

Doctor in the House Seat:
Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

Jill Savege Scharff, M.D.

David E. Scharff, M. D.

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Jill Savege Scharff and David E. Scharff

www.scharffmd.com

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www.freepsychotherapybooks.com

ebooks@theipi.org

Dedication

**For Murray Biggs, Edward Gero
and Tappy Wilder**

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Authors

Jill Savege Scharff, MD

Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University, Supervising Analyst at the International Institute for Psychoanalytic Training, and Teaching Analyst at the Washington Centre for Psychoanalysis, Dr. Jill Scharff is in private practice in psychoanalysis with adults and children and couple and family psychotherapy in Chevy Chase, Maryland. She is co-founder of the International Psychotherapy Institute (IPI), past Chair of the International Institute for Psychoanalytic Training (IIPT) at IPI, and she serves on the IPI Board. She was formerly Chair, Object Relations Theory and Therapy Program of the Washington School of Psychiatry (1993-1994) and Co-director of The International Psychotherapy Institute (IPI).

The author of *Projective and Introjective Identification and the Use of the Therapist's Self* (1992), she is also senior author with David E. Scharff on *Tuning the Therapeutic*

Instrument: Affective Learning of Psychotherapy (2000), *Object Relations Individual Therapy* (1998), *Object Relations Therapy of Physical and Sexual Trauma* (1996), *The Primer of Object Relations Therapy* (1992), and *The Primer of Object Relations: Second Edition* (2005). She edited *The Autonomous Self: The Work of John D. Sutherland* (1994), *Foundations of Object Relations Family Therapy* (1992) and *The Psychodynamic Image: John D. Sutherland on Self and Society* (2007). With David Scharff, she co-edited *New Paradigms in Treating Relationships* (2006) and with Stan Tsigounis *Self Hatred in Psychoanalysis* (2003).

David E. Scharff, M.D.

Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and at Georgetown University, Teaching Analyst at the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute, and past Director of the Washington School of Psychiatry (1987-1994), Dr. David Scharff is in private practice in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy in Chevy Chase, Maryland. He is co-founder, past Director, and

Board Chair of the International Psychotherapy Institute (IPI).

Author of *Refinding the Object and Reclaiming the Self* (1992), and *The Sexual Relationship* (1982), Dr. David Scharff has also edited books including *Fairbairn and Relational Theory Today* (ed. with F. Perreira 2001), *The Psychoanalytic Century: Freud's Legacy for the Future* (ed. 2000), *Fairbairn Then and Now* (ed. with N. Skolnick 1998), *From Instinct to Self* (ed. with E. Birtles 1994), and *Object Relations Theory and Practice* (ed. 1994). He is senior co-author with Jill Savege Scharff on *Object Relations Couple Therapy* (1991), *Object Relations Family Therapy* (1987) and *The Interpersonal Unconscious* (2011).

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1

The Skin of Our Teeth

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975)

**Premiere: Plymouth Theatre,
New York, 1942 (Pulitzer prize)
Arena Stage, Washington DC, 1992**

Jill Savege Scharff

Thornton Wilder, Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright and author, explores the problems of human existence from the enigma of fate to the ordinariness of everyday life. Without soothing our anxiety, as theater of his day tended to do, Wilder challenges us to see life as an adventure fraught with danger emanating from internal and external sources, and yet one in which not even our own internal enemies can destroy us. His seriocomic assessment of the human condition in his play *The Skin of Our Teeth* (Wilder 1957) is a hilarious, yet deadly serious, ruthless investigation of our struggle against the evil within us as we aim for moral and intellectual improvement. With one lens

pointed at the particulars of the Antrobus family household and the other lens broadly focused on universal historical continuity, Wilder's highly theatrical piece cleverly engineers a simultaneous vision of the here-and-now of the human condition and the there-and-then of its development through prehistoric and biblical times to the present times of prosperity, war, and racial tension.

Themes of destructiveness and survivorship in *The Skin of Our Teeth* can be related to Wilder's experience in his family of origin, his knowledge of psychoanalysis, and his writing (1957) that includes *Our Town* (1957), *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), and *Theophilus North* (1973). The destructiveness can be considered in terms of the classical psychoanalytic concept of the death instinct (Freud, 1920) and projective identification (Klein 1946), an unconscious mechanism invoked to deal with the force of the death instinct. Understanding the hidden power of unconscious communication, especially projective identification, in shaping family and individual development can illuminate Wilder's disquieting perception of the male-female

relationship in which woman is split into childish exhibitionistic, aggressively sexual, devotedly maternal, simplistically black or white aspects, and man is seen as intelligently arrogant, entitled, and barely in control of violent and sexual impulses. Wilder's own family of origin experienced many actual splits when his parents lived apart, sometimes on separate continents, and when the siblings were sent to schools in different locations. Wilder's survival of many separations and his experience of his parents' committed, but strained, couple relationship, may have influenced his choices to live as a single man, enjoy closeness to family, and contemplate life and death.

Born in Madison, Wisconsin, where his father was editor of the local paper, Thornton Wilder later lived in China and Europe as well as in the United States, at home, and in boarding school, variously separated from one or both parents and from his sisters and older brother. His first major separation occurred at birth when his twin was still-born. He was the survivor of the twin-ship, even though his twin brother was the well-formed infant and Thornton was a

sickly, underweight baby who had to be coddled. It must have seemed as though the wrong twin died. According to Thornton Wilder's biographer, Gilbert A. Harrison, the family story was that delicate Thornton was carried around on a pillow for the first year of his life (Harrison, 1983). It is easy to imagine the anxious care and concern that his bereft parents showered on the surviving twin. After being a frail and jumpy child, Thornton eventually did become robust enough for adult success as a long distance runner. He had enough vitality to withstand the effects of heavy smoking and social drinking, but he remained psychologically preoccupied with death and survivorship. Although firmly in favor of marriage and the family, he himself did not marry, his most significant relationships in adulthood remaining with his four siblings. He was particularly close to his sister, Isabel, who was his business manager, and, conversely, remarkably spurned in later years by his sister Charlotte, a gifted writer who suffered mental illness and was institutionalized. Charlotte's breakdown would be alluded to in Wilder's novel, *The Eighth Day* (Wilder 1967; Blank 1996).

The Death Theme

The German scholar, Horst Oppel, emphasized the recurring death theme, converse with the dead, and descent into the underworld (qtd. and trans. A. Wilder, 1980). *Our Town* uses the dramatic effect of having Emily return from the dead, while *The Skin of Our Teeth* exposes the family to the philosophy of the dead poets and thinkers. But Wilder is not drawn to death as a solution to conflict. He uses death to explore life and survivorship.

Wilder's commitment to these subjects may have been derived from the impact of the loss of his twin, Theophilus, at birth (Glenn, 1986). His older brother writes of Thornton as follows: "As himself a twin who lost a brother at birth, he was predisposed to fascination with this relationship. Indeed, one could hazard that he was haunted all his life by this missing alter ego. Thus, he plays with the afterlife of this twin in the dual persona suggested by the title of his last novel, Theophilus North, 'North' representing an anagram for Thornton. In this way, he was able to tease both himself and

the reader as to the borderlands between autobiography and fable" (A. Wilder 1980, p. 10).

Jules Glenn, a psychoanalyst interested in applied psychoanalysis, noted Wilder's preoccupation with twinning and described how the author's twinship affected his choice of material (Glenn 1986, p. 627). As evidence, Glenn mentions many plays and novels, but focuses especially on the novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In that novel, Wilder explores the lives of the victims of a collapse of a bridge. Among them is Esteban who, grieving for his dead twin' Manuel, had undertaken a long journey in the course of which he crossed the bridge on the fateful day. The date Wilder originally assigned to the collapse of the bridge was the birthdate of himself and his twin before Wilder changed it (Harrison, 1983 p.105). So, in the story, the twins are reunited in death on a date associated with the birth of the author and his twin. In this story, as in much of his writing, Wilder uses death to examine life.

In this late-life, semi-autobiographical novel, *Theophilus*

North, a study of love and virtue set in the Newport, Rhode Island, of the nineteen twenties, the protagonist Theophilus North, a bustling, do-gooding, adventurous, quixotic character rescues people from a series of nine settings. The nine ambitions, nine cities, and nine gables mentioned in the novel may refer to the nine months of a pregnancy (Glenn 1986, p. 635). Together with the theme of rescue, the recurring motif of nine may refer to Wilder's wish to rescue both himself and his twin from the unhappy result of the nine months of pregnancy. And Glenn reminds us that *Our Town*, a play about family and community relationships begins with the joyful announcement of the birth of twins (p. 634).

There are no twins or twinned families in *The Skin of Our Teeth* but there is a pair of families; the present-day family in New Jersey and the stone-age family, its historical twin. The family name, Antrobus, has been chosen to refer to the family of man ostensibly for its affinity to Anthropos, but it has a hint of being almost an anagram for Thornton, as is North. Added to this, we have information that the father-son struggle in the play is a painful echo of Wilder's love-hate

relationship with his admired, ebullient father who was, however, somewhat critical and even tyrannical as perceived by his son. Now we have the autobiographical element to add to the fictional element of the Antrobus family, through which *The Skin of Our Teeth* addresses the issues facing the human family.

What light does Freud's theory of the death instinct throw on this play? Previously believing humans' wish to live by the pleasure principle and reluctantly accede to the demands of reality because their intelligence allows them to see that survival depends upon becoming civilized, Freud later became convinced that some of the time we are motivated not by pleasure, but by the need to repeat painful situations, and then we get caught in a repetitive cycle of self-defeat and self-destruction, seen in symptoms, in recurrent fantasies, and in dreams after trauma (Freud 1920, pp. 21-22). He looked for an instinct to explain this "repetition compulsion" and proposed the death instinct, an instinctual disposition that either led the organism surely, but silently, back to oblivion or that was diverted outwards as an impulse of aggressiveness

or destructiveness (p. 44). The death instinct could only be detected in the form of repetitive symptoms, fantasies and dreams, especially sadomasochistic fantasies in which the more visible erotic elements with which the destructive elements are paired act as symptomatic manifestations of the death instinct. Freud suggested that the life instinct driving the organism to survive and enjoy pleasure, sexuality and procreation is opposed by the death instinct which led to aggression and destruction (Freud 1933, p. 106).

Whether he was aware of the concept of the death instinct or not, Wilder himself was a victim of repetitive compulsion. Wilder, who suffered many separations as a child, continually recreated repeated separations from his loved ones due to work and travel. In simple terms, he was running away from the pain of closeness, and doing what his family always did. In technical terms, his pattern of flight can be viewed as arising from the death instinct, with which he was infused by association to his dead twin and by being cared for by grieving parents. We may also view his repetition of separation as a personal attempt at mastery of a painful

situation, a clinging to what is known, even if it was not satisfactory, in preference to depending on the possibility of an ephemeral security that was unknown or unproven. His repetition of separation occurred as an identification with a family style of repeatedly responding to loss, disappointment, and conflict, by flight.

In the early 1960s, Wilder dropped out for nearly two years to live in obscurity in the southwest. Perhaps this was the equivalent of the city boy spending the summer on a farm as he had had done as a teenager on his father's orders, a vehicle for getting in touch with ordinary people in a non-intellectual way. It must have also served to provide psychological space for reflection and self-renewal, after which he wrote his most complex novel, *The Eighth Day*. After the age of 65, Wilder wrote comparatively little, perhaps because the issues of survivorship were invaded by anxieties about the approach of death.

In later life, Thornton commented on another kind of separation, his flight from seriousness, as follows: "What I

must put behind me is the continual passing from one 'false situation' to another" (qtd. in Harrison 1983, p. 267). He said to himself, "I must gaze at, the boundless misery of the human condition, collective and individual" (qtd. Harrison 1983, p. 270). He does just that in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, but with enough comic diversion to make the confrontation palatable. Although some critics thought that Wilder's writing smacked of middle America and disguised religiosity, others thought that it transcended the trivia of everyday while celebrating the latent dignity within the ordinariness of the humdrum. Wilder is concerned not with his characters' actuality, but with their promise (A. Wilder 1980 p. 71).

At the time of writing about the death instinct, Freud was deeply affected by the loss of his own nephew and by the massive destruction of World War I. At the time of writing *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder was in a state of strong emotion about the atrocities of World War II. Both the scientist and the artist were trying to draw our attention to the forces of destruction at large in the repetitive cycle of aggression and defeat in human society. Freud used a

biological model, whereas Wilder used a relational one.

Projective Identification

It fell to Melanie Klein to grasp the significance of Freud's observations concerning the death instinct. She thought that the infantile self was desperately afraid that the uncontrollable hatred and devouring love arising from the death instinct would destroy the object of its affections, the good mother and her body. The infant, so her theory goes, attempts to deflect the death instinct, as Freud suggested, by an unconscious mental mechanism called *projective identification* (Klein 1946 p. 8) so as to defend against anxiety and to communicate experience within the context of an unconscious reciprocated relationship. Using projective identification, the infant projects out the aggressive, threatening part of itself that is under the influence of the death instinct and identifies it as arising from its mother's body, to maintain the security of its self. Unfortunately danger returns when the baby identifies the mother as being like the primitive, aggressive part that is lodged in her especially when the mother identifies with the baby's

perception of her and responds aggressively. Now instead of a mother experienced as loving and good, the baby thinks that the mother must be bad and hateful. The baby attempts to control this persecutory situation by taking in this bad image of the mother and storing it inside itself as a bad object.

Fortunately, according to Klein's theory, the life instinct is there to combat the death instinct. Under the force of the life instinct, good aspects of the self are projected into the mother to preserve them from destruction by the forces within the baby, and then she is experienced as good and loving, and the baby takes in the good object. So inside the self, the baby has good and bad objects that are in conflict, which leaves the baby anxious that the good object may be destroyed. The balance between the amounts of good and bad projected into and returned from the mother to the child eventually lead to appreciation of her as a whole person who is sometimes found to be good and sometimes felt to be bad. With maturation in cognitive abilities, the infant develops an integrated good and bad object inside the self and then a realistic sense of the self as a whole with the good and bad

impulses that can be managed inside the self and within the context of the primary relationships.

Projective identification is a form of unconscious communication in adult life. With it comes a pattern of intrapsychic conflict and interpersonal behavior that is reiterated in relation to the parents and all future significant relationships. For instance, projective identification occurs between members of a family at all stages of the life-cycle. Aspects of the parents' relationship that have not been adapted to and modified tend to get projected out of the marriage, either to get rid of unwanted, bad parts, or to save and protect good parts of the marital relationship. These unacceptable parts of the spouse's joint marital personality are projected into one or another of the children where they show up as behaviors in that child that lead to the same level of anxiety that they generate in the parents; and the child gets treated with the same attitude that the couple holds toward these unmanageable parts of their relationship. So the child, for better or worse, becomes the repository for all the unacknowledged marital themes and is treated accordingly,

being denigrated for the unacceptable bad aspects, or overly cherished for the good aspects. Some sturdy children can defend themselves against this process and refuse the projective identification, but others react more to their parents' than to their own agenda. The distribution of the projective identifications among the children encourages sibling rivalry.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the competitiveness and meanness of a conflicted brother-sister relationship appears as an incidental part of the action. The repetitiously quarreling children enact a battle for control and favor that constantly confronts the parents with conflicts that have to be managed. Is this cyclic repetition due to the innate response to the death instinct? Is the son, Henry/Cain, simply born bad?

Following the theory of Ronald Fairbairn (1952) and others of the object relations school of psychoanalysis, contemporary psychoanalytic theory has moved away from viewing instinct as the sole source of human motivation. The infant is still seen as having biological needs, of course, but

the primary motivation is thought to be the need to be in a relationship. The infant is still seen as being born with a unique constitution deriving from a gene pool, but with an equally unique family with whom to progress through the life cycle. After all, without a mother the baby cannot survive. The infant builds the structure of the self from satisfying and frustrating experiences with the mother and other family members. Now the question becomes more complicated: Is the cyclic repetition in the Antrobus family due to the death instinct, or is it due to the way the anxiety has been managed in the family and in the culture in which they live? Is Henry/Cain born bad, or does his evil stem from the way that he has taken in good and bad experience in his family? Is he behaving in ways determined by his parents' relationship and by his family heritage?

In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the brother-sister struggle is an interpersonal replay of the children's internal struggle against Oedipal desires to murder a parent in order to possess the other. These children are clearly living in an incredibly hostile environment in which the protection of both parents is

vital to their survival and in which the parents who need each other for survival have not worked through their envy of the other's part of the bargain. The unhappy parents are worried about the death of their union, their family, and their culture, and they locate threat in the form of their son.

To protect their frightened parents' union – which the parents do not secure against threat from the children or from the sexually appealing maid, Sabina – the children displace their rage and sexually proactive impulses on to each other and attack them there. In the Antrobus family, the parents identify the girl as all that is sweet and favored especially by her father. They see the boy as evil incarnate. So the daughter acts in ways to please the parents and the son resentfully rebels against their authority. The children conform to role expectations placed upon them by their parents through projective identification which is a result of the parents' inability to contain conflict within the marital relationship. The parents act and the children react. The children's behavior diverts attention from the central problem in the marriage, and at the same time that problem is

displayed in the children's behavior.

The relationship between brother and sister and their responses to their parents' behavior and expectations gives form to the tension in the parents' marital relationship arising from the parents' unresolved conflicts over authority, self-esteem, sexual worth, and entitlement to respect and gratitude. Because of the family's projective identification of the girl as seductive and the boy as aggressive, we see a powerful reflection of the destructiveness of the female-male relationship derived from the children's experience of their parents' marriage and their shared perceptions of male and female roles and responsibilities. In contrast to these negative aspects, the positive aspects of the brother-sister relationship are focused on in Wilder's *Our Town*, a play that features twinned families each of which has a brother-sister pair out of which a marriage is created when George marries Emily.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder portrays the man as a single entity: intellectual, brilliant, devoted to work, inventor

of survival strategies, and leader of the family unit. He portrays the woman in two parts: (1) the maternal woman – Mrs. Antrobus – who is devoted to her children and deeply in touch with their needs for comfort, shelter and nurturance, yet unable to tolerate her daughter's exhibitions of sexuality or her son's aggressiveness; (2) the seductive, single, childless woman – Sabina – who has the erotic appeal that the mother lacks. We see in the girl echoes of both adult women, but in the boy we see mainly a rejected, unsatisfactory, unsublimated and uncivilized part of his father. Lily Sabina splits herself into the woman, the maid, and the actress when she steps out of character and tells the audience that it is really difficult to play her part. She acts the seductress because she identifies with what she believes men want from her, the prototype for men being her father. Her problem in playing her role is one of difficulty in tolerating and escaping from a projective identification. It is hard for her to be the maid she is required to be for Mrs. Antrobus, while acting as the seductress that she imagines she must be for Mr. Antrobus, and still be the real person who is in a role as their

maid. She identifies with what she perceives will please the other person, and fills that role temporarily, because she does not realize that her own enduring self could be pleasing just as she is without role-playing. At the same time, she avoids recognizing her inherent aggression and sexuality, because they seem only to be attitudes that occur in role. These identifications occur to protect against death to the self, if the self were really to admit its full potential for sexual and aggressive feeling.

Wilder chose the family bond rather than the marital relationship for himself, a choice that his mother and father had also made despite the fact of their long and fertile marriage. His parents, each a person of character, remained committed to their marriage, yet chose to live separately in different continents for much of Wilder's life. Each was devoted to the children. We can see in Wilder the qualities of his mother – her literary and artistic interests, her gregariousness and musical sensibility – and his father's austerity, morality and intellectual drive, his writing ability, ebullience and wit. According to Mrs. Wilder, Mr. Wilder

was dictatorial, not tender with her. He was unable to recover from the loss of an earlier love, and thought of himself as a widower at heart. Mrs. Wilder thought that she and he could have "rubbed along comfortably enough," but there was not enough understanding between them to contain the strain of their long separations (Harrison 1983, p. 14). Only when Wilder was a very young boy was his father at home. Perhaps that is when he absorbed enough of the whole family atmosphere to provide the basis for his writing about family life. He also absorbed the strain in the couple relationship as projected by his parents.

It seems that Wilder identified with each of his parents separately, but he was unable to take them in as a whole, loving *internal couple* (Scharff 1992, p. 139). How could he if they were not together for most of his childhood that he can remember? Wilder's unconscious psychological inheritance was that of a dead internal couple, based on a coalescence of images of his father as a widower at heart who lost the woman he loved, of himself as the surviving twin who lost his brother, and of his parents' dead marital union. Despite

his immense creativity that allowed him to explore and illuminate this issue for his audience, Wilder was personally unable or uninterested in bringing the couple to life for himself in the married state that he celebrates in his plays. Although charming as a social companion, he had few, if any, sexual relationships, and the one report of a homosexual relationship remains unsubstantiated (Tappan Wilder, nephew, personal communication).

Like many intellectuals of his time, Wilder who had read Freud, decided to visit him. In a letter to Arnold Zweig, the German writer, Freud referred to receiving a visit from "Thornton Wilder, the author of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*" (Freud 1935). (Freud kept the novel in his waiting room along with Conrad Aiken's *Great Circle*). Then Freud sent a note to Wilder thanking him for greetings he had received from him on his eightieth birthday (Freud 1936). According to Harrison, Freud referred to his theory of infantile sexuality, the Oedipus complex, and Wilder's problems with women (p. 140), and after the meeting with Freud, Wilder was convinced and declared himself a Freudian (p. 139). Certainly, *The Skin*

of Our Teeth recalls Freud's conclusion that "the evolution of civilization is the struggle of eros and death, is the struggle for life of the human species" (Freud 1927, p.122).

Despite his own sexual repression, Wilder found Freud's libido theory interesting, but he recognized its limitation more clearly than Freudians of the day. Wilder wrote, "One can talk all one wants about the libido element in parental and sibling love yes, but one falls into the danger of overlooking the sheer emotional devotion which is a qualitative difference, and must be continually recognized as such" (qtd. in Harrison 1983, p. 170). In this statement, Wilder does not dismiss the sexuality that Freud drew attention to in family life, but like a contemporary analyst who has read Fairburn, Wilder emphasizes the importance of the emotional attachment and commitment that characterize family relationships. He was teaching this at Harvard one year before the publication of Fairburn's book, *Psychoanalytic Studies of Personality*. Not surprisingly, Wilder's plays, including *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, are replete with family relational themes.

The same may be said for all Wilder's plays and novels. They deal with human potential, human follies, life, death, and fate. Wilder's plays retain their universal appeal because they present a view of human experience across the generations, presented with a charitable mixture of severity and empathy. Laced with charm and humor, the plays are highly entertaining, yet profoundly moving.

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2

Heartbreak House

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

**Premiere: Garrick Theatre,
New York, 1920
Roundhouse Theatre, Bethesda, 2003**

David E. Scharff

Heartbreak House, a rather long 3-act play, was written sometime in 1916, about the time Shaw turned 60, two thirds of the way through his remarkably long life. It came after a crescendo of productivity, culminating in the most psychological of his plays, *Pygmalion* which won the hearts of the English speaking world and is the one for which he is best known. First performed in 1913, *Pygmalion* may have best expressed Shaw's dynamics, and autobiographical elements of some difficulty for him, and yet had an immediacy and warmth of feeling that is entirely lacking in *Heartbreak House*. Shaw saw the opening production of *Heartbreak House* only once after opening night, and

emotionally rejected the production. I think of *Heartbreak House* as the rejoinder to the heartwarming *Pygmalion*. *Heartbreak House* is a rejection of the heart altogether, in the guise of a social drama spiced with the Shavian wit for which he is best known. Shaw draws the characters not as full-blooded people but as cartoons of roles within a social reality meant to be manipulated by wit and circumstance. His parody of English upper class life mocks and celebrates English upper class society so vividly that it has generated the widespread feeling that indeed no-one of that class does, did, or had done anything useful in living memory.

