more fundamental truth.

Rabe has said of the play that 'I think it is about the war, I think it isn't about the war. It's certainly about coming home from the war, and it certainly makes a political statement about materialistic oblivion in relation to carnage' (Schroeder, ed., *Vietnam*, p. 207). To his mind, however, it was also about complicity, the complicity of a society that closes its eyes to what is done in its name, and the complicity of the audience who he calculates will find David as 'unreasonable' as do his family and hence endorse the logic that leads to his death. Beyond that, he acknowledges of himself that, 'I live my life, and I haven't taken the time to understand or do anything about those things that I should' (Schroeder, ed., *Vietnam*, p. 208). If David's invitation to join him in his anarchic vision of the world is a demand that can only be resisted, then the amnesia desperately chosen by those wishing to shore up their version of the real is also a moral, social and psychological cul-de-sac.

*Sticks and Bones* was, for the most part, critically well reviewed and was transferred to Broadway, where it had a respectable run (225 performances) but lost 1,000 dollars a performance, while winning a Tony Award. Together with *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, however, it served to place David Rabe at the centre of attention. It was also the recipient of a Tony Award to add to those awards earned by *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*.

His next play, however, and the third part of the trilogy, *The Orphan* (1974), was not a success. A complex play, which incorporated the Greek tragedy of Orestes, Electra and Iphigenia, the Charles Manson killings and My Lai, it prompted preview audiences to walk out. As Stuart W. Little has pointed out, astonishingly Joe Papp chose to enclose an explanation of the play in the opening-night programme:

David Rabe's utilization of primitive Greek myth interwoven with contemporary bloodletting does call upon the audience's familiarity with the *Oresteia* in all its versions, the Manson affair, drug culture, and My Lai – not to mention *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones*, the remaining two-thirds of the Rabe trilogy. But the knowledge, I venture to say, is not an essential requirement for responding to the work. (*Enter Joseph Papp*, pp. 256–7)

It was a curiously contradictory statement and not improved as it went on to explain that to this primal soup should be added science and religion, while Rabe, the writer, was himself complicit in the crimes of which he accused others:

at the very centre of the storm he has created is the playwright – not above it, not immune to it, but a part of it. He bears the same lash as those around him. We find him in every character in the play: in one Clytemnestra, desperately wanting to be heard; in the other, burning for revenge. In the innocent victim, Iphigenia. In the wrath of Apollo – in the deceit of Apollo. In the anguished cry of handless, tongueless and finally cremated Electra. Even in Agamemnon and in the crushed heart of Aegisthus. We find him in the primitive murders of My Lai and in the casual and ‘natural’ savagery of the Manson tribe. In Orestes we see him seeking diversions, and ending up with becoming one of the many – wiping out his differences, his own humanity. And finally we find him murdering, like everybody else, and then with great confusion hanging himself, just as he cuts his wrists in *Sticks and Bones* and as he ends up in a coffin in *Paulo Hummel*. (Little, *Enter Joseph Papp*, pp. 256–7)

I quote this at length because it is in fact a remarkably astute, if somewhat gnomic, analysis of the play and of Rabe’s own relationship to it. But it is not difficult to imagine the despair it must have created in the minds of those who read it before the curtain rose on *The Orphan*. When the curtain fell, and despite Papp’s efforts to elucidate, the critics remained baffled. Rabe’s own account of the play broadens it out, in particular de-emphasising the Vietnam reference: ‘I just used the myth [of Agamemnon] . . . but what concerned me was certain things about generations, about idealism and the lack of it, about the betrayal of the young by the old, and then the vengeance of the young on the old. It’s basic to all families’ (Schroeder, ed., *Vietnam*, pp. 54–5).

In 1967, fresh back from his tour of duty in Vietnam, Rabe had seen an Off-Broadway production of *Iphigenia at Aulis*. The following year he saw, and was impressed by, the Open Theatre’s production of *The Serpent*, a play which links biblical stories with the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. In the same year the Living Theatre staged *Paradise Now*, which integrated events in Vietnam into a series of mythic rites drawn from the Cabbala, Tantric and Hasidic teaching and the *I Ching*, while the Performance Group staged *Dionysus in 69*, their version of *The Bacchae*. In other words Rabe’s play was one of a number which chose to explore the fast-congealing myths of the contemporary world by reference to classical myths. But where the Open Theatre and the Performance Group stressed the physicality of

the actors, who were a primary focus of their activities as avant-garde groups moving towards political commitment out of a commitment to avant-garde aesthetics, Rabe presented a play which was not merely complex but, at least in the Public Theatre production, static and declamatory.

Though the play would continue to evolve in subsequent productions (the best account of these changes being that offered by Barnett Kellman in *Theatre Quarterly*, Spring 1977), it never achieved the impact of his other work, though the dominant image called for by the text (a large rope cargo net) proved a powerful icon in a play in part about those trapped in a net of fate, paranoia and betrayal. As Rabe had observed in an article about the student generation: 'they are people come together because they have experienced things in this country for which they have no other name than betrayal . . . The draft . . . when it came to get them told them that their precious, private, holy lives were not their own to be directed . . . as they had believed' (Kellman, 'David Rabe', p. 88). That was a perception carried forward, though in a rather different sense, in his later play, *Streamers* (1976), which won him a New York Drama Critics Award.

But before that would come another work, which stepped aside from the question of Vietnam, while offering an equally bleak portrait of an America in which characters are traumatised by experience and unable to offer one another the consolation they seek. *In the Boom Boom Room*, originally written and performed at Villanova University in 1972, opened at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Centre in November of the following year. It went through various revisions, eventually returning to its original two-act version for a 1980s Off-Broadway production.

A critic was later to refer to David Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* as a disco *Dance of Death*. It is a description that could equally well be applied to a play, partly set in a go-go bar, in which men and women meet across an emotional divide, circling one another warily, baffled by their radically different desires. The needs that seem to bring them together are the very ones that force them apart. These are damaged people, disabled by experience, deeply alienated from one another and themselves. Ironically, in this, his first play not to draw on his Vietnam experience, Rabe has chosen to stress the extent to which the play was in part a reflection of that same 'coming home' to be found at the heart of *Sticks and Bones*. 'I spent a lot of time in those bars. There was a vibe . . . that was similar to being over there. A kind of sexual edge, danger'

(Schroeder, ed., *Vietnam*, p. 209). Elsewhere he has said that 'there was the same sense of proximate violence and the same sense of indiscriminate behavior being acceptable'.<sup>10</sup>

The world of *In the Boom Boom Room*, he suggested, illuminates the real nature of the other plays. That tension, though, is now accommodated to other experiences, and when a revival played simultaneously with *Hurlyburly* in New York a connection between the two was seen by some critics, as the fraught relationship between the genders was explored and an incipient violence, unconnected with the war, exposed. Vietnam, it seemed, was evidence of a more fundamental fracture in the psyche, a deeper schism in the culture. Thus, in *In the Boom Boom Room* Chrissy, the protagonist, struggles to survive in a psychotic environment – male-dominated, coercive, exploitative, destructive – without absorbing its values. Her friend, Susan, meanwhile, jilted by her high school boyfriend, shoots him, learning thereby how easily 'they fall down'. It is in this context that Chrissy tries to discover some other basis on which to relate to those who see her only in the most reductive way.

At the time, Rabe saw the play as very personal, an attempt to close the distance between himself and women, an objective which might equally have applied to the later *Hurlyburly*. However, that space, in terms of the play's characters, never closes and it is that irony which, retrospectively, colours the play. The go-go cage in which Chrissy performs, simultaneously implies entrapment and accessibility, the former in the end more powerfully symbolic. Like the peep show in Sam Shepard and Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas*, it offers the illusion of an intimacy that is simultaneously denied. Indeed, even beyond the boundaries of the Boom Boom Room, outside the limits of the cage, the characters are unable to bridge the gulf between them.

Chrissy is a young, naive woman working in a go-go bar where the music is 'loud' and 'harsh' and the lights are 'tawdry' and 'cruel', all terms that characterise the world she inhabits without understanding. Indeed, in a note about the set Rabe insists that the bar itself is to be a metaphor. It is a place people pass through, drawn by their desperation, lured by an intimacy that is no less tawdry than the lighting, no less factitious than the performances staged for their benefit.

Chrissy is the butt of a joke which she never understands, believing that the men who pass through her life crave lasting relationships and love. She trades sex for a communication that is never established. It is

<sup>10</sup> Janet Brown, *Taking Center Stage: Feminism in Contemporary US Drama* (Metuchen, NJ, 1991), pp. 78–9.

the price that she assumes must be paid for comfort and reassurance. As she says, 'I just keep thinkin' what if they didn't want me for anything? . . . I mean, if they want me for that, at least they want me for something.'<sup>11</sup> Like Blanche in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, she fears that she is only real to them when they are making love to her. But love, in *In the Boom Boom Room*, is non-transitive. Nothing communicates except a brute desire on the one hand and a baffled need on the other. In the past, meanwhile, lies a vague memory of deeper trauma, sexual assault by her own father, who now comes back to haunt her. Nor are the men less vulnerable in their own way. They are subject to feelings they can neither master nor understand. Those who wander in and out of her life are mentally damaged, racist, sexually ambivalent, as desperate, indeed, in their way, as is she.

There is a brittle comedy to *In the Boom Boom Room* at odds with this account, an energy that seems to deny the downward spiral of the action as Chrissy, who had hopes of moving on from Philadelphia to New York, and who took pride in not descending to nude dancing, arrives in the city of her dreams, but only to perform the topless dances she despises. But that energy is deceptive. It amounts to no more than the advice given to her by a gay friend: 'I am personally in despair . . . But isn't that the *sine qua non* of our time, that out of our absurdity, we must create – must we not – by our wit and cunning, the delight of our survival? If our lives are a joke of such perfection as to be a triumph of ridiculousness, then I say, "Enjoy the joke!"' (*In the Boom Boom Room*, p. 60). For him, however, lonely and increasingly desperate, that means dressing up in a rabbit suit, scattering himself with glitter to attract those who are no longer drawn to him for his attractiveness; for her, it means surviving with the memory of abuse and submitting to violence from those to whom she turns for consolation.

The play ends with her dancing, isolated in a pool of light, degraded, alone, the object of lust but not love. She is, admittedly, still dancing, as though she had not given up on her hopes, but it is clear that whatever it is that she waits for will never come, just as Vladimir and Estragon continued to perform their vaudeville act and Blanche DuBois her role as coquette, *femme fatale*, Southern belle, in the face of defeat and absurdity. It is not so much that they choose to live with the irony but that they have no alternative. Chrissy has tried to protect herself against others by denying her natural humanity: 'I don't wanna be hard, but if that's how

<sup>11</sup> David Rabe, *In the Boom Boom Room* (London, 1986), p.38.

you gotta be, I'm gonna do it. Gonna be a hammer and everybody else is nails in a world of wood' (*In the Boom Boom Room*, p. 103). In so far as she succeeds, however, she defeats absurdity only by succumbing to it, reduces her vulnerability but at the price of the loneliness she is anxious to neutralise. Desperate for meaning, she turns to astrology, to career, to love, but the consolation of meaning is no more available than any of the other consolations she seeks.

There is something disturbing, however, in the portrait that Rabe draws of Chrissy, as there would be of the women characters in his later play *Hurlyburly*. If there is a model for her it is tempting to find it in Marilyn Monroe, herself the victim of abuse as child and adult, ostensibly naive and yet required to be a symbol of sexual availability. There was, however, more to Monroe than the myth permits. The worry in *In the Boom Boom Room* is that the writer comes close to being as reductive in his treatment of Chrissy as the men he creates. Her naivety is total, her sexual pliancy assumed. She is no more than she appears to be. She undresses in front of men but also, therefore, in front of the audience. In part this is an expression of her obliviousness to the implications of her actions, an aspect of her character. It may also be a conscious attempt to make the audience complicit in the objectification of women that is an aspect of the play's concern. But the difficulty of staging a play about the uses to which people put one another, the exploitative nature of relationships, the reduction of sexuality to commodity value, without in turn being exploitative and reductive, is considerable and it is not clear that Rabe entirely succeeds in avoiding this pitfall.

Not the least remarkable aspect of David Rabe's career is the degree to which the composition of his early plays overlapped. Within a year of returning from Vietnam he was trying out ideas, jotting down lines of dialogue or entire scenes. Like a chess master playing an exhibition match, he butterflyed from one text to another. One such was the work that was eventually to become *Streamers*. He later claimed that he effectively wrote it in a single day but that that day was spread out over a period of seven or eight years.

At first this was a 'mood piece', written in three hours. That was essentially what later became the first act of the finished play, though without the incident which initiates it, the cutting of his wrist by an enlisted man desperate to leave the army. That incident was added when Rabe returned to the play three years later, by which time it had become a substantial one-act drama. It was a further three or four years, however,

before he completed it and it was staged at the Long Wharf Theatre, under the direction of Mike Nichols, in January 1976, before moving to Lincoln Centre, three months later, where it won the New York Drama Critics Award for Best Play.

*Streamers* is set in a cadre room of an American military base. President Johnson is in the White House and in the background is a distant war, but this is only one of the facts that threatens to disturb the equanimity of those who serve their time serving their country. In this room are the bunks of three men: Billy, a twenty-four-year-old white college graduate from Wisconsin who had been drafted when he dropped out of graduate school, Roger, an educated young black man from the ghetto and Richie, an enlisted man from a well-to-do background. There is an easy camaraderie between the three men, though Richie disturbs this male bonding by affecting an effeminate manner. Unsure whether this is anything more than an ironic pose, a sustained joke at their expense, the other two prefer not to allow anything into their minds that might disturb what is almost a family unit.

The room is their 'home', but they can no more protect their privacy than they can determine their lives, for into this room intrude a number of people, each, in different ways, constituting a threat. But the fact is that the threat is already on the inside. Whether they have enlisted or been drafted, their existence seems to have no purpose beyond its self-justifying routines. They have brought with them the insecurities, the self-doubts, the anxieties and confusions of civilian life. Billy's father had abandoned the family. He recalls a youth in which a midwestern equanimity had been shattered by acts of random violence. Wanting to be a priest who could 'take away what hurt' people, he had run with a gang who beat up homosexuals and has now ended up as a soldier. Roger, likewise, recalls being on hand for 'gay bashing', and remembers seeing murder on the street. He even hints, though perhaps ironically, at being under psychiatric care. The mindless discipline of the army offers to remove the need for this but there is, finally, no protection. Their apparent friendship is fragile. They are brought together only by their situation.

The play begins with the scene Rabe eventually added to his first draft, as Martin, an enlisted man with two years still to serve, slashes his wrist, explaining that he 'just wanted out'. Richie's explanation is more direct: 'It's just fear.'<sup>12</sup> That fear is tangible, throughout. In part it is a

<sup>12</sup> David Rabe, *Streamers* (New York, 1977), p. 5.

fear of being sent to Vietnam; in part it is a fear of facing truths about oneself and one's situation. Martin disappears from the play at an early stage but stays as a shadow character, an absence that implicitly comments on the apparent equanimity of those who remain and whose own desperation intensifies.

At the heart of the play, and providing it with its title, is the metaphor of the streamer, a parachute which fails to open and simply streams above the doomed parachutist 'like a roman candle'. It is an image introduced by two seemingly permanently drunk sergeants, Rooney and Cokes, one just returned from Vietnam, the other just assigned there. Both are veterans of the Korean war and of the One Hundred and First Airborne Division. The streamer comes to stand for more than the imminent threat of dying in Vietnam. It becomes an image of a certain determinism. Not only are all the characters victims of their own circumstances, ineffectually reaching out for something to save them, but, like everyone else, they are in free fall without a parachute. They are the products of and subject to chance, but, beyond that, they are all, of course, under an ultimate sentence of death, an inescapable irony. Thus, the returned Vietnam vet is now suffering from leukaemia, while his colleague escapes a traffic accident unscathed only to return to the barracks in time to be knifed to death.

For those in the barracks, their nemesis takes the form of Carlyle, a black soldier who intrudes on their 'home', and precipitates the violence they have feared. He is the embodiment of the fate that awaits them and that in some senses trivialises those conflicts which otherwise assume such significance in their lives, conflicts that turn on sexual preference, race or, in a distant Vietnam, political differences.

Vietnam lies in the background of *Streamers* almost like a watermark. It is a constant but barely visible presence. The soldiers themselves seem remarkably ill informed about the political or military realities of the war, Billy and Roger debating whether Ho Chi Minh or Lyndon Johnson should be seen as a modern Hitler. It even becomes the source of a certain self-deprecating humour when Billy, whose own apprehension is obvious, insists that 'I hope the five hundred thousand other guys that get sent over there kill 'em all – all of them gooks – get 'em all driven back into Germany where they belong' (*Streamers*, p. 32). But the threat of the war is the one thing that this disparate group share. Otherwise they are deeply solitary and afraid. And the subject of their fear is not simply Vietnam, or the violence which threatens to invade their lives, but death itself, as friends disappear one by one and Billy and Rooney are

killed in front of their eyes. When Carlyle insists that 'they pullin' guys outa here . . . ain't they. Pullin' 'em like weeds . . . throwin' 'em into the fire' (p. 22), he is not only talking about Vietnam, but, by implication, about a more fundamental weeding out. Carlyle's threat is not, ultimately, sexual or racial. He represents an anarchic principle: he is a force of dissolution, an embodiment of their ultimate fears. He himself is infected by terror – 'I don't wanna be no DEAD man' (p. 50) – but he brings death with him, becomes its agent and its expression. When he cuts Billy with a knife he says, 'look how easy it come out' (p. 87). He is a reminder of the fragility of their grasp on life.

There are times when it looks as though *Streamers* is going to become a political play. When Carlyle insists, 'it ain't our war because it ain't our country, and that's what burns my ass – that and everybody just sittin' and takin' it' (p. 22), this seems like a justifiable comment about discrimination and inaction. When Billy screams racial abuse at him, razor in hand, this appears to suggest an innate prejudice and the sort of linguistic reductiveness, equally evident in Vietnam, that is a prelude to and justification of violence. But *Streamers*, though started earlier, appeared long after American withdrawal from Vietnam, long after the final peace settlement. It is not offered, then, as either an historical or a political drama. Nor, I think, does it turn on racial identity (the white Billy and the black Roger are genuine friends) or sexual difference. In *Streamers* David Rabe comes a deal closer to Beckett than to Peter Weiss, to Pinter than to Amiri Baraka or Tony Kushner. His characters are serving their time. This is an anteroom to death and Carlyle is the Godot they await.

In an interview which accompanied the release of the film version Rabe elaborated his own conception of the play and of the image which lies at its centre, in doing so underscoring this tension between absurdist plight and the possibility of social transformation:

It's . . . everybody. Everybody is a streamer. Your life is a streamer. Ultimately, the chute doesn't open because we all die. And one's reaction to that fact, whether we know it or not, largely forms the way we shape our personalities . . . Ultimately, the play is saying that everybody is in that situation and that it should be possible *not* to get caught up in the struggles that are in the play, the judgments of one another, the treacheries and lies, however harmless. It's that very small, subtle fabric of misunderstandings and betrayals that makes the final thing happen in the play. (Kolin, *David Rabe*, p. 72)

*Streamers*, which won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play (an award matched by the Los Angeles critics), is ostensibly a realistic drama. Setting and dialogue are naturalistic. There is a

logic to the events, though a logic born out of sensibilities distorted by fear and insecurity. But, like Miller's plays, at its heart is a metaphor which places that realism under pressure. At the same time, Rabe was increasingly interested in realism while remaining suspicious of it. Indeed, in describing the impulses behind the writing of his next play, *Hurlyburly*, which opened at the Goodman Theatre in 1984, he identified a desire to write more realistically while at the same time offering a description of that style which reveals at the very least a profound ambivalence. It is a description heavily freighted with suspicion and distaste. Thus he confesses to:

an impulse to venture near at least the appearances of the so-called 'realistic' or 'well-made' play, which in my view is that form which thinks that cause and effect are proportionate and clearly apparent, that people know what they are doing as they do it, and that others react accordingly, that one thing leads to another in a rational, mechanical way, a kind of Newtonian clock of a play, a kind of Darwinian assemblage of detail which would then determine the details that must follow, the substitution of the devices of logic for the powerful sweeps of energy that is our lives.<sup>13</sup>

Though this comes from an 'Afterword' prepared for the published text, it should not come as a surprise that his impulse to 'venture near at least the appearances of the so-called "realistic" or "well-made" play' was restricted to appearance. Just as there is, in the above statement, clearly a counter-current to his alleged new enthusiasm for realism, so, in the play itself, cause and effect are by no means clearly related or proportionate; characters do not know what they are doing as they do it, nor do others react accordingly. There is little apparently rational about events and their connection to each other nor is this a Newtonian play, an assemblage of detail. And, most assuredly, the devices of logic do not substitute for the powerful sweeps of energy that constitute human lives.

Indeed *Hurlyburly* has an excess of such energy, as characters speed their lives up and puzzle over the fragmented experiences which constitute the jigsaw of those lives. If Rabe wished to venture near the realistic play he certainly did not wish to write one. Indeed, if he were interested at all in logical procedures he would not have chosen to create the play in the way he did, jotting down lines of dialogue whenever they occurred to him 'with no concern for sequence' (*Hurlyburly*, p. 162), or to produce a work in which logic appears to play so little role and the real to be so deeply problematic.

<sup>13</sup> David Rabe, *Hurlyburly* (New York, 1985), p. 162.

*Hurlyburly* is a savage comedy set in a Hollywood that Rabe knew from personal experience. In 1975 he spent time there when he was getting divorced from his first wife. Asked whether Eddie, the central character, was in any way autobiographical, as Kolin notes, he replied: 'To the extent that Eddie is the hub of that group of men, there's none of him in me . . . To the extent that he has a fascination with self-destruction and an anger with it, there is some of me. I was very alienated from where I came and from most of the people in Hollywood. I had an insane terror of that place' (Kolin, *David Rabe*, p. 85).

Mickey and Eddie are script editors living in a two-storey house between Sunset Boulevard and Mulholland Drive. Though we never see them close a deal, they are clearly surviving in a profession which they seemingly despise. 'The M.O. out here', explains Eddie, 'is they take an interesting story . . . distort it . . . Cut what little truth there might be in it out on the basis of it's unappealing, but leave the surface so it looks familiar . . . So like every other whore in this town, myself included, you have to learn to add your little dab of whatever truth you can scrounge up in yourself to this total, this systematic sham' (*Hurlyburly*, p. 29). The prevailing attitude, as expressed by Eddie's friend Phil, an aspiring actor and practising psychotic, is 'This is shit . . . But there might be somethin' in it for me' (p. 30).

Of the two housemates, Mickey is the more committed to his job. He has a marginally greater purchase on reality in a world in which reality itself is a doubtful proposition (since their job is to peddle fictions to people who are themselves presented as inveterate liars, desperate role players, and whose deals are the subject of rumour and myth). He, at least, acknowledges the basic necessities of life, from the need to buy food from the supermarket to keeping appointments. He is determined to keep the show on the road. He has a California diet, breakfasting on fruit and muffins. Eddie, meanwhile, begins his day with another version of the California menu, 'Bolivian blow' (cocaine), surviving on alcohol and industrial quantities of pharmaceuticals. He despises his job and seems to be full of self-disgust. And though he insists that he is 'a real person', and 'not a TV image' he seems to seek what is elsewhere called 'the American oblivion'. His one redemption, at least in his own eyes, is his concern for Phil.

Phil, who intrudes from time to time, is Eddie's protégé, for reasons which never become entirely clear, though Mickey hints that it is because Eddie wants reassurance that no matter how low he falls Phil will still be below him. A would-be actor, he is, for the most part, high on drugs, and

deeply disturbed, liable at any moment to hit out. He has spasms of violence and is liable to smash up the house, other people and, eventually, himself.

These are people who have lost the plot of their lives, living in an America, glimpsed through flickering television images and the newspapers that Mickey scans avidly, which appears to have done likewise. Paranoia operates on the private and public level alike. Violence is imminent in this homebase of the American dream and in the wider world where the virtues of the neutron bomb and the likelihood of war in the Middle East are discussed. The dream, indeed, has become little more than trashy fantasies which they recycle professionally and act out in lives stripped of real meaning. All four men in the play (a fourth, Artie, apparently a successful script editor, makes brief appearances) have failed marriages and are baffled by the failure of their relationships. Language itself no longer seems to serve them. Gaps open up in their vocabulary; syntax collapses. The television and the hi-fi blare out and they fill the air with their own voices, engaging in pointless and circuitous arguments, detecting hidden codes they cannot decipher. Words spill out. As screen writers and would-be actors, language is their business but they have a spurious articulateness. They build fantasies, substitute linguistic dreck for the silence they fear. Dialogues are frequently overlapping monologues as private fears spill out, paranoid visions are voided. Desperate to assert their own reality, to discover meaning and justification, they inhabit what Saul Bellow has called 'the moronic inferno' and Philip Roth 'the American beserk'.

The women in the play are little more than commodities, the currency in which the men trade. Donna is a fifteen-year-old air head, introduced into the house by Artie as a 'CARE PACKAGE'. Having found her living in an elevator, he offers her to them for their sexual pleasure. Bonnie fulfils a similar function. A nymphomaniac stripper who convinces herself that her act is artistic, she lives on drugs. Her marriage, too, is broken. Eddie fixes her up with Phil, oblivious to, disregarding or welcoming the danger he exposes her to. The third woman, Darlene, a photo-journalist, is herself traded between Mickey and Eddie, both of whom convince themselves that this a meaningful relationship while simultaneously competing for the charms of the fifteen-year-old.

It is hard not to feel the presence of David Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* here, as of *American Buffalo*. The confident sexual aggression of the male characters conceals a deeper anxiety just as male camaraderie proves self-limiting and ambiguous. The scatological language, the lin-

guistic detritus, is entirely familiar from Mamet's plays. Bernie's elaborate description of seduction in a burning building, in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, has a parallel here in Phil's account of seducing women with a vibrator. Rabe's Phil seems close kin to Mamet's equally psychotic, equally dangerous and violent Teach, in *American Buffalo*. Both writers dramatise a society in which fantasy has come to substitute for reality, a world in which characters fail to make contact, men and women have different needs, different perceptions of experience. Both create humour out of the space which opens up between language and what it describes, between genuine needs and the means adopted to satisfy those needs. Both offer a bleak portrait of an America adrift, an America which another American playwright, Sam Shepard, sees as potentially destroyed by its own myths, and Shepard's *True West* is perhaps another influence.

Eddie and Mickey, like some of Mamet's sharp manipulators in his plays and films (in *The Shawl* or *The House of Games*), are aware of the vortex of absurdity towards which they are drawn, aware of the corrosive nature of the fictions they peddle, but themselves feel the need for them. As Eddie remarks to Phil, 'What I want you to understand . . . is the absurdity of this business, and the fact that you're a success in it is a measure of the goddamn absurdity of this business to which we are all desperate to belong as a bunch of dogs' (*Hurlyburly*, p. 82). Perhaps, too, there is something of Pinter in a play of shifting allegiances, changing centres of power, sexual encounters charged with a disquieting sense of menace. This room, after all, is invaded by forces which carry their own threat. But Rabe is far more than the sum of his influences.

His coruscating portrait of post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America is also of a piece with his earlier work; though, with the special circumstance of Vietnam removed, it now seems evident that Vietnam was a symptom and not a cause. Eddie and Mickey, and, indeed, all the characters in *Hurlyburly*, are 'streamers', desperately refusing to acknowledge their downward plunge towards oblivion, generating fantasies for themselves as they do for others, blotting out the world whose threat they wish to deny. Whatever else they fear, sheer contingency lies at the heart of an anxiety that takes many forms. Where Harriet and Ozzie, in *Sticks and Bones*, had chosen to deny the truth of what faced them by shoring their lives up with banalities, insisting on an American normalcy, Eddie and Mickey take the opposite route, seeking to neutralise their fears by living on the edge, their geographical situation paralleling their psychological one.

This is a society in which there are no rules and conventions. This is a generation as lost as Scott Fitzgerald's which had grown up to find all gods dead, all faith in man abandoned. As Eddie remarks in a key speech:

the Ancients might have had some consolation, from a view of the heavens as inhabited by this . . . divine onlooker – we have bureaucrats devoted to the accumulation of incomprehensible data – we have connoisseurs of graft and the filibuster – virtuosos of the three-martini lunch for whom we vote on the basis of their personal appearance. The air's bad, the water's got poison in it, and into whose eyes do we find ourselves staring when we look for providence? We have emptied out the heavens and put oblivion in the hands of a bunch of aging insurance salesmen whose jobs are insecure. (*Hurlyburly*, p. 118)

This is a world without transcendence. Science, religion, politics are bankrupt or potentially lethal. Sociology and psychology merely codify the sickness. Reality itself is the source of terror. At such a time only the self becomes a value. The very idea of a society, with shared values and a mutual apprehension of the world, gives way to hedonism and self-serving fantasies. Relationships, drained of meaning ('interpersonal fuck up(s)'), are no longer of any significance. As Eddie says, instinctively drawing for his central metaphor on the artificial world of the media: 'we're all just background in one another's life. Cardboard cutouts bumping around in this vague, you know, hurlyburly, this spin-off of what was once prime time life' (p. 112). They are all, 'testing the parameters of the American dream of oblivion' (p. 95), a dream to which Eddie himself seems as dedicated as anyone else, to which the industry which he serves is also dedicated.

And yet, for all that, Eddie is searching for something that Mickey no longer seems to care for. Mickey, staid (for California), genuinely concerned to make it in Hollywood, anxious to reassert some balance, distrustful of the anarchy which surrounds him, and to which he is not fully committed, would like to detach Eddie from Phil. He wants to eject Phil and redeem Eddie from an incipient madness which is also, however, a sign of his resistance to a world whose definition of sanity is creating violent fantasies for a country that has been systematically lied to by politicians and deceived by generals. For Rabe, Phil, who represents psychosis, also stands for an uncontrolled vitality, a sense of disorder. He is Dionysian. For Rabe, indeed, the play was about how 'Eddie, through the death of Phil, was saved from being Mickey' (*Hurlyburly*, p. 168). Eddie's final diatribe, directed at a remote Johnny Carson, on a strobing television screen, is thus an indication that he will not now rejoin Mickey

and live out the dream, 'the dream devoured and turned to incandescent shit' (*Hurlyburly*, p. 153). He is, however, on the verge of suicide when Donna returns, looking for some protection against the 'paranormal' desperation of the street. It is her presence that, at least for the moment, makes him hold on, however desperately.

It is not clear that all this is self-evident in the text, however, and certainly, for Rabe, Mike Nichols failed to make it so in the first production. Phil's destructiveness is also too convincingly established for him to be accepted as the embodiment of a redemptive energy, while the play ends as Eddie offers drugs to Donna and she offers sex to him, precisely the terms of the bargain struck earlier, if more casually, with Bonnie. The final two-word speech – 'Pleasant dreams' (p. 160) – cannot be seen as anything but ironic, not, to be sure, in the mind of the person who speaks it (since, for all her sexual precocity, she remains naive), but in the context of a play in which there seems so little space for redemption. What there is, however, is evidence that Eddie, at least, remains resistant to the blandishments of the dream 'turned to incandescent shit'.

For Rabe, the play was 'about the price some guys pay to be men . . . I guess the theme of the play is this guy and his effort to control his life and everybody around him. And his feelings – you have to control them or you cannot control everybody else' (Kolin, *David Rabe*, p. 89). It had emerged in part from observing the impact on men of the women's movement. Suddenly unable to function in terms of their old personal and social relationships, men found themselves flung off from their centre, deprived of wives and children, uncertain of their role and unsure how to relate to women. *Hurlyburly* was, indeed, originally to have been called *Guy's Play*. Seeking to de-emphasise the significance of the play's Hollywood setting, Rabe explained that it was set there 'because that was my last spasm in the bachelor world . . . I was separated then and in the process of divorce and I felt there was no verbal articulation going on of the prices men were paying in this sort of social upheaval'. Speaking of the death of an actor friend Rabe remarked that he died 'of an inability to live with masculinity. He just couldn't hold it together. It really is true that he opened my heart in a certain way to whatever this play is about' (Kolin, *David Rabe*, p. 87).

For all Rabe's comments, however, there is little evidence that the women transcend the reductive images born out of male desire or apprehension. Admittedly, all the men have found themselves ejected from their families but the unreconstructed women they encounter hardly suggest that the revolution has cut very deep. On the other hand,

these are men, like those in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, who remain largely baffled by the failure of their relationship with women whom they despise, hate or are drawn to without ever understanding. These are men locked in an adolescent phase, bonding with one another but aware of the inadequacy of lives which seem to be going nowhere. They are lost.

The remnants of that other play are plainly still there, but the essential theme, as Rabe came to see it, was closer to that at the heart of *Streamers*: 'in the end the essential core of the thing is "accidents" and "destiny" . . . out of apparent accident is hewn destiny'. ('Afterword', *Hurlyburly*, pp. 169–70). The ultimate absurdity, then, the real source of anxiety and paranoia, has less to do with failed relationships or coercive fantasies than with death, the one unavoidable logic. Eddie recounts the story of an astronaut who circles the moon and is then elected to Congress but dies of cancer six months later. It is a cliché but one that identifies a truth which these characters attempt to blot out. They are on a journey to nowhere. Phil drives around with no destination. Donna rides up and down in an elevator. Mickey and Eddie trip on alcohol and drugs, on which they also ride up and down (taking tranquillisers and stimulants). There is no meaning. When Phil commits suicide he leaves a note which underlines the fact that only death has the power retrospectively to identify the logic that led to it, an irony which the characters in *Hurlyburly* choose to ignore but which is the real cause of their desperation. Redemption lies not in the sentimentality which Eddie voices at the end of the play, when he recalls crying at Phil's funeral on hearing the unaccompanied voice of a chorister, but in his refusal to accept the world to which he is drawn and to which Mickey seems capable of adjusting.

As Rabe himself has said, 'The play is the story of a guy who is searching and dissatisfied and worried and vulnerable and crazy' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 200). True insanity for Eddie would be to adjust to the world which so alarms him, to become Mickey. In a world in which normality is defined by the neutron bomb and reality by fantasies and lies devised by Hollywood or politicians, paranoia seems like a rational choice. As Rabe insists, 'The world may be falling apart, but whether it does or not, you're going to be separated from it, and therefore its fate ultimately is not your concern. Your own development, your own soul is your concern . . . If you decide that you'll change only if the world changes, you're going to be in big trouble' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 203).

*Hurlyburly* is simultaneously bleak and brilliantly funny. Its humour is

generated in part by the paranoid logic of characters never quite aware of their paranoia, by the disproportion between events, anxieties, feelings and the language used to describe them. In part it is a product of its own outrageousness, of characters who recognise no constraints and yet wish to maintain a version of themselves at odds with what they do. A stripper believes her act to be artistic because she uses balloons in that act. The men sentimentalise the children they have abandoned, speak of true love in relation to a woman they happily exchange for others. They abuse the industry they are desperate to join. It is a play whose quick-fire comedy depends not on jokes but irony, its own pace, meanwhile, reflecting that of characters who themselves live neurasthenically, high on drugs, driven by fear, stasis and silence.

In what amounts to a prequel, *Those the River Keeps* (New York, 1991) places the anarchic Phil at centre stage. Set in his rented house in the Hollywood Hills, 'a while ago', it explores his relationship with Susie, an attractive, if none too bright woman in her thirties who craves motherhood and domesticity.

Into this emotionally tense situation intrudes Sal, a hit man on a mission, anxious to recruit Phil, himself a former hit man now trying to break into the movies. Sal is in crisis, having been warned by a fortune teller that 'death is imminent'.

Like *Hurlyburly*, *Those the River Keeps* offers a comically ironic account of a society in a state of collapse, a society in which, as Susie's friend Janice observes, 'Everybody's empty . . . people are empty' (p. 79). Bewildered by his own violence, and by a world he cannot control, Phil comes to the conclusion that 'We are the fucking ice age. Us. People. We're the terrible thing that's come to leave the world a wreck. And we're here now. People. We've arrived' (p. 98).

He and Sal try to patch together their disintegrating world with a language that cannot bear the weight. Thus, when Sal insists that 'the old ways are the best ways' (p. 104), when he speaks of 'loyalty', he is referring, Mamet-like, not to American values but the traditions of the Mob. By the same token, Phil insists on his love for Susie with a disjunctive nursery-school language – 'she's got my heart, see . . . and it ain't a big heart, it's a tiny little heart like somethin' like an egg' (p. 105).

*Those the River Keeps* is something more than a satire on American values and an account of the dissolution of private and public values. Its title refers to those dumped in the river for crossing the Mob, condemned to death for making a mistake, but, in a sense, of course, all Rabe's characters in this play are similarly condemned, having made the

same mistake, not only being born but being born into a society so at odds with itself. Beyond that, audiences are aware of Phil's fate in the play that is to follow. Thus the concluding scene of the play, in which Phil and Susie go off to the bedroom, presumably to start the family for which she has always yearned, is ironised by the fact that we know Phil will re-enter, in *Hurlyburly*, separated from his wife and following an undeviating path towards death.

*Hurlyburly* ran for 343 performances on Broadway. Its publication was followed by that of a play which assuredly did not flirt with realism. *Goose and Tomtom*, first briefly staged in 1982, in a workshop at Lincoln Centre (according to Rabe without his permission being sought for a public opening), is a surreal piece apparently about two small-time thieves who become involved in kidnapping, rape and murder. The clue to its real concerns, however, seems to lie in an epigraph which suggests that we are likely to be destroyed by our fantasies. *Goose and Tomtom* is a gnomic play ('I wrote it without understanding it' (Kolin, *David Rabe*, p. 83)), another of whose epigraphs is taken from Werner Heisenberg: 'Not only is the Universe stranger than we think, it is stranger than we can think.' The strangeness of what follows, however, is less compelling than merely fanciful, as Rabe appears to take pleasure in dreaming into existence characters who do the same for themselves. Whether this is offered as a metaphor for the process of artistic creation or not, for the seductiveness, the lubricious attractions and power of the imagination, it remains less than convincing. Stylistically at odds with his earlier work it does, however, relate to it in that the two central figures appear to conjure their world into existence and, as Rabe has said in another context:

I feel that in life and particularly in drama, language is something people use to create realities, to create truth and systems and inflict them on other people, or try to coerce others into agreeing with their reality or submitting to it. That's what happens in the world. It happens in our own minds with the words we think. The words create reality, rather than reflecting it. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, pp. 204-5)

The play is set 'in the underworld', a reference not only to the criminal sub-class, perhaps, or to the magical world which the two principal characters invoke, a world of witches, but to the mind which generates its own reality. *Goose and Tomtom* thus becomes an exemplary text and if it steps aside from realism we have Rabe's reminder that the period of realism is aberrant.

Sometimes, however, the power of the real is so insistent that it dictates the form in which it is reproduced. On reading, in the Sunday *New York*

*Times Magazine*, of an AIDS patient who had planned his suicide with the help of a doctor but changed his mind when taken to hospital as a result of the overdose, Rabe wrote *A Question of Mercy*. Originally to have been a television drama, it became a stage play by default when the company lost its funding for the project. Though standing in stark contrast to *Goose and Tomtom* and, ostensibly to his earlier work, it nonetheless shares certain concerns with everything he has written. As he has explained, 'deep down a lot of my work is about people trying to make reasonable accommodations of situations that are insane or absurd'.<sup>14</sup> Beyond that, and again in a way reminiscent of his earlier work, he was struck by the discrepancy, in the newspaper account, between the language and what it tried to encompass, 'the richness and the contrast of the language against the insanity of the dilemma'. This seemed to him to be 'very theatrical' (*A Question of Mercy*, p. 22).

In those remarks are to be found the essence of Rabe's theatrical concerns and his dramatic tactics. In a sense, too, the title of this play – *A Question of Mercy* – could be said to be equally applicable to almost everything he has written. For beneath the violence, the desperate anxieties, the paranoia, the persistent, though often unmentioned, fear of mortality, has lain an equally persistent urge to justify life. Whether it is the unlikely, and sudden, compassion of Sergeant Cokes in *Streamers*, shocked by his own approaching death, or the ironic humour, and refusal to capitulate, of Eddie in *Hurlyburly*, there is a redemptive urge which is nonetheless powerful for being understated and oblique.

In *A Question of Mercy* Dr Chapman is lured, against his better judgement, to assist in the suicide of Anthony, a man who is in pain and suffering degradation as a result of his illness. He acts out of compassion. He is to administer an injection of morphine if the man's own attempts to swallow a lethal dose of tablets fails. At the urging of the man's lover he fails in his part of the bargain and Anthony survives only to be taken to the hospital, where he contracts pneumonia. It is now possible, if treatment is withheld, for Anthony to die, but at this crucial moment he changes his mind, indicating such, however, only by a series of gestures. Thus we never know why he changed his mind, why a resolute decision to die became a determination to live. A few days later he dies, nonetheless, still in hospital. The doctor is thus relieved of responsibility, safe from the consequences of his planned action but ashamed of his feelings of relief, ashamed, in particular, at

<sup>14</sup> David Rabe, 'A Question of Mercy', *American Theatre* (July–August 1997), p. 22.

his wish not to have picked up the telephone when it rang, not to have been confronted with a dilemma whose paradoxes have never left him.

That there have been betrayals, he is sure, but just who betrayed whom is not entirely clear to him. Was it he who, at the request of the man's lover, had failed to administer the morphine but who had betrayed his own oath in contemplating taking life? Was it the lover whose own fear overcame him or, perhaps, whose love was too great to consider taking a life that meant so much to him? Was it the dying man who created a dilemma for others because he could not take action on his own? As the doctor observes at the end of the play, 'Villainy. Mercy. I see them now like two snakes coiled around a staff, their tangled shapes indistinguishable, their eyes fixed on each other.'<sup>15</sup>

The fact is that while all acted out of mixed motives and all were guilty of betrayal, all, too, acted out of a certain altruism, a sense of pity that lifts them out of themselves. Impending death, and the fear it induces, leads them all to the edge, to a point of definition. Nobody knows, not the characters, not the audience, not, clearly, Rabe, why Anthony chose life over death, especially when life was little more than a flicker on an oscilloscope. What matters is not so much a decision which may have been no more than a failure of courage, a desperate and, as it turned out, momentary reprieve from the inevitable: it was the ambivalent response of those others who wished to do what was right but were, perhaps inevitably, unsure what right might be.