In *Heartbreak House*, Ellie Dunn, a child-like woman of marriageable age, visits the home of a higher class family. Ellie, her awkward uptight father, a failed idealist called Mazzini Dunn, and her untrustworthy middle-aged fiancé, the industrialist Boss Mangan are invited just before World War I to one of Hesione Hushabye's dinner parties at the home of her father Captain Shotover, a man who has an interest in dynamite. Shotover believes her to be the child of another Dunn who was with him in the navy. Enter Shotover's rich

daughter, an enticing woman from whom he has been estranged and Billie, a burglar, also by the name of Dunn, who just wants to be looked after, and who uses the pranks of a 6 year-old to get himself incarcerated in a jail as the place where he is most likely to get taken care of. Shotover is a man who thinks that the natural life of an adult's affection for his children is 6 years, and after that, children should take care of themselves. Not surprisingly, Shotover's daughters are heartless. Ellie's social status will profit by her marriage to Mangan a wealthy industrialist, but she is in love with Hesione's romantic husband, and yet by the end of the play she makes the unlikely choice of loving Captain Shotover. Having faced a life decision of social import, Ellie makes an emotional choice, giving up her financial security with Mangan for Shotover, who she thinks is the only one who really cares, is too old to impose sex, and knows about selling his soul to the devil while not really doing so. But Ellie's solution is a ridiculous fantasy, even while the world turns to its destruction.

Let me first trace some of the themes of the social drama, themselves complex ones which some people find tedious. Shaw took on all the conventions of the day – marriage, the role of class in English society, hypocrisy, and the destructiveness of war. He was a socialist although not a Marxist, believing in planned evolution to socialism, not in revolution. He satirized almost everything. This play is rife with amusement and social irony, the characters best understood as embodiments of social positions and roles. There is Mangan the industrialist and politician who turns out to have the heart of a child longing for a mother; Ellie, the child who reveals an inner steeliness not expected in the first act; Hector and Hesione, a couple who were once passionate but have by now settled into a gentle, if socially outrageous, accommodating relationship, trying in backhanded ways to give moments of pleasure to others by arousing momentary excitement for them or attempting to plan their lives. Shaw gives us a cartoon of a supposedly caring parental marriage whose provision for the family they assemble for the

weekend makes a kind of sense in the couple's own terms but to us is a farce.

In the production that I saw at Roundhouse Theatre in Bethesda the director cut some of the material to shorten this very long play. Perhaps the intention was also to cut down on pedagogical language that is heavy-handed. But the director's choice of cutting the dialogue designed to carry the social argument then focused the play on the personalities of the characters. Although editing may make the play more accessible, it is actually hard for the audience to follow the logic of the social argument without the fuller script.

At the end of Act I, Shotover, Hector and Hesione are discussing how Hector's inventions, which are supposed to support the family, have not brought in enough money, the full script brings out the social irony in the comic interpersonal situations:

Hesione Hushabye (an ironic name for the soothing mother she tries to be) says to Shotover, "Living at the rate we do, you cannot afford life-saving inventions. Can't you

think of something that will murder half Europe at one bang?"

This idea makes Shotover's interest in dynamite that produces the final explosion more thematically cohesive. Here he says back to her, "No. I am ageing fast. My mind does not dwell on slaughter as it did when I was a boy." She suggests he invent a harpoon cannon he has had in mind. "No use," says Shotover. "It kills whales, not men."

She says, "Why not? You fire the harpoon out of a cannon. It sticks in the enemy's general; you wind him in; and there you are."

Shotover replies, "There is something in it. Not to wind in generals; they are not dangerous. But one could fire a grapnel and wind in a machine gun or even a tank. I will think it out."

With this kind of dialogue that is not about character but about social irony, not comedy but the tragedy of man's destructiveness to man, the ending makes sense – an explosion that does away with the two characters who

represent two of Shotover's ideological enemies: the exploitative industrialist and the burglar who once did him out of his stores and set up shop, and who now makes a living breaking into houses and tricking people who are easily duped because of their innocent charitable instincts. Dramatically it's farce, but primarily it's social commentary.

This play is widely held to be a social drama, and can be analyzed from that perspective more usefully than from the personal and autobiographical psychoanalytic perspective on the inner life of individuals and of relationships, which Shaw employs only for the sake of social arguments. Social reality is, after all, embedded in our individual psychologies, brought to us originally by our experience with parents and other important figures in our lives. Such issues as the relationships between the sexes, hate and war, the idleness of the upper classes while Europe destroys itself, and so on, are at the most important levels, deeply personal to us. This play was understood as a ringing castigation of a British intellectual society that carried on as if immune to the awful destruction of the war. Shaw courageously spoke frequently

and actively against that war – to the great diminishment of his previous popularity. But what I find so interesting in this play is the way that the apparently ridiculous quality of the interactions belies the intensity of the personal relationships and serves as a rejoinder to the fantasy solution found in *Pygmalion*.

Let us turn to Shaw himself. Shaw's mother was extremely negligent of him, and his father was an unsuccessful drunk. He longed to be loved by his neglectful mother, and he lived with her in hope until he married at 41. When he was a youth, his parents brought in a Professor of Voice to live with them in a threesome (Silvio 1995). This man became Shaw's first mentor and the model for Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*. Briefly sexual before marriage at 41, Shaw was chaste afterwards. He remained for many years in this a-sexual marriage in which his wife supported him and did not require him to be sexual with her provided he was not sexual with anyone else. Years later, he fell in love with Mrs. Pat Campbell, and wrote ardent letters to her

In a letter to Mrs. Pat, Shaw wrote, “I seldom dream of my mother, but when I do, she is my wife as well as my mother. ... I [take] it as a matter of course that the maternal function included the wifely one...What is more, the sexual relations acquire... all the innocence of the filial one, and the filial one all the completeness of the sexual one . . . if circumstances tricked me into marrying my mother before I knew she was my mother, I should be fonder of her than I could even be of a mother who was not my wife, or a wife who was not my mother” (Holroyd 1988, p. 20). Shaw had the play *Pygmalion* in mind throughout the 15 years of his relationship to Mrs. Pat, but she finally lost patience with him for staying with his wife, who was mainly a mother to him. This was also a time of serious illness for his mother.

In the final throes of his relationship with Mrs. Pat, Shaw wrote *Pygmalion*, and recruited her for the role of Liza. I see Liza as a female alter ego of Shaw, like him, mentored by a voice teacher, a child who will live with Higgins and Pickering in a threesome, as Shaw predicts in his epilogue to *Pygmalion*. I see Henry Higgins as both a callous mother and

a father who makes his own child into a wife and mother without involving sex – a magical solution. When Shaw finally wrote *Pygmalion*, he did it in a hurry. He had resisted Mrs. Pat's pressure for physical intimacy, and then only before the opening of the play did he decide he wanted to physically consummate the relationship. But by then she was fed up, and a week before it opened, she ran off and married a young aristocratic military officer. The play was a huge success, but Shaw hated the production and, because he was so embittered, saw it only once after the opening night. He was deeply disappointed at the loss of his only true love. No magical solution there. Although Liza stayed happily with Higgins and old Pickering, Mrs. Pat left Shaw for a young man. Resentful at her rejection, he experienced once again the lack of affection from Mrs. Pat that he had felt from his mother during childhood.

So to the current play, *Heartbreak House*, written in the years after Shaw's heartbreak. Shotover is the cynical idealist spokesman for Shaw. Shotover presides over a house run by heartless daughters, who care for him while he takes

care of the household by fanciful inventions that bring in the money. Shaw's inventions, his plays, possess social dynamite that is intended to explode the evils of social inequity and those who perpetrate them. Shotover is continually supporting his household by his inventions. These inventions remind me of the inventive plays of Shaw that support his house in his old age as he continually tries to set things right in the world, while becoming increasingly cynical about the possibility of doing so. I see this play as an antidote to the failed fantasy solution of writing *Pygmalion*.

In *Heartbreak House*, Shotover, a man who seems totally dismissive of family values, seems to be the character Shaw consciously identified with. Shaw rejects many other aspects of family life in this play, including the care of children, an intimate loving couple, and a consummated marriage. There are no children in the play, and the adult children all turn against their parents in one way or another. Coming at the end of his only great love and his most successful period of playwriting, Shaw's own heartbreak is immense. His loss is reflected in the ironies of all loving relationships drawn in

this play. The irony is that Ellie's symbolic marriage to Shotover while rejecting real marriage is actually the kind of marriage Shaw wanted, and for him it was neither ridiculous nor unrealistic. *Heartbreak House* is an attempt to portray and rectify Shaw's own disappointment.

The play makes several formulaic equations: of age and wisdom, and of youth and guile. All women are cast as one or another form of dominating manipulator to be fought off. Nevertheless, woman is not the chief enemy of sensible man. Rather it is the evil industrialist, who uses men up without scruple, enslaving them through both their innocence and their industry. The men are liars. They have to lie to please the women with their seduction and flattery. The women who believe these liars are fools who need to grow up to more wisdom. Those who seem innocent are treated as in need of enlightenment by the tea and sympathy of the cynical old captain.

Shaw is not trying to manipulate character to show psychological truth, but in his terms a truth deeper than

psychology, and he does it with that tool that is perhaps richer to us than the submerged truths of human character – language. Shotover, who is continually putting a shot over across everyone's bow, says things that ring true despite their paradox, and because of their paradox. This is the language of social truth, an aspect of psychology that we have not been used to acknowledging or recognizing in the dream of the theater. Admittedly it is a social truth of a man with a social message. This is not a play of discovery through character as revealed in interaction. Because of the social urgency Shaw expresses, the speeches become longer, more polemical as if to educate or persuade. As I said earlier, some of these speeches, which come at the end of Act I, were cut from the performance I saw, perhaps in order to decrease the sense of social cause and increase the sense of realism in the characters. I see these speeches about social exploitation as expressions of the social unconscious (unconscious ideas widely shared in a culture).

Look at Ellie, the most manipulative of the women, posing as the most innocent, working to fool even her friend

Hesione who is more cynical than them all, and a match for the exploitative and cynical Mangan. Ellie has two fathers, the crooked Billie who robbed Shotover and would do it again, and an innocent father who was exploited and robbed himself. Both fathers are in relationships of robbing, and it is Ellie's intention both in innocence and in cynicism to get her own back through sex and seduction, offering Mangan the youth and innocence he has exploited in the father.

The first act sets up the problem of the exploitative men and the innocence of women, all threatened by the social machinations of industrialism that is out to exploit everyone who is blind to what is going on, with only the aging and cynical Shotover standing between both family and strangers against looming destruction and doom. Then the rest of the play rings changes on this theme. It is not until Shotover, the captain who deserves his fate and who drinks his rum to achieve the 7th degree of concentration, delivers his epilogue that there is a degree of farcical resolution. Shotover becomes the one person Ellie can trust, a father and a mother

who has been referred to as a “mummy” in lines about her spiritual marriage to him.

This farce of a conclusion tells us this has all along been a play about numbskull behavior among upper class Brits who fiddle away their days and nights away. The talk about the price of a soul, a selling out so no one wants for gloves, is now also about a population that sells itself for comfort, for a pretense of love, for time that has no value. The Hushabye couple’s shameless serenity that seems to provide a modicum of peace at the center of the play is revealed as a complacency that is at the heart of the social difficulty. When complacency takes the place of facing the truth in our personal, social or political lives, we face disaster. It is not only Mangan and Dunn who are blown up. They take the lead in a parable about what society is heading towards and what we are saving our dynamite for.

We have to acknowledge that there is a pervasive truth to Shaw’s pessimistic cynicism. All of us pose and present our false selves to the world. When we go to sleep and trust in

Providence, when we assume there is a reality to our good intentions, when we become complacent in the thought that goodness is a benign condition, it is then that we truly invite trouble. Goodness is not totally benign. It has its match in the cynical exploitation of others. Being asleep at the switch makes for the surest course for the rocks and opens individuals and society for real social difficulty.

This is a play about social and national character. Each dramatic character gives voice to certain general qualities in interaction. That makes *Heartbreak House* a morality play with a gentle, only mildly disturbing ending. We do not care much about Mangan and Dunn who get blown up. We forget that they stand for us. Everybody is in a way waiting for a violent ending that could just as easily have come to them. Everyone's worst nightmare is spoken for by Manzini being stripped naked socially. Maybe the Captain will get more dynamite and the whole population will return to a life a little heartbroken. They will still have pointless lives because they have not learned from experience. They have not learned to feel, think, share, and care about the world beyond

themselves. In this group and in the cynicism of this farce,
it's not as bad as it could be. Quite comfortable, really!

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3

Morning's at Seven

Paul Osborn (1901-1988)

**Premiere: Longacre Theatre,
New York, 1939
Lyceum Theatre, New York, 2002**

Jill Savege Scharff

Morning's at Seven by Paul Osborn (1901-1988) brings us into the lives of an extended family in the 1920s in small town America. It is light comedy, but with a surprisingly strong emotional pull. The play opens with a small town setting for two adjoining houses owned by two sisters and their husbands. Cora Gibbs, now Swanson, lives in one house with her husband Theodore (Thor) and her unmarried sister Aaronetta (Aary) Gibbs. Next door, lives their sister Ida with her husband Carl Bolton and their son Homer who can't get around to marrying his girlfriend Myrtle. The sisters are in and out of one another's houses and full participants in one another's lives. Esther (Esty) the older

sister, lives up the road with her husband David Crampton, the intellectual, who keeps himself apart from the family dynamics and has recently forbidden Esther to hang out with her sisters. Finding out that she is seeing them against his wishes, he insists on an in-house separation.

The effect of the stranger

When a stranger enters in the form of Homer's girlfriend, anxiety about her arrival forces many family conflicts to the surface. The women are excited that Homer is bringing his girlfriend of eleven years to meet the family at last. The appearance of the young woman in their midst heralds change, revives the impact of a sexual choice made in Aary's youth, and pushes Carl now in his late 60s to re-evaluate the meaning of his life and the choices he made at her age.

Carl's anxiety and its meaning

In the case of Carl, Homer's father, excitement has spilled over into anxiety that has him in a state of tormented questioning of his choices and his identity that frightens his relatives and leads him to delay meeting the girlfriend. They all know about his anxiety, but they don't want to know what

it is about and dismiss it by calling it “his spells.” Carl experiences his angst in four ways: he leans his head against a tree, speaks of returning to the fork of the road, wishes he were a dentist, and asks repeatedly, ‘Where am I?’ None of the family members can comprehend what is bothering him. They simply feel socially embarrassed by his having “one of his spells.”

To me, it seems that Carl is the only one who tries to express his conflict. I might say that he is the one who communicates with his unconscious. The rest of the group lives the unexamined life, and he seems to me to suffer on their behalf. Carl does not have the language in which to subject his experiences to process and review, and the family members closest to him do not know how to listen to him. It is interesting to speculate on what Carl’s symptoms are trying to communicate to his family and to Carl himself. Wishing to have trained as a dentist might reflect a wish to have a higher social status and make more money for his family, or it might represent a fantasy of being able to locate and get rid of decay, or a fantasy that he could have saved his own teeth and

would have one less problem of aging. At a deeper level he might think of a dentist as a powerful person who has the authority to inflict pain and inspire fear.

Returning to the fork in the road refers to a wish to re-evaluate his choices. Asking, 'Where am I?' infers that he feels lost and needs to re-orient himself. Resting his head on the trunk of a tree is a much more unusual symptom. Does it speak of despair, of exhaustion, of a wish to reconnect to nature? I think I have found the answer in another of Osborn's writings, *On Borrowed Time*, in which an old man keeps Death at bay by trapping him up a tree. Is that what Carl is doing? Aging is not bringing serenity or self acceptance. His son may marry and leave the home. The life cycle is moving on. Carl's head is not able to think and express all this. In body and emotional state of mind, does he sense the threat of death coming towards him? Is he holding death up the tree by the force of his head to keep it away from him and his family?

Masculine protest to the matriarchy

Unable to connect fully with the deeper aspects of Carl, Ida has become overly close to Homer. Homer is unable to find the words or the energy to marry his new girlfriend. I see the husbands as the supporting characters in a matriarchy. They get absorbed in the gossip and the family dynamics and now that they are retired they do not have the excuse of work to get away. It's a claustrophobic set-up for a man, and leads to masculine protest in various forms: in having "spells," having a fling with his wife's sister, and getting a girlfriend pregnant before marriage.

The focus on Homer

Homer's aunts and uncles are as focused on him as his own parents are. They all look to him to stay with them and keep them company. At the same time they all know that he should be getting married. His parents have even built a house for him. He represents the future, the hope for the next generation, but the family dynamic keeps him in place with them in the present.

Male companionship as healing force

Only David can talk with Carl about his anxiety, and even though David remains highly intellectual and cannot solve his own problem of having to control his wife, he can connect with Carl. The two men amaze their wives by moving in together. Their “guy time” helps both of them. Soon both men are able to reconcile with their wives and life goes on as usual. When the secret of Aary’s love for Thor and their fling during her adolescence comes out, she leaves the Swanson residence, only to move next door to live with Ida and Carl. This frees Homer to get married and live in his own home, because Ida will have her sister at hand instead.

The family secret as power

The secret about Aary’s temporary liaison with Thor, which was kept from Cora all those years, gave Aary leverage. The threat of revealing the truth and its probable effect on Thor and Cora gave her a trump card, small recompense for the helplessness and deprivation of her situation. When we realize that living at Ida’s becomes her only alternative, we feel sad for her lack of choices. We realize the desperation and helplessness of a woman living at

a time when her identity depended on her marriage to a man. At the same time the play persuades us to feel relieved that the family will stay together, that God will be in his heaven and everything will be all right with the world.

Women's attitudes to men

The sisters appear to run around after their husbands, fretting over their various idiosyncrasies, protecting them from public embarrassment, and keeping up a fiction of men as powerful. But the sisters as a tight-knit foursome have the real power and fill the emotional centre of the play. They respect the men's right to be in charge of real estate transactions, financial matters, and philosophical thinking but they trivialize their emotional issues. Carl is troubled and inarticulate, David is articulate but lacking in feeling and family loyalty, Thor is hospitable to the sisters but unfaithful with one of them, and Homer is so tied to his mother's apron strings that he can't leave home and take possession of his bride and his own home. The sisters' husbands may take center stage at times as their issues come to the fore, but in general they are secondary to the sisters' closeness, and are

dominated by the sisters' style of living in and out of one another's homes.

Lasting effect of childhood attributes

In childhood the girls had been given their attributes by their father: Esther (smartest), Cora (mildest), Ida (slowest), and Aaronetta (wildest). Esther, the cleverest, is married to the professor but her own intellect is overshadowed by his and she is not smart enough to set her own course. His scholarly reclusiveness prevents her from visiting her sisters where she would enjoy the authority of the eldest. She is dominated by her husband's restrictions on her life with her family as surely as she is destined by her birth order to be the one who thinks she knows everything. Ida, the slowest, is unable to relate to her husband's existential anxiety, and her fears of being alone hold her son to her even while she tells him to get married. Cora, the mildest, puts up with the presence of her maiden sister for years and seems not to know about the secret at the heart of their threesome. Aary, the wildest, who set a fire in their midst has no other hearth than that of one of her sisters.

Contrast to post modern drama

Paul Osborn was born in Evansville Indiana, studied English at Michigan and playwriting at Yale, and went on to write many plays and screenplays including *East of Eden* (1955) and *Sayonara* (1957) for which he received Oscar nominations. He worked in menial jobs, and like Carl Bolton, he questioned his choices and his talent. At his own fork in the road, Osborn chose between boredom of steady jobs and the excitement of the tenuous existence of writing for the stage. He lived with the uncertainty of whether that choice meant that he was an honest writer or a dilettante. In *Morning's at Seven* he goes back to the ordinary life that he left behind, and in its boredom he finds humor and pathos. He married the actress Millicent Green in 1939 when he was 38 years of age, almost as old as his time-expired bachelor character, Homer – an inspired choice of name for a man who cannot leave his family home and cannot inhabit his own. Osborn was suspicious of success, since a hit was often followed by a flop, and elation by let-down, and even when

he was successful in writing movie scripts in his later years, he found “no serenity in getting older.”

Osborn had introduced the theme of love lost in *The Vinegar Tree* and showed how re-finding it could turn one’s assumptions about life upside down. He dealt with the topic of love betrayed in terms of the life situation of Thor in *Morning’s at Seven*. He returned to the topic again in *The Homecoming* (1948) in which a doctor who enlists in the Army falls in love with a nurse, and is guilty about being unfaithful to his wife back home.

By chance, when I was thinking about *Morning’s at Seven*, I happened to read *The Homecoming* by Harold Pinter. In Pinter’s *The Homecoming*, four men express their crudeness and brutality toward one another and toward women as sexual objects, even referring to their late wife/mother as a whore and a bitch. One of the men makes a sexual advance to his older brother’s wife as if this is perfectly acceptable. Pinter’s *The Homecoming* epitomizes all that is wrong with patriarchy. Aggression, competition,

contempt for intellect, and hatred of success abound, and there is really no resolution. The only solution for the characters is total identification with the depravity or physical departure from the scene and emotional cut-off. The atmosphere in Pinter's play could not be more different from the nostalgic quaintness of *Morning's at Seven*.

In contrast to *Morning's at Seven*, which is centered on four women in small town America, Pinter's *The Homecoming*, is centered on four men, a father, his brother, and the father's two sons living together in lower class, sleazy circumstances in the 1960s period of anger and unrest in Britain. The four male family members hate one another. In *Morning's at Seven*, the women may quarrel but basically they have secure attachments. They love one another. The gritty Pinter play shows only the worst effects of a vertical patriarchal culture. The nostalgic Osborn play shows the strengths and weaknesses of a horizontal matriarchal culture.

In contrast to Pinter's bold portrayal of the chaos, disconnection, and nastiness of family life in *The*

Homecoming, in *Morning's at Seven* Osborn provides a loving family picture full of quirks and quibbles, but basically caring, and a regularly predictable pattern of existence with little ripples. Where Pinter's is a loud shout and a curse, Osborn's is a quiet chat and a hug. Osborn gently confronts and modifies the undercurrents of tension in the extended family. The rocking of the family boat is extremely gentle, amusing, and touching. Watching Pinter's play, you may feel gripped by the raw emotion and crude thinking, but you tend to recoil from the horror of it. In *Morning's at Seven*, you have a much easier, more pleasant experience. It's easy to recognize yourself and your family relationships, suffer with them, laugh at them, and learn from them.

Resolution

Cora becomes positively nasty in her new found assertiveness and fights to have her husband to herself. Aary accepts the constraints of reality and leaves the Swansons to be a couple without her. Ida lets her son go, but only because she can accept her sister as a replacement child. Estee gets her husband back without really having to do anything. You

get the sense that David will continue to retreat to his books and try to pry his wife away from her sisters, that Carl will continue to have his spells and no-one will understand them emotionally, and who knows how Thor and Cora will do without Aary as the thorn, the guilty secret, the child they never had. The family has its problems with dependency, but the supportive network is reassuring and resilient, conflicts blow over, and the relationships endure.