*A Question of Mercy* is not a polemical play which argues the pros and cons of mercy killing, though that remains an inevitable dimension; it is a play, like *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, *Sticks and Bones* or *Hurlyburly*, that explores the dilemma of those confronted with a world whose paradoxes resist easy resolution, for whom indifference is a constant temptation and who reach for a language which can control and contain their fears. When Anthony calls Dr Chapman an angel the doctor wishes that he were such, for an angel would be free of the moral confusions and recriminations that are a part of human existence. Such confusions, however, are the burden of that existence and in all his plays David Rabe has chosen to write about them, with a humour that itself may have a moral force, but also with an unblinking awareness of the ultimate irony within which we all move and have our being.

<sup>15</sup> David Rabe, *A Question of Mercy* (New York, 1998), p. 115.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Paula Vogel*

Speaking in 1997, Paula Vogel confessed that ‘I want to *seduce* the audience. If they can go along for a ride they wouldn’t ordinarily take, or don’t even know they are taking, then they might see highly charged political issues in a new and unexpected way’.<sup>1</sup> There could hardly be a better or more concise description of her method or philosophy, for while she plainly has her commitments, and locates her work in a politicised environment, she is no ideologue. If her plays are, in a sense, a dialogue with her culture, the nature of that dialogue is open. Neither of the sisters in *The Mineola Twins* – one conservative, the other radical – has a monopoly on, or, indeed, a firm grasp of truth, anymore than the male protagonist of *How I Learned to Drive*, who seduces an eleven-year-old girl, could be said to be adequately described by the single word ‘paedophile’. Vogel’s plays do, indeed, take her audiences on a journey they would not ordinarily take but what is unusual about that journey is not only that it frequently takes them into the world of the fantastic and the bizarre but that it liberates them from a Manichaean frame of mind, from a binary mode of thought. Her politics are more inclusive than exclusive, even child abuse turning out to be, in her words, ‘greyer’ than most would be prepared to acknowledge. Indeed, it is a journey of understanding no less for the writer than for those for whom she writes.

Thus, though *The Baltimore Waltz*, like Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, does express anger at the government’s neglect of AIDS, her real subject is less political neglect than loss and the mechanisms we deploy to handle it. The politics of the play defer to the dynamics of human need. If her characters seem to take the audience into unexpected and seemingly bizarre places – that of the septuagenarian prostitute, the woman pornographer, the paedophile – what is striking is less their remoteness from our experience than the familiarity of the

<sup>1</sup> Steven Druckman, ‘A Playwright on the Edge’, *New York Times* (16 March 1997), H6.

dilemma of those who reach out for what consolations they can find, who struggle to make sense of a world that seems to deny them what they need the most. In *The Zoo Story* Jerry tells the bewildered and resistant Peter that sometimes it is necessary to go a long way out of your way in order to come back correctly. That is the nature of the journey on which Vogel takes her audiences.

Perhaps, therefore, it is understandable that her two best-known plays – *The Baltimore Waltz* and *How I Learned to Drive* – are structured around a journey. That is the essence of how she sees her relationship with an audience. It is also a metaphor for that process of education which her characters themselves experience.

She has, she has confessed, concentrated on subjects that are taboo but prevalent in the culture. It is a deliberate tactic, not least because that taboo is liable to be compacted with a subversive energy, and though not ideological Vogel is alert to the theatre's capacity to engage with what is evaded and aware that that in itself may have political implications. 'Politics,' she has insisted, 'has become a dirty word at the end of the twentieth century . . . Is theatre political? Highly political. Is it dangerous? Highly dangerous . . . At 8 o'clock we go in as disparate, individual people. Two hours later we come out as a community that took a journey together. You get elected by dividing and conquering people. Theatre does just the opposite – it forges a community where there wasn't one before.'<sup>2</sup> 'America', she has said, 'wants to import its politics and its history, so that it will import Athol Fugard rather than confronting and embracing the vital spectrum of African-American dramatists. We import our political plays about race; we import our plays about history. We will not do Richard Nelson or John Guare's history plays. It's frustrating.'<sup>3</sup>

When Paula Vogel won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for *How I Learned to Drive* (a play that had already won an Obie, the Lortel Best Play Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Drama Desk Award) it confirmed her status as one of the most original playwrights to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, though she had begun writing some time before this. Indeed, when her previously best-known play, *The Baltimore Waltz*, was staged in 1992, it was her twenty-second.

She herself has said that she dates her career from 1980, when she sent

<sup>2</sup> *San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle*, (4 January 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Christopher Bigsby, May 1998. All subsequent unsourced quotes are from this interview.

*The Oldest Profession*, her play about geriatric prostitutes, to theatres across America only to have it rejected as offensive. Invited by some of those to whom she submitted the play to abandon her career before it started, she was forced to reconsider the play and that putative career. The result was a decision to reaffirm her own vision, to refuse the compromises she was implicitly invited to make, or, more radically, the silence some artistic directors chose to propose as her fate. Had she not, after all, scored a success with an earlier play, *Desdemona*, written in 1977, which came second in the 1979 New Plays Festival at Louisville (in the year Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* came first) before disappearing from view until 1993, when its radical post-feminist take on *Othello* seemed to find a more receptive critical response.

To some degree she attributes the slow burn of her career to the fact that gender, and perhaps other aspects of her sensibility, made her work seem tangential to the interests of mainstream theatre. 'I would point out', she has said, 'that it takes longer for women and playwrights of color to break through the resistance and make it their time. Let's say that a good play is defined as a four-legged animal, but in walks this dazzling, beautifully colored, six-legged animal. Most people would say that it isn't a good play. If the world is looking for another Sam Shepard, it's not going to recognise an Adrienne Kennedy.'<sup>4</sup> Like Wendy Wasserstein, she was aware of the dominant male discourse not only of American drama but of the dramatic tradition (hence her contesting of that tradition in *Desdemona* and her ironic engagement with male playwrights in work which in part could be seen as implicit dialogues with such writers as Edward Albee and David Mamet). She was not black, like Adrienne Kennedy, but she was a self-declared lesbian, and that gave her a sense of exclusion as well as a place to stand, a perspective on mainstream values.

Paula Vogel is a gay playwright but unlike Tony Kushner, for whom that is a preferred designation, she would rather be known as a playwright who is gay:

what the relation is between my gayness and my work is obscure to me in the same way that I feel drama works by indirection. I've been gay so long that it feels straight to me. I think that it has been an asset because it has been one more way that I've had to think through the marginalisation of women, so it's been useful in terms of empathy but in terms of having a direct impact, I think maybe being short is as important.

<sup>4</sup> Ronn Smith, 'Savage Humor', *Brown Alumni Monthly* (April 1993), p. 27.

A further reason for resisting designation as a gay playwright lies in the fact that:

gay playwrights are men writing plays primarily with male protagonists. They are trailing clouds of Hamlet. I am a lesbian playwright dealing with women characters to whom I am trying to give three dimensionality, and the major focus is that – complicating and problematising female characters. Tony can say he is a gay playwright because there is a legacy. You are building not only on the backs of Albee, Williams, Wilson . . . but on the legacy of Chekhov, Ibsen, all the way back. I don't have that. The topsoil for me is very thin. I look around and I bless Maria Irene Fornes, the women playwrights out there, and I bless Chekhov, Ibsen and Williams who have tried to create and problematise female characters. My forerunners are male playwrights, so for me the notion of my sexuality, and the relation of that to my writing, as a political act – having had a brother who has died of AIDS, having witnessed first hand the discrepancy in civil rights – is important, as it is important to me to be out . . . because I am a teacher. It's important to my straight students as well as my gay students.

If male characters enter trailing clouds of Hamlet, female characters 'walk on stage as Gertrude or Ophelia'. What is needed, therefore, is a radical engagement with theatrical history no less than with society, since Vogel is no cultural feminist. Resisting notions of biological determinism or the prioritising of women as a response to injustice, she seeks rather to explore the manner in which gender assumptions are constructed and art responds to such constructions.

For her, theatre is an authentic dialogue with the culture and with the history of theatre itself ('Every time you read a play there is a sense in which you are talking to Aristotle'). At a time when cinema seeks to isolate the present moment, to determine, through its own techniques, how it is read, resisting the dialogic, theatre offers itself as a genuine conversation with self and society alike. However, the politics of her plays owes less to Brecht (a key figure for Kushner) than to the absurd. This is not to say that she borrows either method or philosophy but that she finds in this unlikely source a key to women's experience. As she has explained,

I am drawn to the absurdists and the reason I am drawn to them is because they enable a dramatisation of stasis that didn't exist prior to that. That, to me, then allows a certain portrayal of female characters on the stage. In the novel it was Virginia Woolf and the stream of consciousness – the necessity to fragment the exterior of realism in order to get at female experience, a female perspective. To me, as a dramatist, this comes through expressionism and absurdism. To me, Brecht does not actually fragment. It fragments the exterior but it is still basically a socialist form and it is still basically looking at us as social and political

animals. But the notion of the interior that leads us closest to what Virginia Woolf can do is a different assault on the realistic.

It is a reminder that in approaching Vogel's work, structure, style, form, no less than character and the shaping power of language, are of primary concern.

Paula Vogel is not part of an homogenised women's movement concerned with consciousness-raising dramatic paradigms or engaging in potential challenges to male autonomy. She is not interested in subverting existing gender, social or moral categories in order to operate others, not interested in seeing her plays as operating in the service of worthy causes. By the same token, her dialogues with male-authored texts do not spring from a rejection of those texts but an ironic engagement with them. At the level of style, no less than of character and subject, she speaks for fluidity of definition, for an alchemical, protean, transformative art. She challenges not so much the normative values of society as definitions of the real.

Hers is an allusive, oblique, metaphoric art that does something more than blur the line between realism and fantasy. It concedes authority to the imagination in an acknowledgement of the degree to which the world is a product of consciousness, fantasy being not an evasion of the real but an extension of it. Her characters are themselves often self-conscious fantasists, quite deliberately challenging one story with another, pitching their fictions against those whose authority comes not from their status but the power that enforces them. Thus Desdemona, in the play of the same name, finding herself trapped in a story not of her own devising, a story which burdens her with purity and innocence, sets out to invent her own, at odds with that master story. The protagonists of *The Oldest Profession* find greater meaning in the fantasies they enact, as prostitutes, but also as a supposedly homogeneous team of players in the game of life, than they do in a world in which the banality of routine works to reduce them to the role of elderly souls waiting out their lives. In *And Baby Makes Seven* we are offered a glimpse of the real to which Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* had apparently sought to win its characters as we are offered enactments of the fantasy children which in Albee's play existed only within language. Albee opts for an apparently reductive but redemptive reality: Vogel sees the imagination as itself the source not only of consolation but also meaning.

The closest parallel to Paula Vogel is, perhaps, Caryl Churchill, though her gender concerns and politics differ from those of a writer

whose socialist principles have coexisted with feminist beliefs and found direct expression in a play such as *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*. In terms of American writers, there are times when her work seems reminiscent of that of Christopher Durang or Maria Irene Fornes, while her doubling of characters seems to echo that in Adrienne Kennedy's plays. But perhaps this is saying no more than that she finds in their work some sanction, beyond her own, to break with more conventional models of dramatic construction, character development, the simple causalities of realism. Even in Vogel's work the distortion, what David Savran, quoting the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky, calls defamiliarisation, is sometimes the product of little more than a reversed polarity (as in the transformation of Desdemona from virtuous woman to sexual predator) or an unlikely and vaguely shocking proposition (as in Vogel's portrayal of the female counterparts to David Mamet's old men in *Duck Variations* as prostitutes). The defamiliarisation is more radical in *And Baby Makes Seven* and *The Baltimore Waltz*, but the principle remains the same, the former giving concrete form to shared fantasies, the latter offering a fantasy correlative to an otherwise deconstructive force.

Not that fantasy exists only in order to offer a displaced account of a supposed reality. As implied above, it is an essential component of it. It is plainly one dimension of sexuality (and Vogel explores it as such), but it is equally implicated in the hopes, ambitions, anxieties and fears of the human animal, in that daily life, uncharged with fantasy, uncontaminated with dreams, enabling myths, vivifying if also threatening fictions, would be unlivable. In that sense Vogel's is a form of realism, albeit a realism more generously defined. Indeed at times she is tempted to believe that 'fantasy and imagination are realer'.<sup>5</sup>

Paula Vogel grew up outside Washington DC. Her family was divided in a number of ways. Her grandfather was, she has said, 'a redneck cracker who voted for George Wallace' (Winer, 'Paula Vogel'), echoed, perhaps, in the figure of grandpa in *How I Learned to Drive*, while her brother was a civil rights activist. One parent was Jewish, one Catholic. She was ten years old when her father deserted the family, sixteen when her gay brother left home and seventeen when she announced her lesbianism, a declaration which her mother found hard to accept. Nor did her difficulties end there. Both at Bryn Mawr, where she was an undergraduate, and Cornell, where she taught playwriting and won a national

<sup>5</sup> Laurie Winer, 'Paula Vogel', *Mirabella*, (June 1993).

prize for *Meg*, a play about the daughter of Sir Thomas More, she found herself the subject of harassment. As she has explained, however, this sense of marginalisation and rejection was not without its utility to a writer who was to concern herself in part with the excluded. She had, she felt, been given 'the gift of exclusion', adding that, 'I'll never understand what it is to have AIDS or be an artist of color, but, as a Jew and a lesbian, I can directly picture it.' It seemed particularly significant to her as a writer emerging in the 1980s and achieving success in the 1990s: 'Look, I'm homophobic and misogynistic, too – I grew up in this country! But I also realize, especially after the Republican convention and after losing my brother, that this is not a time to be silent'. (Winer, 'Paula Vogel').

That exclusion, however, was not merely political or social. The theatre itself generated its own conservatism, feeding off its own history, reading the present in terms of the past. Those who work in it can too easily retreat from the new, less because of the challenge of its politics than because it embraces an unfamiliar aesthetic. As Vogel has explained, 'If you try to explore the boundaries of what you're doing it will always take a gap in time until somebody decodes you . . . I couldn't understand why I wasn't being decoded; I thought I was speaking the language perfectly clearly.'<sup>6</sup> That conservatism came partly from within and partly from without, the distinction, perhaps, not being as clear as it seems. Thus she believes that because hers is 'a racist, misogynist, homophobic society . . . after a while it becomes the air you breathe', and the theatre is no less susceptible to this than any other area of American society. Her plays were not offered as an antidote, still less as a palliative, but they were offered as an irritant. She aimed to disturb and for much of the 1980s she found herself operating in a theatre where that was not a priority. It was, she has said, 'a decade of good but harmless work, because people could afford the status quo'. Her own preference was for work with a rougher edge. For all her professed surprise at not being quickly decoded, she explained that she was content to write flawed plays if they would only change the atmosphere.

Vogel moved to New York in 1977 and continued to write plays at the rate of one a year, though without any success and with no financial resources. Then, in 1984, she moved to Brown University, in Providence, which at last gave her a base from which to work. As the 1980s gave way

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Coen, 'Paula Vogel: No Need for Gravity', *American Theatre* (April 1993), p. 1.

to the 1990s, and financial restraint gave further impetus to a conservative impulse by reducing the resources that theatre, and hence the playwright, could command, she saw in this not only a challenge to be addressed but further validation of the free imagination pressed ever closer to the margin: 'only by having unlimited imagination are we going to be able to keep going. If the only time I'll get produced is with a three-character play, then how do I create the world with three characters? We get backed into corners, all our handicaps have to become gifts of exclusion' (Coen, 'Paula Vogel', p. 2). Social circumstance, sexual preference, artistic fate, all combine to forge an aesthetic and shape a dramatic strategy.

Her sense of speaking from the margin, however, has not driven her to become a spokeswoman. She does not, she has insisted, write lesbian plays or wish to speak for lesbianism or, indeed, women in general. Her resistance to hierarchies, hierarchies of meaning no less than of social organisation, is not so much a political act as an instinctive resistance to category and privileging. There is an American instinct for inclusiveness in her work of a kind to be found in Whitman and perhaps for some of the same reasons. At the same time she does not 'believe there's any such thing as the universal in theatre any more' (Coen, 'Paula Vogel', p. 2) beyond the fact of sharing the theatrical moment. The particularities of the play invite the audience to meet within its parameters without asserting a specious connection to a generalised dilemma. The essence of theatre, as Vogel proposes it, is that it leads the audience beyond the boundaries of the given, that it allows the imagination to define its own space. This is not an abstract space, however. Her figures are earthed in emotional truths. They are responsive to needs which transcend the strategies they devise to handle them. Fear of death, desertion, a quixotically demanding sexuality, make their situation familiar, even if that familiarity is placed under strain. In other words, the universal is plainly not entirely evacuated from these plays, and could hardly be so; it is simply not to be found in the easy alignment of national destiny, private ambition, psychological or sociological needs to the necessities of characters who exist primarily to be exemplars of such generalised concerns.

Paradoxically, however, perhaps the true root to the universal which she believes she has drained from her work lies in a shared sense of exclusion. There simply is no unevacuated centre any more, no norm from which to diverge unless it be in the scarcely disinterested minds of politicians or the realm of popular myth, the television soap operas and movies with which we seek to perpetuate the notion of shared values,

shared experiences, a supposedly shared reality. As Vogel observed, in the context of a production of *And Baby Makes Seven*, 'If you turn on your television right now, I think we are facing the fact that the nuclear family is not what Mr Quayle would like it to be. We're not happy little nuclear families with two children and Mummy and Daddy. We're not pretending that we're perfect American sitcoms. But we're all anomalies at this point; we're all exceptions to the rule. Every time I turn on the television and see Maria Shriver or somebody else, I say "Oh, good. A promotion for *And Baby Makes Seven*".'<sup>7</sup>

Vogel has disavowed any intention of writing Ibsenesque problem plays. The nature of the modern family, the fact of sexual preference, the existence of AIDS, paedophilia, may register in her work but they are not her subject. They constitute, she has explained, the atmosphere that her characters breathe. They are not causes she fights, facts which she challenges, or banners she seeks to wave. They are the context within which her characters exist, in search of love, in search of meaning. Nor are such characters quite those to be found in a Chekhov play. They have something of the fluidity of figures in a work by Sam Shepard. At one extreme they are comic gestures, provocative stereotypes (*Desdemona*); at another they fracture and double (*The Mineola Twins*), jumping from one story to another, transforming and exploring parallel possibilities (*And Baby Makes Seven*). In that sense they become postmodern gestures, acting out alternative fictions, never settling for a single perspective. Indeed, much of Vogel's comedy is generated from an inversion of stories (as in *Desdemona*), from the games she plays with expectations (*The Oldest Profession*), the energy released by rapid character change and the overlapping of fantasy on to a supposed reality (*And Baby Makes Seven*). As she has said, 'I find the excitement of comedy and the excitement of theatre is that we are going to explore something together' (Bilowit, 'Bringing Up Baby', pp. 5f.).

Vogel's is a comedy often generated out of pain, anxiety and confusion. Even sickness and death are productive of humour. Tom Lehrer once sang of sliding down the razor blade of life and there is something of that in *The Baltimore Waltz* and *How I Learned to Drive*. But there is also resistance, a resistance to the logic of decline, a sense of irony, forgiveness, reconciliation, which lifts her characters above their circumstances. There is a drive towards understanding of those too easily contained within the shorthand of moral disapprobation, whether it be her senior

<sup>7</sup> Ira J. Bilowit, 'Bringing Up Baby: Paula Vogel's Newest Born', *Back Stage* 7 (May 1993), pp. 5f.

citizen prostitutes, fantasising gay parents, the gay AIDS victim, or a child molester. But if her plays do frequently interrogate aspects of experience, pressing them to extremes, they also engage in an implicit dialogue with other texts.

That was doubly true of *Desdemona*, which received a staged reading at Cornell University in 1973 but which otherwise had to wait until 1993, when it was co-produced by the Bay Street Theatre Festival and the Circle Repertory Theatre. This was a response equally to Shakespeare's *Othello* and to Wolfgang Bauer's *Shakespeare the Sadist*. Indeed, she readily acknowledged that her play was 'written as a tribute (i.e. "rip-off") to the latter's "infamous" work'.

Bauer's play, whose original title, significantly, was *Film und Frau*, was first staged in Germany in 1970 and in England in 1972. Vogel's debt lies less in its content than its structure. A play which features a Swedish pornographic film, starring a character who identifies himself as Shakespeare but is in fact played by one of the play's four characters, *Shakespeare the Sadist* is a surreal, sexually charged piece in which film fantasy shapes the consciousness and behaviour of figures who themselves lack substance.

The play is divided into what Bauer describes as forty-nine 'takes', with four- to five-second black-outs between each take, the structure reflecting the cinematic motif of the play, in which Bauer insists that the director 'should make use of the various technical film devices, e.g. film music, the MGM Lion during black-outs, slow motion and accelerated motion'. All music and film titles were to be current to the time of production. Vogel, while avoiding black-outs, echoed Bauer's instruction to directors: '*Desdemona* was written', she explained, 'in thirty cinematic "takes". The director is encouraged to create different pictures to simulate the process of filming: change invisible camera angles, do jump cuts and repetitions, etc.'<sup>8</sup>

In Bauer's play the style of presentation reflects the content, since film is not only enacted in the sadistic porno extract, in which a woman is tortured, raped and decapitated, but discussed throughout. The rationale for Vogel's use of cinematic structure and methods is less clear, not least because the play's theatricality is emphasised in the first 'take', in which spotlights pinpoint *Desdemona*'s lost handkerchief and the figure of Emilia, who discovers it, in a prologue which, paradoxically, given her instruction, ends in a black-out. The play, like Bauer's, is suffused with

<sup>8</sup> Paula Vogel, *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays* (New York, 1996), p. 176.

sexuality and has something of the air of a pornographic parody, but it lacks both the aggressive and literal nature of the violence and sexuality of Bauer's play (that lay ahead in *Hot 'N' Throbbing*), as it does its concern with filmic construction. Where sadism is deployed it is in a muted form. Desdemona is a sexual adventurer, resisting the role in which she is otherwise entrapped, the cinematic 'takes' reflecting her self-conscious role playing; she is not, however, a person whose imagination has been commandeered by screen images and whose language has been infiltrated by the language of the cinema. What Vogel seems to have derived from Bauer is an alienating technique, a sexualised narrative, a fast-paced collage of scenes and a foregrounding of the processes of the art in which she is involved.

*Desdemona* is a metatheatrical piece in which not only does Vogel construct a play within a play but she also explores other aspects of the theatricalising imagination. Vogel inverts Shakespeare's male-centred drama of jealousy, betrayed trust and unjustifiable violence to focus on the excluded or marginalised woman. The women and not the men are centre stage. They determine the nature of the moral debate, lay claim to a freedom denied to their gender. *Desdemona* inverts the moral world of *Othello*, which turns on the unjust punishment of a virtuous woman, presenting Desdemona as a sexual predator, a foul-mouthed schemer, scornful of her husband and fearful only of an anger that might limit her freedom. Instead of staging a woman who is a victim, the manipulated product of Iago's and Othello's competing stories, she is her own woman, the protagonist of her own story, a wilful inscriber of her own meanings, albeit unaware of the meta-story which makes her subject to an ultimate irony, subject, that is, to the ultimate author who determined her fate, whether that be Shakespeare or some metaphysical patriarch.

There is, of course, a danger in making Desdemona sexually aggressive and promiscuous, as Vogel readily admits: 'There is a risk. I think *Hot 'N' Throbbing* – of which I am about to do a major rewrite – is very much still sorting through the Desdemona material.' The risk lies in simply accommodating to a female character qualities not merely associated with male characters but defined, in their particulars, by the male imagination and sensibility. Elaborating on the play's origins and its potential risks, she explained that:

in the 1970s, when I had read *Othello*, I was struck by the fact that my main point of identification, of subjectivity, was a man who is supposedly cuckolded, that I was weeping for a man who is cuckolded rather than for Desdemona. And, of course, at that point in the seventies, in terms of women's studies, there was all

the virgin/whore analysis coming out, and it wounded me a great deal that Desdemona is nothing but an abstraction and that I didn't find any way of identifying with her. The play is a risk, but in returning to it, it still hurts me that we should see characters in terms of their fate – according to their sexuality, according to who they are – when this is a part of male character recipes, but in terms of moral judgement when we are talking about female characters. I think that very early on plays that dealt with negative empathy – plays like *Othello*, *Hedda Gabler* – fascinated me. I was reading *Lolita* at that point and trying to think of negative empathy in female characters. That's where the whole thing started.

With its deliberate anachronisms and character inversions, *Desdemona* is a *jeu d'esprit*. Less radical than Bauer's play, less complex than Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which engaged in a complex dialogue between the master plot and the marginal narrative, it nonetheless offers an amusing and ironic counterpoint to a play in which women were merely the manipulated products of a male imagination, archetypal figures in a story in which tragic significance attaches itself primarily to men, who alone generate meaning out of a flawed self.

For Vogel, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* had been theatrically interesting but politically regressive 'because it seemed to me that there was a reinforcement, through the Chain of Being motif, of a class structure . . . By foregrounding secondary characters, it was actually saying that there *are* protagonists. But then along came Harold Pinter's *Old Times* and Maria Irene Fornes's *Fefu and Her Friends* and that made me question the whole idea of protagonists. To me that was a kind of answer to what *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* was doing.' The result was *Desdemona*.

*The Oldest Profession*, which gave her so much trouble when she first tried to place it, was first read at the Hudson Guild in New York City in 1981, and first produced in April 1988, by Theatre Network in Edmonton, Canada. Set shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan, it features five women (four of whom are in their seventies and one of whom is eighty-three) who have, we discover, after a deceptively domestic opening, been prostitutes for many years. Though, like their declining list of clients, they are suffering the various debilitations of age, they still take pride in their professionalism and the services they offer. Financially, however, they are in increasing trouble. Income no longer exceeds outgoings. Nonetheless, they remain dedicated and disciplined, their shared endeavour sustaining them even as, one by one, they slip from the story, dying offstage, appropriately enough during a series of black-outs.

Vogel has explained the play's origin and its dubious reception by the man who commissioned it:

there were two reasons for me writing it. I think very consciously about plot forms and I wanted to do something with repetitive form, so I thought I'd better find a subject for repetitive form, and Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* and Mamet's *Duck Variations* came to mind. My grandmother suffered a heart attack the fall before I wrote it and she was the youngest of five, and this was where I ruptured for ever my relationship with Jon Jory of the Actors Theatre of Louisville. He commissioned this as a one-act and I named the youngest prostitute after my grandmother. All of the prostitutes are based on stories and characters of my older aunts and they died in the order that they died in the play. When Jon Jory heard that, he was horrified and so shocked that I would have my grandmother as a prostitute and that I would use the women in my family in that way that he and I didn't work together again.

In *Duck Variations*, David Mamet stages a conversation between two old men in which they seek to allay their fear of impending death with inconsequential chatter. Mamet's play consists of what he calls 'variations' – the theme being loss, decline, death. Such coherence as exists between these two querulous old men is expressed more through the rhythm of their dialogue than the content of their verbal exchanges, more through the stories they tell and repeat than through their actual relationship. They stage their lives as a kind of vaudeville act. Paula Vogel's five women exist in a similar situation. Death presses upon them. In its face they reminisce, tell stories, act out sexual fantasies for their clients but also for themselves, seeing significance in their roles as though they were still a vital part of the community which has effectively marginalised them, as much because of their age and economic circumstances as because of their profession. The very sexual currency in which they deal seems to offer itself as an antidote to death, except that, as they are made increasingly aware, there is no immunity from that.

As they die, one by one, so the story they tell is itself adjusted. They do not mourn, only gently regret, mourning serving only to recall what they would rather forget. Their prostitution no longer pays but it constitutes their identity, their claim to significance, evidence that they have not surrendered to their fate. The very absurdity of septuagenarian hustlers, however, serves to underline the desperate nature of the fiction to which they cling as they evidence what Samuel Beckett, referring to Proust's characters, called 'this long and desperate daily resistance before the perpetual exfoliation of personality'.<sup>9</sup> They invest both in the

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, *Proust: Three Dialogues* (London, 1965), p. 22.

fiction of their communality, their immunity from time, and also in the roles which they act out for those who seek to compensate for their own incapacities, eradicating their own fear of death through a sad parody of sexual performance.

In contrast to Mamet's characters, Vogel's do acknowledge death. It is allowed a place in their lexicon. It is simply that its meaning is drained of significance. When it occurs it does little more than necessitate a change in the schedule or provoke gratitude that it should have come to another first. As one of them remarks, 'I've been thinking all day: It's not me! It's not me! I'm still going strong' (*Baltimore Waltz*, p. 155). Two black-outs later, it is her. Beckett is not so far away.

As indicated above, the action takes place shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan, the oldest president ever elected and himself an actor. And some parallel is perhaps implied. When the right-wing Ursula, 'fond of adages with harsh, moralistic messages' (p. 130), insists that they need to re-shape their business to make it more cost effective, her slogan – 'He that is wise is he that is rich' – is clearly in tune with the times. This story of decline and decay, then, is perhaps not without its wider implications. As Mae, the madame of this stable of prostitutes, insists, 'Remember, President Reagan has called on all Americans to reduce the deficit, and to balance the budget. We can start here' (p. 148).

The play is structured around a slow dissolution, as one by one the women die. Memories, enacted fantasies, gestures of compassion, are finally insufficient to stave off the logic which leads inexorably to death. Their alliance is broken, their lives forfeit. The play ends with a Beckettian image as the youngest of the five, seventy-two-year-old Vera, sits alone on a bench, staring into a radically foreshortened future, deprived of the conversations which sustained her, stripped of the fictions in which she and her customers took refuge from the evidence of their mortality, and the function which gave factitious meaning to her life. There is, Vogel instructs in a stage direction, 'a quick black-out. When the lights come back up, we see Vera, sitting alone in the middle of the bench. She just sits, plaintively quiet, at times watching the traffic. But she sits still, looking very frail, and a bit frightened. There is a slow fade-out' (p. 172). Dispossessed of her home (she, like the women who in part prompted the play, has been thrown out by her landlord), of her friends and her profession, she is face to face with her mortality, her life drained of meaning.

There is, perhaps, a feeling of nostalgia in *The Oldest Profession*, a sense of a past in which order and purpose seemed to inhere, and yet that past

already contained the seeds of its own collapse. It is a play which, like Tennessee Williams's drama, places time and its ironies at the centre of attention, which dramatises the losing battle between love, or perhaps more patently, fiction, and the deconstructive logic of time. Yet fiction, too, has its logic. There are endings to stories. *Desdemona* and *The Oldest Profession* may stop just short of that finality, a finality which is one component of the absurd, yet it lies just beyond the final black-out, which is something more than a mere stage direction. It is that fact which creates the retrospective irony within which her characters live and which they struggle to invest with meaning, the fiction-making power of the imagination being the imperfect, flawed but necessary defence against anxiety, fear and, ultimately, absurdity, a fact which was to be most movingly, if humorously, demonstrated in *The Baltimore Waltz*, but which is evidenced in most of her plays, including *And Baby Makes Seven*.

If *Desdemona* was a response to Shakespeare and a 'rip off' from Wolfgang Bauer, *And Baby Makes Seven* (first staged in 1984 and re-staged in 1993 by the Circle Repertory Company) has echoes of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, at least in so far as it involves the creation of fantasy children. But in Vogel's play, as opposed to Albee's, these are given something approaching substance, and, though momentarily killed off, are finally resurrected. And where Albee's play is a purging of fantasy in the name of a concrete reality, Vogel's definition of reality incorporates fantasy, which is merely located at another point on the spectrum. Indeed, as she jokingly remarked of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 'what a shame they killed off their son. They could have had another wonderful ten years of marriage!'

In Vogel's play two lesbians cohabit with a gay man who has fathered a child by one of them. The needs expressed by the relationship between the three of them and the anxieties generated by those needs, as well as by the pregnancy and the approaching birth, lead them to create fantasy children who become the physical manifestations of those needs and anxieties. One, we are asked to believe, is a nine-year-old genius called Cecil – a part played by Anna; the other two are played by Ruth. Henri is an eight-year-old based on the figure from Albert Lamorisse's film, *The Red Balloon* (which Vogel had seen 'many, many times'), the other, Orphan McDermott, has supposedly been raised by wild dogs (the phenomenon of the wild child having always fascinated her). Beyond anything else, they seem jointly to represent the possibilities of the yet to be born child – the effete intellectual at one extreme, the romantic symbol or animal force at the other. Asked about the origins of the fantasy

children, Vogel has suggested that they may be seen as representing the libido, the id and the super-ego, 'though it was not that tidy!'

Whatever else it is, *And Baby Makes Seven* is not offered primarily as a portrait of a gay household or as a contribution to the debate about gay parenting, though it does address the question of the post-nuclear family. The fact is that the conventional family has been a staple of American drama as it has been an icon of American society, its tensions providing a means of exploring public myths and values as well as private attitudes. But that family was itself historically situated. The very vigour with which its centrality was announced in the 1980s, on both sides of the Atlantic, often by politicians whose own families were anything but functional, suggested the degree to which it was under pressure and hence, therefore, the society of which it had been seen as a foundation stone. The single parent might be treated with contempt by politicians, who saw such a phenomenon as evidence of the collapse of traditional values and a threat to public order; but it was becoming something more than a product of social pathology. Marriage itself was increasingly no longer seen as necessary to sanctify relationships or justify reproduction. The gay family may have attracted particular opprobrium, but any deviation from the norm was treated with suspicion, not least because the family was seen as a key to normative values.

It is tempting to say that Vogel herself had little reason to celebrate the nuclear family when her own had proved to be made of such fissionable material, but *And Baby Makes Seven* is not offered as a polemical work or in any way a direct critique of conventional roles. It is a comedy which acknowledges the problems of parenting, the pressure on relationships which children can exert and the anxieties which attach themselves to pregnancy, childbirth and the raising of children. It is these anxieties which lead her characters to generate fantasies and which implicitly impact on the structure of the play itself. As she has said:

I think the structure of the play *is* the meaning of the play. These three people are taking a journey, and it's a journey that a lot of people face at some point in their lives, which is that kind of insane crisis period just before you have a child, when you know your entire life will change but you're not sure how. There are no predictions. And there is that sense of high anxiety and great exuberance and hope, and fear. There is a sense of comic crisis in the structure of the play itself. (Bilowitz, 'Bringing Up Baby', p. 5)

The only polemical desire that drives the play is Vogel's hope that it will draw audiences in, that its comedy and invention will persuade those

who watch to explore aspects of themselves through staging the dilemma of those they believe remote from themselves, and that as a result 'we feel a sense of inclusion when we leave the theatre. I hope we . . . expand the boundaries of what we think parenting is. I always hope that the boundaries are a little . . . expanded at the end of any play' (Bilowit, 'Bringing Up Baby', pp. 5f.). Aware that 'people are finding alternative ways of making a family', that 'it's not "Father Knows Best" any more' and that 'it causes a lot of conflict for people who are trying to find ways of forming families', she insists that 'where there's conflict, there's comedy' (p. 5).

The play ostensibly begins with a precocious discussion of sex between three children in the dark. The nature of the children only becomes apparent as the prologue gives way to the first scene, in which Peter upbraids the two women for 'going into character' more frequently. Theirs had been a mutual decision to have an equal say in the raising of the child that Anna carries, but the fantasies which the women share have the effect of excluding him or forcing him into an unacceptable role – itself an expression of the exclusion men are liable to feel once pregnancy begins. His insistence that they address their anxieties directly rather than in this oblique way, however, carries less conviction when they point out that he himself pays a psychiatrist a hundred dollars an hour to accomplish the same objective.

Vogel readily admits that in some respects *And Baby Makes Seven* begins where *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* ends – with the killing of the fantasy children. At Peter's urging the women decide to eliminate their invented offspring to prepare for the birth of the real one. Much of the play's comedy turns on the elaborate plans to accomplish this, plans which are the more difficult to carry out since the children are played by the women who plan their destruction. And there is an element of circus or vaudeville in Vogel's play. Thus, at one moment Orphan and Henri fight over a sandwich. Since both roles are played by Anna, this involves what Vogel herself describes as 'a Dr Strangelove battle with her other hand'. There is, indeed, an element of slapstick in Vogel's work, a broad comedy which involves predictable punchlines and pay-offs.

The fact is that this trio constitute a comedy act. To some degree this is how they handle their awareness of the precarious nature of their relationship and their joint project. The sexual act which engenders the child is, of necessity, provoked by the fantasies of gay sex while their efforts to practise child care with a doll devolve into knockabout comedy as they parody the roles they are about to adopt. Peter slips away for sex

with male friends but returns to play out the role of father to the fantasy children, all of whom are male, as is the baby when it finally appears. Asked why the children were male Vogel answered, 'inside every woman is a little boy waiting to get out' (Bilowit, 'Bringing Up Baby', pp. 5f.), an ironic remark which may or may not reflect on the particular sexuality of her central women characters. Certainly she found herself attacked by some in the gay community for having her characters create male children. Her response was to insist that, 'I don't speak for all lesbians and I don't want to' (Druckman, 'A Playwright on the Edge', p. 6).

The killing of the fantasy children is akin to a writer's completion of a book. As Ruth remarks, 'I want to get my last inch of fantasy out of them. I can't just stop doing them, just like that . . . We're going to tidy up the plots. No loose ends dangling' (*Baltimore Waltz*, p. 84). And, indeed, the play is scattered with references to literary works, from *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* to *The Waste Land* and *Tea and Sympathy*. Orphan, raised by dogs, duly dies of rabies, while Henri, like his film namesake, is carried off by balloons. Cecil dies, like Brutus, falling on his sword, a further self-conscious literary reference. Indeed, *And Baby Makes Seven* is almost perversely metafictional. Not merely is the text littered with quotations but it proposes a parallel between the creation of a text and the creation of a child. Thus, Ruth insists on the right to deviate from the agreed plot: 'I don't see why we can't change the . . . the narrative at this point', only to be told by Anna that, 'we can't stop now. Not in the middle of the story' (*Baltimore Waltz*, p. 105).

The characters in this play are self-conscious performers, struggling to invest their roles with conviction, improvising their lives. As Cecil advises Peter, 'just make it up on your own, this father thing' (p. 113). In that sense, though, all parents are actors, all roles are performances, all lives improvisations. As Vogel has said, 'I think we all have imaginary children, in one form or another' (Bilowit, 'Bringing Up Baby', p. 5). Fantasy is not an alternative to experience but part of it. Life, like this play, is interlaced with fiction and, indeed, having killed off their fantasies, Peter, Ruth and Anna re-invent them rather than settle for a life untransformed by the imagination. The play ends as we become aware that this 'family' is in essence like all those which surround them in the city just beyond their apartment, as Vogel calls for what, in film terms, would be a reverse zoom. The essence of *And Baby Makes Seven*, indeed, is not the extent to which this trio differs from those other families but the extent to which they are the same. Their fantasies may take apparently more literal form, their anxieties attach themselves to uncertainties

which stem from the ostensible discrepancy between their sexuality and their desire to play conventional roles, but fantasy and anxiety are a common currency and playfulness, game-playing, fiction-making, a necessary component to lives generated out of shared necessities.

Vogel's narratives are fast-paced, fragmented, cinematic. Character and language are in part shaped by fantasy, whose authority is no less absolute and no less provisional than is reality itself, infiltrated as it is by fiction. There are few Vogel plays, indeed, which do not acknowledge the shaping power of such fictions, few which do not respond to, debate with, or incorporate the work of other writers whose own visions have shaped our way of perceiving the world, being themselves mechanisms for interpreting and understanding experience. Her texts are charged with a sexuality which is itself subject, objective correlative and a means of understanding the parameters of experience. Hers are plays in which language is as much subject as mechanism for constituting the world which it describes. All of which is true of the play that was to prove her breakthrough, the play that lifted her, finally, to national prominence: *The Baltimore Waltz*.

This takes as its ostensible subject a woman, Anna, who discovers that she is suffering from Acquired Toilet Disease, Vogel's ironically displaced version of AIDS. The play was provoked by the death of her brother, Carl, who died in January 1988. She had earlier declined an invitation to join him on a trip to Europe, not knowing that he was HIV positive and that the journey would have been their last together. The European journey at the heart of the play is thus that which they never made, a fantasy trip, a mock quest which, like most quests, derives its meaning not from realising its objective but from the journey itself.

From a personal point of view the writing of the play was a therapeutic gesture, a way of discharging a mixture of anger, regret, obligation, a means of coming to terms with the finality of death. Like most of Vogel's work it manages to combine pain and loss with humour as she braids the actual with the fantastic, shaking together emotional truth and imaginative perception, bizarre images, literary references, political allusions, satirical asides and private insights in a kaleidoscope of shifting patterns.

The play takes its tone and style from a letter that Paula's brother had sent to her two years earlier, detailing his suggested plans for a funeral/memorial service, an event that was to be part ceremony, part camp display, part celebration, an invitation to a continued friendship

beyond the grave. Wholly lacking in self-pity, this note and the death that followed, inspired a play that was likewise an oblique and comic account of a relationship, an emotional diary, a dream, an extended account of post-traumatic shock. David Savran rightly relates its central conceit to that deployed by Ambrose Bierce in 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge', in which the whole action takes place in the split second that it takes a hanged man's neck to snap. The shock of Carl's death sends Anna's mind into hyperdrive as she lives at the level of the imagination what cannot now be lived at the level of reality. In the case of Bierce, the device remains simply that, a puzzle which, once resolved, leaves no residue. Not so in the case of Paula Vogel. There is that same adrenaline rush of images held together by need (in Vogel's case a cascade of movie fragments, shards of fiction, travel books, private truths given public form, mysteries which find a tangible correlative, symbols become literal, the literal symbolic) but the difference lies in the ending, as it does in the pressure of acknowledged truth. The whirl of invention leads back to death, but the pain begins rather than ends with the moment of death. In *The Baltimore Waltz* fantasy is chosen rather than being involuntary as, at the play's conclusion, she justifies her own fictional transpositions by endorsing the fiction-making of her alter ego, Anna.

For the first time the tense changes to the past, Vogel learning, perhaps from Pinter, the power of a tense change. Anna and the Doctor exchange banalities, albeit banalities which, like the clichés of condolence letters, acknowledge the ultimate impotence of language in the face of death ('There was nothing we could do . . . Sometimes little things become important . . . there are worse ways to go . . . I never would have believed what sickness can do to the body . . . I wish I could do more' (*Baltimore Waltz*, pp. 56–7)).

The speed slows, the bizarre and the oblique give way to direct prose; the 'highly stylized, lush, dark and imaginative lighting' makes way for 'the hospital white silence of the last scene' (*Baltimore Waltz*, p. 6). The music which accompanies the play, and which is to express every cliché of the European experience as imagined by Hollywood, is stilled. An aesthetic of excess collapses, leaving Anna confronted with the reality that had sent her spinning into delusionary reverie, so that when she now chooses to embrace her brother and dance with him to a Strauss waltz the nature of the fantasy has changed. Their silent dance is an image of a relationship that no longer needs the full panoply of desperate invention. They meet in a fiction, to be sure, but that fiction now has a quiet

assurance. The music plays softly; the dance never ends. And what Anna accomplishes in the play Paula Vogel accomplishes with the play.

*The Baltimore Waltz* is a mechanism with which she attempted to neutralise the fact of death with fantasy, as her central character unknowingly also tries to do, to counter the power of the real by creating a story which brother and sister can mutually inhabit, as they can no longer inhabit a life. It invokes the imagination to redress the implacable power of the real, and not in vain since here, as in much of her work, the imagination is as implicated in the definition of that reality as are the blunt facts which seem to define its limits. Carl died; Paula Vogel resurrects him. His solitary trip to Europe becomes a mutual journey, if not into understanding then at least into the heart of a mystery which she thereby inhabits.

The play begins and ends in a Baltimore hospital. All that happens in between is an illusion, generated by the need which gives birth to that illusion. A surreal comedy, it is equally a moving account of the mind's struggle against the irremediable. An exuberant work, laced with a sense of menace, it offers a spiritual Baedeker that explores less the byways of the Europe through which it ostensibly moves, than the topography of need. Against a disease, parodied and caricatured, cut down to size, an ironic by-product of sexuality, it pitches a homoeopathic eroticism. This is a play in which pain is not so much denied as displaced. The imagination becomes the site of the celebration, a memorial, a camp display of the kind for which her brother had called. For at least the length of the play it is possible to go beyond the confines of the Baltimore hospital where a life was lost, retrieving that life imaginatively until, inevitably, that life must be lost again, in a circularity that is a mark of many of Vogel's plays, but this time with the grace of understanding, an epiphany that leaves brother and sister dancing a waltz, describing the circles which mirror a sad but sustaining fable in which alone they are never separated. Yet, in some senses, the loss is the greater for this reprieve in that the imagination can never escape the blunt facticity of that Baltimore hospital, merely translate it into different terms.

Paula Vogel leaves her brother his secrets, secrets which he smuggles through frontiers literal and symbolic. The correlative for these secrets takes the form of a toy rabbit that he carries and protects from prying eyes. Vogel uses her brother's real name for much the same reason that she wrote the play. She thereby keeps him alive, at least in memory. As she has explained, 'I put Carl in the play . . . but the truth is that Carl

isn't in the play. I used his name because I wanted to say "Carl" in the present tense.<sup>10</sup> The theatre, of course, itself operates in the present tense so that each production re-animates him and yet, as she suggests, not so in that his representation is also, inevitably, a reminder of his absence.

AIDS has inspired some solemn but moving plays, as well as others tinged with sentimentality or charged with anger. Tony Kushner has shown that it is entirely possible to generate brilliant images and camp extravaganzas which themselves become an antidote, as well as an indictment. The achievement of *Angels in America* was, in part, that while acknowledging the human cost, the reality of abandonment and betrayal, it could equally generate a redemptive energy born out of despair. Paula Vogel works in that spirit.

The disease exists not in its frightening and debilitating reality. We see nothing, for example, of Carl's decline. Instead, it exists in parodic form, a kindergarten illness striking not the marginal but a virginal school teacher who contracts it from toilet seats. Nonetheless, it prompts the same disregard from government, the same lack of priority in healthcare expenditure that AIDS received.

It is not until the final scene that we discover what prompted the action of the play. The rush away from America gains its meaning not just from our privileged knowledge of the European journey that Vogel failed to take, but our ultimate realisation that Anna would rather be anywhere than where she is, that there is an overpowering reason for the denial she feels. The Doctor's incapacity to intervene must be neutralised with other possibilities. The fact of death must be countered by evidence of life. So, the Doctor, who spouts jargon and nonsense in roughly equal amounts, hints at a possible cure. This, in turn, blends with a memory of *The Third Man*, whose unscrupulous Harry Lime had been involved with the then miracle cure, penicillin. For Vogel he is part crook, part doctor, wearing the latex gloves of that profession while spouting lines from the movie. At one time she toyed with the idea of making him the originator of AIDS, the first propagator and victim. Beyond him, lies another mysterious figure, the charlatan Dr Todesrachen (German for 'death rattle'), who drinks his own urine.

Vogel permits herself a flash of anger when she has Carl complain that 'if just one grandchild of George Bush caught this thing . . . that would be the last we'd hear about the space program' (*Baltimore Waltz*,

<sup>10</sup> *Rhode Island Monthly* (May 1998), p. 113.

p. 12), but this is not, for the most part, a play that rails against political indifference or, finally, a disease which hardly invites dialogue. This is not to deny the anger, as well as the pain, that prompted the play. Indeed, she told Gayle Detwailer, of *The Baltimore Gay Paper*, that the play was written out of rage, the rage that she felt whenever she heard the phrase 'innocent victim', as if there were those who invited and hence deserved the disease and those who acquired it innocently. Acquired Toilet Disease is her ironic response to such a notion.

Vogel has suggested that she would have contributed to the AIDS memorial quilt had she only been able to sew. *The Baltimore Waltz* was her substitute for that quilt. Whatever anger generated the play, however, is sublimated in a work about loss and the mechanisms we employ to reconcile ourselves to it, about the struggle to understand and to translate other people's experiences into terms that we can ourselves understand.

Indeed, a series of language lessons run through the play, attempts to translate from one language to another and, implicitly, one experience into another. A lesson in pronouns and the possessive case raises questions of responsibility and suggests the shared nature of apparently private experiences. Thus Anna offers as an example an ironic declension of the verb to do: 'There's nothing I can do. There's nothing you can do. There's nothing he, she or it can do. There's nothing you can do. There's nothing we can do. There's nothing they can do' (*Baltimore Waltz*, p. 14). Later, the Third Man speaks of the verb *verlassen*, whose translation is a reminder of the absent subject which generates this play, a verb meaning to leave, to abandon, to forsake. His conjugation of the verb is a further reminder of what was lost, what is lost and what will continue to be lost.

Anna's loss is underscored as slides of her European tour turn out to be images of Baltimore which culminate, with a terrible inevitability, in pictures of the hospital as she is drawn back to the fact she would escape, the loss she would deny. She desperately tries to re-animate her dead brother, in a parody of resuscitation: '*suddenly, like the doll in E.T.A.Hoffman, the body of Carl becomes animated, but with a strange, automatic life of its own. Carl begins to waltz with Anna. Gradually, he winds down, and faltering, falls back on the bed*' (p. 56). Finally, however, and now in full knowledge of what has happened, they dance once again, Anna opting to sustain her relationship with her brother in the world of fantasy as Vogel sustains her relationship with her brother through the medium of fiction, writing *The Baltimore Waltz* and thereby creating a story in which their fates are conjoined.

If that play was in part inspired by anger, as well as a welter of other emotions, so, too, was her next, *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, directed in workshop at the Circle Repertory Theatre in 1993 and given its first production by the American Repertory Theatre the following year.

In part it was a play written as a response to what she regarded as a deliberate affront. At the urging of Senator Jesse Helms, all recipients of the National Endowment for the Arts fellowships were required to sign an obscenity pledge, agreeing that they would not create art that might cause offence to the community. Vogel's response was predictable. She applied for and won an NEA award and proceeded to write a play about an act of extreme violence in which one of her characters is a writer of pornography, as Mac Wellman wrote the provocatively entitled *Seven Blow Jobs*, which she has acknowledged as an influence, sending a copy to Jesse Helms with a note thanking him for his work in destroying civil rights. But the play was also a response to a greater affront. She became aware of the extent of domestic violence, having witnessed an instance of this and collected a dossier of such incidents in her home city of Providence. She has noted, moreover, that the première of her play came just two months before the murder of Nicole Simpson, herself the acknowledged victim of domestic violence.

Ironically, her play had as much difficulty finding a stage as its subject did in receiving acknowledgement in society. Indeed, she saw her own problem in securing productions as evidence of self-censorship in a theatre that seemed, to her, to have made its peace with those who wished to deny what they should have confronted. 'We have', she insisted, 'drifted to the Right in our seasonal offerings of benign and often vacuous theatre: boulevard theatre (now termed "classic") of the 1930s to 1950s; new comedies in the 90s written within the mode of *Harvey*; and an occasional political drama imported from South Africa or England to expiate our own lack of moral courage' (*The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays*, p. 230). *Hot 'N' Throbbing* falls uneasily into such a repertoire, and was designed to do so.

But this is not a play which offers itself as a ritual denunciation of male violence. It treads dangerous ground, exploring, as it does, the link between sexuality and violence, eroticism and pornography. It addresses the question of female fantasies, the link between an announced autonomy and a decision, by some women, to embrace rather than reject an erotic aesthetic, albeit, as in this play, as an aspect of economic necessity as well as of a claimed freedom.

The author Elizabeth Wurtzel traces the link between romantic love and what is offered as a tender cruelty. She recalls Cathy's bruised skin, marked by Heathcliff's fierce embrace in *Wuthering Heights*, Rhett Butler's slapping of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, the Crystals' hit single produced by alleged wife-beater Phil Spector and co-written by feminist Carole King, which had the catchy refrain, 'He hit me, and it felt like a kiss'. She notes Cora's scream to 'Bite me! Bite me!' in James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and, indeed, Nicole Simpson's attempts to return to the man who had brutalised and stalked her. 'Violence in love', she suggests, 'is deeply instinctive, creating covalent bonds between sweetness and cruelty; it is the most direct metaphor for complicated, crazy love, which is why good feminists and old-fashioned moralists alike, find themselves drawn into the meaning of its allure.'<sup>11</sup> Wurtzel is fascinated not merely by the collusive attitude which she identifies in some women, but a hunger which goes beyond simple tolerance for images which combine brutality and love in a culture which apotheosises equally female beauty and male violence. It is into this minefield that Paul Vogel stepped with *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, a play which takes her enquiry into the relationship between sex and violence rather further than Wurtzel's, in some respects recalling the Bauer play that had earlier influenced *Desdemona*.

The action of the play takes place under two different sets of lighting conditions: stage lights and blue lights. Vogel has insisted that 'I would not believe ANYTHING in *Hot 'N' Throbbing* that takes place under blue light . . . like Peter Shaffer's *Black Comedy*, the stage lights are a device to separate stage worlds: the blue lights signify a stage fantasy that is not literally true, and all texts should be suspect when there are blue stage lights indicated.'

*Hot 'N' Throbbing*, a play in which 'women . . . are screens on to which are projected males fantasies', concerns a dysfunctional family. Charlene lives with her two teenage children, Leslie Ann and Calvin, having separated from her violent husband, Clyde, against whom she has obtained a restraining order. She keeps her family together by working as a story editor for the low-budget Gyno Productions, which specialises in what she likes to call 'women's erotica', but which seems indistinguishable from pornography. Leslie Ann seemingly follows in her mother's footsteps, slipping away to perform in the nearby nude dance hall. Calvin, meanwhile, is a voyeur, like his father who drops quarters in a peep show,

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Wurtzel, 'Murder in the Doll's House', *The Guardian Weekend* (9 May 1998), p. 18.

unable, again like his father, to relate to women except through the crude images of pornography. Again like his father, he turns women into fictions. As Vogel insists, 'Calvin makes up the story of his sister as an erotic dancer (to compete with his mother's making of erotic literature).' In fact, 'I think [Leslie Ann] is innocently with her girlfriends at a slumber party and driving around, and watching horror movies in someone's basement.'

There is, perhaps, something of David Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* here, except that in Vogel's play women as well as men generate sexual fantasies. The barely repressed tensions eventually leap across the void in their lives, as they do in Mamet's *Edmond*, in a spasm of violence which acts out the erotica Charlene has been composing and which seems necessary to Clyde, who now requires such a stimulus to achieve satisfaction. When her husband breaks into the family home, she shoots him in the 'butt' only subsequently to be murdered by him.

*Hot 'N' Throbbing* is challenging in its presumptions. Charlene falls victim to the fantasies which she, no less than her husband, fabricates. Her claim to autonomy turns on her production of a pornography which is itself essentially about power. The leap from language to action is underscored as the words Charlene writes on her word processor are amplified by a Voice-Over, a woman who dances in a glass booth, an embodiment of Charlene's inner voice, a projection of her thoughts as well as an extension of her erotic prose. Another Voice also presides over affairs, this time that of a man, infiltrating other perspectives – literary, psychological – directing the action, playing various roles from bouncer to peep show operator.

There is, of course, an irony in the fact that Charlene's autonomy rests in her generation of pornography, whose images and whose history are male dominated. And Vogel was fully aware of this: 'Absolutely . . . I feel very ambiguously about it . . . Charlene does become collusive. I think what I am trying to do is create female characters who are as flawed as male characters.' Yet, she insists, 'I feel about Charlene the same way I feel about Desdemona: had she slept with the entire camp she did not deserve that fate.'

The play ends with Charlene dead while the Voice (which throughout quotes from male authors of erotica, or, as Vogel suggests, 'what many might consider male pornographers') recites from Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses*, a male attempt to enter a female sensibility, to understand something of female sexuality and, as Vogel has said, 'frustrating for that reason'. Leslie Ann then enters and, as Vogel suggests, 'if

this play were a film script, we would see The Girl age before our eyes, transformed over the years from what she has just seen. The Girl dresses to the music.' Leslie Ann, who until now has been provocatively dressed, or hardly dressed at all, now 'puts on knee socks, and a long-sleeve shirt. Then thick jeans and, finally, running shoes. She arranges her hair tied back . . . She picks up the glasses The Woman wore and dons them' (*Baltimore Waltz*, p. 294) and begins to type a continuation of the script on which her mother had been working. Indeed the final lines are a direct mirroring of the opening ones.

The image is ambiguous. In one sense she deliberately de-feminises herself (as her mother, herself described as overweight, has done), avoiding the male gaze, refusing to be looked at, but also replicating her mother's actions, apparently learning nothing. As in LeRoi Jones's urban myth, *Dutchman*, the characters seem doomed to repeat the same mistake, enact the same roles. In another sense, she becomes the manipulator rather than the manipulated, except that in this play the two roles hardly seem to differ.

In some ways that ambiguity reaches out to the author, who also exposes her characters to degradation, displays the language of pornography, lays claim to an erotic aesthetic, even while revealing the roots of family violence as sexuality is transmuted into brutality. But that was part of the attraction for Vogel: 'that was the greatest irony and the thing that I enjoyed most about writing *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, that as a woman writer I was writing pornography and that being a pornographer was something that I enjoyed the most. I am not', she insisted, 'unconvinced by the notion of women writing erotic literature. The question is, can we control it, and that is where all the arguments make me uneasy. If we are talking about the dividing line between eroticism and pornography, it depends on the power position of who is writing.' In that context, however, Charlene is ambivalently placed, working, as she is in a male tradition, a fact underlined by the recitation from Joyce. For Vogel, that is, indeed, a problem: 'that's why I got lost in the play, because, as I started doing that, the structure that I chose was a kind of Chinese box and I couldn't find my way out . . . We are still using a legacy, a language, if you will, of male pornography while trying to transform it into female erotica.' But there is a more troubling circularity than this, troubling to the author, in that the play's cyclical nature seems to imply an hermetic, reiterative logic that is disturbingly deterministic, ending where it began: which is where, to me, after standing back and looking at it, having written *How I Learned to Drive*, I am going to go back – and here is what I feel in terms of erotica and pornography – the form tells the story. I have to change the form.

To me, the ending has the moral of the tale and I was very disturbed by the response of some of my younger students who found the play very painful because it said that there was no way out.

Speaking shortly before the London opening of *How I Learned to Drive*, she outlined her intention of re-writing the play:

I'm thinking right now that I will change the ending. The ending of the play is going to be the daughter dressing (also hiding her body) in academic dress – skirt, silk blouse with scarf, possibly pearls – and she will be giving her keynote address as a professor of critical legal studies in domestic violence and talking about language and the law. In terms of the problematising of language it seems to offer one more layer.

It was an ending in part inspired by the murder of a woman professor, with a similar specialism, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after Vogel's reading of *The Baltimore Waltz*. Beyond a recognition of this woman, however, the changed ending was designed to show the possibility of breaking the cycle of violence, of identifying a language and a mechanism for understanding that violence and hence obviating it.

There is, however, one further twist, one further irony in *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, for the fact is that this is a text which implicates the audience, itself invited to collude in the voyeurism which is its apparent subject but then led, by a seemingly inexorable logic, to the violence which provides its climax.

Vogel has a tendency to compose to music and something of the tone and rhythm of that music is reflected in her plays. Here, as she explains, she wrote to the sound of Janet Jackson's *Control* and Kuoma's *World Beat* in the early scenes, and Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and the sound-track to *The Silence of the Lambs*, in the later ones, a change, as she puts it, from the erotic to the 'terrorific'. In a similar way, the play, again like her other work, is powered by cinematic jump cuts, bursts of action, transposed viewpoints, as though the whole action were contained within a film of a kind which is its ostensible subject. Thus Charlene and Clyde end by performing (and none too convincingly) within a movie (remarkably like the one in Bauer's *Shakespeare the Sadist*) whose clichés reflect those of the texts which shape alike Charlene's erotic screenplays and Clyde's own barely articulated fantasies.

There is something of Sam Shepard here in the gulf between men and women, in the brutality of the former and the brutalised nature of the latter, something, perhaps, of *The Curse of the Starving Classes* or *A Lie of the Mind*. Some unbridgeable gulf seems to open between the genders, who may be victims of the same sexual compulsions but who share

nothing but that need. They see the world differently, inhabit different myths, propose different roles for themselves. These are characters who have reduced their lives to a single focus, drawn to the thing which destroys them. In search of the archetype, Vogel flirts with the stereotype but, then, hers are characters who are, at times, no less two-dimensional than the fictions which they elaborate or to which they are drawn. They are actors performing their lives in a culture which itself, as in *The Mineola Twins*, stages its own drama, enacts its own myths, performs a national drama.

*The Mineola Twins*, which opened at the Perseverance Theatre in Douglas, Alaska, in 1996 and at Trinity Repertory Company in Providence the following year, takes the audience on a journey from Eisenhower's America to the time of the Bush administration, from nuclear paranoia to bone-deep conservatism. A mock morality tale, it features twin sisters, Myrna and Myra, one big-breasted (Vogel published *The Mineola Twins*, together with *How I Learned to Drive*, under the combined title *The Mammary Plays*<sup>12</sup>), naive, conservative, the other flat-chested, worldly-wise and radical. Since both are played by the same actress (their sons being played by the same actor), the implication seems to be that we are seeing two aspects of a divided sensibility and beyond that two aspects of a divided nation.

The play begins with the girls at seventeen. Myrna is going steady with Jim, who works in an advertising agency, while her sister hangs out with suspect young men and works as a 'so-called cocktail waitress!' in a roadside 'tavern of ill-repute'. Prudish and sanctimonious, Myrna, who is working for her Homemakers of America Senior Award, insists that her sister threatens the family's good name in the 'small but decent town' in which they live, a place so dull that the Red Scare has passed it by. Myrna is a parodic version of the 1950s housewife, planning meals to cook for her executive husband while picking up typing skills to take dictation from him as he plans his inevitable rise. Her sister plots a different future. Described by her barely articulate father as 'a whore of Babylon', she casually seduces her sister's fiancée by offering him the sexual favours which the puritanical Myrna is bound to refuse him.

*The Mineola Twins* offers a comic-book version of American history, an ironic account of the changing manners and morals, commitments and self-deceits, ideologies and betrayals of thirty years of the Republic. The twins constitute a Manichaean paradigm, mirror images of one another

<sup>12</sup> Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays* (New York, 1998).

— one deeply conservative, the other instinctively radical. Myra is a rebel without a cause, a bohemian for whom Greenwich Village is a mecca, the transition to 1960s radicalism being an easy segue for such a spiritual anarchist. She is ‘making it up from scratch. No marriage. No children. No suburbs. Just freedom!’ (*The Mammary Plays*, p. 122). Jim, meanwhile, who sees his moral world collapsing, clings to the idea of his existential freedom, his cultural centrality, believing that ‘girls are born the way they are. Men *become*’ (p. 125).

By 1968, Myrna has rejected Jim, raised a son, Kenny, worked for the Nixon for President Campaign and watched as her sister raids a local bank where Jim is now a petty clerk. Still suffering from the effects of electro-convulsive treatment, she finds herself occasionally sporting dangerous beliefs, berating her son for his failure to understand moral relativity, before snapping back into her familiar faith. She reciprocates for her sister’s having committed her to a mental hospital by informing the FBI of Myra’s whereabouts.

Two decades later, Myra, after five years in prison, has become a lesbian while Myrna has become a right-wing radio shock-jock, publishing her book, *Profiles of Chastity*, and bombing her sister’s abortion clinic. The twins represent two different Americas joined by violence. Deeply intolerant of one another they are locked in a deadly embrace in what Vogel herself sees as a melodrama in which the stereotypes are driven to the point of exhaustion.

Vogel’s next play was, like a number of her works, inspired by another text, in this case David Mamet’s *Oleanna*, a play which purported to create a balance between its two characters, one male, one female. At university she had begun a doctoral thesis, later abandoned, on successful plays with controversial subjects which managed to sustain a sense of tension between contending values. Earlier examples had been *The London Cuckold* and *The Octoroon*. There appeared to be no modern equivalent. She now set out to write one, a play which also engaged the idea of negative empathy.

Speaking of Joe Christmas, in *Light in August*, William Faulkner once remarked that his tragedy was that he did not know who he was. It is tempting to say the same of Peck in *How I Learned to Drive*, a play whose ostensible concern with child abuse and paedophilia can too easily distract from a subtle portrait of two people who bear the burden of their own nature and come to an understanding of themselves only by degrees. *How I Learned to Drive* was inspired in part by Vogel’s admiration

for Nabokov's *Lolita*, which is also scarcely about abuse and whose moral ambivalence and account of shifting patterns of power and consciousness appealed to Vogel, whose own work has always shown a bias in favour of the oblique, the tangential, the ambivalent. As she has said, 'I must have read that book a half dozen times since high school . . . It was fascinating to me because it was so even handed and so neutral.'<sup>13</sup> She wished, she continued, to see whether it was possible for a woman to approach this territory and retain that neutrality – a neutrality which she felt was likely to inspire hostile reviews, more especially when the morality of child abuse was seldom out of the news and political correctness threatened to inhibit those who wished to do something more than echo an understandable indignation.

The problem was that indignation could easily make attempts at understanding seem merely collusive. The fact that the play did not spark such a response was a testament in part to its dramatic strategy. Nonetheless, the play was staged against the background of a major paedophile scandal in Belgium while the London production, in 1998, opened in the middle of a public debate over the morality of Adrian Lyne's film version of *Lolita*, of whose impending release Vogel had known nothing while writing the play. As she remarked, 'In this time of political correctness . . . you have to go against the grain. If the audience don't embrace both sides of an issue, there can be no real political dialogue . . . In my sense of political, you can never be politically correct. To be political means to open up a dialogue, not to be "correct"' (Druckman, 'A Playwright on the Edge', H6).

In fact, unlike Joe Christmas, Peck does have an intimation of those qualities in himself which both draw him to his young niece and urge him to warn her against the very power he wishes to exercise over her. What remains closed to him is the nature of the force which makes them vulnerable to one another, and the source of the passion which simultaneously tortures and transfigures him.

Indeed it would be surprising, given her previous work and her natural sympathies, had Vogel chosen simply to indict a man who is an outsider, struggling to understand the nature of his sexuality. Not the least astonishing aspect of the play is that it is a genuine love story in which love finds its apotheosis not in consummation but sacrifice. It is undeniably a play about a sexual relationship (unconsummated) between a young girl and a man, but while exposing the mechanisms of

<sup>13</sup> *Playbill*, Century Theatre.

seduction and forcing the audience to confront its reality, Vogel is not content simply to condemn or sentimentalise. ‘Critics’, she noted, ‘have said that this is a play about pedophilia, but I think the relationship between these two characters is more complex than that’ (*Playbill*, Century Theatre). She herself only uses the word paedophile once, and that in a stage direction. Asked if it was in her mind when writing the play she replied, ‘I didn’t have it in my mind at all. The first time it was said to me was by Molly Smith, Artistic Director at the Perseverance Theatre, Alaska. It stopped me because I hadn’t thought about it at all. I think I wanted this play to suspend those kinds of judgement as long as possible.’ What she wanted, she explained, was ‘to create a man who was, in a way, a love object to a woman as subject. I wanted the arrows to reverse themselves in the course of the play.’

Peck is an attractive man in his forties. He should, Vogel instructs, and despite what she calls ‘a few problems’, be played by an actor one might cast in the role of Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, hence his name (Gregory Peck playing that role in the movie). Li’l Bit is by turns a woman in her thirties or forties and a prematurely developed young girl seen at various moments from the age of eleven through her twenties. The action takes place in suburban Maryland, described by the older Li’l Bit as near the crumbling concrete of US One, which ‘winds its way past one-room revival churches, the porno drive-in, and boarded up motels with For Sale signs tumbling down’. Once there had been another Maryland, ‘before the Malls took over’, but even then innocence had been tainted: ‘This countryside was once dotted with farmhouses – from their porches you could have witnessed the Civil War raging in the front fields’ (*The Mammary Plays*, p. 7). This is a moralised landscape, invested with the qualities of a country whose own insistent innocence had itself never been entirely plausible, never quite realised. *How I Learned to Drive*, indeed, is surely in part about an America which struggles to sustain notions of innocence, spiritual concern and family values while flooding its consciousness with sexual titillation: a cheer-leader culture of pre-pubescent beauty pageants, eroticised movies and advertisements, as though sex were a language in which it is necessary to become fluent as soon as possible. In such a context, moral affront at Lolita-like affairs becomes more difficult to sustain or at least more profoundly ambiguous.

Vogel, indeed, establishes this wider context for the relationship between Peck and Li’l Bit. Even her name, it seems, is sexually derived. Indeed, as she explains, hers is a family in which everyone’s nickname is

a sexual reference and in which she has long suffered sexual taunts, a practice which Vogel insists is not exclusively a function of what some have mistakenly taken to be a hill-billy family ('I'm concerned that what some people see as coming across is *Tobacco Road*. I don't think it's class-oriented and it's not Maryland as opposed to Massachusetts. I didn't intend them to be hick. I think families do this'). Ironically, it is only Peck who takes her seriously, who understands something of her anguish.

The audience's attitude to Peck, and to his relationship with Li'l Bit, is in part shaped by the fact of the play's broken chronology. The first scene finds the young girl at seventeen, 'going on eighteen', allowing what Blanche DuBois (who herself conducts affairs with teenage boys) would have called 'little familiarities' at the hands of a man who is, admittedly, more than twice her age. Despite the disproportion between their ages, however, this seems a relationship which if disturbing is relaxed and not overtly exploitative. Though hardly an innocent encounter it is presented as little more than a parodic teenage tryst. If the genders were reversed we would have *Tea and Sympathy*. Peck partly undresses and fondles Li'l Bit but Vogel instructs that this is to be performed in mime while the mock solemnity with which it is enacted – 'Sacred music, organ music or a boys' choir' (*The Mammary Plays*, p. 12) swells as she permits the intimacies – defuses its potential for affront. If anything, power seems to reside with the young woman and not the man whose behaviour makes him seem younger than he is, and more dependent.

In *How I Learned to Drive* we see the effect before we understand the cause, detect the trauma before being told its root. We learn early that at eighteen Li'l Bit leaves college for a string of dead-end jobs because of her fondness for alcohol, spending the nights driving through the countryside 'thinking just one notch of the steering wheel would be all it would take' (p. 21) to end it all. However, it takes much of the play to understand what lies behind this suicidal impulse.

Meanwhile, though Peck damages Li'l Bit, she is his lifeline, all that stops him free-falling towards death, and despite his calculated seduction of a vulnerable girl he still offers her an understanding that no one else in her family cares to do, and, ultimately, warns her against himself, thus surrendering the one thing that holds him back from despair, an action that has led Vogel to call him 'heroic'. As Vogel observed, 'I see him as teaching her ego formation, as giving her the tools to grow up and reject him and destroy him.'

Peck never forces himself on Li'l Bit, though he plots his campaign

with the skill of a practised seducer and there are suggestions that she has not been his only victim. When she storms out of the family home in a teenage fury Peck's wife, Aunt Mary, observes that 'Peck's so good with them when they get to be this age' (*The Mammary Plays*, p. 19), while his approach to the weeping girl is described in a stage note to be 'like stalking a deer'.

His method is obliquely exposed in what is one of the most disturbing scenes in the play, when he describes a fishing trip back in South Carolina with a young male cousin. His strategy with fish mirrors that which he adopts with the young woman he desires: 'they're very shy, mercurial, fish. Takes patience and psychology. You have to believe it doesn't matter if you catch one or not . . . you don't want to get close – they're frisky and shy little things . . . easy, reel and then net – let it play.' And when the fish is landed his comments to his young cousin are a displaced version of his relationship with the young Li'l Bit: 'I don't want you to feel ashamed about crying. I'm not going to tell anyone, okay? I can keep secrets . . . There's nothing you could do that would make me feel ashamed of you . . . you can't tell anybody . . . least of all your mom or your sisters. This is something special between you and me' (pp. 34–5). It is Peck's apparently genuine gentleness combined with his patient cunning that is the source of his seductive power. He is driven by his sexual need but that very need gives him an insight into the vulnerabilities of others.

For Vogel, it is clear that Peck does molest his young cousin. Indeed she saw his equal attraction to young girls and boys as a necessary counterbalance to assumptions that paedophiles are gay: 'it is the age that is the attraction, not the gender'. When she was invited to delete the scene she insisted on retaining it, not least because she felt she owed a debt to her gay brother to clarify what she saw as a slur on gay men. At the same time the scene had not featured in her own outline for the play. It was a product of the process of writing, but it gave her and the audience what she came to feel was a crucial sense of distance, and became a vital element in the drama.

Vogel reminds her audience of the arbitrariness of the lines drawn by society. What is legitimate at eighteen is statutory rape at the age of seventeen. As Li'l Bit's grandmother reminds her daughter, 'It was legal, what Daddy and I did! I was fourteen and in those days, fourteen was a grown-up woman' (p. 37). As a gay writer Vogel knows all too well the capricious nature of sexual prohibitions. But, as the play progresses so she raises the stakes and the audience is forced to revise its reaction to

the early scene, forced to question its liberal or sentimental response as Li'l Bit becomes first seventeen, then sixteen, then fifteen and, finally, eleven. If the line was not crossed in the opening scene then it is later and we are led, little by little, into the heart of that darkness, a darkness which Li'l Bit herself, however, eventually begins to understand or at least to find echoed in her own experience.

At the age of twenty-seven she experiences the same thrill that she imagines, in retrospect, Peck must have felt as she meets a teenage boy on a bus and seduces him, staging a drama in which she is author, director and principal actor: 'dramatically speaking', she explains,

after the faltering and slightly comical 'first act', there was the very briefest of intermissions, and an extremely capable and forceful and *sustained* discussion – I lay on my back in the dark and I thought about you, Uncle Peck. Oh. Oh – this is the allure. Being older. Being the first. Being the translator, the teacher, the epicure, the already jaded. This is how the giver gets taken. (p. 40)

In one sense this could be seen as an account of how abused becomes abuser but it is equally an attempt to understand the seductiveness of seduction, the allure of innocence, the compelling nature of power, the fascination that lies in devising a plot that will enfold another's life. And the fact that Vogel chooses a theatrical metaphor is, perhaps, not without its significance in that the playwright, too, deals in the manipulation of emotions, the seduction of others. She, too, takes her audience to places they have not been, exposes them to experiences which threaten their composure, moral assurance and, ultimately, therefore, innocence. She, too, works by stealth. The description of Peck's fishing technique could, indeed, be seen as an account of her own dramatic strategy in *How I Learned to Drive*: 'reel and then net – let it play'.

As the play's title suggests, the principal metaphor is that of the driving lesson. On a literal level it is this that enables Peck to secure time alone with Li'l Bit. But beyond this it charts their developing relationship and Li'l Bit's increasing autonomy. When Peck insists that 'when you are driving, your life is in your own two hands' (p. 50), he is offering her a lesson in responsibility for her own life. When he speaks of the power it conveys, he is explaining the necessity for her to realise her own strength. Most significantly, when he instructs her in the need to 'think what the other guy is going to do before he does it' (p. 50), this is something more than a piece of roadcraft advice. It is, we later realise, a genuine warning against his own planned action, a moment of honesty, a proffered grace. To think ahead, he insists, is to be the only one to survive an impending disaster. Indeed it is tempting to think that perhaps

Peck has summoned Li'l Bit into being, or at least forged her into a weapon against himself, precisely to be his nemesis, to punish himself for past, present and future sins. Certainly he trains her to survive without him while simultaneously struggling to hold on to her.

Throughout the play, a Voice, of 'the type . . . that driver education films employ' (p. 5), offers a commentary on driver skills which likewise comments, often ironically, on Li'l Bit's unfolding relationship with Peck. Thus, at this moment, it remarks that 'Good defensive driving involves mental and physical preparation' and asks *Are you prepared?* Another Voice immediately adds: 'You and the Reverse Gear' (p. 51). Li'l Bit does not go into reverse any more than does Peck and the drive (automotive and sexual) continues, as does the journey on which they are, apparently mutually, engaged. The question *Are you prepared?*, however, echoes throughout the text.

The references to driving thus apply as much to Li'l Bit's relationship with Peck as to road safety awareness, and that fact is underlined by phrases which implicitly comment on the unfolding action: Idling in Neutral Gear, Shifting Forward from First Gear to Second Gear, You and the Reverse Gear (the last displayed as the action moves back into the past), *Vehicle failure* (displayed as Li'l Bit is incapacitated by drink), *Implied consent*, *Children depend on you to watch them*. These comments, in turn, are accompanied by projected signs with equally evident ambiguities: Slow Children, Dangerous Curves, One Way. Indeed, this parallel even infiltrates the stage directions, Vogel referring to Li'l Bit and Peck as 'running out of gas', a phrase glossed as meaning 'running out of small talk' (p. 79).

Where does responsibility lie in this relationship? Clearly with Peck, but there is a level at which Li'l Bit colludes. There is, in the words of the Voice, an 'Implied consent' (p. 66), and this is where the play treads dangerous ground. Plainly in *Lolita* the young girl is a knowing collaborator in her own seduction. In Vogel's play she is led to such implied consent by Peck's seductive skills, but also by their shared sense of exclusion. She responds to his evident need as he in turn offers her understanding. He exploits her youth and innocence, damages her, but also, in his own terms, seeks her consent and will not transgress the terms of that consent. He indulges his own needs, subordinating hers to his, rationalising his behaviour, and yet, finally, hands her back her life at ultimate cost to himself. Nothing he does justifies his actions but his own vulnerabilities are real. There is a kind of innocence even at the centre of his corrupting power, for there is no reason to doubt that at the heart

of his obsession there is love, as at the heart of his love there is obsession.

Yet even as the audience is itself seduced by Peck's manner, so Vogel increases the tension. The man and the seventeen-year-old girl fooling around in a car become the uncle and his thirteen-year-old niece, she posing nude for him in the basement of the family home. She in turn becomes an eleven-year-old girl whose nascent breasts are fondled. Slowly, and by stealth, Vogel has raised the stakes, peeled away the layers of sentimentality and self-deceit, until we are face to face with the thing itself. Yet even now this is not presented as simple assault, though the law would rightly designate it as such. It is a moment whose meaning is in some ways coloured by what goes before, by our knowledge, still limited, but already ambivalent, of the path this relationship is to follow.

There are no threats; there is no violence. It is more subtle and insidious than that, but also more gentle, more compassionate. Vogel reveals the vulnerability of the child but also the pathos of the man. The young Li'l Bit draws lines which he is obliged to respect. The audience do likewise and suddenly find themselves on the wrong side of that line, forced to reconsider their reactions to the earlier scenes, forced, too, to ask questions about the wider context of this drama.

The fact is that the photo shoot itself takes place against a background of other projected pictures, from *Playboy* and Calvin Klein ads, to images of Lewis Carroll's Alice Liddell. In other words there is a context for the eroticisation of children no less than of women, a legitimising in cultural terms for what, on an individual level, is seen as deeply suspect. 'A tag line I had when working on the play', she has explained, was that 'it takes a village to molest a child. In many senses I wanted to document how children become aware of sex, how sexual information is acquired in the culture.' The poses which Peck persuades Li'l Bit to assume are themselves shaped by a library of images constituted by the world of advertising and soft porn. And yet, as the image of Alice Liddell suggests, there is an unexplored ambivalence in such images of children as there is a fascination with the moment when innocence turns to experience. For Benjy and Quentin in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* it is a process that must be stopped, the organic carrying its own threat. For Peck it must be speeded up as he seeks to invigorate his own life, a life already touched with despair and foreboding, as he yearns for the legitimising moment when Li'l Bit will turn eighteen, though the logic of his paedophilia should make him regret her progress towards maturity. The law makes clear pronouncements, fixing the age of consent at a culturally

acceptable moment, but as Li'l Bit's grandmother reminds her, the law and biology are not the same. Peck is a damaged man. Behind him, in the war maybe, lies some kind of trauma, not to be explored, not to be admitted. Or perhaps it is not the war, for as Li'l Bit wonders when he has died, 'Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?' (*The Mammary Plays*, p. 86). (In a planned film version a jump cut is to return us to this moment as recalled by Peck, though not necessarily with the force of reality.) Perhaps that is too pat a solution, a turning wheel of abuse suffered and abuse enacted. Perhaps Li'l Bit is looking for a reason within her own experience and the void at his heart was really caused by something else. The fact is, indeed, that Vogel felt guilty at proposing a closed system from which there was no escape: hence an ending in which Li'l Bit will light out for the territory.

Meanwhile, beneath his practical competency, his air of quiet assurance, Peck is plainly lonely and disturbed, driven by demons he can neither name nor defeat. His wife can do nothing to address his needs. Aware of his relationship with their niece, she sees it as a temporary infatuation inspired by a manipulative girl. Yet whatever pain lies at the heart of Peck's life all she can offer is domesticity, routine and what she imagines to be a restorative banality, as if this man could settle for something as prosaic as that. She lives with a stranger and seems to understand nothing beyond the fact of his suffering. The plight of her niece, meanwhile, matters not at all. She offers less love than a baffled and frustrated attempt at understanding.

Li'l Bit, by contrast, does care for Peck. On their last encounter in an hotel we are told that she is 'half wanting to run, half wanting to get it over with, half wanting to be held by him' (p. 81). She comes close to kissing him but tears herself away. He is destroyed. The lifeline cut, he is, finally, lost. As Li'l Bit explains: 'It took my uncle seven years to drink himself to death. First he lost his job, then his wife, and finally his driver's license. He retreated to his house, and had his bottles delivered' (p. 85). The loss of his driver's licence is simultaneously a fact and a symbol as he loses that power over his direction, that command of his life, which he had once tried to teach the young girl he both abused and loved as they sat side by side and he taught her the ambiguous lessons of life.

Nor is Li'l Bit shown as ultimately damaged. This is not an accusatory play. Indeed, it ends on a note of reconciliation. As Li'l Bit drives off in her car, in the final scene, she looks in her rear-view mirror and smiles at the spirit of Peck who sits behind her. She is now in charge of the car. She did, in the end, accept his advice and anticipated the problems

coming towards her. She is, as he had urged her to be, the only one to survive the accident. She floors the accelerator and drives off into her future, no longer haunted by the ghosts that she has chosen to accept as companions on her journey. And significantly Peck is in the rear and not the front seat. He is in the back and not the front of her mind. In 1998 Vogel insisted that 'I am paying more and more attention these days to endings. The fact that Peck doesn't get out of it doesn't mean that she doesn't. I think that the ending of *How I Learned to Drive* came very much as a response to some of my students being crushed by the ending of *Hot 'N' Throbbing*. *How I Learned to Drive* was a response to this young woman who just sat and cried in my office.' This time there is a way out.

Vogel has talked of her alarm at the growth of a victim culture in the United States – the desire to shuffle off responsibility for one's life by locating some external cause for failure. 'I hate the word victim,' she has said. 'It's a buzz word people use these days. We're all victims just by virtue of being alive'. (Druckman, 'A Playwright on the Edge', H6). Li'l Bit's education is thus not only in the occasional cruelties and disabling selfishness of others, but the knowledge and acceptance of her ultimate responsibility for her own life. She comes to recognise in herself a desire for power as well as that unfocussed need which had characterised Peck, until he chose to focus it on a girl whose very innocence made her a *tabula rasa*, a place to inscribe his own desperation. She now drives her own car, accepts her memories, implicitly confesses to her own collusions, acknowledges her necessary cruelty in abandoning a man whose decline and death she thereby made inevitable. He, too, of course, finally accepts the price he has to pay. He never seeks to excuse his own actions, saying nothing of his wartime experiences, nothing derogatory of his wife. And if Li'l Bit learns from Peck how cruelly exploitative some people are she also learns their potential for something which perhaps could only be called love.

She learns that her own life consists of everything that has happened to her and that a life of blame or regret is no life at all. Ironically, she never accuses him of the crime which in truth he committed. Indeed, in some ways she devises the rules of the deeply suspect games they play. Even as a woman in her thirties (who, after all, narrates this play much as did Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*) revisiting her own past, she does so not to lay blame or make accusations but to understand her life so that she may live it without regret. As a result, the audience does not reject Peck but grants him his own pain, his own bruised dignity, his own curious courage in the face of feelings he struggles to contain. But they do so not

because of the man himself – manipulative, exploitative, dangerous but also compassionate, understanding, self-sacrificing – but because Li'l Bit accepts him in all his confusions and moral equivocations. The man we see is the man she reconstitutes in her memory. She declines the opportunity retrospectively to invent him as pure villain and herself as simple victim, and as a result can take her life in her hands and not, finally, cede it to another, not entomb herself in a myth that can only leave her the helpless product of circumstance, the residue of process and the result of abuse. As Vogel has said, 'I had no interest in a movie-of-the-week drama about child-molesting.' She wished, rather, 'to see if audiences will *allow* themselves to find this erotic; otherwise, they only see victimization without empowerment' (Druckman, 'A Playwright on the Edge', H6). To her, the essence of the play lay not simply in the fact of the relationship but its consequence. As she explained, 'it seems to me that one thing that gets left out when we're talking about trauma is the victim's responsibility to look the experience squarely in the eye and then to move on. That's the journey I wanted to craft here' (*Playbill*, Century Theatre).