4

The Price

Arthur Miller (1915-2005)

**Premiere: Morosco Theatre,
New York, 1968
Theatre J, Washington DC, 2008**

David E. Scharff

Victor Frantz, a 50-year-old policeman, has mounted the stairs to the attic where he stores furniture that his parents brought with them when his father was ruined in the Depression. He looks around at these items, which he has not touched since his father's death 16 years earlier. He silently picks up relics of his past, and puts two records on the ancient phonograph, one an old duet of men singing, and the second a laughing record, at which he is overtaken with laughter. His wife, Esther comes in. Caught up in the infectious gaiety of the moment, we are then sobered to learn that the building is to be torn down. Esther and Victor are waiting for a used furniture dealer to arrive and take the father's untouched belongings away. Then they will go off to the movies to

enjoy a rare night out. As they wait, we learn about Victor's loyalty to his father. Keeping his safe salary as a police officer and working within a predictable schedule, Victor was able to care for his father until his death. But filial duty has been an excuse. Victor has been unable to bring himself to retire from the police force and start a more satisfying, new life.

The used furniture dealer arrives, a 90 year-old man more antique than the pieces he has come to view. Gregory Solomon engages in wandering reveries and humorous exchanges to form a relationship with Victor before offering him a price for the furniture. The prime piece of the lot is Victor's mother's harp, a relic of the musical career she sacrificed to be a homemaker. As Gregory draws Victor out, we learn that Victor has a brother, Walter to whom he has not spoken in 16 years, and who has not responded to Victor's calls this week about the disposition of the furniture.

Solomon tells Victor parts of his own sad life. He had retired from business some years ago, living above his store,

selling a few items, waiting for death. Failing to die, he has felt recalled to life by Victor's phone call. After much conversation, they arrive on a price for the goods, but just as Solomon is ceremoniously counting out the money, Walter unexpectedly enters, ending the first act.

The second act focuses on the failed relationship between Walter and Victor. First we hear of Walter's life, successful in medicine, a failure in his family life, estranged not only from Victor and Esther and their successful college-age son but divorced and effectively estranged from his own children. As Solomon wanders on and off stage, trying to keep the deal from falling through, Walter tells Victor about the failures in his own life. Victor blames Walter for turning his back on Victor and their father and for failing to help Victor with a loan for school many years ago when caring for their father. Walter reveals that he had initially refused because their father had enough money hidden away to help Victor, but when it became clear their father would not pay, Walter had called the father to offer help to Victor – a message the father never relayed to Victor.

Walter now offers Victor a job at his hospital, a new start, but Victor is too proud and angry to forgive Walter for his years of neglect in the past and accept his generosity in the present. As the argument mounts, Walter stalks out, the estrangement between them further set in stone. Esther and Victor go off to the movies, leaving Solomon alone on stage. The play ends as Solomon puts the laughing record on the phonograph again and, laughing helplessly, collapses into the father's armchair.

Discussion

In his production notes, Arthur Miller wrote,

“A fine balance of sympathy should be maintained in the playing of the roles of Victor and Walter. The actor playing Walter must not regard his attempts to win back Victor's friendship as mere manipulation Walter is attempting to put into action what he has learned about himself, and sympathy will be evoked for him in proportion to the openness, the depth of need, and the intimations of

suffering with which the role is played As the world now operates, the qualities of both brothers are necessary to it; surely their respective psychologies and moral values conflict at the heart of the social dilemma. The production must therefore withhold judgment in favor of presenting both men in all their humanity and from their own viewpoints. Actually each has merely proved to the other what the other has known but dared not face.”

Through the metaphor of bargaining with a used furniture salesman, *The Price* tells the story of two brothers, Victor and Walter, whose decisions have exacted a price on their lives. The play is enriched by the Greek chorus-like comments of Victor’s wife Esther. Solomon, the used furniture dealer, a facsimile for the wily old father, comments both from inside his own experience and from outside the family’s experience, bringing into this isolated family the social issues that set the stage for the agonies we will hear. Solomon has an intuitive way of sensing and judging character, of wooing each

member of the Franz family, and at the same time he has an agenda of his own. Cast at the center of the play, in this inside and outside role, he brings the theme of resilience to the play. Almost 90, he's been broken and rebounded many times. He is proverbially "older than Methuselah," and therefore gives the sense of endless, repeating generations, of financial and emotional boom and bust through which he has come back. "I can tell you bounces," he says. "I went busted 1932; then 1923 they also knocked me out; the Panic of 1904, 1898 . . . But to lay down like *that* . . ." He gets a laugh. Even in 1968 when the play was written, Solomon's first bust would have been before most people in the audience were born. With his call for help, Victor has brought Solomon back from his death vigil, and he can't see how someone would just give up as Victor's father had.

Solomon is surely a stereotypical old Jewish European businessman, charming, and perhaps (and it is never settled in the play) a bit of a fast act, maybe even a con man. He also represents King Solomon the Wise, understanding the family and the costs of their internal struggle better than any of the

family members themselves. That he is the only character in the play with humor emphasizes the deadly seriousness of the others. For although Arthur Miller's drama is serious stuff about the agonies of choices and the pitfalls of family love, there are many dreary dramas written without the leavening Solomon provides.

We get a great deal of Victor's history before he says a word. He is in police uniform. Taking off his jacket, he's at leisure, reminiscing. In mime, he goes through the parts of his life, the phonograph, the furniture, his fencing gear. We detect the sadness in the difference between his youthful fencing and his aging body that is no longer comfortable trying to assume "en garde" position. By the time Esther enters, we know a lot about him. As the two of them reminisce, we get a portrait of their marriage. Their intimate bickering shows us the personality of their marriage and reveals their hopes, nostalgia and regrets, and the admiring way they see each other when they are dressed up. With their son recently gone to college, they are alone for the first time. They have an opportunity for something new. But what?

Esther pushes for something new, for Victor to retire on his police pension, but Victor demurs. What is their life? What are these old parental relics worth? Is it enough to fuel their future when Victor has not so far been able to fashion the future for himself?

Enter Solomon. Enter humor, vitality that cuts through the nostalgia, loss and paralysis about the future. So many pithy lines: “I like her, she’s suspicious . . . a girl who believes everything, how you gonna trust her?” “I was also very good. Now not so good.” “Time, you know, is a terrible thing.” “I don’t need water, a little blood maybe.” “I was good, now not so good.” There is something compellingly genuine about this relic of a man at the same time that we can’t help being suspicious. It’s part of Miller’s genius that we never know whether we can quite trust Solomon, but we can’t help liking him, and that came through brilliantly in the April 6, 2008 production I saw at Theater J in Washington DC when Robert Prosky played Solomon.

The play is mainly choreographed in duets, framed by Victor's opening and Solomon's closing, both done as mime soliloquy. Frequently a third character intrudes and comments on the duets. I've commented on the marital portrait in Esther and Victor's opening sequence. The next pairing is Victor and Solomon, given a tweak by Solomon's appreciation of Esther, as he also sweet-talks Victor. When Victor and Solomon talk, they discuss the price for whatever remains of his father's goods – the harp, the radio, the gown, the armoire. The chair where Victor's father sat out his spent years as an old man is never mentioned in the dickering. I see the radio and its tubes, reaching out to the orient, as a hope for moving beyond the limited boundaries of Victor's life looking after an aged father and working police shifts. The armoire gives hope that things that went out of fashion may come back in. Victor's mother's lap robe and silk gown that Walter might like for his daughter are signs of by-gone luxury. I see the harp as a reminder of the meaning of Victor's mother's music, and later a measure of her bitterness. The mother's harp is the soul of the deal, although

Solomon points out more than once that the sounding board is cracked – a metaphor for the cracks in her past life. Victor wants to salvage as much as possible from a past he has been unable to take stock of for the 16 years since his father's death. What is valuable, what is not? How much is an old life worth?

Solomon plays a double role in the duet: He is the outside voice, the voice of the “factual man” that Victor cannot hear. Solomon gives things a reality. He deals with the furniture of their life. Its value in the outside world has nothing to do with its emotional value to Victor and Walter. And he is the voice of a father who has also lost. His line, “I had a wife; I had a daughter” invokes, with Shakespearean simplicity and depth, the longing of the distant, unspeakable past, the lost and found love of women, and connects us with the losses that pervade the play emotionally and poetically. He makes judgments about value, many very funny. The harp is the heart of the deal, as it was the heart of the family when the mother played. The oar and fencing equipment have only sentimental value, no value to him, and he uses their

sentimental value to leave them with the brothers if he can. He likes the bed – who knows what value the bed had in the family? There is some innuendo of sexuality, but mainly the bed is a place for faulty connection. It is where Solomon waits while Victor and Walter try to find each other and fail. Solomon offers love and laughter to leaven the atmosphere when the brothers cannot understand each other and cannot reconcile. Part of his authority comes from his extreme old age. He has been waiting for a death that has not come, but in the course of this play he opts for life again. If not death, why not life?

Solomon offers a potential space in which life is created. The potential for love and understanding has collapsed for Victor and Walter, and with that failure has come the loss of meaning in life for each of them. In the heart of the play, we see this tragedy played out in the clash of their personalities as the climax of the second act. Victor had potential, but when his mother died and his father collapsed economically and emotionally, he opted to stay with the father, sacrificing his own future to support him – selflessly, but also helplessly

as a victim. Victor derived self-respect from his sacrifice, but at a tremendous cost. He has never had a future, and he still lacks the capacity to develop one.

Here a word of theory: We all carry the past as a crucial internal psychic organization. We live it and are organized by it through our memories and regrets. The memories we carry are often not facts about the past as they would have been accurately recorded on video, but are rather the way we carry our pasts. We eventually learn that Victor has known things he could not bear, and lived out the consequences of that inability to face what he knew and knows. He knew his father had more resources than he let on, and he chose to think of his father as helpless rather than manipulative and exploitative. If he decided that his father had exploited and lied to him, that new view would invalidate his entire life. He maintains an ideal of himself as loving, caring for his father who loved and needed him, and he fends off the idea that his father sacrificed Victor and Victor's family to his own selfish needs. He argues that Walter simply chose to leave the two of them selfishly, and that his was the noble course from

which Walter could have saved him. He maintains that he is Walter's victim, not his father's. When Walter faces him with the "facts" that their father sacrificed him and never even told him of Walter's offer of financial support, he refuses to take in Walter's explanation.

Psychologically, Victor embodies the virtues of loyalty and fealty, the plain self-sacrificing and loving son. He has regrets, but he cannot move from the course he plotted. In the fine balance maintained by the play, his motives are wholly laudable. But also in this complex balance, we have to see that he has lived by splitting the image of his father. To maintain the image of his father as loving and needy, he puts any hint of resentment underground. But it does not stay just underground. It re-emerges as hatred of Walter for betraying him. Even when he learns towards the end of the play that Walter had offered to help him, had tried to extricate him from the bond to his father, he reasserts the position he has held for 16 years: That Walter is the villain, not his father. Rather than see his father with a realistic mixture of love and regard on the one hand, and appropriate skepticism

about his failings on the other, he has split the image of a whole, complex father between the two persons of his father and Walter. So for many years, he has idealized his father and denigrated Walter. One is all-good, the other all-bad. This splitting in response to the problem of how to regard both his father and himself has cost Walter the ability to make autonomous choices about his life, and has robbed Esther of a freely chosen life for the couple. If Victor came to hate his father, his image of himself would be subsumed in regret and denigration for all the lost years, too. He has to maintain his simplified, sympathetic view of his father to keep his self-respect.

Victor therefore stands for the ideal of self-sacrifice, of caring for the patriarch, of family above ambition, no matter what the cost. But to do this, he has to maintain the idea that Walter is nothing but a selfishly motivated, self-serving cad who would sacrifice his father and brother if that is what it took to be successful. It is Cain and Abel all over again. But in this modern version, we can see this division of the good and bad brothers as a fiction of their psychologies.

When the production is successfully done with equal emotional weight and sympathy for Victor and Walter – as it was in this one in which Robert Proske's sons played Victor and Walter, it demonstrates the tragic role of splitting as a central organizing aspect of a family suffering estrangement. Victor and Walter cannot understand each other because they are separated, estranged parts of a whole. Victor represents the self-sacrificing, dutiful boy who does not ask questions, even if that means sacrificing the future for himself and for his wife as well. Walter is the boy who struggles against the family seduction to a loyalty that also means a kind of individual collapse. He is, or was, self-interested, ambitious, hard working. He refuses to give in to the destructive and depressive, needy pull that took over the family at the time of the economic and emotional crash, the Depression.

I have said something about the way the internalization of the past organizes these characters. But we can also see how it has influenced their view of the future. The internal image of the future, for everyone, is modeled on a transfer and transformation of the past. In these sons we can see how the

image each carries of the past shapes what they have seen as a future they have, consciously and unconsciously, molded through the years. If Walter has ruthlessly made something quite considerable of himself, he has done so in an identification with the father, but it is the identification he had before the economic and emotional collapse. He has become, like that aspect of his father, somewhat ruthless in the pursuit of ambition. He has cast his marriage and children aside in the process, as his father may have done before collapsing and asking them to support him. In a sense, Walter sacrificed his family in both generations, both his father and Victor, and his wife and children. But while Victor finds him ruthless and self-interested, and makes a compelling case for that point of view, Walter has fought for life, for not being bound by the past, for not dwelling in loss and catastrophe. He has fought for a future, and he is still, or once again, doing so. Walter has also been identified with his mother, especially with the mother's anger at the father for ruining her musical career. He is not going down with the ship as she did. It is as though he is also setting right her loss.

When Walter enters, one of the first things he does is to retrieve one of her gowns, saying it is for the only one of his children, his daughter Jeannie, with whom he seems to have significant contact. But I think there is also a hint that he is unconsciously identified with her in his love of her beautiful and feminine things. Perhaps if this play had been written in the modern era, Walter would have had to out his own unconscious homosexuality or transvestism in the identification with his mother. (I am not saying that he is, in this play, secretly homosexual, but that current theatrical preoccupation might have been invoked to organize his inner situation in that way.) It is fairer to say in Miller's idiom, that in identification with his mother's resentment he has been unable to sustain a family, unable to achieve what Victor has.

In the present time of the play, Walter has learned a great deal and tries to approach Victor with his self-knowledge won through suffering. He longs for Victor, for his other half, and experiences loss again when Victor, in his own concrete way, will not and cannot meet him halfway. Walter's memory of the family is that his father killed his

mother. Exactly how he did so is not specified, but presumably it was by collapsing after the economic crash, and by sacrificing her career to his own vision of the family even before the crash. Walter is convinced that he tried to do this to Walter as well. Walter believes his father succeeded in killing life off for Victor and Esther. So that is the way he remembers the family, and when he is pressed by Victor to see himself, Walter, as the villain of the piece, he reaches into this version of the family that justifies sacrificing his own family to his ruthlessness.

The play's tragedy is the failure of Walter's quest to achieve reconciliation with Victor and for either brother to fill out the missing parts of himself. Esther begs Victor to listen to Walter, but he refuses. Victor cannot hear because of his own defensive structure, which has only hardened with time and the accrual of losses on top of the original surrender to his father. Now he is stuck in the sacrifice, and that keeps him from being able to retrace his steps, go back to school and in some way pick up where he chose the fork in the road that he still pursues. Walter has changed, but in the face of

Victor's denial, he regresses to self-justification in the story of why he has led his life as he did. This doesn't mean this is the best he can do. He seems to have been doing much better since his breakdown, but in the battle with his brother, he is defeated and in that way, the "victory" is Victor's. Walter has been living with his regret, mourning his losses and maturing. Defeated in the confrontation with Victor, he moves back to the position that represents all the forces that organized his flight from his family. He was driven from the family's defeat, driven away from a feared fate and identification with his father, driven to have the life in medicine like the one in music he thinks his mother sacrificed. And Victor is driven now, in the confrontation with Walter, into a hardened, once more reified, unreflective position: he cannot afford to forgive Walter. Even more he cannot afford to understand the dilemma Walter faced, because to understand that, to empathize with that, would call into question all the major decisions he took. He may well have taken them passively, without conscious decision, but take them he did. Both Victor and Walter have made

decisions without really seeing what the implications were. As Walter says, “The time comes when you realize that you haven’t merely been specializing in something – something has been specializing in you . . . the whole thing comes down to fear.”

This is a play about emotional catastrophe and its price. These brothers, have lived their lives trying to avoid an emotional catastrophe that has actually already happened. The first dramatic crash was the economic crash in which the father collapsed emotionally. But perhaps even before this, the parents’ marriage was a quiet disaster, one played nightly on the harp that Solomon says, “. . . is the heart and soul of the deal.” These lives of fear, phobia, inhibition of possibility and stagnation, are continuations of fear of emotional collapse that had already happened to the family at the beginning of their adulthoods. The father lived in fear of being abandoned on the lawn – but he had already lost everything, and he enshrined that loss in his role as a victim, recruiting Victor as his caretaker. Victor lived in fear of losing himself, but in so doing he perpetuated the loss of

himself to his father, sacrificing Esther and the possibilities in the relationship with her, in echo of his parents' loss of their possibilities. And Walter, who on the surface was so successful out of fear of the same loss, lost his mind albeit temporarily and lost the capacity for a loving relationship. Esther is not so fully developed as a character, but she speaks like a Greek chorus for the loss, the tragedy in Victor's life that she has borne with him. And so, in the end, Walter, Victor and Esther live out the fears of their parents' loss. Their tragedy is that with each new opportunity, with each chance to take and mourn their losses and move to new possibility, they make the same choices in regard to each other. These choices about a future with potential for growth are made from the model of the same old internal catastrophes they carry within, and therefore they remain isolated and disappointed.

As for Solomon, the wise? He has seen it all. Like Tiresias, he has lived it all, grown the wiser for experience and age, but at almost 90, he still has resilience. His life, while also full of tragedy and loss, is a foil to the brothers

who cannot bounce back and move on. He is father, commentator, and survivor. The play's first sound is the laughter with which Victor accompanies the laughing record, senseless laughter echoing against the mournful strains of a trumpet. Enter the brothers Walter and Victor who live out destinies, determined by their personalities and perceptions of their parents. As Miller says, "At the end, demanding of one another what was forfeited to time, each is left touching the structure of his life." Then the play ends with the echoing refrain of Solomon's laughter, as if to say, "This is the endless human comedy!"

5

Lost in Yonkers

Neil Simon (1927-)

**Premiere: Richard Rodgers Theatre,
New York 1991 (Pulitzer prize)
Theatre J, Washington DC, 2009**

David E. Scharff

Like all great comedies, *Lost in Yonkers* has an embedded tension between the humor and the pain of the situation in which the characters find themselves. At the personal level, the play is about the obstacles to development for Artie and Jay, the teenage grandchildren. At the family level, it concerns the attributes of character that have made life difficult in individual ways for each of Grandma's adult children: the boys' father Eddie who cannot be tough enough; their aunt Bella whose intellectual development is stunted; Uncle Louie who is a petty thief; and Aunt Gertrude who is too frightened to have a social or romantic life and who can hardly breathe or talk in Grandma's presence. At the social

level, the play deals with the aftermath of the persecution of Jews in Europe leading up to WWII, the pogroms and the holocaust that were part of Grandma's childhood, as we learn without surprise. Seeing *Lost in Yonkers* at Theatre J in the Jewish Community Centre of Washington DC in November 2009, I was particularly struck by the tragic backdrop to the comedy.

Before saying more about the play, I want to talk about the battle between trauma and love, and the vicissitudes of development in the wake of trauma and loss. When there is serious trauma and loss in life, especially when it is early, it handicaps the rest of the developmental progression for the whole family as well as for each of its members. In all such cases, there is the question of whether the forces of growth and the healing power of love will be strong enough to overcome or compensate for the destructive and inhibiting powers of trauma and loss. These questions, which are embedded in all great literature, have been explored in analytic theory beginning with Freud. Recent developments in the psychoanalytic literature and especially in two areas of

research have helped our thinking enormously and have brought them once more to the center of psychoanalysis.

During the last thirty years, Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory fostered groundbreaking research on the earliest infant-parent development and the transmission of templates of security, insecurity and trauma from one generation to another. The most recent developments in this area involve emotional communication and affect regulation that parents teach their children without knowing consciously that they are doing so. The basic attachment relationship forms the foundation for the growth of the child's mind throughout the developmental period. This has given us a new way of understanding the role of both conscious and unconscious communication in child development. We now understand that the surface of parenting technique, the things that formerly child developmentalists had focused on, is actually less important than the unconscious communication of security, anxiety or trauma through attachment style, mentalization, and projective and introjective identification.

Secondly, analytic understanding of trauma has been enriched by recent developments in neuroscience. Neuroscientists have been able for the first time to see the crippling of brain development that occurs with trauma and early deprivation. For instance, the need for substitute chemical objects to soothe the irritated brain pathways can lead to a propensity for drug and alcohol addiction. Fear pathways that form in the brain as a result of early trauma become exceedingly resistant to change and growth. Fear and despair hamper parenting, affect attachment styles, and interfere with the transmission of love and security in this family.

From this brief preamble, I'm going to switch gears now to talk in more colloquial terms about the battle between love and hate, trauma and growth in this play, and then discuss how that tension relates to the struggle of each character in the play to parent or to grow. The boys hold the center of the play, their adolescent language at the heart of the comedy. They use their adolescent jokes to disarm the force of the crueler aspects of life and love. As the boys are taken to their

grandmothers' house, Jay begins the play by saying, "I hate coming here." Family times are tough. Their loving mother (who was also a loving wife) has died, and their father Eddie who mortgaged his family for the care of his ill wife, must leave them to find work to ensure his financial recovery. So Eddie takes his boys to his mother, who reluctantly takes them in. The boys are motherless, now fatherless, and imprisoned with a hateful, hard-hearted grandmother, an anti-mother who was hard to her own children. Only Bella stands between them and an orphanage – at least metaphorically. And she does so by taking her first stand with Grandma, and insists that Grandma must take in the boys. Each of the adults has a story of developmental delay and handicap which is the result of the impaired parenting in their childhood. Bella stands for the most severe developmental delay, a result of infantile scarlet fever. Other children who did not survive stand symbolically for the greater tragedy of death by trauma and deprivation. Bella is intellectually impaired – "a child" Grandma says. The resulting symbiosis between her and Grandma is one that Grandma both resents and exploits. But

Bella who has such weakness also has strengths that make her level of development more complex than the initial picture of her we are introduced to in Jay and Artie's jokes. In not having the intellectual veneer and ability to falsify or dissemble, Bella always goes straight to the emotional heart of matters, a capacity that is demonstrated as the play progresses and the stakes get higher for her. She begins to want to be the woman that her body makes her want to be, not the child that Grandma tries to keep her. Although she strikes out on her first, belated attempt at independence with her similarly challenged boyfriend, an usher at the local cinema, the last lines of the play make it clear she has just begun to fight for the right to grow.