*How I Learned to Drive* plays against our expectations. It seeks to go beyond the labels, the categories which do little to explain ourselves to ourselves. It is about a love affair which, if not mutual, nevertheless, and not entirely paradoxically, does have love on each side. It is about a man whose loneliness is too deep to be filled, who looks for consolation in the wrong place but loves enough eventually to release the object of that love, a man who inhabits a society that is itself deeply confused as to the role of sexuality. The music to which Vogel wrote the play and which she suggests should accompany the action, is, as she has said, 'rife with paedophilia', a word she seldom uses in interviews: 'Dream Baby', 'You're Sixteen', 'Little Surfer Girl', 'This Girl is a Woman Now', 'Come Back When You Grow Up'. Peck, in other words, is not some aberration, someone to be labelled and filed away. He inhabits an ambiguity that reaches out beyond the parameters of his own special need.

Whatever else it is, this is surely a play about love itself, as it is about the limits to mutuality, the shifting patterns of power in relationships, a need so great that it breeds the very vulnerability to which it seems to respond. There is a level, in other words, on which Li'l Bit and Peck are two people drawn together by their separate needs, who hold one another's lives in their hands, momentarily killing their loneliness by pooling it. There is exploitation here, selfishness, a disregard for consequence; there is emotional damage, desolation, despair as well as a fever of expectation, consolation and a transfiguring emotion. But so there is

in most relationships, and though Vogel is not going so far as simply to accommodate this particular relationship to the norm, neither is she content to allow moral absolutes to prevent her examination of those driven alike by despair and need, those who allow the intensity of that need to take them beyond the frontiers of the acceptable. The relationship between Li'l Bit and Peck is never consummated yet it is his memory that she allows to travel with her on her journey, not that of those others who degraded her in less obvious ways, not that of relatives who offered her contempt rather than the tainted but faithful love of a man who died alone by surrendering what was not his, finally, to claim.

Paula Vogel has herself chosen to travel the border territories, exploring lives which seem tangential to the thrust of her society. Stylistically, her plays reflect this commitment to crossing frontiers, moving around in time and space, often blending the real and the fantastic. But at their heart is a desire to understand, to incorporate. She brings a Whitmanesque inclusiveness and generosity of spirit to the theatre. If there is a risk, at times, of sentimentality, that is, for the most part, neutralised by humour or contained by the ironies which provide an undercurrent to practically everything she has written. At the same time she is not afraid of sentiment if we mean by that a willingness to acknowledge anxiety, pain, need, but equally the mechanisms we have devised to accommodate them, one of which, of course, is the act of writing itself.

## CHAPTER 9

### *Wendy Wasserstein*

Tom Stoppard has remarked that there is 'a deep suspicion among serious people of comic situations. The point is that good fun is merely frivolous.' Attacked by Edward Bond for being 'a clown in a charnel house', he was seen by some as unwilling to take seriously those issues which they saw as critical to the moment. Of his own work he remarked ironically, 'I used to have a redeeming streak of seriousness . . . and now I have a redeeming streak of frivolity.'<sup>1</sup> In fact, Stoppard has, throughout his career, been a moralist and if he has admitted to a lack of interest in either plot or character, on occasion switching lines from one character to another, he has been concerned to question the nature and extent of human freedom and (in *Night and Day*, *Hapgood* and *The Invention of Love*) the centrality of love. The fact that he is equally dedicated to humour should not deceive us into believing that he lacks moral concern.

Though Wendy Wasserstein comes from another tradition she shares both his confessed disabilities (also admitting to weaknesses of plot and, like Stoppard, transposing lines) and his wit, while suffering the same suspicions. She, too, if equally ironically, could claim that she has moved from seasoning comedy with seriousness to redeeming seriousness with wit. Certainly the gag-a-minute delivery of *Uncommon Women and Others* and *Isn't It Romantic* gives way to the more measured ironies of *The Heidi Chronicles*, *The Sisters Rosensweig* and *An American Daughter*. But where in England Stoppard could justifiably claim to be part of the mainstream, with Bond perhaps representing a more European strain, Wendy Wasserstein seems to relate to a history of comedy that invites audiences to see her as a vaudevillian, a Jewish comic, anxious to please, according to her critics, by disavowing the very principles that generate her subject matter.

In many ways comedy is a central tradition of British, and, indeed, Irish drama. From Wycherley and Farquhar through Wilde and Coward

<sup>1</sup> Paul Delaney, ed., *Tom Stoppard* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1994), p. 5.

to Beckett, Pinter and Stoppard, humour has been a definitional mark. Much the same could be said of the novel, beginning with *Tristram Shandy*. In America things seemed somewhat different. The moral seriousness which drove *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick* and, later, the work of Dreiser, London, Hemingway, Faulkner and Mailer, seemed to be matched in the theatre at first by the moral absolutism of melodrama and then by the tragic sensibility of O'Neill, Hellman, Miller and Williams. Comedy, meanwhile, it appeared, was spun off as a separate element, with its own history and development. From the days of minstrelsy and vaudeville to Broadway hits, it was frequently populist in tone and often ethnic in origin.

It is a neat opposition, and with some element of truth, but even in its broad outlines difficult to sustain, whether we are talking of the novel – which incorporates the subtle ironies of Hawthorne and James, the satire of Lewis, the moral comedy of Bellow or the bizarre humour of Heller, Vonnegut and DeLillo – or of drama itself. George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, Philip Barry and Neil Simon are not best viewed as aberrant to the mainstream while comedy is as central to Miller's work as a sense of the tragic. Neither he nor Tennessee Williams wrote many plays that could be called comedies – though both tried their hand at them – but a sense of the comic was vital to them, as it is for David Mamet and Sam Shepard, for Lanford Wilson and John Guare. Beyond that, the impact of the absurd, in the 1950s and 1960s, seems to have inspired an entire generation to explore the affecting power of a disjunctive humour. There were few new writers who did not confess their debts to Beckett and Pinter.

Given the composition of America, meanwhile, it was always likely that ethnicity would play a more significant role than it did, for the most part, in Britain (music hall aside) and, indeed, Jewish humour has provided an essential ingredient of what is surely a comic tradition in American writing. Meanwhile, a surprising number of the women playwrights who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s chose comedy as their principal mode: Maria Irene Fornes, Beth Henley, Tina Howe, Adrienne Kennedy, Rochelle Owens.

Wendy Wasserstein has said that she writes 'serious plays that are funny'.<sup>2</sup> What is interesting about her work, according to the author

<sup>2</sup> Jackson R. Bryer, *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995), p. 258.

herself, 'is that they are comedies, but they are also somewhat wistful. They're not *happy*, nor are they farces.'<sup>3</sup> There is, she insists, 'an undercurrent in my work' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 418). Indeed, she has suggested that 'you can go deeper being funny . . . I think that if you're writing character, comedy is humane' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, pp. 270–1).

As to an ethnic quality in her work, she is equally clear about this. Asked by Jackson Bryer whether a Jewish identity and a Jewish cultural upbringing informed her work, she replied, 'Oh, very much so . . . in terms of humor . . . and in terms of pathos, too', though she has also expressed the suspicion that the success of *The Heidi Chronicles* may have in part been due to the fact that the central character was 'a Gentile girl from Chicago. It wasn't about Wendy with the hips from New York, even if Wendy with the hips from New York had the same emotional life' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 272). She has spoken of being raised on Jewish comics and of suspecting that her sense of community, melancholy and spirituality can be traced back to her experience of temple. She is aware, too, of having, at various stages in her life, been a Jew amongst non-Jews, a fact that has perhaps given her a double perspective from which some of her humour derives. She is, like Holly Kaplan in *Uncommon Women and Others*, a spectacle and a spectator, part of the world which she explores, drawing heavily on autobiographical material, but also an observer.

Wendy Wasserstein was born in Brooklyn in 1950. Her mother grew up in Poland and was an amateur dancer while she herself took dancing lessons from teachers who performed on the Jackie Gleason Show: 'I grew up with chorus girls, and it was show biz' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 258). Her grandfather wrote Yiddish plays and her parents regularly took her to the theatre. Her father, however, was the owner of a textile store who, like the father of Holly in *Uncommon Women and Others* (the character which Wasserstein based on herself) invented 'velveteen'.

She had something of a privileged upbringing. The family moved to the Upper East Side of Manhattan when she was eleven and she went to a series of girls' schools before attending university at Mount Holyoke, in Massachusetts, where she enrolled in the first feminist course on offer in this essentially conservative institution. She confesses to having hated it. Her own femininity was of a different kind, developing out of an

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* (New York, 1987), p. 418.

interest in women's language and relationships rather than gender politics: 'being a writer who has come of age as a woman, you have had a very different language, you have had a very different experience. My plays are generally about women talking to each other. The sense of action is perhaps different than if I had come of age as a male playwright' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 264). Distrusting the label 'feminist', and attracting a critical response from feminists accordingly (particularly for *The Heidi Chronicles*), she has chosen to explore women's lives and concerns without adopting prescriptive models. Indeed, to some degree her comic approach implies a sense of detachment and irony of a kind seldom found in feminist accounts or gender theory.

On leaving Mount Holyoke, she took a writing course at City College in New York with Joseph Heller and Israel Horovitz, having her first play, *Any Woman Can't*, about a girl from Smith College who makes a bad marriage, read at Playwrights Horizons at the YMCA on 52nd Street in 1973. The relationship with Playwrights Horizons was to prove a lasting one.

Meanwhile she applied simultaneously to Columbia Business School and the Yale School of Drama, still uncertain where her future lay, finally settling for the latter. At Yale, however, she felt nervous, indeed 'frightened to death', as she has explained, not least because she remained unconvinced of the legitimacy of the enterprise to which she had committed herself. Playwriting, more especially for women, did not seem a secure and sensible road on which to set one's feet. Certainly the Yale class was described by her fellow student Christopher Durang as 'bizarre macho', a reading of her play *Uncommon Women and Others* proving alien to at least one of its members. Ironically, her earlier play, *Any Woman Can't*, involved a young woman struggling to achieve independence in a male-dominated world, a subject to which she returned after *Happy Birthday, Montpelier Pizz-zazz*, a play about the college party scene and a comic book exploration of male-female relations.

*Uncommon Women and Others*, written as part of her academic requirements and first produced at Yale in 1975, was by far the most successful of these early plays. The assumption in the theatre, she has remarked, was that the pain in the world was male pain and that women could only write 'small tragedies'. But if women wrote 'small tragedies' they were, in her words, 'our tragedies, and therefore large, and therefore legitimate' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 426). And while *Uncommon Women and Others* was not offered as a tragedy of any size it was, in its thematic concerns and, indeed, in its mere existence, an assertion of the significance

of women, of the legitimacy of their anxieties and hopes, and of the power, irony and wit of their language.

Assumptions about the primacy of male stories did not only typify the history of American drama, however, nor even simply the ethos of Yale, where the two principal teachers were Robert Brustein and Richard Gilman. She recalls, too, the sense of irrelevance that she felt in studying Jacobean drama, in which women were often the source of corruption, and her feelings on seeing posters for the film *Deliverance*, a violent film about male relationships in which women played no role. Accordingly, she decided to write a play in which all the characters were women, a play whose politics lay essentially in that gesture. As she has said, 'It's political because it's a matter of saying, "You must hear this." You can hear it in an entertaining fashion, and you can hear it from real people, but you must know and examine the problems these women face' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 426).

In truth this description implies a sharper political edge than is apparent in the play. The fact is that earlier versions were rather more direct. Based on her own time at Mount Holyoke, it had originally allowed the radicalism of that period to bleed into the text. This was, after all, the time of the killings at Kent State, when National Guardsmen opened fire on protesting students, the time of the bombing of Cambodia and, as she has recalled, the opening up of male colleges to women students, a side issue whose ramifications were nonetheless significant in terms of transforming America. But, as *Uncommon Women and Others* makes plain, another version of America, and of university education for women, was still in place. America might be undergoing radical change but women were presented with models of themselves that offered no space for such change. They were still being groomed for a world in which manners, social proprieties, secure careers and bankable marriages played their part.

The original version, however, allowed the wider world to intrude. It had included a speech calling for a strike over Vietnam, following the visit of a radical activist. This was excised as a distraction, Wasserstein fearing that the question of Vietnam itself would destabilise a drama which she wished to focus on women's voices. And, indeed, it is hard to see how her comedy, which deliberately sets out to capture as well as utilise an undergraduate humour, would have sat beside this more potent and disturbing issue, though by the time of the play's first professional production, in 1977, something of the sting had undoubtedly gone out of that.

*Uncommon Women and Others* was offered to a string of theatres and rejected before finding a home at the Marymount Manhattan Theatre in a Phoenix Theatre production in 1977. After a short run it closed without transferring to Broadway when a producer requested a revised ending. It was, however, televised by PBS the following year and revived in New York in 1994.

The play is set in a restaurant in the 1970s and, six years earlier, in the college living room of what is clearly Mount Holyoke. A group of women who had graduated together now meet for a reunion. Having set themselves to achieve their goals by the age of thirty they confront what time has made of them and they of time.

The published text of the play begins with a series of elaborate character notes that take us beyond anything dramatised, fleshing out what we never quite see. Hence, we are told of Rita Altabel that when she 'walked through the Yale Cross Campus Library with the Yale Crew Team' she 'had cowbells on her dress', that she 'refuses to live *down* to expectations' but 'shouldn't worry about it' because her 'imagination would never let her down'.<sup>4</sup> And what is true of this character is equally true of the others. It is as if Wasserstein wished to fill in some of the gaps in her episodic play, as if, given her love for witty dialogue, she wanted to grant her characters the very depth which they refuse, choosing, as they do, to regard life as no more than an occasion for jokes, a fact acknowledged by her own notes, which describe Muffet as 'wry', which note Holly's 'wit' and Samantha's 'closet wit'. Even Mrs Plumm, housemother of Stimson Hall, is partly defined by her power to inspire laughter.

The episodic structure, meanwhile, which Wasserstein believes she may in part owe to years of television viewing, underscores her emphasis on character rather than story, on language rather than action. In some senses the play is like a series of revue sketches, with seventeen scenes. Believing that she is 'not that good at storytelling', Wasserstein suggests that the episodic nature of this and other plays, together with their humour, enabled her to compensate for what otherwise might seem a deficiency: 'I've always thought that if I kept the language bright enough and the comedy bright enough no one could tell nothing's happened!' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 264).

The college is in transition. Mrs Plumm presides over a ritual described as 'Gracious Living', which involves afternoon tea and candlelight dinners in hostess gowns, while the students take an altogether

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Wasserstein, *Uncommon Women and Others* (New York, 1978), p. 7.

more direct view of life, discussing sex, plotting their careers and, in the case of Rita Altabel, and despite her possession of a DAR scholarship (Daughters of the American Revolution), devising a unique version of feminism that requires her to taste her own menstrual blood, an operation somewhat removed from tasting Mrs Plumm's finger sandwiches with Earl Grey tea. Still part of a world in which women are, according to the Man's Voice which prefaces many of the scenes, 'part-time mothers, part-time workers, part-time cooks, and part-time intellectuals' (*Uncommon Women*, p. 20), they are caught at a moment of change. When a class on women's history, involving study of suffragettes, sexual politics, the feminine mystique and *Rosie the Riveter*, is interrupted by a student waving *petits fours* and announcing that sexuality is more important than intellect, only Holly and Rita protest and that by snatching the *petits fours*. As Muffet Dinicola, another student, remarks, 'Sometimes I know who I am when I feel attractive. Other times it makes me feel very shallow like I'm not Rosie the Riveter.' Indeed, she is inclined to see men as more interesting than women and the new role offered to her by feminists confusing: 'I just don't know why suddenly I'm supposed to know what I want to do' (p. 21). The tension between love and career, in *Uncommon Women and Others*, is a central tension in Wasserstein's plays and the source of much of her humour.

Part of the feminist animus against Wasserstein lies precisely in her mocking of feminist assumptions and language. Rita expounds her theory of the sexual basis of architecture – 'this society is based entirely on cocks' (p. 28) – Kate and Leilah discuss clitoral orgasms, while Holly invests in a diaphragm as the price of entry to a liberated existence. What they do not do is take feminism seriously. Marriage and sex are the dominant topics. Germaine Greer and Simone de Beauvoir are the subjects of jokes. Men, pursued, derided or admired, are at the centre of their attention.

Apart from a series of vaudeville one-liners, Wasserstein generates her humour out of character, as Kate's single-minded careerism comes up against Carter's self-effacing inner-directedness, Rita's masculinised directness breaks over Samantha's sentimentality. Holly, meanwhile, based on Wasserstein herself, seems to be a model for that overweight, Jewish, defensively witty figure, with an overwhelming mother, who was to reappear in *Isn't It Romantic*.

Wasserstein also creates comic effect out of juxtaposition. When what is described as a Man's Voice announces that the college 'fosters the ability to accept and even welcome the necessity of strenuous and sus-

tained effort in any area of endeavor' (p. 53), Rita, wearing a denim jacket and cap and mimicking a man's voice, says, 'Hey, man wanna go out and cruise for pussy?' (p. 53). When the same Voice observes that the college 'places at its center the content of human learning and the spirit of systematic disinterested inquiry' (p. 57), Kate asks Holly: 'did you ever have penis envy?' (p. 57).

Yet, while distrusting schematised feminism and programmatic academic courses in women's studies, while committing herself more fully to humour than political statement, Wendy Wasserstein does celebrate what seems to be a transitional generation. The Man's Voice, at Commencement, may announce that 'By the time a class has been out ten years, more than nine-tenths of its members are married' with many of them devoting 'a number of years exclusively to bringing up a family', or working 'as Girl Friday for an Eastern Senator, service volunteer in Venezuela, or assistant sales director of *Reader's Digest*' (*Uncommon Women*, p. 50), but that Voice then fades into that of another, a woman, who acknowledges the obstacles thrown in the path of women, observing that 'Society has trained women from childhood to accept a limited set of options and restricted levels of aspiration' (p. 52).

The action then moves forward in time so that the play both begins and ends with the former undergraduates, now seen six years after graduation. The distance they have or have not travelled is thus a measure of the significance of the gender shift between the male and female Voice. The near-catatonic Carter has had her movie on Wittgenstein, planned at college, shown on Public Television. Leilah has married a Muslim, Rita and Kate (after a failed relationship) are in analysis, Muffet, who prides herself on being self-sufficient, is an insurance seminar hostess. The radical feminist Rita, meanwhile, is married to Timmy, a wealthy man, and is jointly suing his mother for her stocks. Samantha is married and pregnant but confesses to being intimidated into silence and feeling inferior to her former friends, who she imagines still celebrate the idea of independence and a professional life. Holly, meanwhile, is still poised in hesitation, still receiving calls from her mother asking, 'Are you thin, are you married to a root canal man . . .?' She is still, she confesses, 'in transition' (p. 54), maintaining her options.

The play ends as they announce their need for one another and their continuing potential – 'We knew we were natural resources before anyone decided to tap us' (p. 55). But for all that they go their separate ways again. The projects, great and small, are now deferred (Rita's novel is not yet written, or even started) and where they are achieved seem to

leave a residue of discontent (Kate is a successful businesswoman who longs for a child and, on the basis of no available evidence, insists that she is now a feminist). Those lengthy descriptions offered by Wasserstein at the beginning of the play no longer seem to apply, no longer accurately locate these women who imagined the future which she now allows them to inhabit. Where once they believed they would realise their potential by the age of twenty-five or thirty, they are now obliged to push the date on to some indefinite future.

The final speech is given to the one-time feminist. Its ironies retrospectively define the tone of the play:

Timmy says when I get my head together, and if he gets the stocks, I'll be able to do a little writing. I think if I make it to forty I can be pretty amazing. (*She takes Holly's hand*) Holly, when we're forty we can be pretty amazing. You too Muffy and Samantha, when we're (*Rita pauses for a moment*) . . . *Forty-five* we can be pretty fucking amazing. (p. 56)

The 'Timmy says', together with the pause before the last sentence, are a measure of her and their failure to fulfil their hopes, to realise their dreams. The final stage direction may indicate that they exit with their arms around each other, but there is no suggestion that the solidarity of which they once spoke, or even the sentimental and nostalgic affection they still feel for one another, will now have the power to transform their lives.

It is true that the world of 'Gracious Living' has gone for ever, that tea and finger sandwiches need never again define the limits of their possibilities or define the style of their lives, but in their place has come not the confident balance between private needs and public lives they had thought would be a consequence of changing times, but confusion, contradiction and disappointment. Despite Samantha's pregnancy, none of the women has had children. Careers, Kate's aside, have not taken off. Life is on hold and seems likely to remain there. The women's movement, meanwhile, exists only on the fringe of their lives. Thus Rita, in thrall to her wealthy husband, and six years after her declared alliance to the feminist cause, announces that 'I'm really getting into women's things. I've been reading Doris Lessing' (p. 11) (a decade and a half late), while Holly announces her hatred for the movement on the grounds that an article sent to *Ms* magazine was returned with a note saying that she 'was a heretic to the sisterhood' (p. 12).

The real feminism of *Uncommon Women and Others* lies not in the lives of the characters but the fact of the play. The very sense of community, of sisterhood, which they alternately mock and yearn for, and which the

vicissitudes of life, the competing privacies of experience, have eroded, survives triumphantly in the on-stage ensemble. This is a play of women's voices, of characters observing and acting out women's perceptions and needs. It is a successful demonstration of what the play itself seems to despair of finding, a sense of unity and solidarity in which the individual gains meaning from the group.

When Wasserstein returned to Mount Holyoke, in 1979, to see a production of the play, she was surprised to discover that far from seeing it as an innovative attempt to present a group of women working out their attitudes to a changing world, the students regarded it as an amusing period piece. Themselves clear as to their plans, whether for work or marriage, they regarded *Uncommon Women* as a study of women who were uncommon in quite a different way from that which the playwright intended. For Wasserstein, however, such a response seemed less like the emergence of the new woman than a reversion to the 1950s. Certainly these women undergraduates had yet to step outside the university to discover the confusions that she was herself to address in *Isn't It Romantic*.

Wendy Wasserstein was the first woman playwright from the Yale drama school effectively to make her mark and she did so with a play whose cast was, with the exception of a single male Voice, entirely female. Indeed, the sight of an all-woman cast taking a bow at Yale gave her immense pleasure and seemed, to her, of considerable symbolic significance, not least because her own description of herself at that time matched precisely Holly's situation in the play. She was, she has explained, uncertain of herself or her direction, unsure, like many of her characters, whether she had made a wrong decision about her present and hence her future.

*Uncommon Women and Others* was not the only product of 1975. She collaborated with another Yale student, Christopher Durang, to create *When Dinah Shore Ruled the Earth*, which included an outlandish beauty contest featuring, among others, a faculty wife, a white 'black lesbian mother' and a woman poet. The loose structure enabled the writers to address and generally satirise a number of subjects, from motherhood and marriage to feminism and work. But her next success outside the environs of Yale, and following the 1977 production of *Uncommon Women and Others*, was *Isn't It Romantic*, presented by Playwrights Horizons, in New York, in December, 1983.

At the centre of the play is the figure of Janie Blumberg, confused about life and harassed by her parents – Tasha and Simon Blumberg – who

wish to see her suitably, and quickly, married, preferably to a doctor with a six-figure salary. That is to say, this is a play that in some ways elaborates a familiar vaudeville and Jewish routine, and much of its humour derives precisely from the familiarity of the central character. Janie is vulnerable, unclear what she wants, but aware that she is, indeed, a comic figure. If her speeches are laced with wit, therefore, this is both a defensive strategy and a knowing performance. In some senses this play is close to being a situation comedy and it hardly comes as a surprise to learn that Wasserstein was indeed hired to write comic material for CBS's *Comedy Zone*, in 1984.

Janie's struggle is to escape the stereotype awaiting her, to become herself rather than conform to the expectations of others. The humour with which she defends herself, Wasserstein insists, is 'a way of getting on in the world, of taking the heat out of things. Humor is a life force' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 419). It is simultaneously her method of relating to the world and a mechanism for distancing herself from it. Language is a shield. It also, however, potentially becomes the cage in which she is trapped, another aspect of the stereotype.

At twenty-eight she is looking for 'meaningful work' and to 'fall in love',<sup>5</sup> in other words, she is looking for her life to start. The message on her answering machine, which recurs throughout the play, concludes with her singing 'Isn't it Romantic'. Romance, however, has not only proved elusive but also unsatisfying until Murray Schlimovitz comes by, a doctor whose family had Americanised their name to Sterling when their Kasher Dairy Restaurant chain in Brooklyn re-emerged as the Sterling Tavernes and their son went to Harvard, itself an indication of accommodation which carries its own warning in a play about discovering the self. An old college friend, Marty Sterling (aka Murray Schlimovitz) appears to represent the answer at least to her mother's dreams. As Janie observes, 'Wait till I tell my parents I ran into him. Tasha Blumberg will have the caterers on the other extension' (*Isn't It Romantic*, p. 9). Yet Janie is an artist and unsure how that can be reconciled to the conventional futures on offer.

Harriet Cornwall forms part of a double act with Janie, in part a parallel, in part a foil. Attractive, with an MBA from Harvard, as Janie is somewhat dumpy and struggling to find the right employment, she secures a job with a major company and begins an affair with her boss's boss. However, she has the same insecurities as Janie, the same sense of

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Wasserstein, *Isn't It Romantic* (New York, 1985), p. 7.

being adrift in a world in which gender relations are either formalised or confusing. Where Janie's mother has opted for a life in which the family is a primary concern, Harriet's mother, Lillian, is a business-woman who finds little time for her daughter. And though she plays only a minor role she represents one possible expression of the values of the women's movement. As Wasserstein has remarked:

of all the women in *Isn't It Romantic*, she is the most modern . . . she's tough . . . she's very wry and dry . . . Lillian knows of the world and her own life. She has made her choices and come to terms with them. In her life there was no room for a man. She could not 'have it all'. She did pay a price and what's tragic is that her daughter is now going to pay another price. (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 423)

Lillian's price was to have 'a bad marriage with a selfish man' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 423). She is not a romantic but a 'modern because she faces herself'. A careerist, she detaches herself from husband and daughter. She is, Wasserstein insists, 'very American. A good mother, a hard worker' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 424). What she is not is a model Wasserstein can endorse, as Harriet, with her MBA and executive lover, a life of high achievement and no meaning, follows in her footsteps becoming equally modern, equally American, and equally empty.

Janie's mother, by contrast (modelled closely on Wasserstein's own mother), is outrageous, demanding, suffocating, invasive, embarrassing, tasteless but vibrant. She and her somewhat dominated husband have the deeply irritating habit of waking their daughter each morning by singing to her over the telephone, pushing their way into her apartment and her life with equal disregard, showering her with unwanted presents and urging her to marry. They even provide what strikes them as a suitable candidate in the form of a Russian immigrant taxi driver with little English, while themselves offering a bizarre paradigm for such a marriage. But Tasha Blumberg is full of life, performing exercise dances and learning tap. Described as an untraditional Jewish mother with traditional values, she is content for her husband to run the business while she runs people's lives, though he is anxious for Janie to join the family company, her brother having opted for the law.

*Isn't It Romantic* plainly has a strong autobiographical element, with its portrait of a woman artist struggling to make sense of her possibilities in much the same way that Wasserstein had herself during her years after leaving Mount Holyoke. And she has confessed that she has always found that autobiographical element the most challenging when writing.

In the context of a discussion of *Isn't It Romantic*, but with reference to *Uncommon Women*, she has explained that:

the hardest [thing] in *Uncommon Women* was writing Holly, who, autobiographically, is closest to me, though there are parts of me in all of the characters. That play is twofold. First, it's a play about Holly and Rita, which examines the fact that the Women's Movement has had answers for the Kates of the world (she becomes a lawyer), or the Samanthas (she gets married). But for the creative people, a movement can't provide answers. There isn't a specific space for them to move into. (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 424)

This could equally well be a description of *Isn't It Romantic*, with Janie playing the role of Holly. It is also an explanation of Wendy Wasserstein's ambiguous relationship to feminism and the women's movement. Instinctively resistant to being enrolled in other people's myths, she is, as a writer, especially resistant to models that seem to substitute one prescriptive mode of behaviour, one paradigm, for another. She is even doubtful of the label 'woman playwright'. While accepting that she writes primarily about women and that she brings a woman's perspective to bear, what matters to her is that she is first and foremost a writer and that that vocation also involves insecurities, uncertainties, a sensitivity to language, an ambiguous relationship to social reality and the culture of politics. The experience of so many of her characters, that they are simultaneously outside and inside society, itself partly a product of the politics of gender, is equally that of the writer who may also, like them, yearn for a sense of involvement even while retaining a necessary detachment.

To be a comic writer, moreover, is in some sense to remove oneself from the passions and commitments that provide the subject matter of her work. If comedy is, as she suggests, a way of taking the heat out of things, that would seem to imply a disengagement, a dissociation from the issues on which she chooses to focus, while the autobiographical element implies an engagement. The tension between the two is definitional of her work. Certainly she has said that what is truly liberating is not a programmatic system in which a woman qualifies for a sense of independence by virtue of achieving a sequence of stages in economic, social, psychological, political development. What matters is a growing personal understanding, an instinctive series of choices generated out of individual needs and aspirations rather than peer pressure or group ambitions. What is 'really liberating is developing from the inside out. Having the confidence to go from your gut for whatever it is you want'. And, as she indicates, 'Janie is able to do that' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 421).

The play, indeed, is centrally concerned with Janie's discovery of this fact. Her talent is slowly recognised, albeit in a way that at first seems trivial to the man to whom she is genuinely drawn, for the fact is that Marty Sterling is not merely her mother's idea of an ideal partner but, for a while, her own, aware, as he is, of the danger of betraying his calling for hard cash, an idealist who has served on a kibbutz, a man with a sense of humour. By degrees, however, he begins to commandeer her life, to make plans to which she is not privy. He offers her a glimpse of what life with him might be. Of his sister-in-law he remarks that she

had even less direction than you do and she's a bright girl too. But she met my brother and now she's a wonderful mother, and believe me, when Schlomo is a little older, she'll go back to work in something nice – she'll teach or she'll work with the elderly – and she won't conquer the world, but she'll have a nice life. (*Isn't It Romantic*, p. 27)

The danger signals are hoisted. And though Janie has no ambitions to conquer the world, and is not averse to the idea of family life, she resists the nest being prepared for her. As in so many other Wasserstein plays, she ends up alone.

For several critics the ending was a disappointment, not least because of Marty's sterling qualities (and perhaps the linguistic rhyme is not without significance). But this was not offered as a feminist statement. As Wasserstein remarked, 'If the Jewish doctor had been a creep, and Janie decided not to marry him, the play would be a feminist statement: Good for her, see how strong she is' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 421). The point is not whether Janie does or does not get married but that she makes a choice, good or bad. She takes control of her own life, assuming responsibility for it. She remains confused and uncertain but those are her qualities as, Wasserstein insists, they are equally her own. She writes plays in order to give voice to those confusions. As Tom Stoppard once remarked, plays are an ideal medium for contradicting yourself. 'I'm a playwright *because* I don't know everything,' Wasserstein has said, 'because I'm trying to figure things out' (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews*, p. 424).

*Isn't It Romantic* is not, however, exclusively a play about women. The men are no less baffled by the world in which they find themselves. Harriet's executive lover accurately identifies the confusion felt by men who find the women they like looking for the very qualities in their male friends and even husbands that the men had previously sought in women. He understands the frustration of those intelligent women who had previously been told to be content with supporting their husbands,

but by the same token the MBAs from Harvard, women, in other words, like Harriet, 'want me to be the wife. They want me to be the support system', and 'I just wasn't told that's the way it was supposed to be' (*Isn't It Romantic*, p. 30). His response is to opt for relationships which apparently place no obligation on either party, relationships whose virtue lies in the fact that they lead nowhere. Harriet, behaving like her mother's daughter, believes that this is perhaps the solution to her problem.

The two relationships, that between Janie and Marty and Harriet and Paul, develop side by side. Indeed, Wasserstein intercuts between them, thereby underlining the similarities and differences. In like manner, she brings together the two mothers in a conversation that underlines the extent to which their daughters are beginning to mirror their own lives, one more positively than the other. Lillian, the business executive, who earlier had found no time for lunch with her daughter, now finds herself on the receiving end of a similar disregard. Her conviction that 'life is much easier without relationships' (*Isn't It Romantic*, p. 38), is reflected by her daughter. Meanwhile, Tasha, who admires Richard Nixon because both his daughters married well and he travels, actually has her heart in dancing, and the play ends as Janie begins, hesitantly, to tap dance, mirroring her mother, of whom it is evidence of her irrational but undeniable love of life.

The essence, in other words, is not marriage or career but a commitment to life, a commitment already shadowed in Janie's ironic humour. It may or may not, in Harriet's words, be possible 'to be married or living with a man, have a good relationship and children that you share equal responsibility for, and a career, and still read novels, play the piano, have women friends and swim twice a week', a notion dismissed by her mother, Lillian, as 'your generation's fantasy' (p. 45), but it is possible not to give up on life in frustration at being unable to square the circle. Lillian chose career first, her child second and her husband third. As a result she ends up successful but spending her evenings watching re-runs on television. Janie does not so much put career first as decide that she cannot live her life at somebody else's direction. And ironically it is her mother who provides the paradigm, a mother who, despite what she says, did not marry a Jewish doctor, cook chicken for him, persuade her daughter to go to law school or live with a man she does not love. She has devised a life for herself which seems eccentric but is vital. As she says, 'I believe a person should have a little originality . . . Otherwise you grow old like everybody else' (p. 58).

Structurally, the play is once again episodic, with thirteen scenes,

reflecting the picaresque nature of the story, the fragmented nature of the characters' lives. More pragmatically, Wasserstein has spoken of this structure as yet another means of compensating for her weakness at story-telling: 'For me they're [my plays] fun to write because basically I know that within ten pages I'm out of this scene – so I'm not stuck there. In some ways you can move the action forward in that way, and also in a way you can make the action and the storytelling elliptical. I'm not that good at storytelling' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 264). The play is also framed and interrupted by a series of messages on a telephone answering machine which serves to create the social and emotional context for Janie's *bildungsroman*. Harriet offers the latest instalment of her unfolding adventures, her parents sing her sentimental songs, and Cynthia Peterson, whom we never see, sends back messages from the emotional front line, reporting on her divorce and desperate search for replacement men. Meanwhile, Janie's own message, which opens the play, concludes with her singing 'Isn't It Romantic', a song whose irony has deepened as the play progresses.

Wendy Wasserstein has said that people are products of the time in which they came of age and her plays would seem to bear that out. It is not that the dilemmas that they engage with have disappeared with time, though she frequently reports women who tell her so, but that they take the particular form that they do because of the state of the social debate. For this reason she is always careful to locate the action of her plays with precision, while making small adjustments for production purposes. *Uncommon Women* is set in 1972 and 1975, *Isn't It Romantic* in 1983, while *The Heidi Chronicles* takes us from 1965 to 1989, by way of nine specific intervening years. That is to say, beyond creating a comedy of manners, beyond offering an ironic account of male–female relationships, she is concerned, in this play, with chronicling (and the title of *The Heidi Chronicles* is significant) the changing attitudes and values of a society in which personal and public priorities are constantly in a state of flux. Beyond that, the different timescales enable her to counterpose hopes to realisations, ambitions to achievements, as she dramatises the impact of experience on those who set out on their journeys with a degree of innocence and naivety.

Unsurprisingly, the protagonists of all three of these plays seem to confront the same dilemmas, to encounter the same possibilities, engage with the same issues. In part this is because she offers a heavily autobiographical story but beyond that it is because she has chosen to chart the

unfolding story of a generation of women charged with re-defining themselves, perceived as bearing the burden of transforming social values, while struggling with the same necessity to make sense of themselves and their lives as confronts any men or women at any time. There are no prescriptive answers in any of her plays. Indeed, her comedy is frequently directed against those who believe such prescriptions to have either legitimacy or true authority. Hers are dramas which place at their centre individual women desperately trying to understand who they are and what they might be, aware that they are caught in a human comedy which has the potential to turn into a human tragedy. The plays' humour constitutes her strategy for exposing the vulnerabilities, hypocrisies and contradictions of the individuals whose perplexities she stages. Beyond that, it is a defensive tactic deployed by her characters, a mask behind which to hide, a way of denying the depth of their anxieties, of navigating through a world whose operative principles they find hard to grasp.

Holly, at the end of *Uncommon Women*, and Janie, at the conclusion of *Isn't It Romantic*, have not solved the problems that confront them, not entirely found their own voices. Indeed, the final speech of the latter is given to the neurotic, man-hunting Cynthia. But Janie has edged a step further forward than Holly, finally unpacking her belongings, deciding against marriage and beginning to stand, indeed to dance, on her own feet. With *The Heidi Chronicles*, first performed in workshop by the Seattle Repertory Company in 1988, and then presented by Playwrights Horizons in New York before moving to Broadway the following year, the central character moves yet another stage forward, though in doing so she attracted criticism from many in the women's movement who regarded the trajectory of her life as being at odds with that which they would prefer to see described.

Both first and second acts of the play begin with a prologue set in 1989, before proceeding from 1965 to 1977 in the first act, and to 1989, in the second. These scenes are frequently underscored with music which acts as a marker for the period, while political events, irrelevant to the young Heidi, begin to intrude into her life, further fixing this unfolding history. In *Uncommon Women and Others* that public political world had existed by virtue of nothing more than an occasional remark. In this period, as American politics are enacted on the streets and a younger generation is drawn into the political arena, public events become more central.

In the first prologue, Heidi Holland, an art historian, is lecturing to Columbia University students on women artists only recently rescued for

the canon. Slides are projected on a screen as she offers a gently ironic account of their work. She remarks on the absence of pre-twentieth-century women in the students' textbook, but comments, too, on their total absence 'in my day'. The scenes which follow offer an insight into that 'day' as we follow the development of Heidi's personal and professional life, beginning with a high school dance twenty-four years earlier.

At sixteen Heidi is a gauche, though self-possessed, young woman. Repelled by the crude sexuality of this teenage ceremony, she sits the dance out, watching with detached interest as a young man dances the twist. She then has a self-consciously ironic conversation with another young man called Peter Patrone, who becomes a key figure as the play continues, irony emerging as her principal mode. This position as an observer is essentially that which she adopts throughout the play until a final gesture of commitment, one which irritated many feminist critics, draws her into the world which she had previously watched and judged.

The action then jumps to 1968 and another party, this time of Senator McCarthy supporters, where she meets the other man who will act if not as a sheet anchor to her life then as the continuing possibility of a relationship which will attract and repel her in equal degrees over the coming years. Scoop Rosenbaum, editor of the *Liberated Earth News* (circulation 362), is, as he admits, or perhaps boasts, arrogant, difficult and smart. He has the confidence she lacks. As a would-be art historian she is, she declares, 'interested in individual expression of the human soul. Content over form'.<sup>6</sup> And though this is a flip remark, delivered as ironically as anything else she says, it does represent her position as she subsequently struggles to negotiate her way through the competing demands of the ensuing two decades. The oddity of the scene, however, lies in the fact that the issue for which McCarthy stands is nowhere mentioned. This was not an election about women's rights, though Scoop and Heidi spar over this, but about Vietnam. Talk of 'burning bras', of battles over equal freedoms, seems strangely irrelevant. It is as though, having invoked the period with such care, Wasserstein seemed more interested in anticipating the direction in which she was to move the plot. It is also difficult to believe that the Heidi to whom we were introduced in the first scene would so easily bow to Scoop's unobtrusive sexual suasion.

The effect of the rapid jumps between scenes, each one taking place several years after the preceding one, is to eliminate psychological development. Thus the Heidi who a moment before we saw following

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Wasserstein, *The Heidi Chronicles* (New York, 1990), p. 171.

the egregious Scoop Rosenbaum, is now shown attending, albeit with more than a little scepticism, a women's support group dominated by a foul-mouthed lesbian. Janis Joplin's 'Take a Piece of My Heart' gives way to Aretha Franklin's 'Respect', the cosy liberalism of a Eugene McCarthy rally being superseded by a radical feminism, albeit one mercilessly satirised by Wasserstein. In fact the group consists of nothing more than Fran, who wears army fatigues and a chip on her shoulder, Jill, a forty-year-old mother immaculately dressed in a pleated skirt, who dispenses what she calls 'goodies' (to which Fran responds: "'Goodies?' Jill, we're . . . not the fuckin' Brownies") (*The Heidi Chronicles*, p. 176), a naive seventeen-year-old and Heidi, with her friend Susan from the first scene. For Fran the choice is simple, 'either you shave your legs or you don't' (p. 180), a phrase which Wasserstein herself heard used at a feminist meeting. For Heidi, who is at heart more humanist than feminist, such an absolute is repellent. For her, the central principle is that 'all people deserve to fulfill their potential' (p. 181).

By 1974 her feminist credentials seem more deep-rooted as she pickets the Chicago Art Institute over the issue of the relative absence of women artists on show. But her public stance is still intertwined with her private life as she spends much of her time sparring with Peter, now a doctor and one of the two men to whom she has been drawn for ten years, discovering in the process that he is gay. By degrees, for all those involved, the issues begin to bite more deeply, the space between observer and participant beginning to narrow as life choices are made, options begin to close down. Even now, though, Heidi holds back. It is not so much indecision as an unwillingness to commit herself. Three years on and Scoop Rosenbaum, the other man to whom, in spite of herself, Heidi has been drawn, marries a rich and somewhat mindless Jewish woman from the South while still insisting on his feelings for Heidi.