Uncle Louie and Aunt Gertrude are less fully developed characters. Louie represents the steely side of his mother, taken to the extreme of delinquency. He describes the parenting "tough-love" that produced his tough hide and his criminality. He learned to not fear anyone or anything, just like his mother. That toughness enabled him to face her down, but it cost him his integrity. He is a grown-up

delinquent who fears no one and who is constantly on the edge of society. He is Grandma “gone bad.” And his literal criminality underscores the emotional criminality that Grandma excuses in herself. Gertrude has sucked in all her fear of her mother. She too is stunted physically and emotionally, and so cannot talk, cannot make a romantic connection, and trembles before the world. Eddie can love, but he cannot be manly or really productive. The play seems to say that his mother’s accusations that he has no balls are correct. Louie has the balls but at the cost of honesty. Eddie has the honesty, but no balls. He is the only one who could be in a marriage, and a loving one at that – but until now, he has not been able to manage the world on his own.

Finally, Grandma: She became tough as nails to survive the trauma of witnessing the beating of her father and other acts of German cruelty to Jews. Given her history, we feel sympathy for her way of being and for the sad fact that the blessings of new life in the next two generations could not save her from her anger and resentment. Her family has suffered her emotional withdrawal and hardening. She fights

– almost to the death – the appeals from her children and grandchildren to open up to love. The viciousness she shows to herself and her children is in excess of what is needed for survival and represents her personal version of the crime against humanity. Grandma’s hardship in childhood, loss of husband, and alienation from her children are counter-balanced by Jay and Artie’s optimistic struggle to grow and to love in the face of the death of their mother, abandonment by their father, and the national trauma of war around them all.

Jay and Artie’s grit is at the center of the play. Their humor, their relationship, and their capacity to relate to everyone else ties the whole play together. They have the developmental fluidity to bring out the best in each character, and they stand up to each of the adults when required. They even cope with Grandma by surviving her while not antagonizing her more than absolutely necessary. In the spirit of the romantic and essentially comic theme that “the child is father to the man,” the boys provide the growth element for each member of their family. They are the real parents in the

family. They are companions of a different stripe to Bella and Louie. They get along with Gertrude, whose character is peripheral and not fully developed but who does take in Bella in time of need. The boys are the reason that Eddie takes on the challenge of a job he finally does well in, and in doing so, meets his own mother's challenge. But most of all, the boys are the ones who bring a fundamental change of heart to Grandma. She softens in her own guarded way, and comes to love them, and she even gives them a present, although as Bella says, she has to be told she's doing it. And she comes to respect them as they come to respect her.

Lost in Yonkers is about the triumph of growth over trauma, of love over hate. As Eddie says, "My wife didn't turn me against you, Momma. She turned me towards her with love." That is the love that the boys also had during her lifetime: the love of a mother and of two parents who loved each other. And fundamentally that is why they have love to share, love that turns out to be tougher than the steely anger of their grandmother. As love flows upwards through them into the previous generations, it goes a considerable distance

towards freeing up development for Bella and for Grandma. They have had a secure attachment to loving parents, and that security and the love that is built on it are stronger than steel. It produces “moxie” and “balls.” The kiss they finally force their grandmother to accept, stands, as all comedy does, for the triumph of love over hate.

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6

Blithe Spirit

Noel Coward (1899-1973)

Premiere: Morosco Theatre,
New York, 1941
Arena Stage, Washington DC, 1996

Jill Savege Scharff

Dazzling dialogue, sparkling wit and high spirits abound in this improbable farce. *Blithe Spirit* has been said to be about the way that men and women amuse each other and get on each other's nerves as they skirmish to win the battle for control of the marriage. But to me it is mainly about the male view of the female. Urbane Charles Condomine "is at the mercy of a party-girl first wife, a nannyish second wife, a dotty mystic and a daffy housemaid" (Lloyd Rose, *Washington Post*, 1996). His friend Doctor Bradman, whose own wife is a silly nonentity, has little to say in the supporting male role, and not much support to offer. The play gives us a view of women as domineering, crazy,

seductive, irresponsible, bossy and irrelevant to the man who is the center of the action.

The introduction of a psychic to direct a séance that leads to the materialization of a former spouse is a mesmerizing convention for addressing the unconscious. The action of the play gives rise to witty reflections on the way we deal with our ambivalence, our perceptions, and our memories. Charles and Ruth Condomine are discussing their former marriages, apparently with humor and tolerance, while awaiting the arrival of their dinner guests, Dr. and Mrs. Bradman and Madame Arcati, a psychic who will conduct a séance for the entertainment and erudition of the skeptical couples. To their astonishment, the provocative spirit of Charles's dearly departed spouse, Elvira, appears to haunt them long after the séance is abandoned. Now the hag-ridden husband doesn't stand a ghost of a chance with either of his wives. Their jealousy and Ruth's murder lead to further losses which reveal Charles's surrender in relation to his wives, an attitude that stems from his submissive relationship to his mother. All in all, a sardonic tale of undying love.

Take the character of Madame Arcati, the psychic whose paranormal gifts exceed their promise on this occasion. A jolly-hockey-sticks kind of person who loves exercise and strong drink, she seems an unlikely sort to be into paranormal influence. This perception of her supports the idea that she may be a hoax. Compared to the two mainstream, bourgeois married couples, she is, however a singularly unconventional person who proves herself capable of trances – at first a seemingly extraordinary gift, but then found to be held in common with someone as unlikely as the ungainly maid.

Sophisticated, educated couples from the literary Condomines to the scientific Bradman's scoff at the paranormal, as weird, fake and low class. They assume that the only reason for their being vulnerable to its influence must be that Charles Condomine has been harboring a preoccupation about his first wife. Ultimately it is proved that the source of influence was in fact the paranormal susceptibility of the maid. But that does not explain why the subject chosen to materialize was the first Mrs. Condomine, Elvira. And why might the maid have done this? Could the

maid have been angry at her employer, the first Mrs. Condomine, Elvira, for controlling her and therefore wanted to stir up trouble to get back at her? But we saw no evidence of her rage as she tried to comply with directions. So we have to return to the first explanation and elaborate upon it. Charles Condomine was longing for the mischievous companionship of his first wife at a time when his second wife was rather brittle, humorless, and preoccupied with things about the house being just perfect for her guests.

Ruth said that she was not worried about her husband's memory of his physically attractive first wife, Elvira, but he seemed to like to tease Ruth about it. Was he right that she was secretly jealous and threatened or was he trying to evoke strong feelings in her when really it was his own longing that he wanted to disavow and attribute to her?

Coward uses the paranormal as a theatrical convention to explore the effects of lingering love attachment on marriage. Paranormality gives the playwright a literal way of dramatizing the unconscious in general and looking at the

interlocking unconscious internal object relationships of a couple. He also draws our attention to the problems of remarriage. Any ambivalence that remains about the first marriage will enter the arena of the second marriage and ill-feeling will land on the current spouse despite efforts to dump it on the former spouse. In couples with children, this troubled aspect of the former relationship may be brought to the second marriage by one of the children who has identified with that aspect of the parent's relationship. In this play, we hear nothing of any children of either couple, unless you consider the maid as being in the role of the child, and an unsatisfactory child certainly. Both couples seem out of touch with their own child-like selves as they strive for a veneer of civility for social approbation.

Ruth Condomine is portrayed as a rather proper person, beautiful in an elegant, understated way, well-mannered, always civil, sometimes icily so. A woman who already seems to be made of something other than flesh and blood, she looks like a mannequin, behaves impeccably, and controls her environment. In the production I saw (Arena

Stage Washington DC, May 1996) Ruth carries an affected accent that is clipped and distorted like a person who is trying to jump up a social class and sound like the Queen. In contrast, Elvira is beautiful in a voluptuous way, impulsive, outrageously noticeable, and naughty. Her speech betrays a hint of midlands accent which is regarded as inferior to the perfect standard accent that is used for Condomine himself. The two women represent powerful female influence with twin aspects of control and seductiveness, domineering to the man. Charles is helplessly entangled in his passion for Elvira, unable to return the world of rationality represented by Ruth, and so remains caught between his two images of the female figure, both of which ensnare him. We learn that he was hagridden by his mother until the age of 25. I imagine his mother to have been more like Ruth on the surface. I think of Charles as a son who required the powerful attraction of a woman like Elvira to pull him away from his mother. With an exciting woman like Elvira he could hope to re-find within her the lost libidinal object from his oedipal years. When Elvira died, he lost that object for the second time and chose

to re-find a different aspect of his mother the second time in Ruth, so as not to lose again.

In the course of the play Charles defuses the power of both women by setting them off against each other, until their mutual jealousy leads to their death and separation. Charles declares his independence at last, and we get a sense of how hag-ridden he has felt. For a moment we think that he is free, but again we learn that significant attachments persist. Now his wives join each other in the spirit world where they will combine to torture him forever. He will never be free of them.

Most psychoanalysts would attribute this attachment to bad objects to the paranormal, but to the persistence of experience in the form of psychic structure. All our relationships fit into a scheme that resides inside us as a template, an expectation of how our loved ones will perceive us and treat us. We and they will find aspects of themselves in us, and we will find aspects of ourselves in them, and together we will enact current relationships that reflect past

scenarios. The healthier we are, the more hope there is that new relationships will have the potential for not simply reflecting old experiences, but for modifying it. With Elvira, Charles Condomine must have hoped to recreate an image of his mother that was warm and exciting, but Elvira remained a one-dimensional character and seemed not to have matured in the seven years of marriage. She retained a defense of having affairs as an alternative to having her seductive agreeable demeanor be disrupted by confrontation and anger at Charles for his ignoring or patronizing behavior. The patronizing behavior of which both women complained is Charles's defense against realizing how infantile he feels because of being so totally dependent on these women to run his life. The inept maid is a simple woman. All that is plain, boring, unglamorous, unsophisticated, and verbally uninteresting is projected into her. This characterization of an uneducated woman is full of snobbery and prejudice. The others laugh at her and try to cure her faults. Surely they do this to aggrandize themselves and to distance themselves from

human failing. Yet her ordinariness is a point of entry to play for some of us who cannot identify with her employers.

For all his sophistication, Coward himself came from a humble family, not of the servant class, but the lower middle class living in genteel poverty and moving frequently – from Teddington, to Sutton, to Barrersea, to the country. At each location, there would be house-guests – his mother's mother, her mentally retarded sister, her maid Emma, and lodgers, two of whom dressed for dinner and enjoyed musical soirees after the meal. Perhaps they brought a glimpse of the influence of theatre on daily life.

Noel's mother Violet was the moving force in the development of his artistic career, while his more retiring father, Arthur provided the musical inheritance. Arthur was an adequate pianist for the purposes of demonstrating the performance of the pianos that he sold but had no talent for composition. Coward's uncle was an organist like his father before him, and all the members of his father's family were musical and sang in the church choir where his parents met.

When Noel received instruction in confirmation class, mainly to please his mother, one of the instructors made a pass at him, which he rebuffed, and he was definitely not one for religion after that. In any case sacred music was not his métier: When he sang, he wanted to enjoy applause.

Noel began as a child actor at the age of eight. As a teenager he learned theatrecraft by apprenticing himself to Charles Hawtrey whom he virtually shadowed. During this time, his schooling was somewhat neglected, but no doubt the two-pound-a week pay that he earned helped pay the bills for his family and keep him in books. He was already friends with two other child stars, Gertrude Lawrence and Esmée Wynne who put up with him because of his charm and talent, became collaborators, and remained lifelong friends.

The playwright got his name, Noel, because he was born on 16 December, just in time for Christmas 1899. His mother hovered over him in his infant years, anxiously trying to protect him because she had lost her firstborn son at the age of six, one and a half years before Noel's birth. This let up

somewhat after brother Eric was born, but Noel continued to be the object of his mother's intense preoccupation. Noel was unimpressed with his brother's "bright red and singularly unattractive appearance". Perhaps Noel wished that Eric had not been born, an idea that came to me when I read that Noel was known for playing tricks in which he rigged up prams holding babies to run back into their mothers. He was also known for shoplifting to make ends meet. He was self-centered and precociously gifted. His mother doted on him, recognized his theatrical talent, and fostered his artistic ambitions. For all his confidence, he was anxious about losing his mother to accidental death. He had a dreadful temper that he exercised to get his own way. As an adult, he always felt that he was right and refused to allow a single word of his script to be changed deliberately or carelessly, and frequently refused permission for screen adaptations.

Blithe Spirit opened in London in 1941 with Cecil Parker, Fay Compton (Ruth), Margaret Rutherford (Madame Arcati), and Kay Hammond (Elvira). Noel Coward himself took over from Cecil Parker the role of Charles Condomine for a two

week period and also took *Blithe Spirit* with two of his other plays on a tour of the provinces. Then it was produced on Broadway where it won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for 1942. But Coward refused offers from Hollywood for some time. Finally he gave permission for David Lean to make a film *Blithe Spirit* starring Rex Harrison, Constance Cummings, Kay Hammond and Margaret Rutherford. But he flatly refused its serialization as a radio soap opera with Janet Gaynor in the lead. His telegram read:

“IN NO CIRCUMSTANCES WHATEVER STOP
SUGGEST THEY GET SHAW’S PERMISSION TO
USE SAINT JOAN.”

During the two weeks when he took over the role of Condomine, Coward was devastated to learn of the accidental death of his friend and neighbor, the Duke of Kent. Grieving, he found it difficult to act in his amusing play that treated death so lightly, and yet the tone of the play must have made it palatable to his wartime audience. *Blithe Spirit* ran for

almost two thousand performances, a record broken only by Chu Chin Chow and *The Mousetrap*. In the production I saw (Arena Stage, Washington, DC, May, 1996) I loved the reversal of color used in the set design. The super elegant country house is alarmingly tilted and yet characters are supremely unaware of the disorder inherent in their normal space. The text calls for the living world to have normal color and for the spirits to waft through it in grey like traditional ghosts. Instead, the everyday world is a subdued, smoky grey-blue with correct fifties evening attire while the spirits in contrast kick up their heels daringly in siren red and electric blue haute couture. These colors speak to me of the power of the lost objects overshadow the current everyday objects in our inner worlds.

Of course *Blithe Spirit* is a farce, based on an improbable premise, reserve and high camp hilariously intertwined. Lots of action and slapstick make us roll with laughter. But the play packs its punch as it portrays the hidden tragedy of losing loved ones, finding current relationships eroded by ambivalence over current and earlier attachments, feeling

unable to control our loved ones' feelings for us, and being helpless to ensure their continuing presence against the threat of infidelity and mortality. The entry to the spirit world conveys the possibility of life after death, which must have been as reassuring as it was entertaining to the public in Britain at the end of the war.

Coward was a stylist not a conceptual playwright. As an actor who wrote, he knew what would sound good and have dramatic impact. As the son of the middle class, he had an objective view of the upper middle classes and used his theatrical gifts both to comment on their habits and speech and to join their more elite society. He wrote comedies of manners that explored – often without the use of a plot – the sight and sound of human interaction as his characters maintained their pretenses of charm and control and their defenses against the purposelessness of their servant-supported lives. He gave them charming, witty, dialogue that reflects and yet transcends the mundane quality of their preoccupations and the sterility of his characters' existence. He explores the surface of superficial people but he does so in

an enduringly entertaining way that reveals a depth of understanding of social defenses. We are drawn by humor to learn about ourselves quite painlessly and to laugh at ourselves without ever realizing that we have to change. Coward's plays are a triumph of scintillating style over substance, of frivolity over fear. As John Lahr commented, "Frivolity acknowledges the futility of life while adding flavor to it."

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Peter Pan**J. M. Barrie (1860-1937)**

**Premiere: Duke of York Theatre,
London, 1904
Olney Theatre, Maryland, 2008**

Jill Savege Scharff

James Matthew Barrie, a Scottish journalist and playwright, later Baronet Barrie, was a peculiarly small man, shy, and insecure except around a child or a motherly woman with whom he could be intimate in an a-sexual way. At 4 feet 6 inches he was indeed short in stature but he was huge in imagination. He had an extraordinary capacity to use his creative mind to compensate for own emotional deprivation and to divert the sorrows of the world into entertainment. He was the ninth child of his parents Margaret Ogilvy and David Barrie of Kirriemuir, Scotland. Seven of the Barrie children were girls, of which several died in infancy. The eldest was a

boy who had left home and was 26 when James was 7, the age at which life changed suddenly for him, when his brother David (named after his father and the only other son at home) died in a skating accident at the age of 13. This devastated James's mother and led her to withdraw into a deep depression in which she was communicating emotionally only with her dead son David. This was painful to her live children, and the emotional stress on James, her only other son at home, stunted his growth. James attempted to replace his mother's lost son by imitating him and dressing like him, and while he could never live up to the ideal, in the process he became extremely close to his mother, which had a profound effect on the development of his attitude toward women and children. At age 34 he married the actress Mary Ansell, but they had no children, and the marriage ended when she had an affair 15 years later. They had had no sexual relations because Barrie was unable to consummate the marriage. I guess that this followed from hormone deficiency going along with his stunted growth, but Barrie

explained it in psychological terms by saying, “Boys can’t love” (Dunbar 1970).

Barrie’s father, a weaver, had little to do with the children. Not much is revealed about him except that James was proud of him. In life, as in the play, the father is a marginalized character. All James’s energies were directed towards his mother. After the death of Margaret Ogilvy’s mother, which had occurred when Margaret was 8 years old, all her energies went towards her father, a literate stonemason who loved poetry and religion. As a young woman, Margaret Ogilvy joined the Calvinist splinter group, the “Auld Lights” that believed in original sin and predestination. From this background, she told many tales of fantasy and spirit-life that were to inspire James’s imagination. She was grieved by the loss of her daughters, but not all children were expected to survive infancy in those times, and she may have got over that to some extent but not the loss to follow. It was the death of her son David that undid her, and her grief for him would last 29 years until her death – one year after Barrie’s marriage to Mary.

As a result, James immersed himself in his mother's world of childhood memories and fantasy, which were the direct inspiration for his early writing of *Auld Licht Idylls* and later for his most famous work *Peter Pan* in which his title character combines the image of a boy who never grew up (his brother David) with one who was small, naughty, inventive, and endlessly charming (himself). In linking Peter with Wendy who carries his nickname, Barrie fashions a loving mother devoted to him instead of to her actual children. And in the end he sends Peter off without her, much as he might have wished to keep his brother out of his mother's mind.

The idea for the Darling Family

For the family setting of *Peter Pan*, Barrie drew on his friendship with the Llewellyn Davies family. When he met a beautiful woman called Sylvia, the young Mrs. Llewellyn Davies, at a dinner party she realized that he was the fun-loving man her son George (named for mother's father George du Maurier, the novelist) had mentioned having played with in Kensington Gardens. George was the living

inspiration for the character of David, the boy in *The Little White Bird*, a collection of stories including some that introduce Peter Pan as a boy who has escaped from his nursery by flying out the window to live in Kensington Gardens where he plays the pipes. He is a “betwixt-and-between,” a half-boy/half-bird, who is “ever so old,” “one week old,” and “always the same age.”

Barrie enjoyed talking to Sylvia and entertaining her sons, George, John, Michael, Peter and Nicholas with tales and games that became the basis for the more fully developed *Peter Pan*. And it seems to me that Barrie spent more time with that family than in his marriage, not as a rival lover for Sylvia but as another of her children. Sylvia’s husband Arthur was not so delighted by Barrie but he put up with him as a close family friend. Barrie was also involved with Sylvia’s relatives, the literary du Maurier family. Sylvia’s brother Gerald du Maurier played Mr Darling/ Captain Hook, and her niece Angela played Wendy (in full, Wendy Moira Angela Darling – I have not been able to figure out where the ‘Moira’ comes from). Nana, the nurturing dog-nanny in the

play is a Newfoundland, not unlike like the St. Bernard that James Barrie had given Mary as a wedding gift. The Barries named their dog Porthos after the dog in the novel Peter Ibbotson by George du Maurier, Sylvia's father, and Peter Pan was named after Peter Llewellyn Davies, who in turn was named after Peter Ibbotson in his grandfather's novel. For James Barrie, life and fantasy were intertwined.

I imagine Sylvia and Arthur, in typically English (as opposed to Scottish) custom, addressing each other as 'Darling,' and so inspiring the name of the family in the play. Their son and grandfather George gives their name to the father, Peter gives his name to the title character Peter Pan, John to one of the children and Michael, Barrie's favorite, to the other, although Michael is said to most resemble Peter Pan, and Wendy was Barrie's own nickname. Barrie remained devoted to the Llewellyn-Davies children, and finagled the right to adopt them after their widowed mother's death in 1910. Sadly, George died in World War 1, Michael drowned with his lover when they were college men, and

Peter committed suicide in his 63rd year after the death of his brother John.

The dark side of J M Barrie

My Scottish mother, a huge fan of J. M. Barrie, thought he was a literary genius: my father thought he was a child molester. Many questions remain about Barrie. Was he “a man who filled the vacuum of his own sexual impotence by a compulsive desire to possess the family who inspired his most famous creation, Peter Pan ... or a charming hero, devoted to large dogs and small children ... a genius with a great heart” (Picardie 2008). Was he really involved in his brother's death, and did he blight the family he loved and cast the shadow of death upon them, as Dudgeon asserted (2008)? Or was he a lonely man who did everything for the boys he'd adopted and adored, as John's grand-daughter Henrietta said, and truly “an innocent” according to Nico's daughter Laura (qtd. Picardie 2008)? Birkin agrees with them, writing, “Yes, of course Barrie was a lover of childhood, but was not in any sexual sense the pedophile that some claim him to have been” and yet Birkin is disturbed by sensuous undertones in lyrical

passages that describe an adult undressing a child and sleeping with him (qtd. Picardie 2008). Picardie concludes that Barrie's intention was not to stimulate adult sexual desire in boys, but to join them in the innocence of eternal youth.

Yet Barrie had a cruel streak expressed in fantasy in other chapters in *The Little White Bird* and in Peter's thoughts of how he liked to torture people. In actuality, the sinister side of him emerged when he succeeded in becoming the legal guardian of the Llewellyn Davies boys by devious means after their mother's death in 1910. Their mother Sylvia scribbled a note indicating that she wanted her sister Jenny, helped by the children's faithful nanny Mary, to care for them. When Barrie transcribed the note, he changed the name from Jenny to Jimmy, sent it to the maternal grandmother as if it were Sylvia's will, and the boys fell to him. Whether this mistake was conscious or unconscious, Barrie's obsession with his adoptive family was then complete: he now had his own lost boys. There is no report of any pedophilic activity with the boys, and I think it may have remained mainly an unconscious interest that sought

expression in a few pieces of writing that are creepy to modern ears, and instead took the form of identification with the boys and possessiveness of them. The boys complained that Barrie removed them from their parents' friends after he had adopted them; and Peter, who recognized Barrie's genius but remained bitter over the exploitation of being linked to Peter Pan, burned all Barrie's letters to Michael because they were "just too much."

The idea for the play

I have reviewed the manifest content of Barrie's experience that informed the setting of his play – his family history, Oedipal conflict, and pre-oedipal trauma only partly covered over by closeness to his mother through love of tales, and his intense interest in lively interaction with young boys. But how did he work from there to create a genius work of fiction? Barrie claimed that he had no memory of writing the play. This says to me that it was written in a state of dissociation, as if transmitted to him from the children. Karpe (1956) suggests that it must have flown in the window of his mind from his unconscious. As for the skill of flying,

he tells the children they will succeed if they “think lovely thoughts”, a reminder of his mother who he described as “God of all who looked to beautiful thoughts.” Most people think of flying as a symbol of power and freedom. But in Karpe’s view, the children who fly up into the sky from their sleep must be dead children, a way of conceptualizing the loss of his brother who skated to his death. *Peter Pan*, a simple play that is apparently about childhood fantasy also addresses our major preoccupation with aging and death versus youth and immortality, and that explains its resonance with people of all ages.