The second act begins with a continuation of her art history lecture at Columbia, which contains as clear a statement of Heidi's position, and, in a sense, Wasserstein's sense of women's position, as is to be found in the play. Speaking of women's paintings she declares:

There is something uniquely female about these paintings. And I'm not referring to their lovely qualities, delicate techniques, or overall charm. Oh, please! What strikes me is that both ladies seem slightly removed from the occasions at hand. They appear to watch closely and ease the way for the others to join in. I suppose it's really not unlike being an art historian. In other words, being neither the painter nor the casual observer, but a highly informed spectator. (p. 206)

The distinction is one made by Kenneth Burke and one which Wasserstein had first encountered in a Mount Holyoke class. Heidi, she insists, in a paraphrase of her own character's remarks, is not 'someone who leads marches. She goes between being an observer and a spectator . . . She eases the way for others.'<sup>7</sup> Heidi is, indeed, an observer and 'in life when you're slightly removed, it gives you a point of view, but the removal can give you a sense of sadness. When it's comfortable, the distance can allow you to become a critic or an academic . . . but when the gap becomes too large, you feel out of touch, out of time. That's what happens to Heidi' (Kolin and Kullman, *Speaking on Stage*, p. 390). It is the source of Heidi's humour and her vulnerability, of her sometimes caustic judgements but also of her equivocation. And since it is not difficult to see a parallel between the observer/spectator and the playwright it is possible to recognise the dilemma of a writer whose humour depends on her refusal, or unwillingness, to close the gap between herself and the passions of her characters. This, in turn, becomes the source of accusations by those who distrust detachment and comedy as signs of disengagement or indifference. Meanwhile, the careful identification of the historical moment in the play is Wasserstein's attempt to keep her characters in time, to earth them in history, underscore their, and the writer's, awareness of the changing social world whose demands she acknowledges but to which she, and her protagonist, refuse fully to submit.

The play is not simply an account of betrayed commitments, of compromises and concessions, a slow acquiescence in process, though there is evidence enough of this. It is a study of the interaction between private needs and public forms. Her characters inhabit a dynamic world. Part of their dilemma is the necessity to distinguish between fundamental beliefs and the rules of the tribe, to delineate the line between necessary adjustments and destructive accommodations.

*The Heidi Chronicles* acknowledges that other urgencies exist beyond the re-defining of gender roles and if, surprisingly, Vietnam is all but invisible (as it might not have been had the author been male), the rise of AIDS is acknowledged and, through the person of Peter, its emotional impact explored. Indeed, Heidi herself is wrong-footed by her own failure fully to understand Peter's sexuality and the depth of his anguish. If men, in her earlier plays, were often baffled by women who refused to conform to familiar models, then Heidi is herself unsure what it is she

<sup>7</sup> Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1996), p. 390.

requires of the men in her life. Their privacies are as closed to her as hers seem to be to them.

As the second act continues, Scoop's marriage is exposed as conventional equally in its sentimentalities and its betrayals; Susan, Heidi's friend, who, in her idealistic period, had worked for a women's health and legal collective, now attends business school; Denise, sister to the radical feminist, Lisa, decides that she can have it all, opting to establish her career before having children; Heidi chooses career over marriage (though since this possible marriage was to have been with a character we never meet it is a decision with no real dramatic or personal force). Instead of giving birth to children she produces a book on women's art. As the seventies give way to the eighties, the 'me decade' to a hard materialism, they all make the necessary adjustments that enable them to achieve success in a new competitive world in which image triumphs over substance.

Indeed, to underscore this latter point, one scene takes place in a television studio as Scoop, Peter and Heidi appear on a show called 'Hello, New York' (in which Denise is studio manager), which transmutes their real commitments into bland entertainment, offering them momentary exposure and media fame in return for trivialising their lives. The nature of the programme can be judged from the fact that another segment will feature divorced Senate wives modelling coats for spring. Denise offers them a quick run-down of what is wanted: 'Some of the topics April wants to cover today are the sixties, social conscience, relationships, Reagonomics, money, careers, approaching the big 4-0; Scoop: opinions, trends; Heidi: women in art, the death of ERA, your book; Peter: the new medicine, kids today; and April says the further out you can take your sexuality the better' (*The Heidi Chronicles*, p. 215). History, social change, private anguish, emancipation, suffering, are collapsed into a few minutes' airtime.

The irony, surely not lost on Wasserstein, is that *The Heidi Chronicles* itself covers similar territory while also using it for entertainment. Though the point of the scene lies in the manner in which Peter and Scoop conspire to silence Heidi, who is not allowed to complete a sentence, and willingly play the game whose price they seem not to acknowledge, the programme itself, designed to present 'the kids who grew up in the fifties, protested in the sixties, were the "me's" of the seventies, and the parents of the eighties' (p. 216), does accurately summarise the structure of Wasserstein's own drama. The danger implicit in that parallel in part explains the attacks on her work by those who insisted that it was

not in her comedy alone that she failed to take seriously the issues which she treats. There is a price to be paid for being an observer and it is paid both by Heidi within the play and by Wasserstein outside of it.

There is a distinction, however, between such detachment and that affected by Scoop Rosenbaum, who makes no commitments with respect to his private life (his marriage is a victory of style over substance) or his public life, which seems no more, at least in retrospect, than an acting out of fashionable roles. As he insists:

we're serious people with a sense of humor. We're not young professionals, and we're not old lefties or righties . . . We're powerful but not bullies. We're rich but not ostentatious. We're parents but not parental . . . we had the left magazines in college, we had the music magazines in the seventies, and now we deserve what I call a 'power' magazine in the eighties. (p. 219)

He is an opinion-setter who has no engagement with the issues on which he offers his opinions. Between the oppositional pairings of his speech is a vacuum. The surprise is that it takes Heidi quite as long as it does to feel the force of that vacuum sucking air out of the world. But that moment does come. When he accuses her of clutching her purse she replies 'I have valuables' (in fact a line shifted from another play). It is a *non sequitur* which nonetheless expresses a surprising truth about a woman who took pride in never fully committing herself, in seeing the ironies which undercut the seriousness of every cause. And this is perhaps another reason for her privacy. She is finally unwilling to exchange beliefs for status, to trade feeling for fame. She has valuables. The problem is that she is not entirely sure what they might consist of, the more especially since all her friends seem to have embraced a version of the American dream, exchanging principles for prosperity. They were, it seems, simply waiting for the exchange rate to move in their favour.

Even her old friend Susan is now a media executive for whom the women's movement is just so much new material with the power to improve the ratings. In like manner, Heidi, for whom Susan expresses her deep affection in a speech which places that affection on a par with her taste for bread sticks ('you're one of our favorite people in the world. These bread sticks are fabulous!') (p. 225), is now no more than a useful contact for her. After reporting on the conclusion of an affair with a married man in his fifties, safe, without commitment, she urges Heidi to join Denise (now a story editor) and herself in creating a new sitcom featuring three women from the art world because 'maybe some network executive who actually read a book five years ago will recognize your

name and buy the pilot' (p. 226), and 'we know . . . sitcom is big, art is big, and women are big' (p. 227). The proposals become progressively more absurd as the meal continues ('How 'bout a performance artist married to a Korean grocer and living with his entire family in Queens?') (p. 227). The most absurd aspect of the encounter, however, is that we later learn that the programme was not only made but proved highly successful.

As will be apparent from the above, the style of *The Heidi Chronicles* changes, edging progressively towards the surreal. Though the characters were always to some degree an expression of particular social and historically locatable attitudes, as the play progresses into the 1980s so Wasserstein deals more in caricature and cartoon, reflecting what seems to be a thinning out of personality, a surrender of fact to image. Even Heidi begins to incorporate something of the anarchy that surrounds her, in the 1986 scene making a barely coherent speech to the alumnae association of Miss Crane's school on the topic, 'Women, Where Are We Going?'

This stream-of-consciousness presentation mocks what has become of the new woman, who goes from aerobics class to dropping off one child at the draw-with-computers class and the other at swimming-for-gifted-children, before preparing 'grilled mesquite free-range chicken with balsamic vinegar and sun-dried tomatoes' (p. 228) for her investment-banker husband and calling her twenty-two-year-old, squash-playing, would-be lover. This brilliantly free-form aria, which offers an account of lives that have become lifestyles, as if all that had been needed was to redecorate the room of one's own, give the angel in the house a make-over, ends with Heidi confessing the simple but affecting truth about herself: 'I'm afraid I haven't been happy for some time . . . It's just that I feel stranded. And I thought the whole point was that we wouldn't feel stranded. I thought the point was that we were all in this together' (p. 232).

The following scene is a crucial one as, now in 1987, Heidi visits the children's ward of a New York hospital to make a donation of books and records. The gesture seems, at first, a simple act of charity but for her, and for Peter Patrone, who works there, the world has changed. She is leaving New York for the midwest, drawing a line across her life, discarding the weight of her own and their collective past. The music which Wasserstein has used throughout to fix the moment is now gathered together, in the form of a box of records, and disposed of, along with her old art books.

For his part, Peter has exchanged his confident tone for a caustic irony.

Where once he had spoken lightly of sexual preference, now that sexuality is a reminder of the blight of AIDS which has been slowly depleting his friends, and though Wasserstein does not labour the point this slow disassembly of promise, mimicked also in the play's stylistic changes, becomes a metaphor for a society that has equally lost its structure and purpose. Where earlier Peter, like the society he mirrored, had abandoned idealism for an egotism disguised as self-assurance, now the self has collapsed. As the 1980s edge towards the 1990s so the arrogance and self-centredness of the 'me decade', and the crude materialism and shallow self-interest of the eighties, herald something else, still struggling to be born. A new idealism, more realistic, less illusioned, becomes a central necessity. Narcissism is exchanged for a reconstituted sense of community which can only begin at the personal level. Thus, Heidi abandons her escape to the midwest and reconciles herself with Peter. She finally breaks the commitment to Scoop which has somehow, and not altogether convincingly, remained a feature of her life, as he, in turn, sells the magazine that has made his reputation, himself settling for something less and something more than fame, style and an irresponsible freedom.

Most significantly of all, however, and in a gesture that attracted considerable criticism, the play ends, two years later, in 1989, on the verge of a new decade, as Heidi adopts a Panamanian baby: 'It was a play,' Wasserstein explained, 'where some people thought I had sold out, because she had a baby at the end and [thought] I was saying that all women must have babies.' Her original idea, she confessed, had been to end the play, as it had begun, with Heidi at the lecture podium, though still with her adopting the child, 'but I didn't have the time to go and do that'. Nonetheless, she knew that 'it was quite controversial' and acknowledged that she could understand how, 'as an audience person, if I hadn't written that play' but had identified with Heidi's generation, she, too, might have said, "Give me a break! Adopt a baby from Panama? No thank you." I could have gotten angry at it too. But as the playwright, and as someone who was logging that journey, to me it was the right journey for her' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, pp. 266-7). It is a curious admission, for if she is prepared to concede that audiences would, in her eyes, misread the action, then clearly that action needed to be more adequately motivated, more deeply rooted in the sensibility of the character and the logic of the drama.

The problem, in dramatic terms, is less the desirability of Heidi's action in terms of gender politics than its consistency in terms of

revealed character. Throughout the play she has been an observer. She is an art historian and not an artist. She is plainly not without a point of view, involving herself in a demonstration, attending a feminist group, but remains at one remove, never quite committing herself. And what is true on a social level is true, too, in terms of her private life. Her relationship with Peter is unthreatening because the nature of his sexuality means that it carries no implications beyond friendship. That with Scoop is equally equivocal, as she convinces herself of a love she is unwilling to consolidate. It is a perspective that generates her irony and humour, that makes her an ideal lens through which to view historical process. It is also what leaves her alone and unhappy. The collapse of the women's movement which she has observed, the loss of a real connection with the men who have provided occasional consolation and companionship, leaves her more isolated than ever. The decision to adopt a child, therefore, is her attempt to neutralise this. The problem is that this gesture seems entirely one-sided, of a piece with her earlier decision to escape to the midwest and begin over again. There has been no evidence of her concern or desire for children. Even her Christmas-time visit to the children's hospital was in search of Peter. Indeed, once there she shows no interest in the children, donating inappropriate gifts and being more concerned with her own decisions than their plight. In fact, those gifts have more of a dramatic than a social function. The sudden adoption, therefore, is a gesture for which Wasserstein has not prepared the audience either in terms of character or plot.

In part the problem is a function of structure. Her method of advancing the action by two- and three-year jumps offers a series of snapshots of characters and of political and social developments. What is missing is the connective material, the immediate psychological and, indeed, social cause of attitudes, decisions, shifting values. The adoption of the child seems more arbitrary than it might because we leap from Heidi's conversation in a New York hospital in 1987 to her apartment two years later, from a woman who shows no interest in seeing children on Christmas Eve to one flourishing her new child like a trophy, as if it were part of some dialectic, some ongoing debate between herself and the world. Offered as a brave gesture of reconstruction, a move out of the self and into the world, it can equally well and, indeed, perhaps more reasonably be seen as a denial of that wider community for which she had always looked, as a retreat into the self, redesigned now to incorporate a mirror image, a dependent version of that self. It can be seen as an abandonment of the social world, which can now take its own course

quite as if Heidi has relinquished the notion of transforming it, as Steinbeck chose to end *The Grapes of Wrath*, by displacing into metaphor what he seemed thereby to accept could not be addressed in a world of fact. Seen thus, the gesture is no more than a sentimentality, an act of evasion.

Wasserstein has explained that when she visited Cornell in 1990 'two women art historians . . . lit into me for forty-five minutes. Even as I explained it, they just stood there and said, "No, no, you're wrong. No, no, no"' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 267). Their objection, it seems, was to a gesture that came close to saying that the solution to the complex question of women's social and artistic needs was to have a baby, as though the failure to fulfil her biological function had been the real source of Heidi's frustrations, her sense of exclusion from a world which she otherwise saw with such clarity. The problem, however, has less to do with that, which is plainly not what Wasserstein intends or what the character of Heidi could accept, than with a failure to present this action as something more than a gesture to put beside those other gestures which Heidi has made throughout her life in an effort to understand herself and her experience. In the play which followed this, one of the male characters remarks, in not altogether a kindly way, 'if you want to find unconditional love, have a baby. Adopt a red and fuzzy brood of them.'<sup>8</sup> Perhaps that is what Heidi is about, after all, and if it is then that suggests that her gesture could as easily be seen as a deepening of her isolation, an intensification of her detachment, as it could her decision to end such. If so, it is an ambiguity that is not explored. But, then, little or nothing of this decision is explored and it is that contingency which disturbs more than feminists, that sense of an action whose meaning is sealed off from an audience unsure as to whether it represents transcendence or self-reflexiveness. *The Heidi Chronicles* is a witty and satirical account of the fate of the women's movement and of this group of men and women who try to build their lives in the interstices of history. It rests on the central irony that while the music of the social world changes there is another rhythm which remains constant, a rhythm which defines needs that go beyond the politics of a culture at war with itself. It traces the paths taken by a generation who have tried to re-invent the world they inhabit and the relationships which go some way to defining the nature of that world. Believing, as good Americans, that history is progress, that the passage of time will edge them in the direction not

<sup>8</sup> Wendy Wasserstein, *The Sisters Rosensweig* (New York, 1993), p. 17.

simply of change but perfectibility, they encounter a current flowing the other way, as they discover that form disassembles, that utopianism founders on the rocks of its own assumptions, that options close down with age, that deferred projects transmute into simple regret, that egotism remains a powerful engine but that, finally, it is not sufficient to redeem those who must find what consolations they may. It is, in other words, that most serious of works, a play about the human comedy.

Her answer to feminist criticism was to assert that the existence, rather than the content, of the play itself represented a feminist statement. In similar manner she took pleasure in the fact that her next play featured three middle-aged women, thereby focussing on those seldom the subject of drama and, incidentally, giving employment to actresses whose age might normally lead to diminishing employment possibilities. The feminist element here, then, began with the decision to create characters of a certain age.

Interestingly, if she misread critical responses to *The Heidi Chronicles* she also seems to have misread likely reactions to *The Sisters Rosensweig*, first performed at the Seattle Repertory Theatre New Plays Reading series in 1992 before being presented at Lincoln Centre later that same year in a revised form. This, she decided, was her 'most serious effort' (Preface to *The Sisters Rosensweig*) to date. She thus sat through the first Lincoln Centre preview 'in a semi state of shock' (Preface) when audiences began to laugh five minutes into the first act. It was not that there was to be no comedy but that the balance seemed wrong, more especially when the same audience seemed resentful of more serious passages. And though, to her mind, the production did find that balance, with the audience moved by the final scene, she must have felt equally ambiguously about reviews which talked of her being 'as romantic as ever', as if she had ever been such, as 'hilarious', and, in the case of the play itself, 'so warm and lovable you'd like to wrap it around you and wear it home' (quoted on the dust jacket of *The Sisters Rosensweig*).

She saw the play as owing something to Kaufman and Hart, to Noel Coward, but also to Chekhov. From her point of view she wished to find an equilibrium between 'the bright colors of humor and the serious issues of identity, self-loathing, and the possibility for intimacy and love when it seems no longer possible or, sadder yet, no longer necessary' (Preface). It was also her attempt to break away from her habit of writing about her own generation.

The play concerns three middle-aged Jewish sisters from Brooklyn who come together in London to celebrate the birthday of Sara, the

eldest. She is a banker; Gorgeous, one sister, is a talk-show hostess; Pfeni, the third sister, is a journalist who is writing but not finishing a book on the women of Tajikistan. The two men in the play are Pfeni's boyfriend Geoffrey, bisexual director of a hit musical, and Mervyn, whose company makes fake fur and who is drawn to Sara. For the episodic structure of her earlier works she substitutes a one-set play, as Wasserstein insists 'complete with unities of time, place, and action' (Preface), quite as if that were a qualitative advance over her episodic works.

*The Sisters Rosenzweig* takes place in 1991, at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Sara's daughter Tess, named for Tess of the D'Urbervilles (a gesture which indicates her mother's desire to forget her American past), plans to go to Lithuania with her boyfriend Tom (himself of Lithuanian origin) to celebrate its emerging independence. Plainly, for Wasserstein the timing is significant as questions of independence and identity are debated by sisters whose world had previously seemed so fixed and secure. It is an uneasy parallel. Where in the earlier plays an unfolding history had provided the context for, and focussed the issues of, personal development, here it seems grafted on. Tom's Lithuanian heritage is announced but remains non-functional, except as plot device. And if it be objected that that country fulfils the same function as Moscow in *The Three Sisters*, an idea rather than a destination, there is somewhat greater reason for a provincial young woman's dreams of visiting the heart of a functioning empire than there is for Tess, living in London, to wish to go to the fringe of a crumbling one. Tess's announcement that Vilnius was once the Jerusalem of Lithuania is simply insufficient to make it anything more than an unconvincing image, an occasion for humour, more especially since Tess herself emerges as emotionally and intellectually naive.

Nonetheless, this is a play about a group of women, each of whom has taken a different path, whose world and identity are slowly exposed as insecure. Sara, who has dominated the business world and seemingly secured an immunity from emotional needs, is suddenly disturbed by the arrival of a man who shocks her into feeling. Pfeni, her sister, is an experienced journalist/travel writer, drawn to a man whose sexual ambivalence suggests the degree to which she herself simultaneously desires and shuns commitment. A professional observer, she seems never fully to have engaged her own life. Even her name (in reality, Penny) is gifted to her by her entertaining but finally disengaged lover. The youngest sister, Gorgeous, as attractive as her name suggests, in town to shepherd a

Jewish tour group around London, has never quite made it. She has the trappings of success. Back in America she hosts a chat show, but things are not quite what they seem. Her designer clothes are fakes while her family life is falling apart.

The fact that the play is set in London is itself significant, more especially with respect to Sara. She has retreated here from her country and her religion, and has convinced herself that she no longer needs companionship or intimate human contact. She is on neutral ground, living in a kind of no man's land in more ways than one. Her only male companion has been a decorative upper-class Englishman, Nicholas Pym, who provides style without substance. The play is, in effect, about the necessity for Sara to wake from her sleep of the spirit and the body. Turning aside from Pym, she finds herself drawn to the apparently absurd Mervyn Kant, whose name is as fake as his fur and whose role seems to be that of vaudevillian in a house of performers, a Jewish vaudevillian at that. Tess is quite accurate when she says that her mother is 'in desperate need of hope and rebirth' (*The Sisters Rosensweig*, p. 7); it is just that she shows no signs of being aware of this. Her recent ovarian cyst and subsequent hysterectomy have convinced her that she is now out of the game, an observer of her own life.

And these are performers. They play childhood games, sing songs, dress up and occasionally undress. They tell jokes, self-consciously enacting old routines, staging familiar dramas. But, gathered as they are for a birthday, they are aware of passing time. A meaning which once lay ahead now seems to be slipping away behind them. Normally scattered around the world, they come together to enact a ceremony, perform a ritual, but it is not quite the one they assume. The occasion, taken together with Tess's attempts to fulfil a school assignment which requires her to interview her mother and aunts about their early lives, invokes memories of a past in which, whether at the level of fact or invention, things had seemed secure, their identities acknowledged, their lives bound together by faith, by habit, by roots sunk deep into history. Now those identities seem uncertain, that faith problematic, that history perhaps no more than a sentimentality. But, and this is where Lithuania rather inelegantly performs its symbolic role, such identities, faith, history can, perhaps, be rediscovered. The meal which they share may not be sacramental but it signifies something more than a birthday dinner. It reconstitutes their communal identity. Sara is several times divorced. She bears someone else's last name, as does Gorgeous, but here they are the sisters Rosensweig and whatever their subsequent fate

they rediscover something about their past which enables them to commit themselves to the future.

In truth, though the outside world is invoked – Sara is an international banker, Pfeni a travel writer – it seems to bear very little on the central concerns of the play. Lithuania aside, we are told of homeless people starving only a short distance away, but they are little more than the occasion for humour or potential subject matter for art. References to the European Market, to the American Jewish Congress, to a decaying educational system and a disenfranchised class do no more than establish the context in which this drama is enacted or, in the case of Sara, the issues with which she deals professionally but which fail to bear directly on her private life.

It could be argued that what Wendy Wasserstein is doing is to propose a connection between the dissolution of private lives and the decay of public form, in the way that, say, Arthur Miller would do. But the nexus is never really established. Where in Miller's work the connection is carefully plotted, rooted in a philosophy which proposes that public action is, in its essentials, an extension, an aggregation, of private postures and beliefs, here public and private are simply laid side by side. The vaguely Marxist feelings expressed by the immensely wealthy Sara may be offered as an ironic instance of the gap which she has allowed to open up in her life between thought and feeling, but it is not much more than that.

Perhaps, though, that merely underlines the fact that, for Wasserstein, *The Sisters Rosensweig* is primarily a love story and a drama of reconciliation in which the sisters are reconciled not only to one another but themselves. Suppressed truths tumble out, and though Gorgeous alone performs a perfunctory Sabbath ritual the important ceremony in the play lies in a scene in which the three sisters lie together, offering comfort and understanding. Beyond that it lies in Sara's recitation of her name and identity for her daughter's research project: 'My name is Sara Rosensweig. I am the daughter of Rita and Maury Rosensweig' (p. 107). She is no longer Sara Goode, one-time wife of a man committed to serial marriage. The woman who had once been the only Jewish voice in her college choir, blending into it but proudly announcing her name, the woman who had, perhaps, subsequently lost that sense of identity, now sings again, so that the play ends with mother and daughter singing together. In the first draft this musical epiphany had featured Sara and Merv. The effect of this, however, was to make the play too exclusively a story about that relationship. It would have given Merv a significance

which could only have diminished that between the sisters and between mother and daughter. As Wasserstein remarked, 'suddenly this play became Mervyn the Magician, this man who came into these three sisters' lives and turned the place upside down. It made the play smaller instead of larger.'<sup>9</sup>

All three sisters appear to be successful. Sara has succeeded in a man's world; Gorgeous is 'the sister who did everything right . . . married an attorney . . . had the children . . . moved to the suburbs' (*The Sisters Rosensweig*, p. 30); Pfeni is a successful travel writer. But things are not what they seem. Sara's inner life, physical and mental, has been damaged. Until Merv's arrival derails her, she has settled for amused disengagement. Having failed at love, she contents herself with observing the world as if in some sense she were not of it. Gorgeous hopes for but does not receive a television programme. Her husband is unemployed. She works for people she is close to despising while projecting an image of herself as irrepressible and vital. Pfeni, meanwhile, has not written the book she planned and constantly moves on as if to be in one place too long would make her vulnerable. As she confesses, 'I need the hardship of the Afghan women and the Kurdish suffering to fill up my life for me' (p. 77). By the same token, this inspires a sense of guilt which paralyzes her, and makes it impossible for her to write the book she wishes so that her energy goes instead into producing trivial articles about exotic restaurants. In other words, there is a void at the heart of each of them. Their performances are no more than that. Something has been lost, something that Gorgeous's improvised Sabbath ritual indicates but does not resolve.

They, and perhaps the world beyond the elegant windows of this Queen Anne's Gate house, show the evidence of disillusionment if not yet of despair. Pfeni is forty, Gorgeous forty-six, Sara fifty-four. Time has begun to dissolve old certainties and foreshorten the future. The pressure is on for them to resolve their lives. As Sara says to Gorgeous, 'I am asking you to take responsibility for whatever it is you babble about. Life is a serious business' (p. 33). On the other hand, she also remarks that 'I can't tell you what a comfort it is to live in a country where "our feelings" are openly repressed' (p. 35). There are, in other words, aspects of her experiences for which she willingly takes little responsibility, denying her needs, wilfully creating a carapace behind which she hides her vulnerabilities.

<sup>9</sup> Laurie Winder, 'Wendy Wasserstein: The Art of Theater XIII', *The Paris Review* 142 (Spring 1997), p. 177.

The fact is, though, that they take significant steps forward in the course of the play. It is not Sara alone who has the courage to change direction. Gorgeous, rewarded by her tour group with a real Chanel suit, to replace the fakes she has had to content herself with, determines to sell it to finance her son's college course. As Wasserstein has remarked, 'When Gorgeous returns the Chanel suit she is in some way heroic. For a woman to be heroic she doesn't have to save the planet' (Winder, 'Wendy Wasserstein', p. 172). As heroism goes this would seem to fall some way short of genuine self-sacrifice, a Chanel suit being a somewhat refined offering to lay on the altar, but in the context of a character who seemed willing to project an image of herself as frivolous and self-concerned it is plainly offered as a significant gesture.

The men in the play are largely, but not wholly, comic figures. Tom, Tess's boyfriend, is the butt of humour, being desperately out of his depth in Sara's house. Geoffrey, a vital and amusing bisexual theatre director, is Pfeni's lover, offering her everything but true security. Having lost so many people to AIDS he has put his energy not into relationships, which can only remind him of the cruelty and contingency of experience, but into art, his life having become an extension of that. The speech in which he adumbrates this, however, as Wasserstein has confessed, is virtually a statement of her own personal and artistic credo:

Of course, we must cherish those that we love. That's a given. But just as important, people like you and me have to work even harder to create the best art, the best theatre, the best bloody book about gender and class in Tajikistan that we possibly can. And the rest, the children, the country kitchen, the domestic bliss, we leave to others who will have different regrets. (*The Sisters Rosensweig*, p. 69)

Merv is a natural force, an irrepressible source of good humour who, somewhat incredibly, shakes Sara out of her pose of moral detachment and sweeps her off to bed in her own home on their first encounter. He, too, has his vulnerabilities. His own wife having recently died, he is looking for a way back into life himself, but Wasserstein is not interested in pursuing his self-doubts. Sara cries for her life. He does not for his. He exists to redeem a woman who believed she had passed beyond redemption. He is the one who calls her Sara Rosensweig ('No one's called me that in thirty years') (p. 58). And though it is not Merv who succeeds in persuading her to sing (her grandfather had wished her to become a singer, as, for a while, she had been), it is he who, at the end of the play, enables her to awake and sing in another respect, to identify herself as Sara Rosensweig, and thus to re-establish her connection with her own past, with the country she had left and with the tradition she had denied.

Sara, whose English accent is a mark of her assimilation, who named her daughter after a character in an English novel, who has allowed herself to be partnered by an excessively English man (with a penchant for young girls), reclaims her identity. She no longer needs marriage to consolidate this decision. Indeed, she has discovered that this is neither a journey on which she wishes to embark nor a destination which she wishes to reach.

Wendy Wasserstein may have moved away from charting the experiences of her generation in this play but, as she herself has admitted, it still bears the stamp of the autobiographical. 'There are aspects of me in Pfeni – the distancing aspect, the vulnerability and the need to wander. And the ability to get involved with a bisexual . . . There are aspects of me in Sara, too. I am a Jewish girl who's been in these WASPY institutions all my life' (Winder, 'Wendy Wasserstein', p. 179). It is a play, too, born out of her experience of living in London, while writing *The Heidi Chronicles*, and being conscious of the ambiguities involved in being an American abroad, temporary expatriation mirroring a deeper sense of displacement.

In much the same way, it was while she was finishing *The Sisters Rosensweig* that she began to formulate the notion of writing her next play, *An American Daughter*, a work which seemed to shift her career in a new direction. Still with a strain of comedy, this nonetheless turned out to be a play that addressed serious public issues as well as equally serious private ones to do with conflicting loyalties and responsibilities.

*An American Daughter*, which opened at Lincoln Centre in April 1997, was inspired by the treatment accorded to a number of high-profile women who found their ambitions thwarted and their accomplishments denigrated by a curious alliance of media distortion, liberal confusion, conservative hostility and feminist ambivalence. Attorney-General nominee Zoe Baird, a wealthy woman lawyer, was forced to withdraw her name when it was found that she had not made social security payments on behalf of her children's nanny. Hillary Clinton's campaign for the extension of health care foundered in the face of hostility which seemed only in part to do with the issue she was raising. It is not that Wasserstein believed the issues were clear cut – why, after all, should a wealthy woman not pay social security – but that the hostile campaign revealed something about the nature of American society, the moral confusions of liberalism, the inner contradictions of the new feminism and the destructiveness of a conservatism which itself now took different forms. We also have Wasserstein's assurance that it was, additionally, 'a

reaction to turning forty-two – to midlife decisions, to not having children'. It was, she insisted, 'both personal and political' and it was 'a darker play than *The Sisters Rosensweig*' or *The Heidi Chronicles* (Winder, 'Wendy Wasserstein', p. 182).

At the heart of the play is the figure of Lyssa Dent Hughes, public health administrator, professor of public health, forty-two-year-old nominee for Surgeon-General. She is also the great-great-granddaughter of Ulysses S. Grant, the daughter of a conservative Republican Senator from Indiana (recently re-married), and the wife of a liberal sociology professor at Georgetown. Not only, in other words, does she stand at a moment of decision in her own life, but she is also at the confluence of historical currents.

Nor is she alone in that. Her friend Judith Kaufman, an oncologist, is African-American and Jewish. Struggling to have a child by fertility treatment, she is professionally and privately concerned with matters of life and death. Her achievements as a surgeon, along with Lyssa's impending political appointment, make them seem symbols of feminist achievement, but the next generation of feminists, represented by twenty-seven-year-old Quincy Quince, are inclined to see the world differently. Intensely careerist and opportunistic, Quincy has an arrogant self-assurance and is profoundly selfish. Her announced loyalty to Lyssa does not stop her having an affair with Lyssa's husband or climbing over her to the success which seems to provide her real motivation.

And if these portraits of an African-American Jew (who attacks gays for showing no concern for women's diseases or compassion for their victims) and a destructive feminist (prepared to deny those who cleared the way for her advance) were not enough to stir the pot, in what she has called her 'angry play',<sup>10</sup> then she adds to the mix a pro-life, conservative homosexual, Morrow McCarthy, who contrives to destroy the career of a woman he regards as his friend. In other words, in *An American Daughter* Wasserstein goes out of her way to play against expectations. Nor is the issue itself, which brings about Lyssa's downfall, straightforward. Her husband recalls a time when she had deliberately, on his advice, ignored a jury summons. Repeated by Morrow McCarthy in the presence of a television interviewer who then challenges her in a taped interview, this, together with what appear to be some condescending remarks about midwestern women, becomes the skeleton in her cupboard that leads to her withdrawing her nomination.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Wasserstein, 'An American Daughter', *American Theatre*, (September 1997), p. 24.

Wasserstein has said that, 'In some ways Morrow's right about privilege, selective privilege – why *don't* you have to answer that jury notice?' (*An American Daughter*, p. 24). Indeed she saw this as a problem affecting the then-current Clinton administration: 'Because your heart's in the right place, you get away with things. Which is nonsense' (p. 24). The issue at the heart of the play, then, is not whether Lyssa should have accepted the jury summons or not but why it sparks the response it does. It is a catalyst generating a process that exposes the values of those around her and of a country content to allow its priorities to be determined by those who have no concern for the issues at stake, a country in which the choice of a key official is placed on a par with the president's selection of a pet (citizens are invited to phone in their choice of cat or dog as they are equally invited to phone in their view of the next Surgeon-General).

Between them, Walter, her husband, and their supposed friend, Morrow, contrive to destroy her, and it is by no means clear that this is inadvertent. Certainly, when her husband reveals her failure to respond to the summons, in the process contradicting her claim simply to have lost it, her senator father immediately understands the danger, attempting to distract the journalist. When Morrow, himself rich and therefore privileged, repeats the accusation on tape, however, the damage is done.

The first act ends with the return of Judith Kaufman, who has been observing Tashlick, the festival of regrets, a festival involving the throwing of bread onto water, itself a sign of the abandonment of those regrets. Overwhelmed by the failure of her life to match expectations, she has thrown not bread but herself into the Potomac, only to claw herself out again. The incident is presented humorously but behind it lies a genuine sense of abandonment. Her husband, a closet gay, has long since gone. She has no children and, it appears, no prospect of such. She is a surgeon who nonetheless cannot finally keep people alive. Unaware of her friend's dilemma, she comes seeking comfort and receives none. It is an ambiguous moment. Both women are wrapped in their own self-pity. Both are poised, unsure of the way ahead. Judith is angry at those who fail to understand the urgency of action but she is also angry at herself. Lyssa is now transfixed by a regret which she cannot throw away on the water and, having caught her husband kissing the truculent Quincy Quince, suspects that there may be more to regret than a lost or ignored jury summons.

By the play's end it is clear that both women are survivors. The

strength that has brought them to this stage in their lives will sustain them thereafter. As Wasserstein has said:

In some ways, it's Judith who grows in this piece. She says at the end, 'I've got some time on my hands for friendship'. She suddenly realizes that there is someone else in the room . . . I love Judith, and Judith was the character who really connected with audiences . . . I find her strength heroic; I find her work heroic, actually. And Judith is alone, and I find that very moving. At the end of this play she goes back to work. Maybe she'll adopt a baby. But she is, on some level, profoundly alone. (*An American Daughter*, p. 24)

If she were to adopt a baby, however, it would plainly be a better motivated decision than the similar gesture in *The Heidi Chronicles*. Indeed, in some ways this play shows up some of the weakness of that earlier work in that respect. Yet for all the above comments the focus of the play remains on Lyssa and in the end it is less her failure as a citizen that is at stake than the failure of women to be mutually supportive. As her husband observes, the issue is not her evasion of jury duty but that her offhand and condescending remarks about her mother were seen as underscoring the gap between herself and other women. If feminism had been created to enable women to have equal opportunities to rise to the top, in rising to the top they inspired envy from other women. As he says: 'It's the women of America who are furious with you . . . You're pretty, you have two great kids, you're successful, you're admired . . . Face it . . . in the heartland that means you're one prissy privileged ungrateful-to-her-mother, conniving bitch.'<sup>11</sup>

In political terms the play is about living at a time when principle takes second place to pragmatics, when what were once values have been transmuted into empty gestures. Even language seems to have been hollowed out so that words such as 'liberal', 'feminist' and 'conservative' no longer seem to mean anything. Genuine accomplishments defer to public images; ambition becomes a substitute for service. Virtual reality replaces reality itself. The days when the battle was for racial justice, for women's or gay rights, have gone. On a private level *An American Daughter* is concerned with the need to live independently of the models on offer. Lyssa's Senator father gives her a letter written by Ulysses S. Grant to his own daughter, Nelly. Its key sentence is his observation that 'our task is to rise and continue' (*An American Daughter*, p. 103) and though Lyssa reminds her father that Nelly's life in fact consisted of confusion and

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Wasserstein, *An American Daughter* (New York, 1998), p. 64.

failure, that would seem to be the essence of the play. There is no perfection. The only worthwhile objective is to struggle and continue, as has Judith, as, it is implied, will Lyssa.

Wendy Wasserstein, then, seems to have accomplished that transition from comedy with a redeeming streak of seriousness to seriousness with a redeeming streak of comedy ironically identified by Stoppard as defining the arc of his own work. The wise-cracking author of *Uncommon Women and Others*, for whom character, plot and construction were secondary, now chooses to move character to the centre of her attention and create a classically structured plot. The moralist, always present in her work, most particularly in *The Heidi Chronicles*, also breaks surface more clearly. *An American Daughter* concerns the attempt to hold on to values at a time of moral relativism. As Lyssa's conservative father remarks, 'There's some idea of America out there right now that I just can't grab onto. I know I'm supposed to have opinions based on the latest polls, and not personal convictions or civil debate. It doesn't intimidate me. But it's certainly not our most illuminating or honest hour' (*An American Daughter*, p. 101). It is not a unique moment. Their ancestor, Ulysses S. Grant, stood equally for idealism and its corruption. The moral world, as Wasserstein makes plain, is not unambiguous; indeed in some ways moral absolutism is itself as dangerous as the equivocations with which most people live. The essence is to acknowledge confusion and even contradiction and, like Judith, abandon regrets and move on. Lyssa decides to continue her battle, albeit in a diminished arena, but, for all her commitments, she retains a sense of irony and detachment that seems likely to be her ultimate redemption.

At the same time detachment itself, as is made plain by the figure of Timber Tucker, television anchor man, may prove no more than a refusal to take a moral stand. And there, of course, is the dilemma of the playwright. Wasserstein has repeatedly spoken of herself as an observer. While claiming feminist credentials, she has made comic capital out of the moral failings of feminism. Liberal in spirit, she has identified the equivocal nature of liberalism (Walter, in *An American Daughter*, epitomising a more general failure of will and purpose). Even the structure of *The Heidi Chronicles*, with its historical overview, and the moral spreadsheet displayed in *An American Daughter*, suggests a stance which within the plays can be held up for criticism. She wishes to present characters who do work their way towards commitment, if not quite the commitment they had envisaged for themselves – Heidi's, and possibly Judith's, adoption of a child, Lyssa's turn from a public to a private world as she climbs the

stairs to join her previously, and significantly, off-stage children – yet she herself resists it. No marriage for Wendy Wasserstein, no children, no adoptions, no campaigns for this or that. She, herself, seems fated to stand to one side as if this were the price to be paid for an art which distrusts ideologues but which also suggests the necessity for a continuing faith in the possibility of change.

*An American Daughter* comes closest to arguing for a particular stance, yet even here this is not the essence of the play. It may seem the angriest of her works, and certainly she presents a picture of an America that has forgotten its principles, confused power with responsibility and lost the ability to distinguish passion from performance. In the end, however, the commitment that matters is not to healthcare reform or a morally rejuvenated politics, but to the individual's discovery and sustaining of a true identity. Beneath the humour, the failed ideologies and even the legitimate crusades, what lies at the heart of her work is the dilemma of the individual, alone even in the company of others, struggling to make sense of a personal life, conscious of passing time, negotiating with the competing demands of those around her and finally making the only commitment which matters, namely to the need to shape her life into a form in which she can take pride. It is what Heidi does in *The Heidi Chronicles*, Sara in *The Sisters Rosensweig* and Lyssa in *An American Daughter*. All three have been tempted to externalise their needs, looking for meaning in political stances, commercial success or public service, and none of these is dismissed as unworthy or irrelevant. But at the end of the play each emerges with a stronger sense of who they are and what they might be. They are resilient, adaptive, survivors. And they are women.

The final irony of Wasserstein's career to date lies, perhaps, in the fact that a playwright whose characters have had to do battle with role models should herself have become such. Whatever her equivocal attitude to the women's movement (and the post-feminist in *An American Daughter* is cruelly accurate), her plays, along with those of Marsha Norman and Beth Henley, have made it more possible for women playwrights to succeed on as well as off Broadway. The Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award that went to *The Heidi Chronicles* began a process that continued with *The Sisters Rosensweig*. As she observed, in a statement which also engaged with a familiar accusation directed at her plays: 'My work is often thought of as lightweight commercial comedy, and I have always thought, No, you don't understand: this is a political act. *The Sisters Rosensweig* had the biggest advance in Broadway history, therefore

nobody's going to turn down a play on Broadway because a woman wrote it or because it's about women' (Winder, 'Wendy Wasserstein', p. 172). The person who took so much pleasure in seeing an all-woman curtain call for *Uncommon Women and Others*, at a predominantly male Yale drama school, now takes pleasure in presenting plays which engage with the private and public lives of women on a predominantly male Broadway.

*Lanford Wilson*

As the 1950s came to a close the American theatre was in a crisis. After a period that had seen a series of outstanding plays from Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, along with the last, great, plays of Eugene O'Neill, Broadway seemed to have little to offer. The mining of O'Neill was over, Miller was silent and Williams faltering. Broadway itself faced escalating costs and competition from television. On the other hand change was in the air, in terms both of culture and politics. Eisenhower, a president who represented the values of the past, had gone, to be replaced by a president who traded on his youth and sought to address a new generation. While embracing a familiar Cold War rhetoric, he sought to kindle a new idealism with the Peace Corps and, somewhat grudgingly, acknowledged that the supposed homogeneity of American society had been a sham. Civil Rights was now securely on the agenda. The streets were turning into theatre: a crude melodrama in the South, a carnival in the North.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Eisenhower's favourite reading had been westerns. Now there was a man in the White House who frequented opera, apparently read books and invited their authors to dinner, and went to the theatre. And for the first time private foundations began to fund theatre, not, of course, Broadway, in some ways the epitome of the capitalist enterprise, but that theatre which had begun to spring up first in small, unfashionable venues far from 42nd and 43rd Streets, and then in cafés, lofts, church halls, anywhere that a sometimes non-paying audience could assemble. Eventually, by the mid 1960s, city, state and federal governments would also offer subsidies, never, of course, quite enough but sufficient to sustain a number of companies.

And if the definition of a theatre was up for reconsideration, so was the definition of what theatre itself might be, as artists experimented with 'happenings', dance flirted with narrative, texts made way for improvisation, frontiers blurred. The theatre of the absurd, a European

import, did not prove philosophically at home in America, but its resistance to non-naturalistic dialogue, its radical revision of character, its ironic approach to plot had its impact, as did European theories.

Such an atmosphere was likely to prove conducive to those whose work was as yet unformed and who would have had no chance of production on, and, indeed, little to offer to, Broadway. They were talents in the making and the place to invent yourself was Off-Off-Broadway. And just as Tom Stoppard would say that to want to be a writer in Britain in the early sixties was to want to be a playwright, so, much the same was true in America, particularly in New York, though there were few young writers who did not also find themselves painting sets, acting and directing, as well as cleaning tables. This was a theatre rich in talent but not rich in much else. Two decades later such people would have streamed to Los Angeles, seeing film as the key genre. For the moment, however, it was the other way about. Sam Shepard made his way from California while Lanford Wilson, himself briefly from California though now living in Chicago, also set out for New York, with little more to his name than the draft of a couple of one-act plays. There was, however, a degree of serendipity about this movement since those who found themselves in New York were scarcely following a preconceived career plan.

Off-Broadway already had its successes. In 1959 Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* opened at the Cherry Lane Theatre while the Living Theatre staged Jack Gelber's *The Connection*, both of which seemed to draw some inspiration from a European theatre that had itself discovered a new direction. Off-Off-Broadway was altogether different. With little review coverage, it tended at first to recruit its audiences from those who shared many of the values and interests of those whose work they watched. It appealed to a different age group from Broadway and to people looking for a different theatrical experience. It was self-consciously challenging authorised texts in the theatre as, by degrees, it challenged the authorised text of mainstream America itself. This was theatre with its hair down, a poor theatre before Grotowski's theories became popular, a theatre touched by an amateur spirit following no prescribed pattern, adopting no particular ideological or aesthetic position.

There were those, like Sam Shepard, who staged surreal images, influenced in part by the drugs already a feature of the counter-culture, images that would gain a political and social edge as the decade developed. But there were equally those who looked to create a theatre language out of everyday speech, to confront audiences with familiar sights, reformed into theatricalised gestures. Lanford Wilson was one such. At a

time when an Artaud-influenced theatre was de-emphasising language he created a bruised lyricism, a poetry generated out of the inarticulacies of prosaic lives. While lamenting a loss of community, he saw in the theatre a means of exploring that community. Sometimes that led to sentimental encomiums to the dispossessed, the marginal, the emotionally and spiritually wounded, of a kind that made him close kin to Tennessee Williams, and even, at times, to Eugene O'Neill. Certainly the family, that fundamental American icon, was liable to be seen as deeply flawed, the origin of tension and pain. Yet if, like Shepard, he heard the sound of America crashing into the sea he also saw in the theatre itself something more than a mechanism to expose such fragmentation. For its very methods relied upon that sense of community which he otherwise saw as disappearing; its communicative power, its subtle linguistic nuances, suggested the survival, no matter how vestigially, of the urge to break out of privacies, to understand the mechanisms of decay and hence of renewal.

One of the advantages of the Off-Off-Broadway movement was that it made the one-act play fashionable again. At the beginning of the century the Little Theatre movement, which included seminal groups such as the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players, launched the careers of several playwrights by offering an opportunity to experiment with short drama, never a practical proposition on Broadway. Now, once again there was a chance for writers to explore technique, language, character in the context of shorter works and Wilson, like most of the writers in this book, seized the opportunity and produced an astonishing deluge of works, testing his talent, experimenting with character, language and form.

Lanford Wilson was born, an only child, in Lebanon, Missouri, in 1937. He later suggested that it was the fact that he was an only child that led to his being drawn to the group, both in terms of the theatre as a communal art and the group as method and subject. He studied briefly at Southwest Missouri State where, in 1955, he recalls seeing a production of *Death of a Salesman* that was 'the most magical thing I'd ever seen in my life . . . the clothesline from the old buildings all around the house gradually faded into big, huge beech trees. I nearly collapsed! . . . It was the most extraordinary scenic effect, and of course, I was hooked on theater from that moment . . . that magic was what I was always drawn to.'<sup>1</sup> Then, for a year, aged nineteen, he went to San Diego State,

<sup>1</sup> Gene A. Barnett, *Lanford Wilson* (Boston, 1987), p. 1.

subsequently moving on to Chicago, where he planned to become an artist, supporting himself, meanwhile, by working in an advertising agency. During lunch breaks from work he tried his hand at writing stories, and when this failed turned to plays, taking an adult education class which involved working with actors from the Goodman Theatre.

He finally arrived in New York at the age of twenty-five, in 1962, anxious not only to write but to see theatre. To his dismay there was no Miller or O'Neill on offer. Instead, Broadway presented a diet of comedies. The real energy lay elsewhere and he quickly found his way to the new spaces of Off-Off-Broadway. His first productions, which included the one-act plays called *Home Free* (1964) and *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1963-4), were staged by the Caffè Cino, one of the best Off-Off-Broadway venues and the place where he had seen Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson*, a play which itself suggested a new set of possibilities for a writer raised on American classics or what he had read in *Theatre Arts* magazine or anthologies of European plays back in Missouri.

There is a refreshing and, at the same time, disturbing quality to Wilson's comments on his own works. In interview he is liable to offer a mechanistic account of the development of his sensibility and dramaturgy. As he has admitted, he stole, borrowed, studied, appropriated, absorbed what he saw or read, creating his own style almost by default. From the beginning, however, he also followed a track of his own, taking what he wanted from the dramatic smorgasbord on offer in sixties America. Watching the fragmented products of an avant-garde deriving its confidence in part from its own naiveties as well as from the legitimation offered by Artaud's slogan, 'No More Masterpieces', he developed a theatre that celebrated the displaced, the marginal, the deviant in plays that worked against a simple realism, while never embracing the radical experiments of many of his contemporaries. Aware, later in his career, of the public success of the well-made play, he set himself to a systematic study of realist texts, reading Ibsen but deriving from the experience the conviction that Ibsen and Chekhov were two sides of the same coin. And Chekhov, along with the Chekhov-influenced Tennessee Williams, was to remain a major influence, to the extent that he studied Russian in order to be able to translate his plays.

The irony is that somewhere in this apparently random search for form and style, he did develop his own distinctive drama – lyrical, allusive, layered, a realism suffused with the poetic. At the same time he generated a series of theatrical metaphors for a society that seemed to him to be in decline, its institutions in a state of decay, its private and public

relationships under stress. Without appearing to do so he offers a critique of a culture in crisis. His plays celebrate those who are victims equally of their own sensibilities and of a society which sees them as irrelevant to its own myths of progress, to normative values that have little to do with human necessities.

The world that he pictures in his work is one in which commitment is withheld, in which the old symbols of communality, grace, social and moral cohesiveness have lost their authority. He stages the dramas of those who deal with the consequences of wounds already sustained. That he chose to do this in plays in which, early in his career, he tried to breathe life into the stereotype and which, later, were often lyrical, perhaps deflected attention from the critique which lies at the heart of so much of his work. He does not, to be sure, choose to tackle the world head on. He works by indirection. His angle of attack is oblique. He deals in distorted echoes. Meaning is often generated out of discrete moments or events brought momentarily together. He values language but recognises its incapacities. He communicates through tone, inflexion, dissonance, harmony. The past, meanwhile, exists as a shadow but a shadow with the power to sear the present. None of this makes him seem quite the social critic that he is, but then compassion, which is perhaps the single dominating force in his work, can often defuse the force of what sounds, on occasion, like a barely muted anger, so that the elegiac and the nostalgic, the celebratory, triumph over his sometimes caustic presentation of personal and social decline.

Wilson began his career in the small spaces of Off-Off-Broadway, but in 1969, along with three others, and at the invitation of Harry H. Lerner, founder and acting president of the Council for International Recreation, Culture, and Lifelong Education, he co-founded the Circle Repertory Company (which took its name from the initial letters of Lerner's organisation), though he is inclined to play down his involvement in that event. In time this became his New York base. It would be difficult to over-emphasise the importance of the Rep to Wilson or of Wilson to the Rep. It gave him a virtually guaranteed outlet for his work, facilitated the various experiments in which he tried out his ideas and offered a shop-front window in which to display his talents. It also led to his long-term relationship with Marshall W. Mason, who was to direct most of his work. Eventually he took one further step, to Broadway, but always felt uneasy about this while acknowledging the boost which Broadway production gave even to a play with a truncated run. In other

words, he has experienced virtually all aspects of the American theatre. His plays are widely performed, not least, perhaps, because they reflect something of his midwestern values, because that blend of theatricality, nostalgia and a poetic sensibility that made *Our Town* such an enduring success is equally a mark of his drama. His career began, however, in New York and in theatres which in truth were not theatres at all.

The size of the Caffè Cino limited the number of characters in a play so that Wilson's first works were for small casts. The ingenuity required of those working in such a venue itself helped to forge an aesthetic. In *Home Free*, the first play he wrote after moving to New York, and also the first of his plays 'based loosely on people I knew' because 'it takes a while to be convinced you're supposed to write about something you know',<sup>2</sup> he doubled his cast by making two of them imaginary. Lawrence and Joanna are, it appears, brother and sister and involved in an incestuous relationship. Since they are also fantasists, however, it is difficult to be sure. Slipping in and out of nursery school language, they talk to one another and to the invisible children who share their game. There is, perhaps, an echo of Tennessee Williams in a play in which a toy Ferris wheel symbolises the fantasy world into which they step, a world in which they are protected from a reality which they can only engage with when they have transformed it, the price of that protection being their own infantilising. It is an isolation they both fear and crave. The play caused something of a stir and marked the beginning of Wilson's career, more especially since he scored a success with another product of that year – *The Madness of Lady Bright*.

This also features a character for whom fantasy is consolation and entrapment. Leslie Bright is 'a screaming preening queen, rapidly losing a long-kept "beauty"'.<sup>3</sup> He has transformed his one-room apartment into a shrine in which he worships his own memories of past love. The two other figures who appear have no real substance, setting the stage, stirring memories, prompting, recalling, echoing, chiding, remonstrating, quarrelling, consoling. They are generated by his need, part of an internal dialogue that breaks surface only because 'Lady Bright' is alone, projecting this fantasy girl and boy out of his solitariness. They are an expression of his need, his desperation. At times they become the lovers whose existence is otherwise only recalled by signatures on the apartment walls, mementoes of one-night stands, passing contacts. At times

<sup>2</sup> Lanford Wilson, *Twenty-One Short Plays* (Newbury, VT, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Lanford Wilson, *The Rimers of Eldritch and Other Plays* (New York, 1967), p. 74.

they are his means of acknowledging the suicidal impulse he feels, dismayed, as he is, by a sexuality which he otherwise seems to celebrate but which makes him a victim of more than fate. The voices keep him alive.

The play ends with what seems very like an echo of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as the fallen 'Lady Bright' is apparently assisted by a stranger, who exists only in his mind but who will lead him away to a place of protection. 'I'm sorry – I hate to trouble you, but I – I believe I've torn my gown . . . would you take me home now, please? . . . Take me home' (*Rimers*, p. 91). There is, however, no home and no stranger to take him to it. His repeated cry, 'Take me home. Take me home. Take me home', uttered in what is supposedly his home, is no more than a cry of desperation.

Wilson has confessed that 'the subject and form of *Lady Bright*' owe everything to Adrienne Kennedy's *The Funny House of the Negro*. 'In other words I ripped Adrienne off totally' (*Twenty-One Short Plays*, p. 22). Kennedy's play had featured 'a young African-American girl quietly going mad in her apartment', while *Lady Bright* was, in his own words, 'about a screaming queen going stark raving' (*Twenty-One Short Plays*, p. 22). Whatever the degree of influence, however, the play won an Obie award for Neil Flanagan, who played the part of Leslie Bright, while Jerry Talmer's review in the *New York Post* was the first review of an Off-Off Broadway play in a major New York daily, itself a significant moment in the development of the postwar theatre in America.

*The Madness of Lady Bright* was revived in 1967 and was still playing when Joe Cino committed suicide. The Caffè Cino closed, supposedly after receiving 1,250 citations for violating various city codes and ordinances in a single day. As Gene A. Barnett reminds us in his book on Wilson, *Lady Bright* had run a total of 205 performances, its closure, along with that of the Caffè Cino, marking a change in the Off-Off-Broadway theatre, which now became less communal and more competitive.

In February 1965, Wilson followed *The Madness of Lady Bright* with *Ludlow Fair*, a comic dialogue between two women in their twenties, a character study in which the inconsequence of their lives emerges indirectly through their conversation and which ends with one of them staring vacantly into space for what Wilson insists must be a full thirty-second pause, a device he would use in later works, increasingly aware of the power of silence, as he was of the void which can equally exist at the heart of a whirlpool of language.

In July of the same year came *This is the Rill Speaking*, a play, as he explained, 'for six voices' with characters doubled and actions being

pantomimed. This creates a portrait of a small community in the Ozark Mountains, Missouri, out of fragments of experience, overlapping scenes, orchestrated dialogue, techniques he would also use in his later work and particularly in *The Rimers of Eldritch*, which presents a darker view of small-town America. Not without a certain sentimentality, a strain that runs through a number of Wilson's plays, and which finds its expression in his fondness for the adolescent, the emotionally vulnerable, it explores the world of youthful naivety and the gulf which opens up between the young and those who have so easily forgotten their own youth.

Theatrically, and perhaps in terms of mood, it owes something to Thornton Wilder, but Wilson identified another source, suggesting that 'I would never have written *This is the Rill Speaking* if I had not read *You May Go Home Again* by David Starkweather, which was a completely non-realistic play. *This is the Rill Speaking* is essentially the same play. It's just *my* experience, *my* going home'.<sup>4</sup> His own work, however, is less radically non-realist than Starkweather's nor is it 'filled with hate' in the way he saw Starkweather's as being, albeit a hate which coexisted with love. On the contrary, the nostalgia, the sentimentality at its heart, lacked the contrasting element which was a feature of *You May Go Home Again*.

To Wilson, *This is the Rill Speaking* was 'a deliberate exercise to set down just the sound of the people, without thinking how the play was to be done. It was to be a play for voices' (*Rimers*, p. 54), that would resist those stereotypes of rural America that seemed to him to appear too frequently in the American theatre. It was, however, a play whose title seemed to baffle everyone, including those who worked at the Caffè Cino taking telephone bookings. The conversation, he explained, usually ran: 'Hello, Caffè Cino. (Beat) Lanford Wilson's *THIS IS THE RILL SPEAKING*. (Beat) Rill. (Beat) R-I-L-L. (Beat) I have no idea' (*Twenty-One Short Plays*, p. 54).

Following *Days Ahead* (1965), a monologue set on Valentine's Day, in which a middle-aged man talks to a wall behind which his wife may or may not be entombed, a wall that is both literal and symbolic, and *Wandering* (1966), a brief three-character play in which only one speech exceeds a single line, Wilson decided to write a play that would require a larger stage. Accordingly, he moved on to Ellen Stuart's Café La Mama Experimental Theatre Club and a new phase in his career. Nonetheless,

<sup>4</sup> Jackson R. Bryer, *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995), p. 290.

there is something impressive about these early works. The restrictions of the Caffè Cino space were turned to advantage. They necessitated a flexible approach to staging and a non-realist version of character, while the emphasis on short plays, which was an aspect of that theatre, encouraged an impressionistic use of language, a poetic density, a sense of the metaphoric force of setting. He had also begun to experiment with the collage technique that was to be a mark of a number of his plays. The influence of other playwrights may be evident but he was already trying out techniques that he would deploy to greater effect later. With *Balm in Gilead*, however, he wrote a play that could not be contained within the Caffè Cino stage. It opened in January 1965, at La Mama, and featured twenty-nine characters.

Set in and around an all-night coffee shop on Upper Broadway, *Balm in Gilead* seems, at first, as Frank Rich of the *New York Times* later described a revival, a naturalistic account of the low-life denizens of this hang-out for prostitutes, pimps and petty criminals. It seems to be a blend of Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End*, Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* and Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie* or *The Iceman Cometh*, with Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real* thrown in. That last reference, however, suggests the extent to which the play is something more than a slice of life, a glimpse into the lower depths. It is true that the dramatis personae does indeed identify most of the characters as prostitutes, addicts, 'bargainers, hagglers', those who would 'sell anything including themselves to any man or woman with the money', that it includes lesbians, homosexuals and a transvestite, along with two people who seem to have wandered in from another world: Joe, a middle-class New Yorker, and Darlene, an attractive but dumb woman, 'honest, romantic to a fault', just arrived from Chicago. But this is a self-consciously theatrical piece, carefully choreographed, almost like the opening scene of *Guys and Dolls*, and, Wilson insists, should 'be breakneck fast' and 'concentrate on the movement of the whole'.<sup>5</sup> On occasion characters address the audience directly (something he had learned from seeing a production of James Saunders's *Next Time I'll Sing to You*), the action is momentarily frozen, scenes are repeated, with the set reversed, while the action is framed, accompanied or interrupted by music: rock and roll or blues sung by a group of black entertainers, songs from a juke box and a 'round' sung by several of the characters. Having seen a production of Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* in Chicago, he was convinced that theatre should be

<sup>5</sup> Lanford Wilson, *Balm in Gilead and Other Plays* (New York, 1965), p. 5.

'a three-ring circus'.<sup>6</sup> *Balm in Gilead*, named for the hymn sung by the characters, is that three-ring circus, and, perhaps, the most significant of his early works.

The all-night café is a no-man's land in the battle for survival waged on the streets, back alleys and rooming-houses which lie at the other end of the spectrum from the American dream. Here the characters snatch a cup of coffee, make assignments, argue, reach out to one another before hurrying off to hustle, to trade themselves in against a tomorrow when the world will be transformed. In his description of the characters Wilson points out that 'what they are now is not what they will be in a month from now' (*Balm in Gilead*, p. 4), but this is not the familiar American piety that they can re-invent themselves, climb up an invisible ladder to success and self-fulfilment, but an acknowledgement that they are passing through, that their world is transient. They sink no roots but, like Tennessee Williams's characters, survive by keeping on the move. Indeed, if they are unwise enough to stay too long, as Joe is, unschooled in the rules of the game, then disaster looms. These are men and women who survive by making no commitments, seizing what they can while they can. The only logic that operates in their lives is that of decline and entropy.

*Balm in Gilead* is impressionistic, pointillist. Each character is no more than part of a shifting portrait of an America in which space and time are the only coordinates, where definitions are of no account, violence threatens and despair and hope seem to exist in the same moment. These are, as Wilson has said, losers who refuse to lose and hence are reminiscent of Tennessee Williams's bums, prostitutes and desperate romantics trading love, or its simulacrum, for momentary relief from awareness of their own failed hopes. The lethargy of the characters in Jack Gelber's *The Connection*, longing for their fix, so many Vladimirs and Estragons awaiting the arrival of a revelatory meaning, is here exchanged for a frenzy of febrile activity as Wilson's figures evade truths they would rather not confront, substitute action for knowledge, awareness and being. Speeches overlap. The juke box is turned on. There is a constant buzz of chatter in order to avoid the silence in which questions require answers, though there are also those who wander through the scene mute, apparently baffled by the world in which they find themselves and from which they seem alienated, linguistically and socially withdrawn.

<sup>6</sup> David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York, 1988), p. 311.

For much of the time speeches are brief: orders for coffee, questions, answers, fragments of language intercut with others so that the meaning of the scene lies less in the individual exchanges than in the overall impression, a patchwork quilt of sound and movement. At other times characters are given arias, elaborate shaggy dog stories to tell, stories whose meaning disappears in the telling as if language were exhausting itself, as if its function were simply to acknowledge the irony it is designed to deny. For these are people for whom ultimate meaning defers to the moment, for whom everything is a way-station on a journey whose destination remains unclear. They live discontinuous lives, hint at existences that transcend their circumstances, cling to habit, to a reassuring repetition, a repetition reflected in the structure of the play itself, which revisits the same action from different angles as, at one stage, the characters physically lift the bar in which they gather and turn it around so that we now see things from a different angle. Like the characters in Harry Hope's bar (in *The Iceman Cometh*), they not only seem trapped in routine but rely on this fact to neutralise the sense of absurdity which might otherwise invade their consciousness, and it is worth recalling that the second act of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is effectively an echo of the first, as it is that the French word for rehearsal means, literally, repetition. These are people rehearsing for a life rather than living it.

When anyone enters the café all the characters look up to evaluate the stranger who can only represent an opportunity or a threat. They are so many actors waiting to be hired, ready to perform any roles required of them, yet clinging to at least the illusion of integrity, to a faith in the substance of their identities. Hence, Frank, the owner of this run-down café, whose customers represent the underside of the American dream, insists that his is 'a decent place' ruined by its clients.

A few characters stand out. Fick, a heroin addict, as Wilson explains, provides a background to the rest of the action. Darlene, the girl from Chicago, honest but dumb, is out of tune with the world in which she finds herself, indeed Wilson insists that her voice should set her aside from the sound of the rest of the play, and sound is as important as movement in *Balm in Gilead*. Joe, meanwhile, whose daily mounting debt to the mob is an image of the implacable nature of the reality they all confront, slowly edges towards death at the hands of a stranger who performs something of the symbolic role of the street cleaners in *Camino Real*. And when he dies that fact, and its implications, is ignored by those whose own frenzied lives are built on denial. The play, like the characters, pitches a swirl of activity against the stasis which constitutes their

ultimate fear and which is shadowed by Babe, a heroin addict, who sits silently at the bar throughout the first act, a Beckettian figure resisting irony by submitting to it.

From time to time not only do characters address the audience, they also describe the events as a 'show'. It was a technique that Wilson employed in a number of his plays. As he explained, 'with my art history background it seemed as important to me as admitting that what you were working with was paint on canvas'. Years later, however, 'I took the talking to the audience out. It never seemed to work. They always talked in character' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 310). It is a curious remark, since, even in character, the actor, by his or her presence on stage, cannot help but underscore the theatrical status of the work. In *Balm in Gilead*, meanwhile, that device is purely functional, the play being a kind of Hallowe'en game of trick or treat (it takes place at Hallowe'en) in which the characters perform to order, stage a series of dramas, from sentimental comedy, through farce to melodrama.

Wilson began his career when the theatre, in common with the other arts, was undergoing a radical revisionism. Just as artists were questioning the definition of art and exploring its performatic dimension, so John Cage was investigating component elements of music: sound and silence. The 'realism' of *Balm in Gilead* should be seen in this context. In common with many others then working in the American theatre, Wilson was raising questions about the nature of the art form in which he was operating. Even his image of the three-ring circus has echoes of the theories of Antonin Artaud, whose work had entered the American theatre via the Living Theatre, and whose stress on movement, sound, spectacle, were perhaps reflected in Wilson's play. So, too, the improvisatory element in the play ('Improvised, unheard conversations may be used', Wilson instructed; 'characters may wander along the street and back, improvise private jokes, or stand perfectly still, waiting') (*Balm in Gilead*, p. 9) is both in tune with a period in which improvisation (which altered the power system within the theatre, offering a limited autonomy to the actor) was a central concern, and entirely functional in a play in which characters desperately improvise lives which appear to lack coherence. These are characters who have not only lost the plot but suspect that there is none. They have no purchase on the past and no sense of a future that can involve anything other than an endlessly repeated present. They are, indeed, as stranded as the characters in *Camino Real*, for whom the old presumed values of civility and the romantic self have broken on the rocks of a crude reality, lacking transcendence.

These figures are, for the most part, tolerant of one another, but that tolerance hardly seems a virtue when it is momentary, so easily broken, no more than an alliance of the desperate at this end-of-the-line café. They await the next fix, the next trick, serve the moment, provoke and respond to desires. Alliances are temporary. They share little more than coffee and cigarettes and sometimes not even those. Only within the music which punctuates the play do they have a momentary harmony, rather as in Gelber's *The Connection*. The 'round' which they sing, however, serves merely to underscore the contingency of that harmony which emerges from a shared and unchanging situation:

They laugh and jab  
cavort and jump  
and joke and gab  
and grind and bump.

They flip a knife  
and toss a coin  
and spend their life  
And scratch their groin.

They pantomime  
a standing screw  
and pass the time  
with nought to do.

They swing, they sway  
this cheerful crew,  
with nought to say  
and nought to do.

(*Balm in Gilead*, p. 71)

Form and sense coincide, for not only does this round describe the empty and repetitious lives of 'this cheerful crew', but, as a round, it is (like the play itself) a series of overlapping lines which simply repeat themselves without ever progressing.

To Wilson, this movement is equally reflected in the structure of the play which was, he has said, 'constructed in circles'. Scenes are repeated; even individual speeches seem to curve back on themselves, becoming hermetic. The reversing of the set, meanwhile, simply enables us to see the same scene from another direction. He has admitted to deriving this idea from a production of Gertrude Stein's significantly named *In Circles*, but then, to him, one of the great virtues of the Off-Off-Broadway movement lay in its eclecticism, in the fact that works were seen as in some sense common property since so many of those contributing to it were

themselves on a sharp learning curve. Thus, he sees another influence on *Balm in Gilead* as lying in the dances and musicals he saw at the Judson Poets' Theatre, where his own work, *Unfinished Play*, was staged.

In May 1984, on the occasion of a revival of *Balm in Gilead*, Wilson returned to the Upper West Side of New York and the neighbourhood where the play was set. It was, he explained, based on 'his experiences in a rundown hotel at 76th Street and Broadway and the coffee shop on its ground floor' (Barnett, *Lanford Wilson*, p. 19), a setting that was to reappear in another guise in *The Hot l Baltimore*. Meanwhile, he wrote *The Sandcastle*, a play rooted in his personal life and which recalled friends from his time at San Diego State College.

What *Balm in Gilead* did for an urban setting, *The Rimers of Eldritch* did for a rural one, at least in so far as he was interested in creating a sense of an entire community. It opened at La Mama in July 1966, and moved to Off-Broadway's Cherry Lane, in a new production, in February of the following year.

The play is set in 'one of the many nearly abandoned towns in America's Middle West' (*Rimers*, p. 3). Its population of seventy is depleted when one of their number is killed, the trial for his murder providing the spine of a work that otherwise moves around in time. In part the plot is driven by the mystery of this central event but what emerges is a portrait of this small town on the edge of nowhere, a place in which things are falling apart in more ways than one. Indeed, it is as much a play about a community as it is about the individuals who constitute it and to that end all the characters are present on stage at the same time, scenes overlap or are played simultaneously and we are offered an account of a community slowly edging towards extinction, its coal mines redundant, its land exhausted, its movie theatre closed, its buildings crumbling. Rats are in the granary. The town's café is little more than a stopping-off place for those passing through. Its former owner has, like the father in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, fallen in love with long distance and thereby abandoned his wife Cora, now its owner, to the arms of a lover, this being the only kind of consolation on offer. The town's children leave as soon as they are able, abandoning the husk of an unforgiving community tainted with religious bigotry, suspicious of the stranger as of those who do not share its values.

At its heart, however, there are those who are trying to work out what life might be for them in such a place, dreaming of possibilities, looking for love: Eva, a crippled girl of fourteen, on the verge of life, and Robert,

about to leave school, and drawn to her as he might not have been in a town where choices were wider. For Eva, the world is suffused with poetry. She revels in nature, looks for a harmony of souls. Robert, whose brother had died in an accident and who is unfavourably compared to him, is largely baffled by life. They are an unlikely pair and there is a gulf of understanding between them, a gulf underscored when she tries to provoke a sexual encounter, while understanding little of what she precipitates. The result is less love than an assault which she belatedly resists. It is this that provides the principal motor of the plot, since when Skelly Mannor, universally distrusted as the town's eccentric and hermit, hears her cries and comes to her aid he is shot by the well-meaning Nelly Windrod, who rushes from her house and misinterprets what she sees. Charged with murder, she is acquitted. The truth is concealed.

The play bears an epigraph from Jeremiah: 'The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.' In part this indicates the time-scale of a play that takes place from spring through summer to autumn. There is, however, a symbolism in these passing seasons which reflects not only the town's decay and the failure of its citizens to understand their own life experiences, but also the stages through which its characters pass, from hope, through temporary fulfilment to despair. Nelly Windrod's mother, once a pioneer nurse, is now senile. The relationship between Cora Groves and her lover ends when he impregnates 'the prettiest girl at Centreville High' (*Timers*, p. 3). Robert and Eva's romance is destroyed not only by the murder but by his denial of their relationship. The mischief of childhood turns into the violence of adulthood. And watching all this is the figure of Skelly Mannor.

Skelly drifts through the town, peering into windows and people's hearts. He sees the difference between their private and public faces. He knows that Robert's brother was not the hero he was supposed to be, but violent and sexually warped. He observes Walter's betrayal of Cora and tries to step between Robert and the consequences of his actions. He is the eye of God. At the same time all the community ills are ascribed to him and his killing is thus in some senses an unconscious ritual. He is to take the blame, absolve their guilt. They cannot see him for what he is. Only Cora and Eva know the truth and Eva conspires to conceal it, ending as spiritually and mentally crippled as she is physically disabled.

The power of the play lies in part in its construction. The community is summoned into being by a series of brief scenes which unfold stories that are both self-contained and related to one another. Slowly these establish a portrait of a society in which alliances form and dissolve, past

events become present facts, rumours spread, fictions are taken for realities. Scenes are interrupted or interleaved; they jump backwards and forwards in time. Revelations emerge little by little and often by indirection. Securities are suddenly undermined, certainties dissolved.

Movement and actions are carefully choreographed as the voices are orchestrated. At key moments the voices sound out in counterpoint. The lines of verse in a hymn sung by the congregation, a hymn celebrating community with God, alternate with the reiterated cry of the deserted Cora – ‘Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God’ (*Rimers*, p. 33) – which ends the first act, words which owe nothing to religion and deny the consolation which the hymn had seemingly guaranteed.

As we move towards the killing so, in a stage direction, Wilson indicates that the woods should ‘become alive with their voices’ (p. 57). The sequence builds towards crescendo in a litany of such voices, a ceremony, a ritual, in which the only commonality lies in a shared misunderstanding, a joint failure of compassion. In a play that features other rituals, from the church service to the courtroom, truth is neither discovered nor expiated. Nor is it suggested that this failure is restricted only to the town of Eldritch. The circles spread out, to the next supposed community, Centreville, and then, following the truck-drivers who drive the highways of America, to the society for which the small town was to be the basic building block.

The crime, in *The Rimers of Eldritch*, is not so much the accidental killing at its heart, as the cruelty of those who put their own needs ahead of the interests of others, the destructive ignorance of those who recoil from what they do not understand. The gentle, the vulnerable, the damaged are at risk. The crippled Eva Jackson is close kin to Tennessee Williams’s similarly crippled Laura, in *The Glass Menagerie*, a play in which Wilson had performed; just as Cora Groves, of the Hilltop Café, is related to Lady Torrance in *Orpheus Descending*. But if those in this small midwestern town create their own pain, by their wilful betrayals, their prejudices and callous disregard, they are also the victims of a natural process that strips them of innocence, exposes them to forces they can barely understand and then pulls them on towards a fate which offers only dissolution, decay and, ultimately, extinction. In other words, for Wilson as for Williams, the real enemy is time as the seasons pass and the young girl and boy begin their journey towards irony.

*The Rimers of Eldritch* is an elegiac play. For the young Eva Jackson, especially, the world is still touched with poetry, though that poetry is fractured by the sudden assault which in part she provokes. Meanwhile,

the author seems to associate himself with a nostalgia that is an almost inevitable product of a work which dramatises lost innocence. The lives of the characters reflect the state of the town into which they were born. What once had order and held out the promise of possibility, what once offered shape, structure, beauty, is now, as Eva's mother says, 'falling apart, boarded together, everything flapping and rusting' (*Rimers*, p. 57). As winter covers the trees with rime, encasing them in ice, so the people have felt the heat go out of their lives. They have become insulated from one another and from their own hopes. In a brilliant litany, in the final scene of the play, each person contributes a brief sentence or phrase, adding his or her stitches to a sampler. They contribute their voice to the chorus, their brushstroke to the final picture. The effect is a kind of tone poem in which their laments, fears and hopes are woven together:

NELLY. You fall down, you bruise, you run into things, you're old.

PATSY. Tumbleweed blowing down the deserted streets.

MARY. And the flowers dry up and die . . .

MARTHA. I don't know, love.

EVA. And when the sun comes up it blinds you!

EVELYN. The mine shaft building used to just shine.

SKELLY. All in the air.

JOSH. Just see.

LENA. It's a beautiful church.

WALTER. Wouldn't you say?

MAVIS. A decent person is afraid to move outside at night.

PREACHER. As you go your way tonight.

CORA. You seem uneasy.

EVELYN. The doctor said it was just shock.

PECK. You watch yourself.

MARY. Gone, gone gone.

EVA. Like it's been dipped in water and then in sugar.

MAVIS. And not seen the light of day tomorrow.

MARY. All my children.

EVA. And that's what I want to be.

MARY. Gone, gone gone. (p. 58)

Wilson's subject, in many of these early plays, is the group, the community, and his theatrical approach reflects that fact. He began to feel, however, that such an approach had its deficiencies. The risk is that the individual character will be lost in the overall design. Looking back on *The Rimers of Eldritch* he singled out the figure of Josh Johnson, the vindictive and brutal-minded brother of Patsy, whose affair with Walter destroyed Cora's hopes for her future: 'He has ten lines and most of

them to his sister, but from his actions we know he's a terribly complicated character. With this flashy technique and all these characters, I hadn't had time to develop him. I decided to concentrate on depth of character' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 313). That decision was to lead to *The Gingham Dog*, but his comment, made in 1986, is none too accurate. He underestimates the lines given to Josh by several hundred per cent while his key speeches are not to his sister but to Skelly and his girlfriend, Lena. Josh may be a minor character but he is a key one. The fact is, though, that, by 1986, Wilson's interest lay elsewhere. Nonetheless, his own denigration of his 'flashy technique' should not detract from its power in plays that were affecting because of rather than despite their theatricality.

In *The Gingham Dog*, however, he set out to write a play which eschewed the theatrics of his earlier work. A play about an interracial relationship, written at a time when America seemed, as the President's Commission on Civil Disorder had pointed out in 1968, to be self-evidently two nations, divided along the line of colour, it staged the drama of the break-up of a marriage. But where Eugene O'Neill, in *All God's Chillun* and, more recently, Lorraine Hansberry, in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, had chosen to dramatise such tensions by distorting the realist fabric of their plays, Wilson, concerned to foreground character, chose realism, perhaps one reason why the play, which opened at the Washington Theatre Club in 1968, transferred to Broadway the following year.

It was not an easy subject for a white playwright to engage within a year of assassinations and riots, and not made any easier by his decision to make the white protagonist, Vincent, a Southerner from what appears, at first, to be an unreconstructed family, and his wife, Gloria, a new convert to militant black politics. They are both educated, both professionals, both fully equipped, therefore, to engage in the wounding arguments about history and politics which seem to stimulate almost as much as dismay them. Behind both of them, meanwhile, are families suspicious of this alliance across racial lines, themselves partly hostages to the past.

And yet there is an ambiguity to this that emerges only with the arrival of Vincent's sister, Barbara. She reminds Gloria that poverty is not unique to her race. Coming from rural Kentucky, she has seen the conditions of poor whites. Not intellectually equipped to fight Gloria on her own ground, she nonetheless serves to expose the formulas with which she has replaced genuine feeling, just as Vincent has come close to

replacing concern with ambition. Yet she, too, is a product of history and, under pressure, reverts to the same bitterness that has helped to drive Vincent and Gloria apart: 'You're hateful and I'm glad you've broken up, and I knew you would, because at night I *prayed* you would, because you're no different from any other Black, and I don't care *who* you try to be like. You're a hateful, vindictive, militant bitch!'<sup>7</sup> Out pour the clichés on which she was raised. Gloria, she insists, is 'shiftless and lazy'. She is 'just like all other Negroes' (*The Gingham Dog*, p. 34). But Vincent, too, is appalled by the degree to which people seem to confirm the stereotype, become what they are alleged to be.

The stereotype has the advantage of fixity. It is a defence against complexity, flux, social and personal insecurity. But these are characters who feel the ground move beneath their feet. In the context in which they find themselves moral certainties dissolve, brutally direct words become a shield against profound anxieties. Gloria asserts her solidarity with her fellow blacks while unable to communicate with her own family. Robert's liberal principles are unable to sustain him in the context of those who refuse to conform to his model of behaviour. In some sense Gloria is right when she insists that 'our breaking up didn't have anything to do with color' (p. 36). At its heart the failure of the marriage can be traced to the dissolution of the world they thought they inhabited.

America of the 1960s was a world of competing rhetorics and contrasting models. Its improvisatory mood, its rejection of the past, its celebration of the moment had a carnivalesque dimension to it, a naive assurance. Yet this coexisted with a curious authoritarianism as groups denied old ideologies in the name of new ones, denounced violence in violent demonstrations, countered racism with racism, bombed out on acid and bombed ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) barracks, declared history dead while reaching back for older models of community. There was simultaneously a constructive and destructive pulse of energy running through the body politic. Nor was its impact on personal lives inconsiderable. The plot of Wilson's play proved its plausibility when the leading black playwright of the time, LeRoi Jones, not only changed his name to Amiri Baraka, but divorced his white wife (for admitted ideological reasons) and moved his activities to Harlem.

*The Gingham Dog*, however, though it is at times too much of a dramatised debate, in which arguments are rehearsed and the dialectics of race are substituted for that concern for character which Wilson had

<sup>7</sup> Lanford Wilson, *The Gingham Dog* (New York, 1969), p. 33.

announced as his objective, does manage to reach towards something more. The second act contrasts sharply with the first, which had ended with Gloria screaming for her husband to 'GET OUT! ON! OUT! GO!! GO!!' (p. 43). Vincent returns to find Gloria still in the apartment. In the bedroom is an Hispanic man, who we never see, and whom she has picked up in desperation. In the early hours of the morning Vincent and Gloria speak to one another, free now of the rhetoric that had come between them. In place of the lacerating assaults we are offered a simple dialogue between two people aware of their loss. Now Gloria can wonder at the impulse to characterise people by race or national origin that had directed her own politics, no less than Barbara's or Vincent's:

We don't know anything about anyone until we know what they are. God, you could describe someone down to their most egocentric characteristic, and you still would have no idea what they're really like until you know that they're Irish, for instance – or Scottish. Then you think, 'Oh, yeah, yeah'. Got him pegged. . . . Suddenly you know what to expect of them. (p. 47)

She acknowledges, as she could not have done before, both that her compassion is generated out of guilt and that it is racially motivated, as he acknowledges the power of the South to deny both its history and its present reality. They are together again, but only momentarily. The play ends with Gloria alone, staring blankly out of the window. *The Gingham Dog* closed, perhaps unsurprisingly, after five days. At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* had been sustained on Broadway only with the aid of subsidies from well-wishers. By 1969, after three years of riots and with Vietnam increasingly the main focus of concern, it is doubtful that any play on this subject could have commanded a Broadway audience. For all its virtues, however, this is not by any means Wilson's best work. The speeches are over-explicit, the characters unconvincing, the staging unadventurous. A gay character, who acts as go-between for the husband and wife, serves little purpose, beyond offering a reminder of another group easily reduced to caricature. The dismantling of the apartment, as their shared goods are divided up and put into boxes, does serve as a visual echo of the dismantling of the relationship that occasions it, but beyond that there is little here to remind an audience of Wilson's versatility and invention. By focussing on two central characters rather than a community he does not gain in depth what he accused himself of sacrificing in scope. However, with his next play, an autobiographical work, he did contrive to offer

both a convincing portrait of a group and a powerful sense of individual character.

*Lemon Sky* opened in March 1970, at the Buffalo Arena Stage before moving to the Playhouse Theatre in midtown Manhattan. His most autobiographical play, it dramatises the experience of Alan, a seventeen-year-old who leaves his mother behind in Nebraska to seek out the father who had abandoned the family for another woman. He is living in suburban San Diego with his second wife, two boys, and two girls the family has been fostering.

The play, set in the late 1950s and the then present, consists, like Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, of memories presented by its central character, now twenty-nine, who steps into the light and addresses the audience. He revisits the events of his seventeenth year because that was the year in which he learned so much about himself and others, though it has taken time to assimilate such knowledge, to make sense of the emotional roller-coaster on which he found himself. The play is his attempt to shape it, to understand it, as perhaps this play and others have been Wilson's own attempt to do likewise.

Alan frames the play and summons events into being, inspecting them for their meaning. He replays scenes, as though he had failed to drain them of significance the first time through. He acknowledges a gap between the seventeen-year-old self within the play and the twenty-nine-year-old who confesses that it has taken him ten years to be able to write what he now presents, a gap underlined by a midwestern accent that has faded with time. He acknowledges that what follows is a theatrical performance – 'I've had the title; I've had some of the scenes a dozen times, a dozen different ways'<sup>8</sup> – but its purpose clearly goes beyond the construction of an effective play.

He is drawn back by guilt, by regret, by a certain protective bewilderment, but not by nostalgia. Beneath the surface of this suburban world were tensions Alan was ill-equipped to understand or acknowledge; beneath the daily routine were vulnerabilities, needs, anxieties that could never be acknowledged at the time. The subterranean tremors which shake the ground from time to time hint at other invisible tensions. Alan's declared intention is 'to let it tell itself and *mirror* – by what it couldn't say – what was really there' (*Lemon Sky*, p. 4), and, indeed, slowly, the invisible becomes manifest as hidden truths break surface, threatening

<sup>8</sup> Lanford Wilson, *Lemon Sky* (New York, 1970), p. 3.

to destabilise a family held together by little more than routine and the secrets they are afraid to articulate.

Alan himself is a catalyst. He brings hidden knowledge with him to this Californian suburb. His father had served time in jail for robbery as a teenager and had been womanising on the night his daughter was born dead, neither of which facts does his new wife know. And little by little hints are dropped about a man whose habits seem so punctilious, who appears so secure in his prejudices, so anal in his behaviour. Though a keen amateur photographer, he has taken no photographs of his sons for two years. Instead, he photographs scantily clad girls, retreating to his dark room to develop these, looking at them in the red light. When his wife, Ronnie, comments that, 'Doug should have had a girl. He'd have been a better father to her. You should see him with the neighbor girls. He really loves them' (p. 30), the speech not only hints at a fear that she cannot openly confess but is followed by a long pause in which the implications of a seemingly casual remark become apparent. Just as Kate Keller, in Miller's *All My Sons*, had suppressed all knowledge of her husband's culpability in order to sustain the family, respectability, sanity, so here, too, the seemingly bland wife, Ronnie, possesses a knowledge that she must never allow to destabilise the apparent equanimity of family life. For the fact is that Douglas is not merely a compulsive womaniser; he is drawn to young girls, even making sexual advances to the teenage girl he is fostering, an event exposed in the second act but anticipated in the first when Ronnie observes that she is the person 'on whom the plot will pivot' (p. 25).