Peter Pan’s prowess elicits admiration not only among the lost boys in Never Neverland but also in the apparently happy Darling children whose bedtime routine and lovely mother he longs to share. His courage and sense of freedom attract John and little Michael, and his naiveté and sense of longing for what is lost elicit motherly feelings in Wendy – and the beginnings of romance. With no concern for their parents’ worry and grief, the children leave their life of bedtimes, medicine, and a grumpy father to taste the liberty

of Never Neverland. The boys, newly courageous like Peter, will have adventures, and Wendy, patient and loving like Mrs. Darling, will mother the lost boys. The children meet beautiful mermaids and feisty Indian girls who tease and protect the lost boys. Thanks to Peter's cleverness and courage, they barely escape death at the hands of Captain Hook and the pirates, at last returning home to a household where they are welcomed without reproach. The only one in the doghouse is the father who is held responsible for their escape.

The symbols in the play

I like to speculate on the meaning of some of the symbols in the play. I see the window as the opening to the world of the mind. A fantasy of youth and daring flies in, and draws the children to a world of play and adventure. It gives access to the world of fantasy and dreaming where anything is possible and time stands still. It also opens the window of the child's imagination to adults, and as we look through it to what lies beyond, we re-experience our thrills, adventures, and fears of pirates and monsters, this time without the terror

of being a dependent child. I see the crocodile as aggression that is denied but then creeps up on us, and as death that comes and takes us eventually. I see the clock inside the crocodile as the passage of the years towards the approach of death, and the foiling of the crocodile's intentions gives us room to breathe a bit longer. I see the shadow as the dark side of Peter, as his own reflection, and as the companion of his narcissistic self. I see the fairy Tinkerbell as the light, naughty, jealous, part of him. Tinkerbell has a sexually provocative, possessive nature that sees Wendy as a rival who must not be kissed. Yet Tinkerbell loves and defends Peter fiercely, even willing to die for him. In the end, Peter Pan saves her and stays with her forever. Her efforts to keep him from loving a human girl, keep him from loving anyone but himself.

Phallic prowess and preening are part of Peter's attraction. I note that "peter" came into use as a synonym for penis in 1902, the same year in which Peter Pan first appeared in Barrie's story *The Little White Bird*. I fully believe that Barrie took the name from the child Peter, but by

a happy accident the name fits the phallic character of the motherless Peter. At other points in the play male prowess is mocked. The pirates glorify the Captain yet hold him in contempt. The children copy their father's adulthood yet mock his seriousness and insecurities. And the lost boy who is so proud of killing "the Wendy bird" is suddenly in disgrace for hurting the thing that is to be their mother.

This takes us to the part where Wendy, separated from John and Michael, flies in to join Peter and the lost boys and become their mother. She arrives with an arrow apparently through her heart. This image recalls the felling of Barrie's mother by the death of her son David. What brings Wendy back to life? The kiss that she had received from Peter earlier. Since Peter did not understand or want kisses, his kiss takes the form of a button that Wendy wears as a long necklace around her neck. The arrow, it turns out, has struck the metal button and has not entered her heart after all. This recalls the love of Barrie, Margaret Ogilvy's only remaining son at home, as the one thing that pulled his mother out of total grief so that she could relate at least to him.

The undertow of Peter Pan

Barrie has Peter Pan steal the children away from their adoring mother: He gets Wendy as a mother for himself and leaves the mother without any children. Comparing the tale of Peter Pan to Barrie's life story, we note that Barrie through his character Peter Pan inflicts upon his mother who lost her son, the further loss of all her children. He gains a younger, more fun-loving mother for himself, and a companion-housekeeper, similar to the role his mother had played for her father. And in the end he makes reparation by returning the children unharmed to the Darlings.

Mr. Darling is a conscientious, burdened man with an emphasis on limits and duty. In the play-within-a-play the actor who plays him traditionally also plays Captain Hook, the vain, aggressive, sly pirate with a hook in place of the hand that Peter cut off and fed to the crocodile, who having a taste of the captain now wants the rest of him. In the early years of development, a boy wants and needs his mother. He fears the authority of the father and imagines him as a man who wants to kill him so that he cannot have his beloved

mother. The child also wants to kill the father and steal the mother to have her all to himself. Looking at Hook, a child can imagine the all-powerful father as a castrated warrior, followed by a crocodile that wants to finish him off, a murderous feeling about which a child feels guilty and for which he fears punishment as severe as having a body part cut off. Having avoided him for years, in the end Captain Hook prefers to give his life to the crocodile and accept his fate than to die in dishonor of defeat at the hands of Peter. In never growing up, Peter refuses to identify with his father, never challenges his competence, and leaves the father without any satisfaction. In giving himself up to the crocodile, Captain Hook avoids the necessity of allowing Peter to have power over him. Peter never grows up, and the father figure as Hook never hands over the mantle of masculine authority to Peter. In the end the father, Mr. Darling is a cipher, a nonentity in his family, and his only hope for recognition rests on the lost boys who promise him respect in order to get the mother they want.

Mrs. Darling is a devoted, indulgent, fun-loving mother. Unlike her husband who is shown to have a dark side epitomized by his casting as Captain Hook, the actress who plays her does not double as any other character traditionally. However, in the production I saw at Olney Theatre Center, the actress who plays the mother also takes the role of one of the pirates who want to steal Peter, and shows a more aggressive, possessive part of her that lies under her way of pulling the children towards her through love and fun. The faithful dog becomes the pirate second in command (as she is in life) and the timid, sneezy maid who dares not dance becomes the opposite, the brave and beautiful Indian girl who saves Peter. In these choices, the director shows us how the child has an image of the good mother that the child needs and loves, and within it lies an image of the bad mother which the child hates and of which the child is terrified. She plays with the relationship between the father as master and the dog as servant, and extends it into the pirate scenes, and she gives the most inhibited woman on the stage the chance to realize a fantasy of female power.

Wendy is a good girl, fully identified with her mother, a wonderful older sister. She longs to escape the bonds of her femininity but also accepts her future role as wife and mother. The image on the cover of the playbill for the production of *Peter Pan: The Musical* at Olney Theatre Center in Maryland shows Wendy looking wistfully toward Peter. This helped me realize that Peter represents Wendy's longing to do what a boy could do. There are some girls for whom the longing to be a boy is quite strong and persists until puberty ends that fantasy, and pulls her towards finding a man to love and have a family with. The part of Wendy has traditionally been played by a small woman whose voice resembles that of a boy soprano, but in the Olney production, the director follows the modern trend of casting a young man in the role, an interesting shift, and one that brings Peter closer to the identity of the boys in the audience and to Barrie's concept of himself, but takes him away from the pre-pubertal girl's fantasy. In the last scene we meet grown-up Wendy's daughter Jane, the little girl in the next generation looking for fun with Peter Pan. Remember that it is Mrs. Darling who is

the first to see the boy at the window. Thus a mother's fantasy is conveyed to her daughter, as James's mother's fantasy of an ideally powerful, imaginative man (based on her father, the poetic stonemason) had been conveyed to James.

The universal appeal of Peter Pan

In the character of Peter Pan, Barrie gives expression to an appealing fantasy of self-sufficiency, omnipotence, and eternal youth. The play creates a transitional space in which anything is possible, loss does not matter, death can be reversed, and the reality of time can be denied for a while. The clock is ticking but we can pretend it is not for us. We can return to the wonders of Never Neverland. We can freely enjoy the depths and whimsy of our unconscious spread before us as a memory of the lost joys of childhood. Unlike Mr. Darling, who had all the pressures of being the breadwinner while sometimes feeling like a little boy who hates his medicine, Peter Pan never has to grow up and face the reality of earthly existence. He is not tied to the ground. He can fly! He can fly into trouble when he feels like stirring up conflict or adventure. He can fly out of danger. He feels

powerful, pleased with himself, seductive, and persuasive. Yes, he has suffered the loss of a family but he presents himself as the one who rejected them at birth. So he sets his own agenda, and creates his own family, not by marrying a woman, but by attracting other lost boys to himself. And the play Peter Pan attracts audiences of men and women, boys and girls to enjoy the fantasy and the playful turns and twists that help us take the medicine and confront our own mortality.

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8

Theophilus North, the Play

(based on the Thornton Wilder novel, 1976)

Mathew Burnett (1966-)

World premiere: Arena Stage

(Kreeger Theatre), Washington DC 2003

and Geva Theatre, Rochester, New York

Jill Savege Scharff

Theophilus North, the semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional novel by Thornton Wilder, has been re-invented as a play by an actor called Matthew Burnett. Like the protagonist Theophilus, also known as Teddie, Burnett is a man in his thirties whose life had come to a halt and who needed a new direction. Inspired by the novel to make personal and professional changes, Matthew Burnett reinvented himself as a playwright. Meeting up with Theophilus, Matthew Burnett found himself profoundly changed. Just like Theophilus who transformed the lives of the characters he met, Burnett transformed the novel and gave

it new life as a play. Like Theophilus, he found an absorbing project, and he has been working on it for the last five years. Though the play cannot be fully autobiographical for the relatively young Burnett as it was for the old man Wilder, the play must resonate to some extent with his own issues.

Thornton Wilder had had a rigorous education in America, China, and Europe, went on to college at Yale, and then became a teacher, just like the Theophilus character. Wilder taught French at the Laurenceville School where he got wonderful experience of understanding human nature, but he found that he didn't have enough time for writing plays, and after four and a half years he burned out. Like Theophilus he was a polymath, fluent in various languages, a great conversationalist, a traveler, and a devoted friend who maintained relationships in the USA and Europe by visiting and corresponding. Wilder continued to grow as an enthusiast, an internationally experienced, widely educated, cultured man with many friends. At the same time he was an individualist with a need for seclusion where he could work in peace. Though he didn't marry or have a committed

relationship, he had a great interest in the family and the philosophy of human existence.

The novel

Theophilus North is a modern version of the classical picaresque form. It is structured in episodes, the narrative written in the first person, the hero a rascal whose adventures with other characters serve to convey a complete picture of the morals and manners of the society (Kabanova 1999, p. 182). Very loosely based on autobiographical material from early adulthood, *Theophilus North* is about adolescence embellished, idealized, and fondly recollected in senility.

The title *Theophilus North* is the first thing to interest me. Wilder's brother Amos pointed out that this name refers to Thornton himself, the name Thornton being turned into an anagram and compressed to North. Theophilus is an alterego of Thornton and a personification of his twin. Thornton was the only survivor of the twinship, even though he looked like a frail child compared to his twin who, though more fully formed, was stillborn. Tappan Wilder (2003, p. 14) mentioned that, in an interview with the Manchester

Guardian, Thornton Wilder had suggested that Theophilus was the name of his twin. In fact it was not his twin's actual name, and neither was it Theodore Theophilus, as Brunauer thought (Brunauer 1999, Tappan Wilder, personal communication). Theophilus was simply an old family name often given to the second-born male in the line. So Wilder chose the name Theophilus both as an idealized representation of his youthful self and also as a reincarnation of his twin, giving him the brilliant life he never had. Poetic license in *Theophilus North* brings Wilder the freedom to both record history and transform destiny.

In 1968 Wilder began to write the material that he would later collect as *Theophilus North*. It began as a series of unconnected autobiographical novellas set in various cities he had lived in or visited. Each sketch introduced characters in dialogue about their situations and as the series progressed, the protagonist lived through the stories of Wilder's own life. Each story stood alone and was not integrated with the next one. This seems to me to reflect the discontinuity in Thornton Wilder's upbringing, which was filled with multiple

separations as his father moved around the world in the course of his work, and then his parents and his siblings lived separately in various combinations on different continents. Without a theme, the pieces would be like beads on a necklace or photographs in an album, rather than an aesthetic whole. It lacked a unifying principle, and Wilder soon abandoned the project. As Kabanova (1999) says, the classical novel in its interiority corresponds with the entire structure of human personality but without an inner center it dissipates. In a similar way, without a central self, the personality splinters.

Wilder would not fall into the trap of writing his memoirs. In any case his memory was not accurate and that was perhaps a saving grace. He would not rely on facts to reach the essence of his being. In 1973, the year before his death at 76, Wilder found a structure for integrating these diverse pieces and developing them. It would be semi-autobiographical and semi-fictional and he would never tell which was which. This gave him the license to pull the stages of his life together, reveal the rage, despair, love, and

jealousy that he brought to them, and explore the defensive processes by which he had dealt with the unknowable and immutable aspects of his being. At the same time, by investing the secondary characters with these attributes, he could disavow all that was personal or emotionally intense for Theophilus and thereby hide the facts of his own life.

The new concept galvanized Wilder into action, and despite failing health and deteriorating vision, he worked energetically all year, dying only after correction of the page proofs was completed (Tappan Wilder 2003, p. 15). He modified the facts of his experiences and manipulated the structure of the piece so that while apparently presenting his external circumstances he nevertheless gave the reader an interior view. He captured the essence of his being, drew attention to the core of what it is to be human in our age, and conveyed his message for society.

What was the idea that brought unity to the novellas? Wilder reduced his entire life to one time and place. He compressed his life into the summer of 1926 and telescoped

the international cities of his upbringing into a single city, Newport, which he knew well as a frequent visitor throughout his life and where he had taught during his first summer vacation from teaching. He represented himself as the protagonist Theophilus North, an energetic, appealing young man who sets off on a journey of exploration and self-realization, hoping to fulfill nine ambitions, among them to be an anthropologist, archeologist, magician, and rascal. Thornton Wilder wrote, "It's about the ambitions Theophilus North had as a young boy, much like my own ambitions, and how these ambitions arise and influence a man. I believe we are all made of the dreams we had in childhood" (qtd in *Conversations with Thornton Wilder*, 1992 p. 113-114). The result is a reminiscence filled with the omniscience and omnipotentiality of adolescence. *Theophilus North* is a fond recollection, full of American optimism and devoid of the cynicism that characterizes some European versions of the picaresque novel.

The protagonist, Theophilus, also known as Teddie, is an engaging, vivacious fellow full of wit and bright ideas to

improve the lives of all the people he meets. He is on a journey of adventure but when he has gone no farther than Newport, his jalousie (called hard-hearted Hannah) dies and he has to stop. True to his ambitions, he will investigate the various sectors of the city like an archeologist and like an anthropologist he will observe the social behavior of the citizens. Like an archeologist he will expose the human self as an atoll with layer built upon layer (Kabanova 1999, p. 180-181). Like a magician, he will make problems disappear. Like a rascal, he will cause mischief.

The secondary characters each have a need or a problem for which they look to Theophilus for help: For instance, they engage him to read to an aging man, teach French to a reluctant adolescent boy, teach a child to play tennis, introduce a boring wife to literature, and rescue an eloping daughter. Theophilus agrees to meet that need or find a remedy by quackery, tricks, shocks, tutelage, and charm. He determines the action and helps the other characters grow and change, and so the story goes.

Members of the high-class segment of society reveal their dependence on the servant, the tutor, and the repairman. With Theophilus's help, they become capable of greater independence and self-direction. The characters represent various stages of the life cycle: Eloise the Fenwicks' innocent child and Charles their resistant adolescent, Dr. Bosworth the old man of learning whose intellectual world is now diminished by deteriorating eyesight, Diana the heedless lover, Mr. Bell the outraged father, Mrs. Cranston, the wealthy widow whose butler Simmons is her main companion, and the young couples troubled by ignorance and adultery. Together they represent figures from Thornton's past.

The characters also refer to parts of Theophilus. As he says, "I am part of all that I have seen." I have the impression that Thornton saw displayed before him the parts of his personality revealed over the stages of his own life, re-invented in Theophilus. The various characters – the eager, the lovestruck, the rejected, the betrayed, the socialite, the scholarly, the ascetic, and the perpetual child – represent his

internal objects strewn before him and now requiring his concern and reparation. Interacting in the various scenes, Theophilus brings them to life, manipulates them, and is the catalyst that alters them for the better.

Moments of change like this happen at moments in a person's life such as going through a crisis, falling in love, or opening the unconscious to psychoanalysis. At such times of heightened awareness, the central self allows repressed parts of the self to emerge. The learning that takes place at moments of high impact effects a new level of integration that makes for a richer personality.

But does Theophilus change himself, or is he simply the catalyst, as he likes to describe himself? Theophilus does not seem to me to change profoundly, but he does feel affected by the people he meets and his adolescent omniscience mellows. He shows some doubt over his tutoring of Charles Fenwick, regret over breaking up Diana Bell and Hillary Jones, longing to stay connected to little Eloise, total shock when Simmons's fiancée agrees to marry him, and perhaps

some envy of Simmons for being accepted by a woman, or grief that he is otherwise engaged. And there is sadness when it is time to leave.

In his writing about family life and social dilemmas, Wilder revealed a deep interest in the inner life. He wrote that he aimed at “significant truth presented in a narration form in the light of a universality that does not exclude the innerness of every existing human being.” The novel, said Wilder, is “an extended imagined action whose proposal is to view character from its interiority.....It may often be advisable to emphasize the mind and the actions will take care of themselves” (1985, p. 201). It is not surprising to learn that Wilder was familiar with psychoanalysis. He had met Freud, discussed neurosis with him, and sent him greetings on his 80th birthday. I imagine they had quite a lively interaction with mutual respect. Freud appreciated that “the poet natures had always known everything” and Wilder appreciated that Freud had had a huge impact on the arts. He wrote, “Since Freud, and since the literary consequences of his doctrines, we are more and more aware of the complexity

of motivation, the incommunicable character of inner consciousness” (Wilder 1985). I am going into this matter of interiority in some detail as a basis for examining how well the novel transforms into the play.

The play

The world premiere directed by Mark Cuddy for the Arena Stage and the Geva Theatre and performed at the Kreeger Theatre in Washington DC in 2003 followed in the Wilder theatrical tradition of presenting minimal scenery, props, and business to support the words. The simplicity of the stage set and the mime actions of secondary characters recalled the opening scene of *Our Town*. The floor on which the action took place was a brilliant, polished, classical parquet floor at the center of which was a revolving disc upon which an old gramophone was slowly pivoting, soon replaced by a bicycle. The gramophone served to transform the floor into a ballroom for the rich. The bicycle brought it down to earth. These two images at the center of the set reminded me of Konkle’s point that Wilder’s writing stemmed from the Puritan legacy and confronted the moral wilderness of the

jazz age (199, p. 89). The central disc revolved with Theophilus perched upon it on his bicycle, like a compass needle finding its direction. Above the solid reflective base soared an elliptical ramp, serving as a boardwalk, a podium from which to make demands and judgments, and a way to reach the beacon of light. Ending abruptly face forward to the audience, the boardwalk took the drama to another level, connecting past, present, and future, and confronting us with the play's deeper meaning.

Arena Stage director Molly Smith (2003) quoted Kenneth Tynan as saying that "a novel is a static thing one moves through; a play is a dynamic thing that moves past one." Indeed Burnett's play moved past on its spectacular stage smoothly and inevitably to journey's end, like a bicycle overtaking an observer on the street and finally disappearing into the distance, but could this play bring us the interiority of the novel? In the novel, Theophilus reveals to us his thought processes as he perceives himself and others, conceptualizes situations and arrives at solutions, whimsical, sensible, and magical. In the play, how does Theophilus reveal himself?

In the play, Theophilus does share with the audience a few questions, doubts, and uncertainties. When he is asked “What do you want?” he stumbles for an answer: “I want ... I dunno.” Later he asks himself, “Who am I?” and “Isn’t there someplace I should be?” and he concludes, “There is such a mystery about who we may become.” When Ms. Bosworth, herself a divorced woman living with her father, criticizes his behavior and stridently asks him, “To whom do you offer love?” he is stunned. This confrontation helps him to realize that he has his family to love. Like Eloise who finds out that she wants to be a nun, Theophilus prefers to be alone but with friends in various places, like the North star (there’s the anagram of Thornton again) surrounded by constellations that would always be in position but not likely to create a collision or generate a new star of magnitude.

In Burnett’s play, Theophilus’s thoughts are more often spoken of by others in the chorus of characters. This resonates with my idea of the parts of the playwright being distributed in the various characters, but it takes away from the audience’s ability to identify with Theophilus. In the

play, the comical, whimsical, unreal aspects of Theophilus as magician are emphasized which lets the audience enjoy him, but only at moments are we given direct access to his feelings, much less to feeling them with him. We see Theophilus dealing with the other characters' optimism, sexual jealousy, regret, rage over deteriorating capacities, and loss, but what does he want? Where is his sexual energy? We see only hints of it in his wistful glancing after Diana and in his capacity to portray the role of the prostitute beckoning Charles as part of the French lesson. Theophilus as the prostitute clutches Charles from the rear in a position that evokes a homosexual penetration. When Eloise declares that she has decided to become a nun, the audience may laugh at the idea of such a bosomy child deciding to be chaste, but I think that her character's ambition speaks for handsome Theophilus's monastic existence.

Thornton Wilder was bright, engaging and social, and like Theophilus he was also monastic. Some have argued that he was gay – a conclusion that the novel and the play do not make, preferring to leave the matter of sexual preference

undeclared and unaddressed. The family knows of no intimate relationships of any kind and the one report of a homosexual liaison remains unsubstantiated (Tappan Wilder, personal communication). It seems more likely that the end of the play truly indicates Wilder's resolution of his sexuality: He drew love from his family and his friends around him and he poured his energy into learning, creativity, and community. Nevertheless this personal accommodation leaves the audience a bit disconnected from Theophilus. How are we to understand such an absence of sex drive in a handsome young man of thirty? In the novel he at least has a fling with Flora, the gossip columnist and writer, even if she is fifteen years older than he. Unfortunately for dramatic purposes, there is no evidence of such sexual abandon or conflict in the play. Why is Theophilus not attracted to women of his own age? We know from letters that Wilder met Freud in the 1930s, and in the novel, Theophilus discusses with Sigmund Freud how to characterize his sexual inhibition. 'Respectable women, for him, are associated with his mother and sisters, but no such prohibitions apply to

women of the lower classes or emancipated women such as Flora” (Brunauer1999, p. 279). Is it possible that Wilder discussed his sexuality with Freud?

At the beginning of the play, the voicing of Thornton’s inner thoughts by members of the cast of characters echoed the classical Greek chorus, homage perhaps to another influence on Wilder. This was the first moment at which I thought of the play as a musical. I thought it again when I heard one line of “Hard-Hearted Hannah”, and I found myself longing to hear the rest of the song. When Eloise finished her first scene with Theophilus, again a song seemed called for, then a burlesque duet for Theophilus and Charles, an upbeat trio for him and Mrs. Cranston and Simmons, a ballad for Mrs. Granberry, a torch song for Diana, a humorous song, a love song, and a mournful song for Theophilus.