The second act aptly mirrors the collapse of the apparent equanimity of family life by further distorting the realism which, despite occasional asides to the audience, had prevailed in the first. Carol and Penny, the two foster girls, now join Alan in acknowledging their status as characters, discussing the play in which they are appearing, in the case of Carol describing her own death and acknowledging the miracle of theatre in keeping her alive. When Carol flicks a cigarette into the wings she says, 'I hope it burns down the theatre' (p. 69). They step outside the time-frame, singing anachronistic songs, coming together in the play, as supposedly they did not in life, to comment on events. Douglas and Ronnie, permitted a factitious autonomy, likewise turn to the audience to justify themselves. But the family, in the second and third acts, is now in near-total collapse. Penny is sexually assaulted by Douglas and attempts suicide; Carol returns to the drugs she tried to abandon and loses the boyfriend who was to rescue her. Ronnie finally has to face the

fact of her husband's distorted sexuality while struggling to maintain some kind of relationship with a man increasingly desperate and aggressive. Alan is accused of a homosexuality he will not confront.

None of the characters in the play is secure. In a land of sunshine and opportunity, they are lost. The family unit that was to have protected them from their anxieties is the source of their anxiety. Alan leaves Nebraska to build a new life free of his history, to fill the gap left in his life by his father's desertion, only to see that life dissolve. The two foster girls look for protection in this California suburb only to discover that there is no protection, that the shifting ground beneath their feet echoes the deep insecurity in their own lives. The hills outside their home are aflame. Everything burns until nothing is left but ash.

Only when the play is finished, when the memories have been reshaped, can Alan 'escape', a word used by Wilson in the final stage direction. For a brief while the family, which flew apart with centripetal force, comes together again as time is reversed. But into that gap between event and memory of event comes irony and compassion. The father who betrayed Alan's mother, his second wife and his abandoned son, may be the chief cause of pain, but he is also allowed to articulate his own baffled need. Alan, meanwhile, permits an accusation to lie on the table, neither confirmed nor denied. If the play was, from his point of view, an act of exorcism, it is perhaps also an act of expiation, for though he was not the cause of pain, wrapped up, as he then was, in his own needs, he failed either to understand or to enter the lives of others whose real desperation only becomes apparent to him with the passage of time.

*Lemon Sky* is an impressive play whose dramatic borrowings are integrated into a work of considerable subtlety and originality. Its modulated realism is in itself a reflection of its concern with the insubstantiality of memory and the shifting perceptions of its characters. Its emotional truths carry greater force by virtue of a narrative perspective which offers a sense of detachment slowly undermined by a past that offers up its secrets. Its metatheatrical elements, meanwhile, suggest the degree to which its central character acknowledges his own role in shaping that past to serve present needs. The ironies with which the play is laced only come into sharp focus as that character is led back to the heart of the darkness he has struggled to deny. Psychological process and theatrical strategy come into alignment.

A month later came *Serenading Louie* – first presented at the Washington Theatre Club in April 1970 – another play in which betrayal lies at the

heart of relationships, another play which looks back to a world that at least in memory seemed simpler. The epigraph, from 'The Whiffenpoof Song', a favourite of barbershop quartets, conveys something of the tone of regret that echoes through a play in which lives and relationships are slowly unwound as its characters act as if there were no consequences to their actions. 'We will serenade our Louie/While life and voice shall last/Then we'll pass and be forgotten with the rest.'

Alex is highly successful in the law and on the verge of success in politics. Yet something is missing from his life, something not provided by his increasingly desperate wife, Gabrielle. Accordingly, he is drawn to a teenage girl, sentimentalising a relationship which, though not sexual, is profoundly damaging. Meanwhile, the situation is reversed with his friend Carl, whose own success means less to him than his relationship with his wife, Mary, who is herself having an affair with a married man. All are 'around thirty-four' and there is a sense that they have arrived at a fulcrum, balancing dangerously between periods of their lives.

For Gabrielle, her life is like a frosted leaf she had once picked up as a child, intending her teacher to pin it on the wall, unaware that the very act of putting it in her purse destroys the beauty she seeks to preserve. The freshness and the beauty have gone. She is left with no more than the shadow of what once was vital. Now she is unable to concentrate, unable to sustain a thought. She reacts to her husband's withdrawal by drifting aimlessly, stunned by his silences, aghast at his retreats.

Again, with Carl and his wife the situation is reversed. He recalls a moment, many years before, when a young girl had fallen down a well and the whole country held its breath, coming together with a sense of unity that seems to him to have since disappeared. The gulf that has opened between his wife and himself mirrors that gap between a communal past and an alienated present which slowly makes life almost unbearable to him. There are silences in his life, too. Indeed, Wilson instructs that one such should last for a beat of fifteen. His hysteria mirrors Gabrielle's while taking a different form. He strikes out at Alex, shouting 'I WANT IT BACK — LIKE IT WAS. IT WAS GOOD THEN.'<sup>9</sup>

Structurally, Wilson intertwines the two stories, bringing the characters together in different pairings, using counterpoints, duets, distraught solos. Nor is this simply the story of two couples, drifting apart. Mary may feel herself becoming 'an emotional recluse', as Gabrielle retreats increasingly to her room, but it seems that the society of which they are

<sup>9</sup> Lanford Wilson, *Serenading Louie* (New York, 1985), p. 33.

a part is also sliding into narcosis, abandoning its shape and its principles. Alex does affect to care, complaining at injustice, but this is not unconnected with his attempt to recapture something missing in his life, to cling on to the moral concerns of other people. Meanwhile, life becomes a game.

In the final scene the action switches effortlessly between the two couples, the same suburban home being seemingly occupied by both as Wilson edges the action towards its apocalyptic end, Carl, now off-stage, killing his wife and family. The moral detachment, the game-playing, the selfishness disguised as self-discovery, now end in an implacable moment of melodrama which serves belatedly to resurrect the values so casually relinquished.

*Serenading Louie* is an affecting if simple work undermined to some degree by the mechanical way in which action is mirrored by the two couples, but with it Lanford Wilson anticipated what Tom Wolfe called the 'me decade', and Christopher Lasch characterised as 'the culture of narcissism'. In doing so he suggested something of the price that might have to be paid for the collapse of a sense of community and the validation of self-concern.

Many of Wilson's plays tend to have a particularly American blend of sentimentality and irony, a combination to be found in the work of Hemingway and Fitzgerald as much as in that of Wilder and Williams. His characters often manage to be nostalgic for pain, to feel in decay a sustaining warmth. They drift towards stereotype in a quest for protection, limiting their lives the more easily to control them. His is an ostensibly simple world in which needs are never quite met and dreams never quite realised. His characters look back with regret to an innocence that was no more than ignorance of the forces that would disassemble perfect order. Small towns, hotels, families, crumble and fall apart and the wish to reverse this process is strong if deceptive, for at the heart of a presumed perfection is threat. The leaf is always falling from the tree.

No one's hold on life is secure. Fate, in one form or another, moves his characters around. At times their speeches overlay one another less as a sign of realism, of the layered nature of conversation, than as an indication of the separate stories they tell, of the contiguous but secluded, disconnected worlds such figures inhabit. What Wilson dramatises is colliding privacies. Anxious to justify, defend, explain themselves, his characters cut in on others doing the same. And when they break the frame, as they do at times, turning to acknowledge the audience, they also

thereby acknowledge their own inability to transcend the given. They are characters enacting a plot not of their own devising. Even when the frame is not broken that same sense of existing within a plotted life is strong.

These are not existential beings, defining themselves through their encounter with experience, coming into being as a consequence of the accumulated decisions of free souls. They have, for the most part, settled for limited roles, embraced defined functions as if those functions had some ultimate legitimacy. They propose alternative tracks they believe they might follow, but seldom if ever take them. Like Tennessee Williams's drifters, they move on from time to time but never arrive at a permanency that is more than routine. For visions they substitute dreams, for hopes, only memories, as tainted nostalgia replaces a confident progress. Somewhere, they feel, there is a meaning that eludes them, somewhere a promise never quite fulfilled. They lack density of character because they have settled for something less, believing they have no alternative, or believing that such a conviction will offer protection.

This can make Wilson's work seem disquieting at times, as he deploys characters who conform too easily to stereotype, settles for quick sketches of those who are perhaps disturbingly no more than they seem. This is in part a product of a dramatic method aimed at constituting a group, crowding the stage with characters who, collectively, become the society he wishes to engage with. The emphasis is placed on harmonics, tonalities which blend, contrast and interweave, rather than on the resonances of an individual voice. It is not a method which lends itself easily to ambivalence and ambiguity. Yet his point is that these are very much characters who have themselves chosen to accept that they are role players rather than principals in their own drama. For the most part they acknowledge their marginality, however much they patrol the borders of their shrinking territory. They have no power to shift the direction of history, to redirect the priorities of their society, to challenge the fiat of fate. They survive, get by, exist from day to day in the company of others who do likewise but whose inner necessities are closed to them, except when, occasionally, desperation drives those needs – sexual, social, economic – to the surface.

Wilson's characters are capable of occasional selflessness, acts of charity or compassion, but these are momentary recognitions of a shared plight which for the most part are displaced by the dulling ache of routine. They are aware, on occasion, of incompletions; they are sen-

sitive to the wounds they bear, conscious that time is unmaking them as it is the environment they inhabit, but for true insight they too readily substitute imperfect memories, momentary alliances (swiftly formed, swiftly abandoned), fantasies that dissolve even as they are shaped out of hopes and aspirations long since traded for illusion. In some ways this is true of a work which followed three brief plays (*The Family Continues*, *Ikke, Ikke, Nye, Nye, Nye* and *The Great Nebula in Orion*) and which proved decisive in Wilson's career.

The Hotel Baltimore, in the play of the same name which opened in January 1973 at Circle Rep before moving, two months later, to the Off-Broadway Circle in the Square, is a penultimate stop for those who have come almost to the end of their possibilities. Even its so-called permanent residents exude an air of the temporary. It is home to none of them. They camp out here until something else comes along, even if nothing is likely to do so, except the death which had eventually awaited the hotel guest in Eugene O'Neill's *Hughie*, also set in a hotel lobby. For the prostitutes who use the hotel, it is one step from the degradation that they suspect awaits them, time, anyway, being their true enemy. For a young boy who wanders through, on the run from the law and apparently hunting for his grandfather, it is a stopping place on the road to perdition. For a brother and sister, larcenous, paranoid, self-deceiving, it is somewhere to steal in order to finance the next stage of a journey to what they hope will be a home, but which quickly turns out to be a chimera. An old man, meanwhile, plays out his time, increasingly baffled by a world whose sounds he hears indistinctly and whose meaning passes him by, while a switchboard operator takes calls from and passes messages to unseen guests who inhabit the labyrinth above in this house of lost souls.

The play seems to have had its origins many years before. Certainly the hotel at its heart, a decaying building in a decaying city, brought back memories of an earlier time, and not merely of the hotel that inspired *Balm in Gilead*. Wilson recalls that on first arriving in Chicago in 1957 'they were tearing down every Frank Lloyd Wright building for a parking lot', and what was true there was, if anything, more true elsewhere. Thus he chose Baltimore for the setting of *Hot l Baltimore* because it was 'the epitome, to me, of a city that was once really great and [was] now going to hell in a handbag'. It was also 'the first railway center in this country . . . That's why the lament for the railroad goes through the play' (Barnett, *Lanford Wilson*, pp. 89-90). The building itself, an old railroad hotel, is in decline (windows will not close, the boiler fails, the elevator is

boarded up) and scheduled for demolition. Its inhabitants are all on a notice to quit, in more ways than one. Time has run out on a place that once offered the semblance if not the reality of protection, the appearance of style and a reassuring permanence. The management is tolerant of eccentricities and illegalities, but this is less evidence of compassion than indifference, as it presides over a loose alliance of misfits, miscreants and deviants who share a certain desperation and little else and who, on occasion, come together, in the configuration but not the reality of a family. Yet somehow this does not have the Beckettian irony of *Hughie*, where a hotel lobby is refashioned to become the anteroom to death. It is, though, close in spirit to Williams's *Camino Real*, a play in which a group of desperate romantics find themselves in limbo. In Williams's play these were characters from fiction, and it is tempting to say that Wilson's characters, too, come less from life than from literature in so far as their prototypes can be found in the work of O'Neill as well as Williams.

What was to have been 'an elegant and restful haven',<sup>10</sup> is now scheduled for destruction. In a note to the first scene Wilson proposes that 'The theatre, evanescent in itself, and for all we do perhaps itself disappearing here, seems the ideal place for the representation of the impermanence of our architecture' (*The Hot l Baltimore*, p. xiii). And not, on the evidence of this play, the evanescence and impermanence of architecture alone.

Above the lobby is a mural depicting the railroad's progress westward, an ironic commentary on the price paid for that progress, for pushed against the mural is a broken television and a pile of old record books and files. This is the dead letter office of an hotel and a society. The grace and elegance of the past have gone. The original furniture has been recovered in plastic fabric. From the ceiling hangs a non-functional chandelier which no longer sheds light but provides power for a tinny radio and the office hotplate. The play, meanwhile, is set on Memorial Day, a fitting time for a work which, for all its humour and sentimental portraits of damaged but resilient individuals, nonetheless stages the death of a dream. The missing letter on the hotel sign is merely the outward sign of entropy as the machine runs down, energy leaches away, moral certainty gives way to simple pragmatism, and the emphasis switches to survival mechanisms, damage control.

Wilson's description of the characters makes plain the extent to which

<sup>10</sup> Lanford Wilson, *The Hot l Baltimore* (New York, 1973), p. xiii.

he sees *Hot l Baltimore* as what Ntozake Shange, in a different context, would call a choreopoem. It is a play for voices scored so that the result is a chorus, a series of broken arias, and that fact is underscored by Wilson's own description of the characters. Thus Mr Katz, the manager, is described as 'a baritone', as is the night clerk, Bill Lewis. Paul Grainger, a twenty-year-old student, is 'a tenor', while April Green, a thirty-year-old prostitute, is a 'mellow alto' and Suzy, another prostitute, 'a mezzo'. It is not that this is an operatic work. It is that Wilson is a creator of tone poems. So, Mr Morse, a seventy-year-old, is partly distinguished by his 'high croaking voice' as a sixty-eight-year-old former waitress, Millie, is characterised by a 'lovely voice'. Mrs Bellotti is 'thin voiced', Jackie, twenty-four, has the manner and the 'voice' of a young stevedore. Her brother, Jamie, by contrast, is characterised by his 'listening'.

Given Wilson's impressionistic approach, his talent for establishing a community of characters, even if that community is dysfunctional, as it was in *Lemon Sky* and is again here, sound becomes a mechanism both to establish the distinctiveness of individual characters and to score the music of their relationships. Just as he choreographs the movement of characters whose meaning lies both in their privacies and in their relationship to one another, so he orchestrates voices which become the sign of their relationships. When the ageing Mr Morse says 'Listen to my voice' (p. 23) rather than 'listen to me', or Mr Katz says not 'watch your mouth' but 'watch your voice' (p. 43), they are doing something more than revealing their uncertain grasp of language. The voices are both markers of their character and tonal elements in the music of the community.

On occasion, Wilson connects separate conversations which thereby seem to comment on one another. Mrs Bellotti has come to the hotel to seek the re-instatement of her mentally damaged son. In what amounts to a monologue, since the girl she addresses has her mind on other things, she explains that she and her husband can no longer house him: 'He's thirty-six. He and his dad don't get along. I tell him he has to try to meet people – to meet a girl, and he says how would I do that? And I don't know what to tell him' (p. 12). The girl's question – 'You giving up on him again?' (p. 12) – seems apt enough but is in fact a question directed at the night clerk who, significantly, unplugs a connection on the telephone switchboard, having failed to communicate with a guest. The action both underscores Mrs Bellotti's dilemma and the fact that no one is listening to her plea. Similarly, when Millie speaks of ghosts haunting

the hotel and says that 'they form attachments' (p. 16), the telephone switchboard lights up and Bill makes a connection with one of the ghostly guests somewhere above him in the hotel.

Sometimes these assonances and dissonances stress the space between those who inhabit their own stories, which impinge on but never really engage with those of others. Thus when April asks to be rung 'after four o'clock', the girl's response – 'Is that an eight or a zero?' (p. 20) – is not a paradoxical response to her request but a question directed at Bill. When the girl starts to ask April whether she has ever taken 'a ride' on a train, April misreads the comment as a sexual one. The disjunctions are partly ironic revelations of character and partly comments on more fundamental breakages. Thus, Jackie insists on everyone calling her by her first name but herself forgets Bill's. He, in turn, forgets hers, though it is emblazoned on her jacket. She offers to help the aged Mr Morse close the window of his apartment because 'People got to help one another' (p. 26), while planning to rob him of his possessions. For his part Morse mistakes her for a man. She, meanwhile, insists that 'People have no respect for other people's property' (p. 73), while looking to sell what she has stolen to a pawn shop.

The music of the voices is itself complemented by literal music played before and at the climax of the acts, music designed to reflect popular taste at the time of production and which is to begin in the auditorium and fade into an on-stage radio, and vice versa. In particular, Wilson instructs that the first and third acts should end with a positive song, with an upbeat tempo. This is, however, an ironic gesture since the first act concludes on a farcical note as Jamie, on seeing a semi-naked Suzy, drops the items he has been stealing, as his sister simultaneously denounces the 'fuckin' flophouse' (p. 60), while the third act ends with an abandoned Jamie dancing with the prostitute, April. If this latter seems a positive step, April having remarked that 'the important thing is to *move*' (p. 145), the fact is that by this stage of the play the audience has been offered sufficient evidence of the pointlessness of mere movement, and of the transitoriness of such moments of assonance, not to take this at face value. The potential sentimentality is, therefore, undermined, ironised. Jamie has, after all, apparently just been abandoned by a sister who has chosen to 'move' on without him, stranding him in a hotel for transients, with no future of its own.

If there is something of a programmatic approach to character in terms of voice much the same might be said of the broader descriptions Wilson offers of his characters. Mr Katz is 'firm and wary and at times

more than a little weary' (p. xi). Mrs Oxendam, the day desk clerk, is 'quick-speaking with no commerce' (p. xi). Mrs Bellotti is 'a sigher'. Millie is 'Elegance marred by an egocentric spiritualism' (p. xi). April is a 'soft pragmatist', Suzy 'hopelessly romantic and hard as nails' (p. xi). Wilson is a quick-sketch artist, not anxious to probe deeply into the sensibility of those he creates. Several characters even lack a last name. One is simply 'the girl'. If they have a past it seems detached from their present circumstances. If they have a future it is, it appears, a dream without substance. They step through the door from another world (a world characterised by a crumbling urban environment, casual sexual encounters, pain and disease) or go up the stairs to rooms which offer them solitude without privacy, a space of their own without protection. Beyond that, they have no history and, it seems, no future.

They gather in the lobby because there at least is the semblance of a community, even though it proves fragile and the root of discord as well as consolation. When Millie says that she has always been 'a bit outside society' and never seems 'to understand what other people expect' (p. 31), she could be speaking for most of those who end up in the Hotel Baltimore. She has, she explains, 'no interest in peeping in' (p. 39). Mrs Bellotti, meanwhile, shuffles in and out, removing her son's possessions as if she were slowly cutting his links with the outside world, while Jamie collects his own possessions and those of others in a cardboard box. Suzy gathers hers in unmatched luggage, a box tied with an extension cord and a shopping bag. Their lives are reducible to so many containers as they step out into a world that will patently offer them even less security than the hotel.

Mrs Bellotti's son faces a spiralling decline in a family which rejects him; Suzy goes to work for a pimp. Jackie tries to justify her robbing of Mr Morse by contrasting her dreams with his hopelessness: '*I got dreams . . . What's he got?*' (p. 100). But her dreams, and those of her brother, turn on their possession of a piece of worthless land. Indeed, there is something of Steinbeck's George and Lenny (in *Of Mice and Men*) about Jackie and her brother. Jackie is George, protective of her borderline psychotic brother; Jamie is Lennie, potentially violent, bewildered, yet sustained by his sister's single-mindedness, as well as by the fantasy which she holds out as their redemption. Her desertion of him thus leaves him alone and bereft.

Language itself no longer seems capable of shoring up relationships or even communicating with any clarity. Something is missing from it. Shaped by private anxieties, it never quite bridges the gap between

characters sealed within their own necessities. They lie to protect their motives, try not to open themselves to the emotional demands of others, mishear, blot out appeals, shout abuse, hide behind a protective humour.

The guests in this end-of-the-line hotel (it was built to service the nearby railroad terminal, itself now gone) live in their separate rooms, like those in the rooming-house pictured by Edward Albee in *The Zoo Story*, meeting only in a lobby which is a no man's land, a limbo where they brush up against one another for a moment. Theirs is a non-teleological world, with no first cause and no ultimate purpose. This is William Inge blended with Samuel Beckett, with a touch of Eugene O'Neill, and it is tempting to compare the prostitutes in *The Iceman Cometh*, sensitive about their status and the language used to describe them, and those in Wilson's play. Similarly, there is, perhaps, a parallel between Paul Grainger II, in Wilson's play, who speaks the language of idealism only to betray it with his actions and his life, and the figure of Don Parritt, who does likewise.

Wilson himself, however, chose to see the principal influence as being Chekhov, and certainly *The Hot l Baltimore* shares with *The Cherry Orchard* a sense of things coming to an end, of an outmoded and now partly decadent old order giving way to a new pragmatism. Beyond that, he admired Chekhov's ability to subordinate plot to metaphor. More precisely, in writing the play for the Circle Rep he had stalled in the third act and found his solution in Chekhov's play: 'I went to *The Cherry Orchard* and said, 'Of course, we'll have some champagne and leave'. That's where Suzie [*sic*] leaving and throwing the party came from' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 311). As he told Gene Barnett, 'In spring you have the wine ritual, and in a comedy you have to celebrate the harvest' (*Lanford Wilson*, p. 85). Though these may seem somewhat reductive remarks, they do serve to underscore the extent to which Wilson consciously turned for his inspiration to other writers, finding in theatre itself, as much as in observed life, the roots both of his methodology and his themes.

The parallel which he himself offered between the evanescent nature of theatre, the impermanence of its architecture and the setting for his play, applies equally to its characters. They are aware of the pressure of time, the deadline which faces them all, and self-consciously perform their lives on the public stage of the lobby where they offer one another lies, fantasies, consoling stories. The prostitutes are confessed actresses, dressing (and undressing) the part, performing to order: but so, too, are those other characters who pretend concern and practice deceit, who

stage their own dramas to secure attention, to annihilate the isolation they fear.

*The Hot l Baltimore* won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play 1972–3, an Obie for Best Off-Broadway Play and the Outer Critics Circle John Gassner Award. It ran for 1,166 performances at the Circle in the Square and briefly became the basis for a weekly television series on ABC.

Wilson returned to the theatre in 1975 with *The Mound Builders*, which opened at the Circle Rep. A play seemingly about an archaeological dig which locates evidence of a previously unknown civilisation, it is equally concerned with the unearthing of other truths to do with personal relationships, private needs and social values. It is an account of a 'wrecked expedition', in that its purpose is frustrated by a flood and an act of wilful vandalism, but it is also an account of a wrecked expedition in so far as those who go on it find their contradictory feelings and motives unearthed, exposed to the light, their relationships destroyed.

The story is told in retrospect by the project's leader, August Howe. He dictates an account into a tape recorder and, as he does so, the drama is enacted before us, past and present interacting in the play's structure as they do in terms of the characters' lives, as past truths force their way to the surface. Though the play is essentially realistic, Wilson instructs that the house, which had formed the expedition's headquarters, is to be seen refracted through August's memory and hence 'may be represented as he sees it'.<sup>11</sup> It is a house, anyway, fated to be swept away by a flood, as much else is swept away, as alliances have been broken and relationships attenuated.

The team of archaeologists consists of university professor August Howe, his wife, Cynthia, and daughter, Kirsten, together with his assistant, Dan Loggins, and his wife, Jean. They are joined by August's drug-affected sister, a one-time writer, D.K. (Delia) Erikson. Working on earth mounds and their associated signs of a former civilisation, they come upon evidence of a still older civilisation, the existence of which will force a revision of ideas of the past. They are, however, forced to work under pressure. A major re-development of the area, involving a new dam and tourist facilities, is pressing forward. The water of a newly formed lake is already rising, and when it begins to rain a flood threatens. The team, meanwhile, is assisted by a local landowner's son, Chad

<sup>11</sup> Lanford Wilson, *The Mound Builders* (New York, 1976), p. 4.

Jasker, who expects to benefit from the development and has been having an affair with Cynthia while being drawn to Jean Loggins, whose pregnancy is only one of the truths suppressed, buried, until brought to light by the ensuing crisis.

The play is an account of a failed excavation of a failed civilisation which in turn comments on the failure not only of those on this expedition but also of the contemporary civilisation which they represent. The fact is that August has not been unduly successful in his career, leaving the limelight to others, while his relationship with his wife is itself on the verge of collapse. She, in turn, is a failed photographer or at least is regarded as such by her husband. His sister, Delia, is a writer who has ceased to write. Even Chad Jasker will not, we learn, benefit from the development, since August has contrived to have the highway, which was to have enhanced the value of the land, diverted in order to protect the archaeological remains. Meanwhile, though we are told that they are anxious to 'maintain civilization' on the dig, that civilisation seems to be represented by little more than a highway, its associated clutter of gas stations, parking lots, motels and hotels which will cater for tourists characterised as deeply ignorant of the very attraction which draws them. Indeed, the proposed development will require the sacrifice of a portion of the newly revealed site. The countryside itself is to be swallowed by a lake which will for ever drown what remains of the past.

The play's method parallels that of the archaeologists themselves, as they press down through different layers of sedimentation, revealing ever more as they move back in time. They have to construct their picture from fragments, as do members of the audience. The tension between August and his wife, for example, is never clearly articulated, simply implied. Early in the play, though chronologically when the expedition is long over, August refers to Cynthia as his 'Ex-relation by marriage' (*The Mound Builders*, p. 13). At the time the comment makes no sense. As the play unfolds, however, so fragments of information are offered, shards of truth that provide indirect evidence of the tension that finally leads to estrangement. In an exchange between Cynthia and the pregnant Jean, Cynthia asks whether the younger woman will continue with her medical career after having her baby. Wilson indicates that before she replies Jean '*Stops dead. Beat*' (p. 53). In that silence comes an awareness that such a question reflects back on the speaker. Later, Cynthia wanders through the house and into the garden beyond, abstracted, though with no indication of what has sent her spinning into

this isolation. The pattern only begins to emerge as further shreds of evidence become available.

Yet for all the coherence that is slowly constructed from these fragments, the substance of the truth they reveal is itself deconstructive, providing, as it does, evidence of dissolution and decay. Nor is language itself immune. As a child Jean had been national spelling-bee champion. The stress of this experience had, however, caused words to fragment, to break into syllabic units, a dislocation which extended out into the world the words were designed to stabilise:

I lost the meaning. Mary, go to bed was syllables, not sense. (*Beat*) Then there were days when the world and its objects separated, disintegrated into their cellular structure, molecular – worse – into their atomic structure. And nothing held its form. The air was the same as the trees and a table was no more substantial than the lady sitting at it . . . Those were . . . not good days. (p. 56)

There followed a nervous breakdown. Later, that entropic process continued as she suffered two miscarriages. Now, pregnant, and herself a gynaecologist, she is not free of a fear that things may fall apart again. And in that regard she scarcely differs from any of the other characters for whom the rising waters of the lake have symbolic as well as literal force. For August's sister, Delia, too, the world fragments. She has lost the plot of her life as she has lost the ability to plot that of others in terms of her fiction. When Jean tries to probe the nature of the anarchy that seems to infect her, the pain she so clearly feels, Wilson offers a stage direction which effectively offers a comment on the scene we have just observed and on Julia's state of mind: '*BLACKOUT – slide utterly black with a hint of fire somewhere*' (p. 61).

The first act, indeed, culminates in a scene in which all three women come close to breakdown, while the men around them remain ostensibly oblivious, caught up in their own lives. Jean, prompted by a word from Delia, begins to re-enact that linguistic collapse that had preceded her hospitalisation: 'Inscrutable. In. I-N, in, Scrut. S-C-R-U-T, scrut. Inscrut. Ah. A, ah. Inscruta – ble. B-L-E, ble. Inscrutable. Inscrutable: I-N-S-C-R-U-T-A-B-L-E, inscrutable' (p. 87). At that moment, Cynthia, dressed in a robe, wanders past them and out of the house, abstracted, while Delia laments the position of women and the end of civilisation: 'We're the remains. We're what's left. We're the lees in the bottom of the bottle . . . The species crawls up out of the warm ocean for a few million years and crawls back to it again to die' (p. 88). The act ends with an empty stage.

In detailing her objectives in writing her second novel, *Spindrift*, Delia

explains that she had set out to write a Chinese box of a book: 'Every time something was solved, within the solution was another problem, and within the solving of the second riddle another question arose. And when that riddle was unwound there was still a knot' (p. 102). It is a description not only of her method but of the method of *The Mound Builders* itself. A story of an archaeological dig becomes a story of subterranean emotions which in turn becomes a story of betrayal and a dying civilisation. The 'shards, fragments, sherds. Clues, footnotes, artefacts, pollen grains, bones, chips' (p. 102), which the archaeologists use to construct a picture of the past are metonymic signs of a dead civilisation, as similar fragments are signs of dying relationships. By the same token, Dan's immediately following observation – 'Not of themselves – in association' (p. 102), is equally a description of Wilson's method in this play and in others. He works by slow accretion, by bringing together apparently discrete incidents, words, images, in such a way that they appear to comment on each other, establishing links across time or between experiences such that the real meaning of the moment emerges from this collision. His method is thus metaphoric as well as metonymic. He creates a community, stages a society, by collating, by hearing in separate notes a common tune, recognising in private dilemmas a public truth.

On the surface Cynthia seems happily married. Why, then, did her husband not tell her that he has succeeded in changing the course of the highway, thus saving the site of the archaeological dig, albeit at the price of Chad's plans? The clue comes when Chad inadvertently remarks to Dan that 'Cynthia said you were a light sleeper' (p. 137). The remark suggests intimacy and would seem to explain her nocturnal wandering. August, it transpires, has not told her precisely because he knew of her attraction to Chad, whose cooperation he requires. He places the project ahead of private loyalties, deceiving both Chad and Cynthia. Stung by this knowledge, she destroys the photographs which are the only proof of the team's discoveries when Chad flattens the site with a bulldozer and steals the artefacts, an action which, in itself, is evidence for the relationship we never see. Only at the play's climax is it possible to make sense of August's earlier remark about his 'ex-relation by marriage'. What we have been watching is less the failure of an expedition than the failure of a marriage, and, beyond that, the failure of trust, of any sense of sustaining and sharing values. For Dan, too, has deceived Chad, as Chad has set himself to seduce Dan's wife. Delia, meanwhile, is confronted by her father's lack of love for her, a love on which she had relied.

As the past is sifted so the emerging evidence begins to suggest that the apocalyptic image of a flood slowly swallowing a valley has a significance beyond a local event. The parallels between a patriarchal society, where events focussed on a god-king, and an archaeological dig ruled over by August, become clear. Dan, meanwhile, who dies on the verge of his thirtieth birthday, does so at an age consonant with the life expectancy of those in the dead civilisation he studies, while Chad, who puts on the mask of the dead while stealing the artefacts they have collected, is simultaneously an expression of the primitive and a representative of the new civilisation which is already replacing the old. He is Faulkner's Flem Snopes (in the Snopes trilogy).

For Delia 'there are those who hustle and those who don't', while for Cynthia 'there are winners and losers, givers and takers; there's the quick and the dead' (p. 110), an echo of Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Such distinctions, however, no more hold than do those between the social classes represented by the bodies they have unearthed. The real enemy, as ever in Wilson's work, is time. As August suggests, 'a man's life work is taken up . . . to blind him to the passing moon' (p. 113). Against this, there is no defence. The play ends with a tape recorder turning but August unable to speak. Time has run out on his ambitions, his relationships, his project, his society. *The Mound Builders* is not offered as a requiem for a long-dead world but for a society in which there is no longer any genuine cohesion, in which betrayal is a natural instinct and modernity no more than a disregard for the meaning of the past. It is a lament at our inability to resist the deconstructive pressure of time.

The Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart, in *The Underpainter* (1997), speaks of an artist who works by painting over a realistic work until only the shadow of what lies beneath is visible, until that realism is charged with another quality, haunting, impressionistic: 'Each day in the studio I play with colours, build up textures, experiment with white, distort the subject matter underneath.'<sup>12</sup> There is something of that in Lanford Wilson's work, though here the process is reversed. Behind the immediate, beyond the chatter of daily conversation, the fixtures and fittings of domestic life, is something not easily defined. It is that sense of immanent meaning, to be found equally in Chekhov: the realisation that beneath the banality of appearance is a shadow world of meaning which comes from what is not said, from a buried past, from truths not fully apprehended but no less potent for that. At times the underpainting

<sup>12</sup> Jane Urquhart, *The Underpainter* (London, 1997), p. 34.

engages in a dialogue with what is more fully visible, more fully articulated; at times it generates echoes, ironies, assonances by its mere existence, all but invisible but ineluctably there. In *Hot l Baltimore* that shadow world is constituted by the nineteenth-century world represented by the hotel itself; in *The Mound Builders* it is the dead civilisation. In *5th of July* it is the Vietnam war. These are the underpaintings without which the surface pictures would be no more than the realistic dramas they appear to be.

Wilson has explained that *The Mound Builders* began with an image, subsequently abandoned. Underneath the action, unnoticed, the noise of crickets and frogs was to have run throughout until 'a stick breaks and it's all suddenly quiet: all the bugs and everything shut up. In other words, there's something out there that is going to get you' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 293). This background noise is introduced at the beginning of the play but the menace no longer relies on its cessation. The power of the primitive, embodied in the mask, worn first by Dan and then by his probable killer, and the references to cannibalism, no longer require this correlative.

Speaking in 1980, Wilson remarked of *The Mound Builders*, that 'I have to re-do that play . . . It's just the best thing I've done . . . and it's no good at all, at the same time' (Barnett, *Lanford Wilson*, p. 94). Two years later he was still telling himself that though the play was a favourite, he still needed to 'rewrite the beginning . . . because I think I haven't led the audience into the expectation of that disaster' (Barnett, *Lanford Wilson*, p. 94). In 1986 he finally presented a revised version at the Circle Rep.

Wilson's earlier desire for his theatre to be a three-ring circus, in which he filled the stage with a community of people with overlapping language and action, reflected his mood at the beginning of his career. However, he later insisted that after 'we formed the Circle Company, I became more responsible to the actor. I wanted to write deep, fully rounded people, beautiful language, roles an actor could sink his teeth into. The craft became less flamboyant, more subtle' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 285). Perhaps one step towards that was *Brontosaurus*, a play first presented at the Circle Rep, in October 1977. An encounter between an antique dealer and her nephew, this becomes a debate about the nature of existence, in which the former identifies a credo which she wishes to see engraved on her tomb, a credo which is surely close to Wilson's:

we bumbled glassy-eyed . . . through life's humiliating, predictable metamorphoses [I pray] with a semblance of grace and compassion at times – and in a rather difficult age for intelligent beings . . . the first and last to make the migration purely for the sake of the journey, being fully aware of the absurdity . . . and with a good handful of valium but without an excess of ameliorating philosophical palliative. (*Twenty-One Short Plays*, p. 167).

Perhaps his first major step in the direction of creating the more fully rounded characters for which he had himself called, however, was to be found in a play about his own family, set in 1945 when his father had returned from the war. It was to be 'a 1945 play, one of those old-fashioned, well-made plays'. Accordingly, he set himself to study Ibsen (regarding him as a quintessential writer of such plays) only to discover that he wrote 'more like Chekhov than Chekhov' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 313). The result of this study, however, was, to his mind, a hybrid. The 1945 play, indeed, became a 1977 play – *5th of July* (its title subtly changed from *Fifth of July*) – which 'straddled the fence between the well-made play and the way I had always written' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 314). It was the first of a planned series of five plays about the Talley family, the second two of which, *Talley's Folly* and *Talley and Son* (originally *A Tale Told*), were set in 1944 and told the story not of Wilson's own family, but the family for which his mother had worked. It is a story, then, told in reverse, a story in which we hear the echo before we hear what caused it.

Once again, as in *The Hot l Baltimore*, the action takes place in a building which recalls an earlier time. The Southern Missouri farmhouse, home to Kenneth Talley, Jr., and his lover Jed Jenkins, was built just before the Civil War. Kenneth, however, bears the marks of another war – Vietnam. He has lost both his legs and with them his will, or perhaps his courage, to take up his job as English teacher. Meanwhile, he works as a private tutor with a boy whose language is as mangled as his teacher's body. Everything, indeed, is dislocated. Old coherences are no longer operative. The play takes place on Independence Day and the previous evening. The implication, therefore, is that this is something more than a study of personal trauma and its aftermath. As Wilson has said, 'the plays have often been a metaphor for where I think we're at' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, pp. 314–15), and *5th of July* is plainly offered in that spirit.

Ken's response to his own injuries has been to withdraw from the

world. As his sister, June, remarks, 'You're the only person I know who can say "I'm not involved" in forty-five languages.'<sup>13</sup> In his sister's opinion he went to Vietnam only because 'it was fuckin' easier than making a commitment; you fuckin' let them make your commitment for you' (*5th of July*, p. 122). But he is not alone in what seems to be this detachment, this lack of commitment or awareness. The children at the nearby school 'don't even know where Vietnam is' (p. 43). His former childhood friends, Gwen and John, to whom he is anxious to sell his house, have similarly lost whatever commitment they had, dividing their time between big business and the pop music world to which they wish to gain full access. This is a society on hold, anxious only to forget past embarrassments, old causes, yet condemned to live with the consequences of such. Gwen's father is paralysed; she, herself, has lost many of her organs – 'I'm this fuckin' shell. They took everything out by the time I was twenty-five' (p. 50). As Ken's sister explains to fourteen-year-old Shirley Talley: 'You've no idea of the country we almost made for you. The fact that I think it's all a crock now does not take away from what we almost achieved' (p. 62). There is no nostalgia for such a transformed country, however, in that we have a representative of it in the form of Weston Hurley, frozen in the language and attitudes of sixties flower power revolt, bemused by drugs and with no sense of direction or transcendent purpose.

On the one hand, then, we have Vietnam, which crippled Ken in body and mind; on the other, we have those who proposed a utopia that was either vacuous or swiftly abandoned for the practical capitalism of an America returned to normalcy. Even as a rebel, however, Gwen could never quite commit herself: 'I couldn't march 'cause I've never had a pair of shoes that were really comfortable' (p. 62). She did fire bomb her own company but was 'stoned' at the time and travelled by taxi in an anti-war march to the White House. As she explains:

You get there. Five hundred thousand people, speaker's platforms, signs as thick as a convention, everybody's high, we're bombed, the place is mobbed, everybody's on the lawn with their shirts off, boys, girls; they're eating chicken and tacos, the signs say: End the War, Ban the Bomb, Black Power and Gay Power and Women's Lib; the Nazi Party's there, the unions, demanding jobs, they got Chicano Power and Free the POWs, and Free the Migrants, Allen Ginsberg is chanting Ommm over the loud-speakers, Coretta King is there: how straight do you have to be to see that nothing is going to come from it? (p. 63)

<sup>13</sup> Lanford Wilson, *5th of July* (New York, 1978), p. 36.

June, Kenneth's sister, was politically committed. As Gwen says of her, 'she really believed that "Power to the People" song, and that hurts' (p. 63). Like her brother, she is now left with the consequences of that time. As Ken remarks, in another context, what is left is resignation, acceptance: 'Don't choke on it, don't turn up your nose, swallow it and live' (p. 98). It is a lesson which he himself finds hard to learn or to apply. Gwen and John skipped the country to avoid the draft, a move that was to have included Ken. John's motives, however, had less to do with Vietnam than with a desire to 'get out of the whole steamy situation with both of you' (p. 121), Ken and Gwen being romantically drawn to one another. The move was thus a double betrayal, but like other aspects of their shared past, it is to be denied.

And there is another failure of commitment which later comes to light, another act of denial. For Shirley, precocious, confused, is, it appears, John's daughter and his return to Missouri an equally confused attempt if not to acknowledge this then to acquire Shirley along with the house. She is an embodiment of the past that can never really be laid to rest, as in another sense she is of the future she is so confident of possessing.

There are commitments in the play, however. Sally Friedman, Ken's aunt, carries the ashes of her dead husband, looking for an appropriate way of disposing of them. She finally scatters them in the garden of the house in which she was raised and which will not, in the end, be sold to John and Gwen. Ken, meanwhile, has an enduring relationship with his homosexual partner. Indeed, in the family tree of the Talleys, to be found at the front of the published version of *Talley and Son*, Kenneth is described as being married to Jed.

If anything, the play ends on too uplifting a note. Ken succeeds in translating the opaque language of a story told by the disturbed child he is tutoring and it is apparent that the boy's insights are those of the play itself. A science fiction story, it concludes with two sentences that are effectively an account of the journey on which Ken has himself been embarked: 'After they had explored all the suns in the universe, and all the planets of all the suns, they realized that there was no other life in the universe, and that they were alone. And they were very happy, because then they knew it was up to them to become all the things they had imagined they would find' (p. 127). Ken now decides to return to school teaching and Sally to live on in the house. If Shirley is right in suggesting, as she proudly does, that she is the last of the Talleys, she seems more than capable of assuming what she naively claims as 'the

terrible burden' (p. 128). *5th of July* ends as Weston plays the opening of a song he has composed and whose banalities are now charged with a new significance. A bereaved woman finds a home; a wounded man secures love and purpose; John and Gwen are launched on a new, if suspect, career; Shirley hesitates on the brink of life.