The play strikes me as a reflection on finding the good object in oneself and others, a good object that fills the self with feelings of love and satisfaction and frees the self to be curious and to become autonomous. It is not an exploration

of the hero's conflict but a magical resolution of the conflicts of others. It could have more emotional resonance. Music would offer an affective avenue for conveying the inner life and add richness to the piece. My thoughts find their parallel in Jane Horwitz's (2003) comment: "I very rarely say this, but in this case, I can see this might have made a better musical than a straight play. Just because you have this guy who's innately good and he meets all these other people who are pretty good themselves and he helps them be better." Theophilus is basically good, like Thornton Wilder himself. As David Izzo says, "To truly understand Wilder's art one must know that it is an autobiographical account of his progress in a very specific study: goodness" (1999, p. 109).

The metaphor of the number nine

The repetition of the number 9 – Nine Gables (the Bosworth residence), nine ambitions, nine character situations, nine friends and nine female friends, and especially the nine aspects of Newport society – leads me to associate as others have done to the nine cities of Troy. The vitality that sprang up in the ailing Thornton when pouring

forth the novel the year before his death, and the new lease on life that Dr. Bosworth of Nine Gables gained in association with Theophilus, leads me to think of the nine lives of the cat. The nine months of pregnancy also come to mind, a reference both to the incubation of the creative process and to the actual time it takes to produce a living child. In discussion of an early draft of this paper, someone pointed out that nine might refer to Nein, the German word for No, and another said that nine months is the length of time remaining after the three months of summer. These associations did not mean much to me, but my point in mentioning them is to show how the number is evocative in different ways for different people, and introduces new questions: How many months of life did Thornton sense might remain at the time of writing? What might he have been saying No to?

Thornton Wilder was born a twin, the more puny of the two and yet the only one to be born alive. He lived his first year with parents who, having lost a child, were anxious about his survival. In *Theophilus North*, Thornton Wilder gives his alter ego nine identities and a great future, perhaps

his way of acknowledging his own great success as a playwright who invented many characters and settings, but also bringing his dead twin to life in the literary canon at the time when Thornton was nearing the end of his life. He might have been expressing a refusal to accept the death of his twin or his own impending death. This takes me back to the recurring theme of the number 9. 9 is the last number before 10. In 10, the numbers 1 and 0 are together side by side like bodies in a bed. I imagine the 0 as a symbol for the dead twin and the 1 a symbol for the living twin, Theophilus. 10 might be a number that Wilder would have unconsciously wished to avoid.

Theophilus as psychoanalyst

Theophilus's journey through Newport and his meetings with various characters and situations are like the journey a patient sets out on when starting an analysis. Thornton Wilder's writing of it is similar to the recollection of a period of time spent in analysis – various times of life, current situations, past and present figures, self and object, all compressed into the analytic space. Following Fairbairn's

idea of the dream as a short, a movie clip of the dreamer's personality structure, we can look at Theophilus's journey as a dream, the various scenes loosely connected through the dreamer and all of them revealing his character and the structure of his mind (Fairbairn 1952). Theophilus's adventure with the various situations (nine in the novel, six in the play) may also be compared to an analyst's day. She might meet with six or nine patients a day, all of them dealing with individual, interpersonal, and societal difficulties. She is the catalyst in relation to whom they find ways of understanding their dreams, analyzing their conflicts, and recovering the ability to love and work. But unlike Theophilus, she is more than a catalyst. A catalyst is a property that remains unchanged by the combinations it effects, whereas an analyst grows by learning from experience in interaction with each patient with whom she is privileged to enter into unconscious communication. Each psychoanalysis is a unique product of the interaction of the analyst's mind with that of the analyzand, the true catalyst

being the analytic process whose effectiveness remains for use in other situations.

Theophilus as tutor and educated general factotum holds some principles of practice in common with psychoanalysis. He conducts his business with strict adherence to his preferred frame of operation. He works in 45 minute increments. He warns his clients that he expects to be compensated for his time, including when appointments are cancelled. He gives no guarantee of success. If his proposal for how to work is not accepted readily, or if he detects resistance to his methods, he quickly resigns from the project – which an analyst would not do, instead interpreting the resistance and waiting for readiness. His walking out is an effective maneuver on many occasions. It reminds me of a psychoanalytic technique called *the cut* in which the analyst of the Lacanian school ends the session abruptly at a moment of the analyst's choosing to emphasize the preceding point. Like Freud, Theophilus thought it best not to make friends with his clients in order to maintain his objectivity, but he does not always follow his own rules, for instance when he

takes Eloise for ice-cream and stops for drinks with Diana, just as Freud used to feed the patient referred to as the Ratman. Theophilus's feelings of longing for connection sometimes get the better of him, but he does not act out unethically. In analytic parlance we would say that his countertransference (his reaction to the client and the situation) sometimes works well to help him sense what his client is experiencing and to design effective interventions, and sometimes it gets in his way.

Empathy based on his own experience and his countertransference reaction to Charles's arrogance enables Theophilus to diagnose Charles's attitude to learning as a defense against the anxiety of learning about things that might shock or embarrass him because he had not had enough time talking about physiological functions with boys his own age. Theophilus says that teaching French to boys is like pulling stones uphill, a feeling many analysts have had when dealing with major resistances to the emergence of unconscious conflict. Unlike an analyst who would be more respectful of defenses, Theophilus goes straight to the root of

Charles's problem. He finds in himself versions of young boys to help him empathize with and detoxify Charles's adolescent anxieties. He uses drama to enact and rehearse role relationships that provoke social and sexual anxiety. Although compassionate and sensitive to the needs of the other person, he is quite dismissive of symptomatology. When Mrs. Granberry tearfully confides that her husband is unfaithful and she is afraid that his lover is prettier than she is, he tells her to stop all that nonsense as it is a waste of time. He helps her educate herself instead. True to my experience as an analytic marital therapist, Theophilus finds that when Mrs. Granberry starts to recover her sense of self, Mr. Granberry has to acknowledge his feeling of inferiority and unworthiness in the face of her prior idealization of him.

Becoming and being

To me the most interesting moment of the play comes near the end. Dr. Bosworth, the distinguished man of letters, is no longer able to read or to venture outside the confines of his home, but his mind is still lively. He takes to Theophilus as a companion because Theophilus has "resonance" – in

other words he has an interesting voice that is the mark of a lively mind filled with literature and philosophy, a mind ready and willing to debate. Rather than risk being found unsatisfactory by the eminent professor who is quick to complain about inferior minds, Theophilus makes for the door before they begin. Dr. Bosworth recognizes the value of being willing to walk away from a negotiation, and at that moment at the door he takes to Theophilus as a kindred spirit. In the course of their studying together, Dr. Bosworth confides to Theophilus that he has a psychosomatic problem akin to a urinary phobia. He is afraid that he will be inconvenienced by frequent urination if not in his own home, and that is why he cannot have the pleasure of a visit to the great academy of letters that he is building. Theophilus prescribes a placebo pill and an unmentionable device as a temporary crutch to address the physical dimensions of the problem. Meanwhile he engages Dr. Bosworth in regaining his grasp on life so that he can hope to venture forth into the outside world once again. As they come to the end of their work together, Dr. Bosworth takes control and leaves before

Theophilus can do so, thus turning the tables on him by using the trick of heading for the door, which Theophilus had used on him at the beginning. The old man's parting words are to tell Theophilus that when you leave a room like that, you always find that you are simply in another room.

At the end of the novel, Theophilus is given the suggestion that he may have something to write about (and after reading it, the actor Burnett is given the idea of writing a play). At the end of the play when his parents ask if he is coming home, Theophilus says, "We are home." He seems to be saying that he has arrived, he has matured, and he no longer needs to chase adventure. He will have whatever he wants where he is. He has accepted the love and knowledge available to him in his own heritage. At the same time, Wilder's "We are home" may speak of reuniting with his parents in death, accepting that the end of his life is near. At the completion of the play, we see at once the ebullient adolescent Theophilus whose future lies uncharted before him together with the man he became, the distinguished old Dr. Bosworth on his way to the next room.

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***Frankie and Johnny
in the Clair de Lune***

Terence McNally (1939-)

Premiere: New York off-Broadway, 1987

Broadway, 2002

Dramatists Guild Hull Warriner Award

David E. Scharff

The play opens with a nude couple lost in intercourse, building to climax. Then they put on their clothes. In the aftermath of physical intimacy, they try to get to know each other. After sex, they pull closer, driven by Johnny's urgent desire for emotional connection, but held off by Frankie's guardedness. Having overcome her initial resistance, Johnny gets the announcer from the radio station to play "the most beautiful music in the world" for them, and as Act I closes, Debussy's *Clair de Lune* plays, and they begin to make love again. Act II opens in the aftermath of sex, this time with Johnny in a funk because he had lost his erection. Now they

struggle with the world of obstacles to connection and emotional intimacy. Frankie and Johnny feed, drink, spar, come together, and disengage, in a recurrent dance, until they find connection. As the sun comes up, they sit listening again to *Clair de Lune*, brushing their teeth, apparently and hopefully, with a future together.

The play begins with full exposure to a couple in sexual passion. Without warning, lacking preparation or context, and with no connection to the characters, the audience is pulled uncomfortably into a vivid sexual scene, just as the characters have been thrown together by physical desire without emotional connection. We do not know these people at all. In this way, the couple has a mythic presence in their ordinary nudity. There is an intention to shock here, and that goal is achieved.

The opening of the play must have produced an even greater shock wave in the theater when first produced in 1987, a time when few films other than pornographic films would show an orgasm, much less Broadway or even Off-

Broadway theater. The famous scene of orgasm in *When Harry Met Sally* is a fake one, in a public setting, and the characters are fully clothed and with a table between them. To deal with the love, hate, and sexual longings of intimate partners is very much the stuff of theater. But this play uses its malapert beginning to turn the theatrical convention on its head. It looks beyond concern for the characters and explores the meaning of sex for human development. And beyond that, it looks at the modern theater which often substitutes nudity and other devices of shock value for the intimacy of small gestures and careful, well written language.

The play links itself to the history of theater through references to classical theater, song, and popular culture. The play explicitly recalls the traditional song that begins, "Frankie and Johnny were lovers, Oh lordy, how they could love." For me the play has resonance with Lerner and Loewe's musical *Brigadoon* in which the hero has one chance in a hundred years to find love in the mythical Scottish Highlands, in a far-away village that is here today and gone tomorrow, only to come to life a hundred years hence when

the audience will be long forgotten. Like the characters in Brigadoon, Frankie and Johnny have, as Johnny says, “one hell of an opportunity to feel with your own hand the human heart.”

The protagonists begin naked and *in flagrante*. They quickly build to a climax, loud, joyous and shockingly obvious. In 2002, when I saw the first Broadway production with Stanley Tucci and Edie Falco from my front row seat, pretty much underneath their bed, I felt like a small child excluded from the primal scene and yet fully exposed to it. I don't think my Oedipal association is farfetched, because within minutes, Frankie says, jokingly, she wants her mother, and Johnny talks of seeing his girlfriend's mother nude in the bath. Mothers are, otherwise, mostly missing in this play, but in a way, it is a mother that Frankie and Johnny seek in each other. Within minutes of the opening, the playwright has connected sex to mothers, the body and its faults, and all the elemental aspects of life. Soon the scars of life are also exposed.

Frankie and Johnny continue to explore each other in various ways – the shared and separate geography of the cities they have lived in, the diner they work in, what they do with their time and their loneliness, Johnny's love of the sight of women, and Frankie's shyness. Frankie and Johnny begin with a sexual connection, fully exposed in an animal way, and only when they get dressed do they begin to confront the wish for, and fear of emotional intimacy. They reveal the ways that they have guarded themselves against repetition of these failures, and against the pain of recognizing what they each want desperately.

Freud founded psychoanalysis on the thesis that sex is at the center of all development from infancy on. In an obvious sense, we could wonder if this play might ring the changes on that theme. But it seems to me that instead the play reverses the field. I find the play psychologically extremely true and poignant, but not because it puts sex at the center of the human story in that way. Instead I think it does the opposite. It shows that all of development is centered in the problems of connecting and relating with emotional depth, and that sex,

that preoccupation of our culture since the 1960s, takes its meaning from these relationships and their inherent difficulties. By focusing on sex in the way Frankie and Johnny do, McNally gives us a textured, subtle exploration of an ordinary troubled couple who yearn to relate and sadly find that so much is in the way of their happiness. In the end, we love them because they try so hard despite all the obstacles, and because in the way great theater can, they express for us many of the factors that prevent us from successfully connecting with the people we care the most about.

Sex carries the burden of human problems as if they can be solved by passion in an animal sense. The play begins with sex, and shows how it is used to translate emotional needs into physical terms experienced as need and gratification. As they move from night to day, from orgasm to brushing their teeth, from nudity to dress, from sex towards knowledge of each other, Frankie and Johnny slowly and guardedly become more intimate, perhaps able to love. Sex contains their hopes and fears, successes and failures. In the

familiar old song, when Johnny betrays Frankie, she seeks him out and shoots him, and dies herself for her revenge. Could this Frankie and Johnny kill if they fail? No, because from almost the beginning, they are swearing to be different, to undo their past failures.

Frankie and Johnny at the Clair de Lune gains its poetic value from the ordinariness of this pair – a short-order cook and a diner waitress – and from their all-too-human weaknesses and failures. At the same time, they are Everyman immortals connecting us to our culture of song and poetry. Johnny, an autodidact, calls upon his beloved Shakespeare over and over, finding new meaning in quotes he selects and applies at random. He appreciates Shakespeare for having “put it in poetry so that people would know up here what they already knew in here and so they would remember it.”

With his creative genius, McNally has chosen music for his play, from the universally-known folk ballad “*Frankie and Johnny*,” to the Beatles’ *Eleanor Rigby*, to the *Goldberg*

Variations, and especially to Debussy's *Clair de Lune* (moonlight). These and other pieces of music are specified in the stage directions but *Clair de Lune* is not referred to in the dialogue. While McNally includes the others for their musical quality and emotional resonance, it is *Clair de Lune* that he selects as the theme for the setting for the play. Then he can play with all the associations to moonlight – the light of love, witchcraft, craziness, werewolves – a full range of fearful and romantic mythical associations stretching all the way to Johnny's beloved Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* with its magic spells and transformations. We are in the moonlight in which Frankie's beloved mother (the only good mother of the play) feared transformation into a wolf while Frankie held onto the smell of her life-giving breasts and felt for the strongest time in her life fully loved and protected by her guardian angel.

The moonlit setting symbolizes a magical, bewitched space. The radio announcer mentions "two moonbeams", an apt phrase for Frankie and Johnny. The omnipresence of the moon tells us that we are in a realm of depth psychology that

the playwright will have to handle deftly for it to ring true. And for me the play does ring true – and more. It resonates with a depth that gives added meaning to the simple words of these rough-cut characters who are trying so hard to know themselves and to wrest themselves free of the constraints of a lifetime. It is a play between moonlight and sunlight, everything and everywhere, magical and ordinary at the same time.

Each of the characters has been abandoned. Johnny was abandoned by his mother, then his father, and sent to foster parents. Frankie had a marriage of abuse and injury, so extreme that she cannot bear children. Johnny has a background of jail and alcoholism, and is now unable to face his children. Frankie and Johnny are the wretched of the earth, the forgotten of society – and even so they dare, they care, and they struggle to build something together in this microcosm of a bedroom filled with moonlight, poetry, and music. All the elements of hurt and healing that each of us relate to from our own experience are condensed into these two hours of the theater.

Through cheap Venetian blinds we glimpse the world outside, the world Frankie sees every night. The lighting through the slats makes them seem like the bars of Johnny's jail cell and a cage for the wordless, animal quality of their sexual connection. Identification with animals runs through the dialogue. Johnny refers to Archie the Great Dane, a dog that has haunted his solo masturbation. Frankie compares herself to a caged parakeet but she'd rather identify herself as a golden Labrador. She ruffs at Johnny playfully as they try to pull together sexually once more like two lonely dogs.

The blinds are a metaphor for the shuttered experience of Frankie and Johnny's world. The bars of the blinds remind us of all the constraints in the way of mature love. Frankie cannot have children, but if they were to adopt, Johnny could repair his childhood experience of being abandoned, fostered, and never adopted and cared for. They want, most of all, to be adopted by each other. As the Frankie and Johnny song reminds us, love can also lead to betrayal, revenge, murder, and punishment. As the Frankie and Johnny of the play show, it is no easy thing that they are attempting!

The moon shining through the window reminds us of the outside world. Frankie tells Johnny about two couples she has gazed at for years: the old husband and wife who never speak, who seem the essence of married loneliness; and the abusive couple in which the man beats and bruises the mutely suffering woman. These two couples embody the risk of becoming intimate. This is the fear that provokes Johnny's failed erection. Frankie and Johnny are each afraid of becoming like the failed couples. We tend to believe Johnny because he seems so sincere when he says that he would never hit a woman, and yet we know as little about him as Frankie knows after this one night. Nevertheless we do see them doing what all couples, mundane and heroic, must do to build trust.

They have to build upon the repair of inevitable failings and hurts in order to achieve a lasting connection. Frankie and Johnny do it first with food and milk, those nurturing aspects of mothering that they offer each other. Then they try to add sex after they have become more intimate than when they first had intercourse, and they find that sex does not

work for them. Johnny not only loses his erection which makes him ashamed, but he asks Frankie for oral sex in a manner that makes her feel offended. Although sex works to bring them together, it alone cannot keep them together. Sex alone does not suffice as a central building block for a relationship. Passion can bring the individuals together, and it can help them maintain the couple bond, but the relationship needs much more than passion. Frankie and Johnny quickly have to learn to compensate for sexual disconnects. They have to find other ways of caring if they are going to make up for their loneliness, emptiness and desperation.

This play presents the world in a grain of sand, a view from the theater about the compelling need for relating. It shows us just how hard that is. It is a view of the struggles we all face, Everyman given mythic status. It starts under the light of the moon and slowly gives way to daylight. It starts with the thrill of orgasm and ends with the challenge of intimacy. How do we combine the everyday tasks of

brushing teeth and frying eggs and having sex into a life that feels loving and rewarding?

At the same time, the play is a reflection on modern literature and theater. The more explicit the drama or the novel, the harder it is to appreciate the subtle intricacies of intimacy. This play begins with the explicit and delves deep and sensitively into the excruciating and fundamental struggles of human needs, loves, longings, and failures in the search to find ourselves and to know one another. For me, this is a work of genius, of wonderful words that inspire beautiful acting and directing, and of unconscious resonance.

10

The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?

Edward Albee (1928-)

Premiere: John Golden Theatre,

New York, 2002

Arena Stage, Washington DC, 2005

David E. Scharff

The tone of *The Goat* is set by Albee's deft capacity to write a play as immediate as the everyday and as timeless as Greek tragedy. It evokes the Eumenides (the furies who are turned into the mellowing voice of transformation after a tragic act) to the kiss of Judas, inherent in Martin, the protagonist, cursing Ross his alter-ego, thus locating himself as a tragic martyr. It is as modern as the everyday language, the curses and the pottery that are thrown about the stage, as timely as the opening announcement that Martin has won the Pritzger Prize, and as old as the goat – an allusion to the goat that is half man in the character of Pan and to the animal that Abraham sacrifices in place of his son. The satanic fall at the

climax of the play recalls Medea's violent sacrifice of her children. The title *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?* echoing and mocking the love sonnets, announces that this play is a tragic-comedy of Shakespearean proportions.

At the same time, this tragi-comedy is in a modern key, mixed with satire, wit and farce that add to the depth of the play and to our capacity to identify with the characters and the themes they embody. Fresh from the horrible irony of the violent closing scene, it's impossible to feel unmitigated pleasure in this play that is so much about perversion – the perversion of meaning in its mixture of love, sex and destruction. But if we as an audience can find an enhanced capacity to draw meaning out of our shared experience, then there is pleasure of a transformative order.

The Goat has a fairly simple story. Martin is at the top of his profession on this day, near his 50th birthday, just named the recipient of the Pritzger Prize for architecture, and he is in a supremely happy marriage. While being interviewed for television by his life-long friend Ross, he reveals that he is

having a sexual affair with a goat. Ross feels duty bound to tell Martin's wife, Stevie. In the second scene, Stevie is reading Martin's letter. Stevie, Martin, and their homosexual son Billy undergo a family meltdown in which the civilization of their world crashes down, while Billy and Martin call each other unforgivable names about their sexual practices. In the last scene, Billy and Martin have it out, and end up kissing passionately. Shocked when he enters and finds them in an erotic kiss, Ross brands them as perverted. The play closes as Stevie, covered in blood, enters triumphantly dragging Martin's bloodied goat which she has just killed. Martin is devastated. Billy looks at his parents and calls their names as if invoking the gods.

This play works on many levels. First, the social level. The play opens with a man who is afraid he is losing his mind, aging out of his prime at the same moment he is being given outstanding public recognition from his peers in being awarded the highest honor for architectural achievement. Enter Ross wielding a television camera. He comes to celebrate the great man with whom he is on intimate terms,

having known him virtually from the cradle, having shared his humorous adolescent sexual peccadilloes. Ross's role is crucial to the play, precisely because Ross represents the media, the public, the citizenry. He is the Greek chorus. In the end, Ross and Martin argue about whether the real crime is about being found out, about being shamed, or being guilty of exposing private family relationships.

When the attack on Martin reveals the private relationship in contrast to the public image, Ross's position is that the crime is that of being found out publicly, never mind the private damage. Ross claims that he can control the public damage – and here Martin agrees with him. Here Albee raises the value of the lie. If the secret were kept, if a suitable lie had been told, repair might have been possible. The relentless presentation of truth may be more deadly than the lie that seeks to protect the self or prevent injurious harm to the other. We all present a public face that covers our inner conflicts in the name of social harmony. Albee forces us to confront the truth and its terrible consequences.

The goat itself is a symbol on a larger level. Pan, half man, half goat was the Greek symbol for music and passion. The goat is a symbol for lust, and in the end for that which must be sacrificed in penance to the gods. All of this is operating on the level of myth and of social symbolism, but in this play, unlike in classical Greek drama, the sacrifice and the vengeance are deeply personal for both Stevie and for Martin. But the goat is much more. It refers to the perverse sexuality of Martin but it also refers to a part of Stevie, the animal part of her sexuality that Martin adores, and to part of Billy, the adolescent homosexual son who gets his goat. It represents an absurd distillation of all that Martin values in the world of passion, love and sexuality, boiled down and stripped of the dignifying characteristics that make each of the people he loves human. In the end, of course, Martin is the goat of a tragic joke, and in their own ways, so are each of the characters.

This play also draws from zoophilia, the desire to form sexual relationships with animals, as a signifier of our perverse “anything goes” society. Sex with animals goes one

better than the gruesome human affairs and incest aired daily on the television tell-all shows. The group Martin describes for people like him who have had sex with animals is a clever comedic riff on groups for domestic violence or incest perpetrators. At the same time, the metaphor of the goat draws attention to a pattern in our society in which there are people whose love of animals in the abstract means they are almost willing to kill or maim human beings in the service of standing up for animal rights. The commentary is about all such causes gone to extreme.

We see each of the characters as they relate to the protagonist, Martin, at the center of the play. Martin is at the top of his game, a towering figure in his world, a fitting tragic hero. He has always been faithful to Stevie. Her boyish name suggests ambiguous sexuality from the beginning of the play. Yet they have a perfect marriage with perfect sex. They live in an Eden that is equal parts modern American, Christian and classical Greek, with the prints of Greek buildings on their wall and the pottery of modern art on their shelves. They have humor, love, and a treasured child.

But something is wrong in Eden. We hear much more about the reality of their existence after the fall. Martin wants more although he hasn't known it until recently. While looking for a house to provide for their "country pleasures" (surely a reference to Shakespeare's frequent pun on rural life and sexual pleasure) he is seen by a goat, called Sylvia (Who is she that all her swains attend her?). And he falls helplessly, insanely in love. He didn't know he was looking for this kind of love. It is her eyes that he fastens on, the eyes that arouse his longing and his erection.

What powers Martin's fall? That gaze. In a psychoanalytic view of development, we see the gaze in the mother's eyes as a major route of expression of her love in the beginning. The mother takes the baby in through her eyes and skin and nipples, and he takes her in through his eyes and mouth and skin. The early bond forms through an unmistakable mutual falling in love, and often enough, there is a byproduct of maternal sexual arousal that is normal, although sometimes alarming to the mother.

It is this sexual arousal that Martin alarmingly reports to Billy after their sexualized, passionate kiss. A passionate connection between them has been there all through Billy's life. Perhaps it is one of the meanings of Billy's sexual preference for boys, a search for the erotic meaning of the love of his father that was there all along, a search that, from our study of Martin, we can see in his life-long search for "more", for whatever is missing deep in his soul. Martin's wordless search (about which we hear something in his adolescent sexual experiment with prostitutes) comes to the fore now as he is losing his mind in mid-life, unable to find his "razor head" – that condensed sign of masculinity.

Stevie is the perfect wife, able to charm and comfort Martin, and she only has eyes for him. She is his provider, keeper of his wandering mental faculties, his "only love". This steadfast love has kept her going, but when it is broken, she wreaks the vengeance of Clytemnestra, Electra, and the Furies. Total love turns to total destructiveness and vengeance. This is not an exaggeration of psychological truth: Stevie shows us that Hell hath no fury like a woman

scorned. And when she has been ultimately humiliated in the process, she has nothing left to lose. She says she will kill Martin, but in the play's mixture of farce and high tragedy, she kills his love instead, re-enacting the ritual sacrifice of animals. While the symbolism of this play makes her actions partly surreal, they also seem true to the cycles of revenge that murder meaning in real families where parents attack each other and their children – sometimes literally killing the children to take a Medea's revenge on each other.

Let's look at the couple's relationship to their adolescent son Billy. Much more is said about Martin's relationship to him than about Stevie's. Among the many symbolic references that stem from Albee's use of the goat, I believe, is his assigning the name Billy to the son. In this way, the goat (that is the "Billy goat") is not only the object that comes between Martin and Stevie but is also an intermediate object that links Martin and Billy, the homosexual son, who it is revealed, as an infant was the object of Martin's sexual arousal. The play's directions make it crystal clear that Martin is referring to himself and Billy in the story of the

man aroused by his baby. When Billy asks repeatedly, “Was it me, Dad?” the script reads:

“MARTIN: (So clearly a lie; gently) Of course not, Billy.”

So the quality of a man’s love for his child with its primitive qualities becomes part of the pre-history of the extension of that love back to its even more primordial origins in the animal feelings that are in each of us. This relates to the “mixed metaphor” Billy uses when he says that Martin has “has pulled the blanket out from under him” rather than the rug. With Martin’s crime, including the revelation of his sexual interest in Billy, it is not just the emotional floor that has collapsed, but the father’s care for a child who should have been held safely in a blanket.

This play is about the ambiguities in the chain of development from animal to human. We are animals, driven by animal passions, and we are humans, driven by conflict about our animal passions. The resulting irrationality puts us at risk. Men and women are captive to their animal passions,

and in this captivity, have the capacity to destroy what they love and those whom they love. Martin, losing his mind not to Alzheimer's Disease, but to the seeds of destruction central to his animal capacity for love and his capacity to love an animal, drives daggers through the heart of the two people he loves the most. In this destruction he is aided by Ross, representing the social world's good intentions to save them all from themselves. Stevie's passion for revenge makes Martin's destructiveness part of a cycle of love and hate in a story of unending calamity.

Ultimately, this play is about the dangers of our sexual selves. Stevie says "Yes, it is about fucking! It is about you being an animal!" Martin answers, "I thought we *all* were ... animals." In the last scene Stevie hauls in the dead animal, as if that will mark the spot and erase animal lust. The play ends, as Greek tragedies do, with the destruction of the family, with Stevie carrying through in a tragi-comic way her threat to "bring Martin down." But the last line is Billy's. He no longer has a family. He mutely cries, "Dad? Mom?" and gets no reaction from either of them.

So what is the psychological and literary value of such a story? I think it has profound value in reminding us of the primitive forces that course through our veins. In psychoanalysis, linking forgotten and unconscious memories of early experience with the travails of current life does such a “re-minding” by which I mean, it gives new meaning to current life. It builds a new capacity of mind to understand and to cope. In the cultural sphere, remembering the classical and historical origins of our way of thinking does the same thing – re-minding or giving a new mental capacity for understanding our societal dilemmas. The references to ancient gods and their temples, the destruction of old civilizations, the invocation of Greek and Christian gods does for our understanding of our society what the invocation of childhood can do for us as individuals – “re-minding” our capacity to learn the meaning and value of our all-too-human and fragile experience.

11

Proof

David Auburn (1969-)

**Premiere: Manhattan Theatre Club,
New York, 2000
Arena Stage, Washington DC, 2003**

Jill Savege Scharff

The protagonist is a 25 year-old woman who, after the death of her mother at the age of 21, has dropped out of college to take care of her mentally ill father, a brilliant mathematician. The woman reveals considerable aptitude herself, but she has not been trained as a mathematician except by proximity to her father. She may have inherited his gift, and if so, then his mental illness as well. The play hinges on the question of whether she too is crazy and/or brilliant. The playwright explores the overlap of brilliance, creativity, and madness by exploring the complex emotions of the main character and the dynamics of her family. Emphasis on family relationships gives the play its power and

resonance. It raises the issue of inheritance of any kind of family trauma and begs the question whether any of us have control or selectivity in our identification with our parents.

The plot

In the opening scene on the dilapidated porch of the family's Chicago University house, the daughter Catherine, generally called Katie, a woman in her early twenties, is asleep, and is wakened by her father, Robert, who brings her a bottle of champagne to toast her 25th birthday and stops to have a pleasant conversation about their relationship and their shared interest in mathematics. The house is rundown. Robert's notebooks are stuffed everywhere. Katie is disheveled and drinking carelessly. Her hair is lank and her clothing baggy and unattractive. There is a sense of chaos in the house around her, signs of abundant output going nowhere. Katie is too depressed to cope with the sorting out that needs to be done. There is no sense of an incestuous relationship, and yet, she and her father form a domestic couple, a partnership in a life enlivened by their fascination for numbers and dogged by the tendency to instability that

they share. Like him she has mathematical talent, even though she acts as if she doesn't have it and doesn't want it, any more than she wants to inherit his mental illness. Her devotion to him is total. They are living a *folie á deux*. The first surprise of the play occurs when we are shown that her father is in fact dead, and then we realize that this is the eve of the funeral. She can't get organized, can't plan her future, can't contemplate leaving the house, even though it is clearly unsuitable for a young person living alone. Now the question arises: Is she drunk and hallucinating, is she talking to herself, to voices in her head, or is she reliving her memory of many times with her live father represented by her conversation with her late father as if he were still alive?

Her sister Claire on the other hand has stayed far away from the dysfunctional family. She is doing well as a currency analyst and living with a boyfriend in New York. She's efficient, confident, well-groomed, and attractive. Yet she seems stilted and unpleasant in the family setting, critical of her sister's isolation and mess. She makes normality seem quite unappealing. She arrives from her home in New York

to get everything organized, and it is evident that her capacity for controlling anticipated eventualities is incredible. She even has a dress for her sister to wear to the funeral. The second surprise is that the dress fits and reveals how beautiful Katie is, and the third surprise is that Katie actually likes how she looks in the dress Claire chose for her.

Katie is putting up with the enthusiasm of a young professor, Hal who was mentored by her late father, and who is doing research on all the work the father has left in his home-office at the time of his death. Hal enters the scene by waking Katie up, as her father had done earlier. This suggests that he is replacing her father in her mind and in her affections. When Katie is quoting from the biography of her heroine, a famous mathematician born in 1776, Hal suddenly kisses her, as if calling her from the 18th Century to the modern era. Hal extols her father's work as "streamlined, no wasted moves." It's hard to reconcile such precision with the mess of books the father has left behind. Hal is going through all the late father's notebooks looking for a brilliant proof. But none of them so far make any sense. The father's

great gift has been eroded by mental illness and has now taken the form of writing codes for aliens. Still Hal persists. Katie becomes suspicious of his intense interest and accuses him of stealing a notebook from her. He denies it. She overreacts and calls the police. We are led to think that she is paranoid after all. Then we find out that indeed he has taken a book, because it has a message of gratitude and affection written by her father during a lucid moment, and he wanted to wrap it for her to give it to her for her 25th birthday. In the meantime, Hal is becoming interested in Katie. She warms to him and gives him the key to a drawer in which another notebook is hidden. Then comes the fourth big surprise of the play, at the end of Act 1. “Where did you find it?” he asks her. “I didn’t find it, I wrote it!” Which raises the question: Did she or didn’t she write it? Is she simply feeding off her father’s legacy?

We know that after their mother’s death, Katie, the younger daughter, has lived at home to take care of her father. In Act 2, we are transported to 4 years earlier to learn that after a period of in-home care by her, the father was much

better and able to work creatively again. So he could have written the proof in those years. Reassured by his progress, Katie left for college, and her father quickly relapsed. She had to return home. Katie is like her father in her ability to think easily in mathematical terms. Her handwriting is identical to his. Now she is faced with the burden of proof that she in fact wrote the proof that looks like one of her father's. Claire gives Hal the book with the disputed proof in it. When hurt by the incredulity of Claire and Hal, Katie begins to withdraw and looks as if she might indeed become mentally ill. But a scene set 3 and 1/2 years earlier shows us that her father couldn't have written the proof.

Comments on the family dynamics

Katie is inclined to be antisocial and paranoid. She is certainly depressed, merged with a sick father, and disconnected from her peer group. She has come to need the support of living at home, even though it is a crazy place to be, and of being desperately needed by her father. She is an over-attached child who can't live on her own. She is aware of her instability, but she has not had a mental breakdown as

her father has had. She lives in fear of total mental deterioration. The fear of something bad happening is a reflection of a trauma that has already occurred. It seems likely that Katie has been traumatized by family breakdown in response to her father's symptoms and family anxiety predating the loss of her mother. It may be that her father was himself traumatized by events in his family we do not have information about the previous generation. She is afraid to be like him as a mathematician, in case that will propel her towards instability, and yet she must be equally afraid that if she rejects the identification she will end up like Claire, whom she doesn't like and whose preoccupation with the domestic matters of ordinary life are boring.

Katie has not had a mental breakdown, but she is symptomatic. She dropped out of college, sleeps away parts of days, lives in a filthy house, fails to stock the refrigerator, and spends a week in bed during the days after the funeral. She may not be a packrat herself but she has a great tolerance for her father's symptom of holding on to worthless notebooks. She lives in his filthy, deteriorating house,

testament to a crumbling mental structure. She is socially withdrawn. She is vulnerable to emotional highs and lows and personal insecurities. She rejects concern and does not find herself loveable. Yet she is appealing.

There is a strong presumption that Katie is brilliant, but there is no conclusion about whether she has been mentally ill, as opposed to having been depressed by the strain of illness in the family and the grief of a recent death. There is no definitive answer to whether she has inherited mental illness or has been affected by a dysfunctional environment. And there are good signs. She is well related to her father and they enjoy each other. When Claire comes home, she begins to look better. Even though she rejects many of Claire's attempts at mothering her, Katie is able to accept her offer of a dress in which to feel good about herself at the funeral. She can confront Claire with her angry feelings. When Hal kindly and thoughtfully gives her the loving message that he saved from her father, she is able to cry and express her grief and relief. She can relate to Hal intimately

and as the play ends we have some hope that she may be able to sustain a relationship with him.

Claire is the autonomous child. Proficient in Math but not gifted like her father, she has felt less close to him than Katie has. She has been less privileged and less vulnerable to being identified with him. From a position of feeling rejected by him in comparison to Katie, Claire has become rejecting of the family. She moved far away from the family and is soon to be married. Living independently with a career and an intimate relationship, she has achieved the same developmental stage as her peers and is connected to reality and to the future. She has used her ordinary mathematical aptitude effectively to earn success in the financial world. Where Katie is symptomatic, she is super-normal. She has paid the bills to support her father and sister and to “keep him out of the nuthouse,” but she has not been there for them emotionally. She feels regret and maybe some guilt that she was not physically present to help her father as her sister was, but she has contributed in the only way she can. She comes across as inquisitive, emotionally cold, brittle, and

domineering in contrast to her submissive, sloppy sister. Yet people are nice to her, we are told, because she is normal, while they are “assholes” to the more volatile Katie.

The character who is missing is their late mother. She has died and left them in this mess. Why did she die? What was their relationship like? How much was Katie’s return home from one semester of University a form of prolonged grief, identification with her father’s collapse, or a triumph over her mother whose place she now fills? What do the daughters feel about their mother? Is Claire like her? Is Katie like aspects of her mother? Claire and Katie are so different that this suggests the parents were quite different too, and complementary, each making the other whole. I wonder how much the deceased mother did during her lifetime to support her husband so that his creativity could survive the attacks on it from his thought disorder? If I try to imagine the woman who is their mother by combining the characters of the daughters, I see a competent manager, an attractive woman who subordinated her life to her husband’s

career, and a woman who was furious at the emotional toll taken by her role as the guardian of the genius.

Was Katie's writing of the proof an attempt to recapture closeness to her father who was retreating into illness? Katie gives the notebook with the precious writing in it to Hal, after spending their first night together when she hardly knows him. She is eager for him to see it, the first person since her father to express both mathematical interest in her work and love for her. When he has found evidence in the fact that the proof uses techniques her father could not have known, he concludes that she did indeed write it. She is furious that he didn't trust her ability and credibility. She puts down the value of "proof." How anxious is she about outshining her father? Can she afford to triumph over his legacy?

When leaving at the end of the play to join Claire in New York, Katie is scared of being put in a mental hospital but she does not appear to be certifiable. Yet it seems that she is fated to live with her sister and her husband in their family home and repeat her failure to live independently as an adult,

becoming as dependent on them as her father was on her. As for Claire, it is now “her turn” to look after a family member and protect against mental illness. Is Katie doomed to live out her father’s life of madness? Perhaps not, because Katie has experienced Hal’s interest and affection, and this may yet save her from repeating the family script. In the fifth and final scene of Act 2 where Hal agrees that it is Katie’s proof and she then explains it to him, we see that there may be some hope of a relationship in which love and talent, intellect and emotion, can grow side by side.

The Structure of the play

Some comments on the structure of the play and the use of the number 4. Act 1 has 4 scenes and it introduces the 4 characters. The sisters are 4 years apart. Act 2 has 4 scenes that deal with the impact of the past and settle the matter: the father did not write the proof. There is symmetry here. Then there is a 5th and final scene that breaks the formula, and makes all the difference.

In the fifth and final scene, Hal agrees it is a brilliant proof, and his colleagues have verified his opinion. He thinks

it is indeed Katie's proof, because it uses new techniques with which her father could not have been familiar and in short it is too "hip" to have been written by him. Katie is furious at Hal for needing to find evidence of that sort before he could believe that she wrote the proof. To her it was obvious because she knew she had written it and because her proof is awkward and lumpy, unlike her father's elegant proofs. He encourages her that sharing it will enable her to find the elegance she admires. The closing image of the play is of her beginning to explain it to him. Like her role model, the 18th Century mathematician, by having the respect of a man, she takes ownership of herself as a woman and a mathematician.

The lack of a 5th scene in Act 1 connects for me with the lack of the fifth character, the mother who is missing, hardly referred to, and her contribution to the family dynamic overlooked. In fact, her influence is erased. She has been killed off, perhaps drowned in the avalanche of her husband's dependency or by feeling defeated by Katie's hold on his imagination. In this 5th and final scene, Catherine recovers the lost mother in her sense of self. To me this is a hopeful

moment because it connects her father and mother in her mind and this is a more stable internal structure to support her brilliant intellect.

The notebook as dramatic focus

The notebook functions as a symbol saturated with meaning that shifts at different points in the play. It is an object that is transitional between the generations, and between male and female. At times it is highly valuable and at other times it is devalued. It has various qualities at different times, representing both the focus of the dramatic action and a symbol of the protagonist's search for a sense of self. We think of the self as built out of experience in the family group. Our perceptions and memories of these experiences are retained inside the self as pieces of psychic structure that are called objects. These objects are of infinite variety and they color how we feel about ourselves and our future and how we perceive others. We can see many of them displayed in personal interactions between the characters and in the interplay of scenes and flashbacks. We

also see them especially clearly represented by the literal object of the notebook.

The notebook as internal object

The set is stuffed with notebooks, representing buried objects. Their profusion signifies creativity, manic energy, obsessive hoarding, and disintegration of the mind. Are they worthless, or might there be one book of worth among them? From among these many notebooks, one appears precious because it contains her father's thoughts about Catherine. This is a treasure, a precious object of attachment. Hal takes it home to wrap it for Catherine as a birthday surprise. Not knowing this, she nevertheless suspects him of stealing a book from her. She looks for it in his backpack and finds that he does not have a notebook after all. The object of her desire is absent. Then the book falls out of his jacket, an object of guilty possession. Hal reads to her lines her father had written about her in a moment of lucidity expressing his affection and gratitude. Catherine takes the book and weeps.

The notebook as the hidden, true self

After making this emotional connection to her father through Hal and after spending a night with him, Katie impulsively gives Hal the key to the drawer in which he will find a hidden book. She hopes that he will recognize her and help her to find herself in her work and in his appreciation. Hal misidentifies this book as having been written by her father, and the notebook becomes an abandoning object not a statement of self.

Attack on self and object of identification

When Hal is holding the book with the proof which Katie claims to have written but which he disputes, Katie in a rage at not being recognized tries to tear the pages out of the book. What does this mean? Does she want to destroy it because she is ashamed of pretending to write it, or because having the respect and appreciation of her talent from the man she loves is more important than the proof? Katie and Claire struggle for rights to the book, which Claire believes to have been written by their father, and the book is thrown to the floor. The notebook is now a rejected object spoiled by sibling rivalry and envy. Claire holds the book herself. Its

contents are beyond her grasp, and she hates to feel that way. Now the book is an object of envy. Claire then gives the book to Hal and asks him to explain the proof to her, but he can't do it either.

Object of disillusionment and de-investment

In a flashback scene, the father gives Katie his notebook with his latest proof in it. She reads it and we all realize sadly that it is rubbish. He couldn't have been the author of the proof in question. Back in the present, Hal brings back the notebook that Claire gave him. Admiringly, he holds up the notebook and offers it to Katie. She tells him he can keep it, do what he wants with it, pretend it's his own work, she doesn't care.

The loved object and the valued, social self

When Kate knows that Hal accepts that she is the author of the proof that fills its pages, she takes the notebook appreciatively. She opens the notebook, sits down, selects a few pages, and explains them to Hal, sitting side by side.

The notebook as a symbol

The notebook crystallizes the theme of the distinction between madness and brilliance in a tangible form that gets handed from one character to another. It represents the father-daughter connection and estrangement. To Katie the mathematical concepts in the notebook are familiar, puzzling and complex, but manageable whereas to Claire the notebook is threatening, a symbol of her inability to resonate with her father's brilliance or tolerate his peculiarity. The notebook and its brilliant contents signify the possibility of valued attachment to the father, which Katie and Claire fight over.

The notebook represents the true self of Katie hidden for many years in a mutually dependent relationship and in subordination to her father's superior intellect. She is highly identified with him, and it is in one of her father's notebooks that Katie has written her own proof and allowed his legacy to live. The notebook is the vehicle through which Katie reveals herself to Hal, gains his respect, and re-finds in him the love she felt for her father. Through the sharing of the contents of the notebook, she integrates herself as a mathematician and a woman.

Conclusion

There is no proof for the equation of genius and madness. Brilliance does not equate with mental illness. Mathematics can illuminate life but it cannot address the complexity of human experience. Proof cannot ensure confidence in the self and its productions. That comes through appreciation, respect, trust, love, and reconciliation.

12

RED

The life and art of Mark Rothko (1903-1970)

John Logan (1961-)

**Premiere: Donmar Warehouse,
London, 2009**

John Golden Theatre, New York, 2010

2010 Tony award Best Play

Arena Stage, Washington DC, 2012

Jill Savege Scharff

John Logan got the idea for a play about Mark Rothko at the Tate Modern when he was profoundly moved by Rothko's "grand and brooding, mute and magnificent" Seagram murals. Almost overpowered by "the vibrant interplay of colors on the canvasses" he was inspired to put words to the experience. He would create a relationship between Rothko and a young artist, connected by their immersion in art and engaged in work and conversation that would reflect the interplay of the colors and the seriousness of the magnificent paintings. It would be a dialogue between

old and young, teacher and student, dark and light, father and son, black and red (Logan 2011). The result is RED, a “smart, eloquent entertainment” (The New Yorker, April 12, 2010), an “electrifying play of ideas” (Variety, April 1, 2010).

The brilliant and passionate Mark Rothko has hired a new assistant, Ken to help him create a definitive group of murals for an exclusive restaurant. As they stretch the canvas and nail it to the frame, apply the primer from buckets of paint, mixed from heated pigment powder, glue and secret ingredients, Rothko talks and Ken listens, at least at first. Rothko must deal with what this young man represents of himself and the people important to him in his life. Now that he is appreciated by the art world, Rothko is afraid that pop culture represented by art of Ken’s generation will diminish respect for his artistic vision. He is afraid of being corrupted by commercialism. Will his paintings be safe in a restaurant? Will his legacy survive? He feels old and frightened. He must confront his personal demons or be crushed by the ever-changing art world he helped create.

“What do you see?” Rothko asks his assistant, pointing to a large painting. “Be exact – but be sensitive.”

Ken answers, “Red.”

Full of contempt for the young man’s limited vision, Rothko harangues Ken about his likes and dislikes and his lack of education in literature and philosophy.

“How do they make you feel?” Rothko persists. This time Ken contemplates the painting. Rothko appreciates the effort put into receiving the image and sensing its impact.

Ken articulates his response: “Disquieted, thoughtful, sad.”

Later Rothko asks him, “What is red?”

Ken speaks of the emotion of red at sunrise. Rothko is not satisfied.

Ken persists, “Sunrise is red and red is sunrise.”

Rothko throws at him the many distinctions in shades of red as color, the endless associations to red as thing.

In Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a treatise on mythology and culture that Rothko had read, Red is religion: Black is magic. For some of us red is passion, Valentine hearts, sexual desire, life blood. For others red is anger, fire, destruction, escaping blood from a wound, menstrual blood of non-conception, bright blood of defloration. But within red, Rothko sees black. He finds it inescapable. Black may be melancholy, gloom, despair or emptiness. Black could bring forth feelings of sadness or relief from seeing and feeling too much. Red could bring out desire for or fury at a lover, the effect that it had on the couples visiting the red restaurant in Thornton Wilder's playlet *Flamingo Red: A Comedy in Danger*. Red says stop: Black says nothing. Black says mourning and depression: Red says mania. The black depression of the loss of each developmental stage as we progress through life towards death is cut by the red thread of vitality that runs through a life from childhood to old age. Red gives Rothko hope that life can be endurable, but his greatest fear is that: "One day the black will swallow the red."