This is a play which, as its title implies, is about living on after the moment of patriotic epiphany, after the flag-waving, after the moment which seemed to lift life out of its normal rhythms. It is about surviving the ironies which stained that moment, about finding a way to negotiate through the rest of life. It is, as Wilson insisted, 'about an English teacher . . . who happens to be a veteran' (Barnett, *Lanford Wilson*, p. 113). What it is not is a play which entirely transcends its own sentimentalities

With *Talley's Folly*, the next play in the sequence, in Wilson's own view he finally wrote the well-made play he had set himself to create: 'It locks you into place,' he has explained, 'you can actually hear it click.' And yet, at the same time he clearly felt less than satisfied with his achievement. As he has said, 'you have that wonderful satisfaction of hearing the click and the incredible disappointment at the same time that it is that kind of play . . . It's like "Oh, it's all been just a design. It's not really people at all, just this incredibly well-made piece of machinery"' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 314). It is hard to agree. It is no more 'well made', in the pejorative sense of that term, than is *The Glass Menagerie* or *Our Town*, though there is, perhaps, an element of pastiche here, as in the next of the Talley plays, *Talley and Son*, which can more justifiably be seen as a well-made play. Both are set on the same Independence Day evening in 1944 and both are written in a style appropriate to that period (*Our Town* was produced in 1938, *Little Foxes* in 1939 and *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945). If *Talley's Folly* was reminiscent of Wilder and Williams, *Talley and Son* had echoes of Lillian Hellman.

*Talley's Folly* is an account of the unfolding love affair between Sally Talley and the Jewish Matt Friedman. It is a play for two voices, two sensibilities finding their way towards harmony. It is, as the play's narrator and central character remarks, 'a waltz, one-two-three, one-two-three; a no-holds-barred romantic story'.<sup>14</sup>

The play takes place in what turns out to be a self-consciously romantic setting: a Victorian boathouse. Indeed, the first stage direction indicates that the artificiality of the theatrical set should be immediately

<sup>14</sup> Lanford Wilson, *Talley's Folly* (New York, 1979), p. 4.

apparent, while the first speech, like the Narrator's in *Our Town* or Tom's in *The Glass Menagerie*, is a direct address to the audience. Matt draws attention to the footlights, to a device which reproduces moonlight and the ripples from the river, and to the scenery. He cues the sound effects and sets the historical moment, recalling the Depression, the onset of war and the beginnings of hope for a new prosperity, which is not without its ambiguity in so far as it presages the return of an unfettered capitalism. Such observations link *Talley's Folly* to the other two plays in the trilogy. And, indeed, there are ironies that only become apparent when the three plays are placed side by side. The romanticism of *Talley's Folly* seems complete until contrasted with events taking place simultaneously in the Talley house but which audiences would only discover in *Talley and Son* (first produced as *A Tale Told* in an early version the following year).

Sally, as Matt tells us, differs from the other members of her family in that 'she remembers the old hope' (*Talley's Folly*, p. 5) and questions the new values. Her family, who own substantial stock in a garment factory and a bank, are suspicious of the outsider, anti-Semitic (though their sons, we later learn, are fighting in the war) and anti-union. They profit from the war which will kill one of their sons (echoes here of Miller's *All My Sons*). Yet these issues are not taken up here, where the focus is purely on the waltz between Sally and Matt as they circle around, sometimes in tune with one another and sometimes not.

The play opened at the Circle Repertory Company in April 1979, where it had a short run. It was subsequently produced in repertory at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles before opening on Broadway with its original cast. Despite the fact that reviews were scattered with such words as 'warming . . . humanizing' (*New York Times*), 'tender' (*New Yorker*), the triumph of the play lies in the fact that it does not wholly surrender to its own sentimentalities. Matt and Sally acknowledge the gulf between them, a gulf of upbringing and experience, but reach out tentatively, feeling their way to an understanding which ought to be denied them, given their backgrounds. As Matt observes, 'We are a lot alike, you know? To be so different' (*Talley's Folly*, pp. 34–5). And, ironically, that is the common ground they share, that and the sense of humour which lifts them above their history.

Matt's history is defined by his family's deadly experience in Europe (where his parents and sister were killed): hers by an illness that means she can no longer bear children. These are truths to which they must confess before anything else is possible, truths exposed little by little,

until, the games of courtship laid aside, they are able to uncover the wounds that are the real source of their vulnerability. Neither is young: Matt is forty-two, Sally thirty-one. A clock is ticking. They meet in a world whose beauty is deceptive. The boathouse, like the family which owns it and the culture whose values they in part represent, is in a state of decay. The necessity is to act and the play ends with that decision, its own processes, meanwhile, having mimicked those of its characters, whose future depends on an understanding of the past which must be exposed and confronted.

*Talley's Folly* is an affecting and affectionate work. As Wilson has said, it was to be a love story in which he wished to 'go all the way and make it the sweet valentine it should be' (Barnett, *Lanford Wilson*, p. 118). The underpainting hints at a crude materialism, a suspicion of the outsider, a distrust of sentiment, a society grown hard, pragmatic, unyielding. But this is a matter of peripheral vision. Matt and Sally's radicalism is unfocused, significant less for its political astuteness than for its humanity, for its resistant qualities. The play does offer a judgement on the society of the late 1970s (a period, after all, in which self-interest was once again announced as a value), as much as on the period in which it is set, but this is secondary to its affirmation of values built on mutual respect and understanding. Such an affirmation, however, appears in a rather different light when viewed in the context of the next play in the sequence.

*Talley and Son* (first presented under the title *A Tale Told*) dramatises a family battle over the fate of a garment business in which the Talleys, in common with the Campbell family, have a substantial investment, though there are other connections between the two families since Harley Campbell had once jilted Sally on learning that she was no longer capable of producing an heir. The business has been thriving as a result of a military contract but is now threatened by a takeover, recommended by Harley. The old craft values are to be sacrificed to a conglomerate with no interest in the products they produce, and at the price of sacrificing the community which depends on the factory for employment. The new owners mean to capitalise on the family name while moving the business out of the state.

This is a play in which characters are all too ready to reveal their motives, expose their thoughts, and in doing so conform to familiar stereotypes. Old Calvin Talley conveniently recovers from senility to demonstrate the same callous autocracy he had revealed in a lifetime of foreclosing on mortgages. His son, Eldon, reveals himself as a shrewd

and callous businessman, proud of his victories over those in his power. But if he is scrupulous with respect to his business affairs, and the product he produces, he is less so with respect to Viola Platt, the family's washerwoman, who, we learn, has borne him a daughter, a below-stairs affair whose product, Avalaine, now confronts her father while revealing a genetic predisposition to repeat her mother's behaviour with Kenneth (Buddy) Talley, Eldon's son. The threat, in other words, is incest, a perfect image for a family concerned only for itself. The moral decline of the Talleys, meanwhile, mirrors that of a society already anticipating the return of a peace in which money-making will become a central activity.

The hermetic nature of the Talley family, however, is countered if not neutralised by Eldon's daughter, Lottie, who, though unable to break away herself, can at least ease the way for Sally to go through with her romance with Matt (the romance simultaneously conducted in *Talley's Folly*) by suppressing the potentially disruptive news of the death of the family's other son, Timothy, who is both a haunting presence and, effectively, the play's narrator. In a gesture which offers to counterbalance the play's insistent realism, it is this character who introduces events, reappearing from time to time to comment on the action, though in fact dead in action in the Pacific.

Describing the writing of the play, Wilson was disturbingly open about his attitude to the device. 'I used him . . . as a narrator to fill in on a lot of the logistics of the play' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 287). Indeed, in revising the earlier version of the play he concentrated in particular on this figure, re-writing, cutting and adding material during rehearsals. As he explained:

*A Tale Told* was a barn burner. It's a plotted play, it's deliberately a 1940s-style play with a lot of plot. In the first draft, the ghost of Timmy starts talking only in the second act and he starts telling about how he was killed. It's one of the best speeches I've written, but it's quite long and you just wanted to yank that kid off the stage because there was a plot going . . . When you have that kind of a plot going, you're not going to stand around for something as irrelevant as how this guy got killed. That character was completely redone in *Talley and Son* . . . We were working on that all through rehearsals. Timothy Busfield was playing Timothy out in California, and I had him sit on a stool just as if I were drawing him, so I could look at him and try to write a speech for him . . . I couldn't have done it without that physical actor there. (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, pp. 287–8)

The revisions continued during previews at the Circle Rep. The final scene, in particular, was re-written to allow Timothy's words to bleed

into the consciousness of Lottie, who is left alone on stage, like Feers in *The Cherry Orchard*. She listens to a distant band celebrating Independence Day, she who has no independence, as Feers had listened to the sound of an axe chopping down the orchard, ending the life he has known:

We were in previews before I realized that Timmy left and Lottie was on stage by herself. We did get that gradually she realizes he's there. He had talked to her a lot in *A Tale Told*; they had had conversations. They don't have in *Talley and Son* but, as he's talking to the audience toward the end of the play, he begins talking to her as well and we get the feeling that she's hearing it. Then he walks off the stage. It's just an incredibly dramatic moment to leave her alone without that ghost she's discovered. She's suddenly very, very lonely on that stage by herself, and I didn't understand that we had to end the play with just her until we were in previews . . . it was a completely visual thing. (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 288)

The pathos of Lottie's desertion is underscored by our knowledge that she is in all probability dying of the cancer which she contracted from the radium paint used in clock manufacture. The link between clocks and death hardly needs underscoring. She had once before left the family, following her socialist principles, working with the poor, but was driven back by her illness. Now it is too late. She can only live vicariously through Sally. Like Faulkner's Caddy, in *The Sound and the Fury*, she sends someone else out into a world she cannot herself enter.

Wilson's justification for his dramatic approach is underlined by an epigraph from Psalms 90: 'Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in Thy wrath; we spend our years as a tale that is told.' *Talley and Son* permits those iniquities to force their way to the surface. What was hidden is revealed, indeed rather too conveniently and completely. The Talley house, meanwhile, is full of tales as the dynasty itself offers a meta-story: material advance; moral retreat. The revelations, however, are not, as in an Ibsen or, indeed, Miller play, transforming moments. They are, for the most part, merely data to confirm the unyielding nature of character. In a play about power they demonstrate that power operates at all levels of experience. The revelations do not deflect anyone's actions, although Eldon is permitted a marginal softening, a moment of self-doubt, as Sally announces her imminent departure. But it is no more than a gesture, curiously detached from what we have seen of him before. Sally, meanwhile, does not slam the door like Ibsen's Nora, though her decision is no less momentous. It is an act, however,

entirely consonant with everything we have learned about her. Her aunt was forced, by circumstance, to return; there is little doubt that Sally has closed the door on her life with the Talleys for ever.

Wilson's fundamental stance seems essentially that outlined by the narrator in Richard Ford's *Independence Day*, like the Talley plays set at a significant moment in the American calendar: 'staying the course, holding the line, riding the cyclical nature of things are what this country's all about'.<sup>15</sup> But the quote continues, 'and thinking otherwise is to drive optimism into retreat, to be paranoid and in need of expensive "treatment" out of state'. It is an ironic qualification which seems especially apt when considering Wilson's next play, *Angels Fall*, in which a number of disparate characters persuade themselves and one another precisely to stay the course, having lapsed from the national imperative, in one case even requiring 'expensive "treatment" out of state'.

The fact is that in some ways Wilson's origins Off-Off-Broadway mislead, his later drift towards Broadway being entirely consistent with the values he espouses. He is in fact a natural descendant of Saroyan, of the Wilder of *Our Town* rather than *The Skin of Our Teeth*, of William Inge and Robert Anderson. He writes of resilience amidst decay. An admirer of Tennessee Williams, whose name is invoked in *5th of July*, he was unwilling to follow him down the path that led to *The Red Devil Battery Sign* and apocalypse. America may be going to hell but it is going there with a pure heart and whimsical smile. His analysis of decline is clear-eyed but sentiment often wins out over satire. The melodrama of American history, the menace of primitive instincts and bad faith, is liable to be neutralised, more often than not, by a gesture, a lyrical tone, a re-dedication to community, even when that community seems to consist of no more than two people, encysted against intrusive truths and their own failure of nerve.

The mood is essentially that conveyed by Emily who, in the final scene of *Our Town* asks, 'Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?'<sup>16</sup> But if this seems bland and banal, it is essentially the stance of that cynical vaudevillian Kurt Vonnegut who, in *Timequake* (1997), confesses to being moved by Wilder's sentimentalities, finding in them a satisfying response to what otherwise seems the absurd premise of a life built on knowledge of its ultimate extinction and lived in a world intent on hurrying that extinction along (a disturbing truth which Wilson himself was to confront in *Angels Fall*).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Ford, *Independence Day* (London, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Three Plays* (New York, 1958), p. 100.

For Vonnegut, Wilder's celebration of community in *Our Town* was the more effective precisely because it took place in a theatre. The final scene from Wilder's play, along with certain other key scenes from American drama, 'became emotional and ethical landmarks for me in my early manhood, and remain such . . . because I was immobilized in a congregation of rapt fellow human beings in a theatre when I first saw and heard them. They would have made no more impression on me than *Monday Night Football* had I been alone eating nachos, and gazing into the face of a cathode-ray tube.'<sup>17</sup> This is one aspect of Wilson's achievement, to understand that the theatre is not merely a reflection of a social community, but a paradigm of it. His subject and his method depend upon a shared apprehension of private dilemmas. At times this is deeply affecting; at other times it can seem manipulative and mechanical.

The join-the-dots quality of *Talley and Son* is, in the end, less pastiche than re-invention of a dubious mode. Characters are 'characters', as their appearance and essence are brought into perfect symmetry. Plot is 'plot', as the family scheme and connive, a device that drives the action while exposing the mechanisms of a deadening capitalism. Even the language is too heavily freighted with the burden of a meaning that must be fully explored, drained of ambiguity. The poetic content of *Talley's Folly* is now finessed into little more than whimsy as Sally is protected from knowledge of her brother's death as if such knowledge would deflect her from her decision to marry, a fact which, if true, would serve to deny the authenticity of a feeling so carefully constructed in the previous play. Wilson here seems less to plug himself into American history than into the history of American theatre. We are in the world of *The Little Foxes* or, in terms of the sub-plot about sexually wronged members of a sub-class being shown the door of the mansion, nineteenth-century melodrama. It is as though Hellman's Hubbard family had suddenly produced, in Sally Talley, a character from a Philip Barry play who must be kept insulated from the main action because she comes from another theatrical convention as much as from another set of values. The characters are ponderously serious, strangely insulated from their own feelings, which are formularised, predictable; Sally is witty, effervescent, socially aware without allowing such awareness to triumph over romance.

When news of Timmy's death arrives, his mother faints; all the other characters show a remarkable disregard, as if he were indeed no more

<sup>17</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Timequake* (London, 1997), p. 22.

than the device he is designed to be and they embodiments of the qualities they exist to exemplify. Virtually every character is a manipulator, essentially directed by self-interest; or, if not, they are selfless facilitators of love and justice or, like Olive, a stoical presence, a background noise of baffled humanity. The wit which constrained and moderated the sentimentality of *Talley's Folly* is absent, and the irony which replaces it, as Timmy dies defending the values so evidently betrayed by his family, is insufficient to charge the play with the kind of significance that Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* could lay claim to. Miller's play gains its force from the self-deceits which characterise the apparently righteous and the confused motives of those bemused by the inadequacy of their own lives.

*Talley and Son* has been claimed as Wilson's most Ibsen-like play, a claim seemingly validated by his own references to reading Ibsen in preparation for writing it. But where Miller did turn to Ibsen, internalising and re-casting his methods no less than his social and moral concerns, Wilson takes him, if at all, only at face value. Certainly the past contains the essence of the present, explaining the dilemmas which suddenly confront the characters, but that present shapes itself too easily into a melodramatic collision between figures whose ideals, motivations, impulses are polarised, stated rather than examined.

In *Talley's Folly* Sally and Matt acknowledge, and in their actions and words reflect, a convincing doubt about their ability to lay the ghosts of the past or project a future they can mutually inhabit. They meet not quite on neutral ground but in a space which is indeed in part their invention. The set is both 'real' and 'virtual', a product equally of history and of their own romantic impulses, impulses not wholly separable from a desperation emerging from the wounds they bear and the isolation they feel. We have Matt's assurance that things will end well, but the ebb and flow of their feelings, their awareness that need may not be sufficient to enable or justify a relationship which seems so implausible and is hedged around with such difficulties, is convincingly established. Placed beside it, *Talley and Son* seems oddly inert, as if its conclusions were more fully established at the start than Matt and Sally's romance had ever been.

Wilson followed *Talley and Son* with *Angels Fall*, written in four months for the New World Festival in Miami and produced in June 1982. Set in a small church in New Mexico during a nuclear alert (there is an accident at a nearby uranium mine), it gathers together a seemingly disparate group of individuals who shelter there until the alert is lifted. For Wilson,

it was, like his other plays, 'a metaphor for where I think we're at'. In this case, as he remarked, 'if we're not people in a church that very few people go to, huddling there in a minor nuclear emergency, I don't know where in the fuck we are'. It was a metaphor, however, which, he lamented, 'didn't cross the mind of a single critic' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 315).

The play was inspired by his own experience of visiting the area. 'When I used to go out to the desert to paint the missions,' he explained, 'you'd have to go way around the army bases and the experimental aircraft plants and the armament factories to get to this seventeenth-century chapel right in the middle of New Mexico which the Indians had decorated, and kept decorating.' It was a contrast that disturbed him. As he confessed, 'I get scrambled and inarticulate on this subject . . . you can see why it takes a whole play to say what I'm trying to say'.<sup>18</sup>

Those brought together in a small adobe mission in New Mexico are Niles Harris, an art historian and professor, who has suffered a breakdown, seeing no purpose in his work and career, Salvatore Zappala (Zap), a young tennis player possibly on the brink of a great career, Marion Clay, a gallery owner and Zappala's lover, and Don Tabaha, half-Indian and a trainee doctor on the point of abandoning the area (and his people) for a promising research post. Presiding over this group, which also includes Harris's wife, Vita, is Father William Doherty, a Catholic priest who watches and facilitates the various epiphanies which occur as the characters struggle towards some resolution of their problems. The sheer pressure of what seems to them at times like an impending apocalypse focusses their attention on lives which have been unexamined.

A mere statement of the play's premise suggests both its potential strengths and weaknesses. The intensity of the situation raises the stakes for those who find themselves suddenly shaken out of their routines, nudged off the paths they believe themselves to have chosen or been destined to follow. By the same token the quick resolution of assorted psychological and spiritual problems underlines the artifice of a play that first isolates its characters and then speeds them on their way to self-understanding.

An epigraph from Gerard Manley Hopkins poses the question of where humanity derives its sense of 'the horror and the havoc and the glory', the tragic significance of life, given the casual drift from birth to

<sup>18</sup> Toby Silverman Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', *American Theatre* (May 1992), p. 18.

old age. The fall of an angel may have something at once both majestic and terrible about it, but what of men, whose petty ambitions, personal needs, and sometimes selfless actions, seem, on the face of it, to weigh so little in the cosmic scales? What of men, in particular, who face either private immolation or public apocalypse without the faith that might flood such an end with significance? Here, as elsewhere in his work, Wilson looks for the answer to that question in the small change of life, the passing gesture of compassion, the baffled reaching towards objectives barely understood. He offers no nostrums that transcend the capacity of characters who acknowledge the need but see no solution, beyond their own efforts to understand their situation and, occasionally, that of others.

Niles is heading to an out-of-state mental hospital, partly in acknowledgement of his mental condition and partly as a consequence of a deal he has made with his employers. He is in a genuine state of confusion, having lost not his religious faith but his faith in himself and his purpose. He has to find his way back, as Don is torn between conflicting loyalties and ambitions. Zap, however, though himself tense and nervous before his tennis tournament, is sure of his vocation, as Marion, he insists, whatever she may think, is of hers. Father Doherty, meanwhile, who survives in a world in which his congregation has shrunk to a handful of largely non-communicative Indians, poses the central question that faces them all. Picking up the Bible he says: 'This is the end of the world.' He then reads: "'The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. The earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?'" His comment to Niles is 'you are a teacher . . . you simply have to find a way to teach',<sup>19</sup> because teaching, like the priesthood or the role of the artist, is a calling. Though himself manipulative and desperate to prevent Don from leaving, perhaps for private as well as for public reasons, his comments go to the heart of the play.

The only God that presides over this limbo, in which they all momentarily find themselves, is a voice which sounds from the skies, the voice, however, not of a deity but a helicopter broadcasting warnings of danger and subsequently offering a kind of grace. Early in the play this voice announces that 'The roads are closed' (*Angels Fall*, p. 19). At the end

<sup>19</sup> Lanford Wilson, *Angels Fall* (New York, 1983), pp. 89-90.

it declares that ‘*The road is now clear!*’ (p. 93). It hardly needs Father Doherty to underline the symbolic significance of the remark. And, indeed, life continues. An old woman who had taken to her bed, deciding that her life had run its course, now re-animates herself to tend to her ailing granddaughter. Niles’s wife decides to stay for mass, perhaps re-discovering her faith. Don leaves to follow a career in research and Niles seems about to return to teaching. Father Doherty rings the bells to summon the faithful. The apocalypse is deferred and a handful of individuals have found their way back to themselves and to a justification for their existence. As Wilson has said, ‘Angels fall, but we muddle through’ (Barnett, *Lanford Wilson*, p. 132).

Though Wilson grants a touch of ambiguity, in so far as Father Doherty remains unaware of his own emotional manipulations, and Don decides to desert his community, thereby depriving them of a doctor, the thrust of the play seems clear enough as the characters find within themselves reasons to continue. But this endorsement of a fragile humanity is itself fragile in its contrivances and characters. Certainly the play prompted mixed responses from reviewers, who acknowledged its occasional felicities but criticised its artifice and the implausibility of simultaneous crises infecting characters who themselves pressed close to stereotype. Financially, it was, in Wilson’s words, ‘a total wash’ (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 319).

Another product of 1982, *Thymus Vulgaris* (which had received a staged reading the year before) shared something of the mood of *Lemon Sky*. A three-character play set in a trailer park in Palmdale, California, this is a character study in which a mother and her daughter share their dreams and their deeper sense of failure. The mother’s relationships have all collapsed. Her daughter is a prostitute and would-be chorus girl on the verge of marriage to a grapefruit tycoon. In the course of a conversation, interrupted by a good-looking motorcycle cop, the two women slowly expose their fears and acknowledge their inadequacies. They mutually recognise the need to make decisions about their lives because, as the daughter Evelyn observes, echoing Cynthia’s speech in *The Mound Builders*, ‘there are two kinds of people in the world . . . the alive and the dead . . . the users and the used . . . the eaters and the eaten’ (*Twenty-One Short Plays*, p. 187), and they are ‘the eaten’. They decide to go off together ‘to re-know the things we knew’, for, as the mother, Ruby, observes, ‘even though everybody might be livin’ here . . . it wouldn’t hurt them, once in a while – just to kinda restore themselves . . . it wouldn’t hurt them to get away’ (p. 188). It is a statement which could almost stand as a declaration of Wilson’s own faith in redemption in that

such gestures of restoration are apt to end many of his plays. In a context in which, as Evelyn remarks, 'we all come to a bad end' (p. 187), the theatre (and both the characters are aware of their theatrical status), as Wilson sees it, has an obligation to mitigate the absurdity of such a conclusion.

Wilson followed *Angels Fall* and *Thymus Vulgaris* with what, on the face of it, was a startlingly different work, though restoration seems as much the issue as it was in these. Also a single-set play, *Burn This* features not six but four characters, one of whom delivers lines which would not have been out of place in Mamet's *American Buffalo* or Rabe's *Hurlyburly*. *Burn This* (1987) has a dramatic energy and linguistic ferocity that had not appeared in Wilson's work before. Yet, beneath the linguistic and sometimes physical brutality, it was recognisably a Wilson play in so far as it featured a group of emotionally vulnerable people, struggling to deal with their own bruised sensibilities while reaching out to one another in the hope of some consolation, no matter how momentary. He was fully aware, however, of the extent to which the play did represent a break with his earlier work. 'I said I do not want to write another suburban play. So I'm writing about this dancer and a film writer and it's got to be dangerous . . . I was writing "burn this" at the top of every page . . . "Burn this" was a reminder to get personal, to get very private . . . A lot of Burton in *Burn This* is me . . . Burton is a satire of me' (Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', p. 14).

First presented at the Mark Taper Forum in 1987, the play is set in a converted loft in lower Manhattan. Anna is a dancer, about to abandon dancing in favour of choreography. Her room-mate, Larry, works in advertising and is gay. Her lover, Burton, is a successful screenwriter. The play begins in the immediate aftermath of the death of a gay friend, who had also lived in the apartment and who has died in a boating accident. Anna and Larry have just returned from the funeral at which his family, seemingly ignorant of the dead man's sexuality, had treated her as his distraught girlfriend, a part she felt constrained to play. Into this emotionally tense but otherwise subdued scene comes the dead man's older brother, Jimmy Pale, drunk, violent, obscene and aggressive.

The play, in effect, is a love story, though the two concerned make an unlikely pair. Anna seems content with her planned life with Burton but is compelled by Pale's crude passion and evident need. Wilson wrote the part of Pale for John Malkovich, and there is something of Malkovich's nervous intensity in a character who exhibits a barely controlled aggression, takes offence at invisible slurs, precipitates

violence, rhapsodises over cataclysms, makes racist remarks and uses language as a weapon or a wall behind which he retreats as though distracting himself from some pain he cannot bring himself to articulate. He bursts into Anna's apartment and life, shattering her plans, jumping her out of her comfortable drift. He is all but psychotic, launching himself into paranoid arias which collapse, bathetically. He is, he claims, a composer, creating music in his head, a swirling symphony of sound fragmenting, changing tempo, a claim no more plausible than that made by Pinter's caretaker and a deal more threatening as he climaxes his claims to musical skills by insisting he can 'get the whole fuckin' war in it'.<sup>20</sup> Outside the apartment he sees only menace, conspiracy, decay and violence. To him 'people aren't human' (*Burn This*, p. 31). Yet he is reduced to tears by the thought of his brother's death and drawn to Anna in what is at first little more than a crude assault, to which she responds because his need matches her own, an assault, however, which grows into something else.

Wilson has said:

I think *Burn This* is the best thing I've done. It's a love story. But it's not at all like any love story that I've ever written or seen. It's a love story in which people say, 'I don't want this' instead of 'I love you.' It's very contemporary . . . there is no plot, only character development – except there is a plot. It's just that I managed to hide it as well as I ever have. And it's convoluted in exactly the same way those early plays are. But this isn't circles, it's mirrors and landscapes. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 316)

This description, itself convoluted, does accurately describe a play in which the landscape, though unseen, is a commentary on the characters, a reflection of their inner turmoil, as they, in turn, reflect a blighted world which they try to shape with their imaginations. It also, for the most part, accurately describes the resistance at the heart of the attraction and the attraction at the heart of the resistance as Pale and Anna come together out of a need which is never quite convincingly translated into love. We have Wilson's assurance that *Burn This* is a love story, and there is little doubt that Anna is better off without the relationship with Burton, whose attitudes are, finally, so at odds with her own, and whose sensibility is as crude in its way as Pale's. What is less certain, however, is that Pale and Anna share anything but their vulnerability. They are both damaged. And if neither is quite what they appear – she has a

<sup>20</sup> Lanford Wilson, *Burn This* (New York, 1987), p. 39.

sexual directness she herself distrusts, he a sensibility which acknowledges her art in spite of his philistine pose – they do at least meet one another at the level of acknowledged need. The wounds are not healed at the end of the play. Nothing has really been concluded. There is, at best, a momentary ceasefire in the emotional battle as two survivors come together.

The problem of the play, however, lies in the sheer power of Pale, who dominates the stage, a part which Malkovich took by the scruff of the neck. The effect is potentially to unbalance the action, to reduce the other characters to supporting roles. The process whereby Pale slowly reveals his own sensitivities is also not wholly convincing. Something plainly happened to fracture his personality, to distort his language, to cut him adrift. What that was remains largely a mystery so that his theatrical origins, in Mamet and Rabe, seem more evident than his personal history. In the dance which the two principal characters lead one another it is not the professional dancer who commands our attention.

Wilson's next work, the accomplished *Redwood Curtain*, seems at first to offer us a reprise of the character of Pale, in the form of a Vietnam veteran who has chosen to hide from a traumatic past and disorienting present in the redwood forest of northern California. Where Pale had apparently been driven to drink and an unfocussed aggression by the death of his brother, a relationship which can only be inferred from his behaviour since it is never explained, Lyman Fellers has a more plausible reason for his behaviour. He is, we are told, one of many to have returned from Vietnam unable to forget or adjust, one of many to retreat beyond the pale (a linguistic echo explored in *Burn This*) of a society which has practised its own form of oblivion (the play is set in 1990, fifteen years after the final peace, when, for most people, Vietnam is no more than a name). He and others have chosen to step out of the complexities of the social world, to avoid other people and in so doing to avoid themselves.

The play was inspired by Wilson's time at the University of California at Humboldt when he encountered large numbers of veterans 'walking around in shock in Arcata. There are', he explained, '3,000 to 8,000 of them living in the redwood forest. The ones who will talk to you are so crazy that you wish you had never started . . . An impetus for writing *Redwood Curtain* was that I said to myself, what would I have to be to get him to talk?' (Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', p. 17). The answer was that he would have to be a young woman and this, to his mind, also

opened up other possibilities, for, he insisted, 'through the use of a female character, you can emblemize the whole state of the country' (Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', p. 18). On the face of it a curious remark, this conviction emerged from his belief that the father-son relationship contained its own mythology, its own history, and hence lacked the resonance he was after, more especially in the context of a play in which the young woman is in search of an identity rooted in a double inheritance.

One of Wilson's best works, *Redwood Curtain*, a Circle Repertory Company production, opened at the Seattle Rep in 1992 and moved to Broadway by way of further productions in Philadelphia and, fittingly, San Diego. Indeed, it was the decision to head for Broadway that determined the route which it took, since its Broadway producers wanted a regional try-out first, and though, in commercial terms, it was a failure on Broadway its production there ensured subsequent productions, such is the play's residual power.

In one sense this is familiar Wilson territory, as two wounded individuals slowly work their way towards an understanding of themselves and one another. There is that same hesitant reaching out, by the central characters, seen in so many of his earlier plays, a gradual stripping away of appearance as anxieties and fears force their way to the surface and the past gives up its secrets. Once again, the central figures are displaced; for one reason or another they are physically, mentally, morally even, marginal. The resolution, when it comes, however, turns neither on a sexual reconciliation made to bear the burden of social and spiritual adjustment, nor an irony softened by sentiment, but on an affecting moment which can only exist outside language, as music both reflects a new harmony and becomes the place within which it is possible to make contact.

Geri Riordan is a seventeen-year-old Asian-American girl, a musical prodigy whose public success no longer seems relevant to her as she becomes obsessed with discovering her true parentage. Brought to America, as she believes, by her Vietnamese mother, who gave her up for adoption in return for cash, she is adopted by a wealthy couple, her father being an accomplished musician but also an apparent alcoholic who dies seemingly as the result of a deepening despair. Unable to reconcile herself to a life of uncertainty and confusion, she sets out to try to find her real father, an American soldier about whom she knows nothing but a name, itself possibly garbled, together with a few scattered facts which may be no more than fantasies. Staying with her aunt, she

wanders in the woods, challenging the former soldiers who live there, hoping to find him. The play turns on her encounter with one of those lost souls, Lyman, a large, strong man with a stubble beard, unkempt hair and eyes that are 'alert' but 'dull'.

The reason for her search becomes apparent only gradually, so that their first encounter is unexplained. Alone in the forest she seems totally vulnerable, her actions mystifying. He, in turn, is suspicious, threatening; he asks for money. Aware that she has been following him, he responds with aggression. She carries the conversation. His lines are, for the most part, brief. He has to be lured back into language. Like Sam Shepard's Travis, in *Paris, Texas*, he speaks, at first, a dislocated prose ('You ask the wrong question. Little girl. Hang on to that purse, must be something in it'),<sup>21</sup> brief bursts of words as though he resists fluency or no longer has access to a fully expressive speech. Words drop out of his sentences. And if there are vacancies in his language so, too, there are in his life. He does not welcome the stirring-up of his memories which Geri insists upon. She is effectively driving him out of cover, as animals are driven out by the dog who is his only companion. And beyond the threat which she offers is another, for Geri's aunt, who owns the trees, has been the victim of a hostile takeover by a conglomerate which plans to cut down his refuge.

Lyman has tried to step outside of time, to stop it. Geri insists on starting it again, desperate, as she is, to bridge the gap between her present and the past, to heal a wound in history. He barely functions, living with his dog, hunting, begging. But, despite her confident behaviour, she is equally dysfunctional. Her need to know who she is has become an obsession. But this is something more than a play about two damaged individuals. Her need to understand and reconcile herself to events in the distant past reflects the country's need. Oblivion, it seems, is not an option. Meanwhile, the threatened destruction of the forest suggests the urgency of this task of reconciliation with history, this acknowledgement of the link between past events and present identity, national no less than personal.

Geri's role as virtuoso piano player, the references to and introduction of music, emphasises the play's own scoring. The duet, which in effect Geri and Lyman play, has its own rhythm, its own crescendos and diminuendos, its own pianissimo and forte as well as its dissonances and harmonies. The ebb and flow of power and knowledge, the fluctuating hope

<sup>21</sup> Lanford Wilson, *Redwood Curtain* (New York, 1993), p. 7.

and despair, create a dance in which they can ultimately, if hesitantly, join, as Geri plays Satie's *Gymnopédies* on the piano (music deliberately chosen to invoke a wider culture than that defined by America on the one hand, and Vietnam on the other) and Lyman finally enters the music room to watch, thus simultaneously stepping back, no matter how tentatively, into the social world. He is not, we eventually learn, her father, but part of her story nonetheless, offering her the truth she longs for. Her adoptive father is revealed as her real father, and hence the identity she sought one she already possessed. He died not wholly out of despair, then, but out of a love which could never be confessed and hence never be fully realised. Now it is not Lyman who can offer her hope but she who can offer it to him as he comes, in some way, to represent the man who has died and who is thus beyond redemption.

Geri claims magical powers, and certainly the elements seem to oblige when she predicts storm or sunshine, and as Lyman returns to her when she casts a spell. It is a magic which has led her to the one man who holds a key to the mystery of her life and which now enables her to take that life in her arms once again. She returns to the piano she had abandoned as Lyman takes a hesitant step back into the world he had chosen to leave behind. History begins again; the clock recommences. Unfinished business is now completed. Music regains its meaning.

Aware of Vietnamese traditions, which posit genies who have the power to control weather, Wilson is also drawn to Native American mysticism. 'I like the shamanism in American Indian tribes. I think there is a native medicine that comes from a regard for the land, for ancestors and plants and how they can provide for us, for all the environment' (Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', p. 18). It is a statement that makes perfect sense in the context of this play, but it is equally applicable to many Wilson plays which manage to celebrate the land and community while deploring those aspects of American society and of the self that conspire to destroy it.

And in that context there is a third character in the play, Geneva Simonson, who is also faced with a crisis. The meaning of her life has been intertwined with the redwood forest which she owns and manages. She, too, no longer knows who she is. She, too, is about to be displaced. She, like Geri, is wealthy but finds neither satisfaction nor meaning in that. In the original version of the play a great deal was made of the financial manoeuvring which robbed her of her company. This was stripped away. It was quite literally a case of losing sight of the wood because of the trees. The play, after all, is about dispossession and not its

mechanics. It is about deciding what is central to one's experience and what marginal. So, she begins to plan the possibility of buying back some of the land. After a life of compromise she is now tempted to take a stand, having, like the others, learned the true value of things by losing them.

*Redwood Curtain* is a play about a magical healing effected in the redwood forest, the healing of a girl who does not know who she is, and of a man who can no longer face what he has become. Asked by an interviewer, Toby Silverman Zinman, how this play could be said to answer the question posed by the priest in *Angels Fall* – 'what manner of persons ought we to be?' – he replied,

We should be who we can be. The line that I find the most moving is Lyman's, 'I wanted to be something'. Knocks me out, just knocks me out. When we can put him back to where he can be doing something, I will be really happy – if he can be an auto mechanic again, if he can relate to people, have a life or a wife or some partner of some sort. I don't like him out there alone, and thinking that the country has abandoned him. The mystery of this play is who Geri is, but the important thing is that she saved Lyman. (Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', p. 18)

The magic which Geri invokes is drawn partly from her mother's culture and partly from the natural world that provides the setting for much of the play. But the completion of that magic requires her to step back into the social world and to lure the stranger who is no longer a stranger back into a family which is defined not by blood but human affinity. As Wilson has remarked,

his sitting in the chair is the most important thing that happens in the play, and it happens when the curtain's almost coming down . . . He's standing in the doorway during the entire scene with her . . . When you see him again in the doorway and he comes in and sits down, it's very moving – it's one step toward being back in civilisation. (Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', pp. 18, 63)

In Edward Bond's *Saved* the mending of a chair has to counterbalance all the cruelty we have seen displayed. Here, a man sitting in a chair raises at least the possibility of reconstructing this society and, through the universalising power of the music (the music of relationships), other societies, too.

Wilson's plays frequently feature decaying worlds, communities corrupted by greed, relationships threatened by self-regard. His America has come close to betraying its dreams and ideals. Looking back over his life to date he recalls the world he once knew, a natural world which now bears the marks of a history of neglect and a corrosive disregard for man's relationship to the land that nurtured him. As he has said,

we're screwing this gorgeous country to death. I grew up on a farm and in school I studied art and architecture, and I had a rather high idea about what could be accomplished . . . We've fallen so short of our possibilities. We had it all, and we're doing so little with it that it's pitiful. God, what we're going to have to pay. And we're going to have to pay quite soon. (Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', p. 18)

*Redwood Curtain* was not a success on Broadway but, as Wilson has said: 'I never think Broadway is the best possible circumstance for a serious play. Broadway usually allows about one comedy and one, or maybe two, serious plays a year to sneak through, and they'd better be ballyhooed very heavily before they get in. That's about all the critics can cope with' (Bryer, *A Playwright's Art*, p. 279). It, did, however, continue to find a stage outside New York.

While writing a film version of *Talley's Folly*, Wilson remarked that he has never had an idea that announced itself as a movie, 'probably because I start from character and not from idea or story or situation' (Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', p. 63). Certainly his strength as a writer has been his ability to create characters who carry the force of his ideas without, for the most part, becoming merely emblematic. Beyond that, however, he has written, frequently movingly, of a country and a society that has lost touch with its own values as it has wilfully conspired in the destruction of its environment. He has written about people who carry the wounds of their own experiences and who too readily retreat into stasis or distract themselves with illusions. His struggle is to find some way to edge them towards redemption without himself succumbing to sentimentality. His is the authentic voice of those aware of life's promises and the consummate ease with which they are broken.

In the course of his career to date, Wilson has received the Drama Desk Vernon Rice Award (for *The Rimers of Eldritch*), the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Obie Award and the Outer Critics Circle Award (for *Hot l Baltimore*), an Obie for *The Mound Builders* and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for *Talley's Folly*. Yet in some ways he remains as marginalised as his characters. Perhaps it is because he is unwilling to play the game of public fame. As he has said, 'I don't go out, I don't do television because I have too many good examples not to follow . . . I don't like to be feted . . . You have to concentrate, keep it all on a human level . . . When I win an award, I just say, thank you' (Zinman, 'Inside Lanford Wilson', p. 63).

Despite a frequently friendly response by reviewers and an acknowledgement of the central role he has played in the American theatre for thirty-five years, he commands less attention from critics than either Sam Shepard, his contemporary, or David Mamet. In part, that may be because he seldom subscribes to the bleak analysis of his fellow writers, or if he does so never quite follows the logic of that analysis, offering some consolation, some reconciliation in a gesture which can at times seem sentimental because not fully earned. In part it may be because his roots are so clearly in an earlier dramatic and even social tradition, for all the fact that he appeared on the scene when those traditions were being most directly challenged. In recent years his characters have acquired a more caustic language and displayed a more deeply psychotic response to the spiralling decline that now seems the backdrop to the individual lives he stages so vividly. And, indeed, to look back over his career is to acknowledge just how skilful he has been in establishing the reality of such lives even if, as in the short plays which he has continued to write, they command our attention for the briefest of time.

He has remarked on his fascination with language and the 'juxtaposed sounds and rhythms of characters', for many years keeping notebooks in which he transcribed conversations. 'Not only do I hear the way people talk', he has said, 'and the specific rhythms of their speech – but I have a talent for reproducing that in an organized and exciting way.' But, while conceding that '*That* is a talent' he has insisted that 'everything else is work' (Barnett, *Lanford Wilson*, p. 150). Plainly part of his claim on our attention does indeed lie in his use of language, in the excoriating prose and caustic exchanges of *Burn This* no less than in the lyricism of his earlier work. But the 'everything else' is no less significant in a writer who has appealed to audiences from Off-Off-Broadway and Off-Broadway to Broadway and regional theatres.

Lanford Wilson is a gay writer who has seldom chosen to make that gayness the centre of his work (though *The Madness of Lady Bright* is a pioneering and remarkable exception). By the same token there are few of his plays in which gay characters do not make an appearance, establishing by their presence their part in the reality which he seeks both to address and constitute. *Burn This* was written out of a private pain which sought public expression. That pain is a vein that runs throughout his plays, but it does so in work that is about loss in general, the loss of some coherence and meaning which once existed and now is all but gone, the loss of a sense of self in a world which leaves ever less room for the

individual while at the same time conspiring against that sense of community which once offered consolation if not relief. He writes of survivors, and that has a special edge for one who has lost so many friends to AIDS (Edward Albee has also commented on this in his own life), but he writes in the knowledge that quiet desperation is a common condition.

The theatre, therefore, becomes not so much a refuge as an acknowledgement that all is not lost, that identity can be affirmed through the creation of characters whose vital reality is at odds with their sense of decline, through the assertion that community survives because without it theatre itself could no longer function. And if Wilson still permits an ambiguous resolution, that is, perhaps, implicit in the act of writing, which itself depends upon the very communication and sense of communal purpose that his plays are liable to see as deeply threatened and compromised. That bleakly ironic American writer, Kurt Vonnegut, signed off his career in 1997 by remarking that 'a plausible mission of artists is to make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit' (*Timequake*, p. 1). Few can claim to have done this with such conviction and yet such awareness of the nature and gravity of the struggle involved as Lanford Wilson.

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