Rothko's story

What of Rothko's life? Born Jewish in Russia in 1903, speaking Russian and Yiddish, Rothko was nevertheless raised without religion until he was 5, when his father returned to Orthodox Judaism. In the play we learn the bare minimum – that his name as a boy was Marcus Rothkowitz, that these were frightening times in Russia where Cossacks were “cutting people up and tossing them into pits,” that when he came to the United States he lived with his family in the ghetto in Portland, and that his art dealer changed his name to Mark Rothko for commercial reasons. Worried about conscription into the Czarist army, Rothko's father and brothers departed for the United States leaving little Rothko with his mother. They sent for Rothko and his mother when he was 10. Tragically his father died soon after their reunion. Rothko entered third grade but soon progressed, as he became fluent in English. He graduated at age 17, got a scholarship to Yale, and dropped out in his second year to work but he continued to read Freud, Jung and Nietzsche and to study art. “Art is 10% paint and 90% thinking and waiting,” he tells us.

At first the style of painting he favored was representational and then it moved towards mythic abstractionism.

In 1932, Rothko married Edith Sachar, a poet and jewelry designer, but her economic success compared to his lack of artistic success led to problems. They separated in 1937, reconciled, and separated finally in 1943. Rothko suffered a long depression following their divorce, the same year that his mother Kate died. In 1940 he took a year off to read the writings of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Frazer's -. His style was now mythic abstractionism, moving toward surrealism. By 1946 the multiform paintings began to emerge. As he said of himself and Gottlieb, "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth" (Ross 1942).

By 1944 he had met his second wife, Mary Ellen "Mell" Beistle, who married him in the spring of 1945. They had

two children, Katherine Lynn (1950) and Christopher (1963). In 1949 he became fascinated by Matisse's The Red Studio. In the play he tells Ken about the powerful effect of this saturated red painting. The experience ushered in Rothko's late period of great large paintings with layers of color. Rothko believed that his paintings had their own form and potential for evoking an emotional and spiritual effect, meaning being irrelevant. He wanted us to grapple with his paintings but never to understand them. One had to stand before them and experience the rushing in and out of the layered color.

The art collecting world began at last to appreciate Rothko. In 1958, the Seagram mural commission began – a series of 40 red-brown paintings for the Four Seasons Restaurant in the Seagram building. But he turned against the elegant establishment and its diners who he assumed to be materialistic social predators totally unable to appreciate his paintings. He had imagined that his art could turn a restaurant into a temple for contemplation and communion, and in the cold light of day he realized that this was

impossible. He reclaimed the paintings and put them into storage for years until special rooms were built resembling temples to receive them.

In 1968, Rothko received the diagnosis of an aortic aneurysm – a weakening and separation of the layers of tissue in the wall of the main blood vessel which can eventually burst under strain like a bubble in the sidewall of a tire than can blow out at any moment. So some moderation in his lifestyle was recommended by his physician. Against medical advice, Rothko continued to drink and smoke heavily, and deep depression followed. In December of that year, Rothko saw a psychiatrist named Dr. Kline, the spelling of his name unlike that of the famous psychoanalyst Mrs. Klein, and his clinical practice even more different. Unlike Mrs. Klein who worked with her patients intensively to understand the black of the death drive, aggression, destructive abuse of self and others, and the red of futile manic reparation, Dr. Kline held that investigating the source of distress only made things worse, that a typical patient visit should be 15 minutes or less, and he prescribed medication

alone. He treated Rothko's depression with Sinequan and Valium, which Rothko appreciated because it enabled him to work again. Rothko's physician, however, found him to be dazed and disturbed, possibly as a side-effect of the medication, and he knew that Sinequan could cause arrhythmia of the heart. He asked Rothko to stop the drugs, but Rothko continued to take them on the authority of Dr. Kline. The drugs may have saved his ability to work, but they did nothing to help his marriage or save his life. By 1969 Rothko's insecurity and impotence led to estrangement from Mell and they separated, Rothko moving into his studio. He dissolved in a fury of "titanic self-absorption." In 1970 his assistant found him dead in a pool of blood, an event we see symbolized and presaged in the play when the assistant finds Rothko dripping with red paint. Rothko had taken an overdose of his psychotropic medication and had slit his wrists. The black had swallowed the red.

Rothko in the studio

In RED, we see Rothko in his 60s working in his studio, a converted gymnasium at 222 Bowery in New York City.

There is paint everywhere – on the canvas, in packets, in buckets, on brushes and on the floor and on his clothes. There are bottles of whisky, cigarettes, old coffee cans, tubes of glue, and many large paintings in stacks against the wall. Rothko is working on the Seagram commission for a “continuous narrative of murals” to hang on the walls of the Four Seasons restaurant in New York City. The Rothko we meet is the painter at work – demanding employer and temperamental genius, a narcissistic man, more intimate with brush and paint than with people, more concerned for the protection and companionship of his paintings than for his assistant. We immediately feel impressed by the sight of the great artist in his carefully lit work space, and we feel pushed away by his contemptuous dismissive attitude to his assistant, his competitors, and his patrons. The playwright focuses on Rothko, his attitude to art, and his fear of competition and death, and he tells us nothing about Rothko’s parents, his ex-wives, or his children.

We want to know all about Rothko, but it is as hard for us to connect to such a dismissive, brusque man at first, as it is

for the eager young artist who arrives to be his assistant. Rothko quickly establishes that he will not be a father to him. Why is Rothko so lacking in paternal affection? Perhaps it is because he lost his own father tragically at the age of 10, soon after being reunited with him upon immigrating to join him in the United States. Not only will he not be Ken's father, he will not be his confessor, certainly not his shrink, not even his teacher. He rejects that transference of affection before it can even occur, both in words and in his dismissive and verbally abusive behavior. He will be merely his employer and simply use him as his servant, with no wish for a personal relationship. Yet like an anxious father fearing his son's connection to the pulse of his generation, Rothko cuts Ken down to size, prods him to study and engages him in Socratic dialogue as a teacher might do, and, like a psychoanalyst, encourages him to talk about his childhood trauma.

No longer as vigorous as he once was, Rothko needs his healthy young assistant and at the same time hates being dependent on him. He uses him as his arms and legs to bring him food and clean up after him. He uses him as an object on

which to vent his frustrations like a man who kicks the cat. Rothko manipulates his assistant's responses to support his confidence in himself, and then he erases him for doing so. Rothko hates his assistant because he is afraid of him as part of the Warhol generation of artists tearing away at the scaffolding of Rothko's identity as the greatest artist of his Century, much as he himself tears away at Picasso. He hates him for representing that part of himself that is young and ambitious but insecure, a part of him that wants to be noticed, but that has been overlooked and insufficiently appreciated by the art world, yet young enough to still have hope. The young man is willing to work hard and lend the aging Rothko his vitality, but Rothko cannot express gratitude because that would mean acknowledging his own weakness and his own immense loss – loss of home country, birth tongue, early loss of his father, loss of his mother and his first wife in the same year, the more immediate loss of his second wife, and the loss of his physical and mental health.

Impact of the play

When we see RED, the play, we see a canvas on which we will eventually experience the greatest artist of the 20th Century. What do we see during the talking, thinking, and looking? We see the incubation of art alongside a tragic collision of sadism and masochism. What do we see as the artists, and the actors who become them, prime the canvas? Drawn by their mutual commitment to the work, they pull together across their differences. What they do in priming the canvas gives it the foundation that will hold the image and give it dimension. The white canvas will become not yet red, but brown, which has probably been made by adding black to red. We see two men mix the paint and vigorously attack the task, sloshing the paint-filled brush from bucket to canvas, racing to get the job done before the undercoat drips or dries. It is tremendously exciting to watch, and immediately the viewer is drawn in and feels at one with the characters. As the Washington Post reviewer said, this is the highlight of the play, the moment of silent action and resolve that the words have been leading to. It is positively primal. It reminded me of a film I had seen of Jackson Pollock at work. Unlike

Rothko, Pollock was working alone, he was painting not priming, and his canvas lay on the floor of his studio. But like Rothko he worked quickly, deftly, energetically. He moved or rather Samba-danced alongside the canvas dripping paint with each step just as in RED Rothko and his assistant reach, dodge, swirl and arc over and under each other in tune and in rhythm. Rothko claimed that his art was a religious experience as he painted, but in the play it seemed highly physical, sensual, its completion orgasmic. The priming of the canvas is the first step in creating layers of paint in colors that will radiate into and out of one another and create in the viewer a profound emotional and spiritual response of intimacy and awe.

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13

AFTERPLAY

Brian Friel (1929-)

Premiere: Dublin, 2002

Washington Premiere, Studio Theatre, 2005

Jill Savege Scharff

You enter a crowded restaurant alone and someone asks if you mind that they join you. You begin to talk about where you are from, where you went to college, your professional interests, family concerns, what is in the news. You learn that the stranger is in town to see a family member, visit the monuments, attend a Board meeting, interview candidates for a fellowship, or give testimony on the Hill. You present yourself in a certain way, gauging how much of yourself to share. The conversation may remain halting, guarded. Or you may feel an instant connection, perhaps founded on a background in common, a similar perspective, or a shared

sense of humor. Whatever the basis, it is possible with some men and women, and not others.

When it is possible there is a feeling of connection. This sense of “clicking” between people is a “spontaneous unconscious function of the gregarious quality in the personality of man” (Bion 1959 p. 136). It is an instantaneous combination of the personalities at conscious and unconscious levels. What do two strangers go through to arrive at this fit? How do they use their defensive postures for protection, and when do they give them up? How do they reach an emotional place where they can be frank and fully present with one another? What is it that forges this intimacy of the moment? What leads to a second moment? These are the questions that lie at the heart of Brian Friel’s one-act *Afterplay*, an artful curio, a theatrical gem, a contemplative piece on personal history and the establishment of intimacy.

Friel sets the scene in a Moscow café in the early 1920s. He puts together two of Chekhov’s secondary characters from the edges of two of his well-known plays – Sonya

Serebriakova and Andrey Prozorov – to see what happens to them 20 years later. In their original dramatic settings, Sonya is the pragmatic niece of the disorganized *Uncle Vanya* (1899) and Andrey is the ineffectual but enthusiastic brother of *The Three Sisters* (1901). Sonya and Andrey are minor characters in these major plays. In *Afterplay*, they have our attention all to themselves as they get to know one another by sharing complaints, jokes, and reminiscences over cups of tea and soup. We learn from their conversation that Uncle Vanya has died 19 years ago after a stroke that Sonya attributes to the strain of his heart being broken following his rejection by Elena, Sonya's stepmother. Andrey has survived the loss of his wife Natasha, unlike his sister Masha who shot herself because of unrequited love. Such references and allusions to the Chekov narratives enrich the context for the educated audience. Nevertheless the play must stand on its own, as must Sonya and Andrey as they confront the dilemmas and disappointments of middle-age.

Up from the country on matters of personal business in the early 1920s, the two characters had met by chance in a

café, in Moscow, the city that had always been regarded by Andrey's three sisters as the city of dreams where their real life would begin. In the same café, the next evening, Sonya and Andrey connect again over tea, soup, and fresh brown bread. They joke about the physical effects of the Spartan conditions in Russia – chilblains, frostbite, chapped lips, stiff legs, and numb bottoms. Andrey, a shy classical musician of shabby elegance who lives on a small property in the provinces, has come to the big city with his violin as his passport. He boasts about the wonderful diva in *La Bohème* for whom he plays in the orchestra, and he brags about his doctor son and engineer daughter. Sonya is thrilled that her new friend is so illustrious in the arts and suitably impressed by his gifted children. Like Andrey's sisters she has no children of her own. Sonya is now in charge of the country estate that she had inherited from her mother and that her Uncle Vanya had mismanaged while in charge of it on her behalf. Sonya has come to the city to struggle with complicated paperwork issued to her by the Ministry of Agriculture and the central bank. She is considering their

business plan for her to maintain the estate by planting trees which will require less of her time than grain crops. The afforestation project will appeal to her family friend, and her late Uncle Vanya's physician Dr. Michael Astrov, a man who sings the health-giving praises of trees and bees and chases his dream of saving the world. Sonya is afraid of losing a precious small garden that she had purchased in her youth, a symbol of her lost potential for procreativity.

Keeping one another company, Sonya and Andrey tell stories of the past and present and plan for their futures. They reveal details of their lives and habits, and as they do so they develop a relationship of the moment and deal in their characteristic ways with the opportunity that their chance meetings afford them. At first trying to hide their loneliness and longing for love with numerous fictions, Sonya and Andrey gradually confront their self-deceptions and personal truths and how these influence their relationships.

Admitting their vulnerabilities brings Sonya and Andrey closer, and then their many fears interfere with real intimacy.

A strong dose of vodka is not enough to quell their anxieties about loving and being loved, even though the effects of the alcohol provide a giddy coziness, a welcome distraction, revelations of drinking habits, and a moment of rebellion. In a moment of alcohol induced boldness Sonya takes a step out of the mould of the past and gaily plans to blow her money on a visit to the opera to hear Andrey play and the much-touted diva sing in *La Bohème*. His artifice about to be caught out, Andrey covers his shame by trying to put her off so that she will not discover his secret. Thinking that his lack of response means that he wants to concentrate on his work undisturbed, she promises that she will be discreet at the opera, claiming that her interest is not in possessing him but in adoring his genius, along with that of the diva and the master Puccini. Still Andrey does not welcome her idea. Hopes dashed, she falls into the state of fear she hates, into that “endless tundra of aloneness, of loneliness stretching out before.”

Andrey is moved to deflate the fable of his involvement in *La Bohème*. He admits that he is merely a street musician.

He thinks Sonya is angry, justifiably so, but she says that she has no reason to care. He continues to strip away the layers of the onion of deception: His daughter lives miles away and barely stays in touch; his son is serving a jail sentence. Whenever Andrey has enough money to bribe the guards for the passes, he comes to Moscow to visit his son for the allotted hour. Andrey reveals his reality, and his true self emerges. Sonya understands.

Andrey asks Sonya about Michael, her beloved Dr. Astrov, the tree and bee man. Andrey may be checking out the competition or perhaps he is sensitive to a corresponding fiction on Sonya's part. Sonya responds by speaking passionately about having loved Dr. Astrov for 23 years, all the while packing up her stuff to leave Andrey. She and Andrey having exchanged addresses, they part amicably, properly, but with restrained passion, and Sonya prepares a graceful exit, planning to meet Andrey again.

Sonya hesitates and returns to admit one final fiction: The great Dr Astrov is in fact married, and more than that, he is

married to her beautiful stepmother Elena, the one whose rejection killed Uncle Vanya. Sonya cannot promise to see Andrey again because Michael who lives mainly apart from Elena comes looking for Sonya when he is drunk. Sonya needs to wait at home for him, to be there whenever he may appear, because in these moments they “give each other occasional and elusive sustenance.” Andrey is no stranger to longing, so he understands. Sonya tells Andrey that grasping elusive moments helps her to cohere so that the tundra of loneliness that still frightens her, no longer holds terror. She must be referring to her occasional moments of contact with Michael, but she might possibly be inferring that her it is these two chance meetings with Andrey that have led to this hopeful progression. She leaves quickly. Optimist that he is, Andrey quickly resumes contact with her by writing a letter. Who knows, maybe they will meet again next month?

Self and society

Like Checkov the Russian playwright whose work he has rendered in English, Friel (born in Northern Ireland in 1929) deals with national politics and personal themes of family life

filled with false hope, thwarted ideals, depression, futility, and distorted perceptions of reality. Friel says that he is drawn to the Russian characteristics of “behaving as if their old certainties were as sustaining as ever – even though they know in their hearts that their society is in meltdown and the future has neither a welcome nor even an accommodation for them” and he finds them sympathetic “because they have no expectations whatever from love but still invest everything in it” (qtd. in Delaney 2000). Like Checkov, Friel deals empathically yet humorously with the tragedy of life not lived fully and relationship potentials not fulfilled. As Richard Pine (2002) notes, both playwrights are concerned with “a lifetime’s experience of emptiness, of longing, of deferral; action (the real world) always taking place elsewhere.” Where Checkov’s lens was a wide angle on family and society, Friel’s is a telephoto on the two characters rescued from the edge of the earlier plays and given their due.

Similarly, the perspective of the family therapist who deals with the family system and its way of relating to the family members, the generations, and the wider society

differs from that of the psychoanalyst who deals with the internal world and relationships in love and work. Yet both of them are dealing with the correspondence between the inside and the outside, between real relationships in the outside world that affect how a person matures over time, and the internal memory trace of those relationships from the past that color the current relationships and expectations. It all depends on your point of view. In life and therefore in theatre that captures life, similar patterns are reflected at different levels of scale. The shapes at the centre of a complex inherently chaotic system like life are re-created at the edge. It is from the edge that Friel draws Sonya and Andrey to illuminate Chekhov's themes and propel them into the future.

Peripheral to the main narrative in the plays in which we first met them before the revolution, Sonya and Andrey are invited to step out of the old frame to become central characters in their shared drama and in the imagination of one another. Friel takes them from their dependency on the family setting of the Imperialist years and sets them as lone

figures adjusting to the post-revolutionary collectivist Soviet system. Friel shows us that without their family systems and the old order, Sonya and Andrey have lost their bearings. Through their dialogue, Friel deals with the emotional memory of human experience, with hopes, loves, and losses at the personal level at a time of huge social change.

Afterplay is about the relationship between two lost souls and their disconnection from their past life in rural Imperialist Russia and their disorientation in the new Communist society represented by Moscow, the ideal city of Andrey's sisters' shared dream. Shortages of supplies and mutiny had led to the removal of the Tzar from power. Revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries continued to fight it out until the Bolsheviks gained control, nationalized the industries, instituted collective farming, invested heavily in the Arts, and introduced administration by workers' committees. Sonya embodies the struggle to cope with the new rules and regulations imposed on the estate while Andrey (who has not benefited personally from the increase in Soviet investment in

the Arts) has joined the ranks of the poor artistes who subsist on bread and soup.

I am inferring the influence of the time and the political situation on the two characters. The play goes on as if the couple is isolated from the harsher realities of life in Moscow after the revolution. Meeting in the early 1920s, the characters are living during a time of Civil War. There would not be a Ministry of Agriculture. Sonya would not have been allowed to continue living on 300 acres. The peasants would have been in control of the land, and she would have been killed, banished, or relegated to a small house on the land at best. Poverty and food shortage would have been extreme. A Russian psychologist colleague who saw the play with me found it unbelievable that the two characters could be reminiscing with no direct reference to the social conditions, as incredible to him as if New Yorkers on Sept 12 were not mentioning the destruction of the World Trade center. Drought and famine nearly undid the Communist economy until Lenin allowed limited private ownership in farming later in the 1920s.

So we have to think of this as a play that is more about intimacy than about the social order. It shows that ordinary people go on living their lives no matter what is going on. It has them forming a relationship. It shows that people connect in the present based on a degree of fit between their past experiences and how these experiences have been structured in their personalities and are then expressed in their intimate relationships.

Sonya and Andrey are drawn together because they are strangers in the big city, provincial people who are up against the new system. They look at each other and find something familiar there. They talk about family, loves, jealousy, betrayal, and ideals never achieved. Sonya is attracted to Andrey because he reminds her of her hapless Uncle Vanya. Andrey is attracted to her as a dependable person unlike his wife who has divorced him, and a courageous one unlike his sister who killed herself in adversity. They are alike in being strangers facing defeat and they are different in that Sonya is fighting to remain self-sustaining whereas Andrey (who may be remembered as a gambler and drunkard from *The Three*

Sisters) is close to destitute. Whatever money Sonya can bring in will be ploughed back into the land. Whatever money Andrey can earn as a music teacher in the provinces will be used up financing his trips to the city, apparently so that he can have the pleasure of playing in the highly regarded opera, but really so that he can tend to his incarcerated son. Even though life has got them down, Sonya and Andrey find some hope in their connection. I imagine that Andrey sees in Sonya the strength for getting over losses, and that she sees in him the ability to appreciate great music and to enjoy the simple pleasure of fresh brown peasant bread.

Sonya and Andrey are joined by their amusement in references to the discomfort of life in Russia at that time – chapped lips, chilblains on the feet, rashes, a numb bottom. This cartoon of physicality puts matters of basic comfort up front and serves to distract the protagonists from being aware of sensual longings. They also connect over conversation about land, both of them having lived in country estates, but of different size. Sonya manages 300 acres: Andrey a quarter

of an acre. Sonya will have acres of trees: Andrey has two birches. Although I see in my mind two silver birches that have been there for years like Andrey and Sonya, I also see the pair of trees as elements of former glory, standing tall in comparison to the image of Andrey's actual legs and bottom, numb from too much sitting.

At times Sonya and Andrey interact like a practical, but flustered, worn-down mother and her sweetly eager but hapless son. At other times they are like a brother and sister, or cousins, comparing their experience of the same family in which they grew up. They recognize a sense of kinship when they compare themselves to their identical canvas carrier bags, symbols of their selves as culture carriers filled with detritus of the past. Finally they are a middle-aged man and woman in a time-limited couple, a fragile couple whose formation is as compromised by family trauma as the getting together of couples in the earlier plays, and whose destiny is to carry forth the legacy from that generation.

Sonya and Andrey see in one another the hope of a new love, and each of them makes an assertive move towards it, Sonya with her generous gesture of staying another night to attend his opera performance, and Andrey in asking to meet again and in writing his letter. Nevertheless Andrey's inflated self-portrayal, Sonya's anxious practicality, and their shared history of rejection in love block the flowering of their feelings for one another, and the tyranny of the past keeps them stuck as a temporary couple. They will have to continue taking turns in shedding the chains of the past to break free from their disappointing relationships if they are to inspire new love for one another.

Conclusion

Tom Keatinge (2002) experienced *Afterplay* as “a mixture of real life anguish and racing fantasy as the two colliding characters continue on the paths defined for them by Chekhov, both miserable in their existence, almost finding solace with one another.” In contrast, Alan Bird (2002) found *Afterplay* “bland and prosaic – two characters frozen in time and totally isolated from the world around them” and

Peter Marks (2005) thinks of *Afterplay* as “a protracted sketch, an indulgence, a well-written exercise in advanced-placement theatre, an extended inside joke, a master class in acting technique, all a parlor game.” Harvey O’Brien’s opinion comes closest to my own. He holds that “the play itself becomes an incomplete reflection which still inspires thought and contemplation” (O’Brien 2002).

I agree that *Afterplay* is an object for contemplation, a reflection on the topic of self and society, individual and couple. Sonya and Andrey could be members meeting at a Club lunch table, divorced people talking about their children at a soccer game, a widow and widower who meet over bridge at a senior centre in their seventies, people embarking on an affair, or teenagers who study at the coffee-shop. The fears that inhibit their encounter back then have resonance today: We are hurt when we see desire invested in someone other than ourselves. We misinterpret anxious preoccupation as a rejection of us. Like Sonya and Andrey, we hide our frailties and distort our realities to make them palatable. We too show ourselves in the best light to find acceptance and

protect our self esteem. In Sonya and Andrey, we see ourselves and our longing to be in a meaningful relationship. In *Afterplay*, we see a universal dance of intimacy.

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