

at play

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Michal Daniel

Diana Son's STOP KISS had its New York premiere at the Joseph Papp Public Theater where it extended three times, making it the longest running play at the Public under the George C. Wolfe administration. The play earned nominations for both the Outer Critics Circle Award and the Drama League Award, and was a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. In this poignant and funny play, two young women slowly discover that they might be falling in love. When their tentative first kiss provokes an act of violence, their lives are transformed in ways they couldn't have predicted. Our director of professional rights, Robert Vaughan, had a phone conversation with Diana Son about how her own life has been transformed since the success of STOP KISS.

RV: This is going to be fun.

DS: Yeah.

We're putting you on the cover. There's a picture of you sitting on a ledge at the Public Theater.

You're kidding. My hair is twelve inches longer than that now.

Is it really?

Well, not *that* much longer. It's kind of grown out. But I'm a playwright—when else would I get my picture taken?

Exactly. So, did you know you're a complete mystery?

Really?

Everybody I've dealt with on STOP KISS so far has the most interesting questions about you. Should we keep you a mystery, or should we tell them about you?

It's so tempting ... I wonder which we should do?

I'll give you an example, but I shouldn't name names. That would be rude.

Remember, this *is* on tape.

Somebody was convinced that you only wanted a woman to direct your play.

Oh, right. That is so ...

We talked about that once.

Yes, it's very interesting to me, the assumptions people make about me as an artist based on ... a play. You know, based on *one* play.

It's also cool, though ...

It *is* cool ...

... because you make their minds go in all sorts of directions.

Yeah ... It's great to know that people can fill

in what they think you are, based on something you wrote, but the truth is, I don't care if somebody has a woman direct it so long as it's somebody who really gets the play, and is going to have a vision for it. But not an agenda.

Exactly. I would hate to see a production of STOP KISS by a director that had an agenda. I don't think it fits.

In a way, the play can be manipulated to hold that, but for me, it just breaks my heart.

continued next page

“KISS”
and tell

asides

top 10

Dramatists Play Service scored a perfect 10 out of 10 last fall when *American Theatre* magazine published its annual list of the 10 most-produced plays of the current season and all of them appear in our catalogue. We couldn't be prouder of this unprecedented accomplishment and are happy to share the list with you now. (Technically, we only handle the non-professional rights to THE GLASS MENAGERIE, but still...) The top 10 plays of the current season are: THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE by Martin McDonagh; THE LAST NIGHT OF BALLYHOO by Alfred Uhry; MASTER CLASS by Terrence McNally; SIDE MAN by Warren Leight; AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN by Douglas Carter Beane; THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN by Martin McDonagh; THE GLASS MENAGERIE by Tennessee Williams; GROSS INDECENCY, THE THREE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE by Moises Kaufman; THE OLD SETTLER by John Henry Redwood; and last year's Pulitzer Prize winner, WIT by Margaret Edson.

"time" will tell

Time magazine cited the following DPS titles and authors as among the best theatrical events of 1999: the Broadway revival, via London, of Eugene O'Neill's THE ICEMAN COMETH; THE LONESOME WEST by Martin McDonagh; Arthur Miller, for the Broadway revivals of DEATH OF A SALESMAN, THE PRICE and A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE; CLOSER by Patrick Marber; and SNAKEBIT by David Marshall Grant.

significant others

You've probably had your fill of end-of-the-century best-of lists by now, but one more couldn't hurt. In honor of its 25th anniversary, the American Theatre Critics Association voted on which American plays had the greatest impact on the 20th century. Coming in first place was Tennessee Williams' A STREET-CAR NAMED DESIRE followed by Arthur Miller's DEATH OF A SALESMAN and Eugene O'Neill's LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT. Tennessee Williams also placed fifth for THE GLASS MENAGERIE.

congratulations to...

Alan Ball (FIVE WOMEN WEARING THE SAME DRESS), winner of the Golden Globe Award for his screenplay *American Beauty*.

Shelagh Stephenson, winner of the 2000 Olivier Award for Best New Comedy for THE MEMORY OF WATER. Ms. Stephenson's latest play is AN EXPERIMENT WITH AN AIR PUMP.

Kenneth Lonergan, author of THIS IS OUR YOUTH and co-winner of the Sundance Film Festival's grand jury prize for *You Can Count On Me*, which he both wrote and directed.

TheatreBooks, celebrating its 25th anniversary of serving the performing arts community of Toronto with books about theatre, film, dance and opera. The store and its owners have survived relocations, evictions and audits, plus the onslaught of mega-stores and the Internet. For all the help they've given us over the years, DPS wishes them increasing success in the future.

dialogue

Well, I think your play is too human ...

That's what I hope it is. And I was thinking, the line that, for me, is the most important one in the play, is when Callie says, "And they tell me to speak truth to power, and I don't know what that means. Sara. Do you?"

Right.

For me, that's the key line, because it's just about her and Sara. It's one of my favorite moments in the play.

Have you seen the production at Seattle Rep yet, or are you just going up tomorrow?

No, I've been in rehearsal and I saw a runthrough two weeks ago. But I'll be seeing it in the space for the first time this weekend. I'm thrilled with the production. Steven Dietz is directing.

Who's also one of our playwrights.

Yes, he told me. And, first of all, a playwright-director is such a great combination. When I'm in the room, he's doing his job as the director, and yet there are times when he'll direct the actor to me. In a very easy, organic way, not because he's afraid of giving the wrong answer. You'll just see a click in his brain and he'll say, "Oh, Diana, do you want to answer that?" There's something in him as a playwright that recognizes, "I've got the source here. She's going to be able to answer this more clearly than I can, so let's hear from her first." And I take that opportunity he gives me very seriously, so I don't go off on some whole dramaturgical thing about how the character got there, you know. I try to be very responsible, and answer in a way that's clear and actable.

It must be a thrill to be able to go up there to work on that, because it can't be the same working on *The West Wing*.

Absolutely not. Because when I'm in rehearsal with about a dozen people, I think, "This is it, all of us in the room. All we need is an audience." In terms of the making of the thing, this is everything we need. There is a sense of completeness, and of empowerment, that just can't be matched by TV or film. You see these truckloads, you know, with movies and television ... Truckloads of antiquated equipment. And screws. And big mounting rods. And metal. And, you think, do you really need all that? Because when I'm riding my bike in New York, and I pass by some movie truck, and they're unloading all this equipment, I think, "I could get off my bike right now and I could make theatre." It's one of the ways, one of the many ways, in which the theatre is just more fulfilling and rewarding.

When you write for *The West Wing*, do you have to be careful about certain issues and how you deal with them?

No, I won't censor myself because I know that there are so many checkpoints between me and the, sort of, "product" that I might as well get what I want on the page. Somebody else can tell me to backpedal. Or to change directions.

Is it a p.c. thing, or...?

I think the p.c. kind of filter happens in the theatre, whereas in TV, there's a more conservative censor.

They're both censors, honestly, whether it's political correctness or not wanting to scare off the advertisers. Both can be a form of censorship.

Are you bored with p.c. by now?

I believe very much in the importance of language, and that if you want to change attitudes it starts with language. So, I am strongly behind the use of certain phrases. "Asian-American" versus "oriental." But sometimes I'm confronted with a sort of political correctness ... For example, the assumption that I would only want to work with a woman director. I just find that unnecessary. Not helpful. Because I am interested in being broad, in being open, in being inclusive.

Well, I guess we know that Steven Dietz is not a woman.

Steven Dietz is not a woman?!? (laughs) You know, there are no Asian-Americans in the Seattle Rep cast. And that's because I've said to every director that I want the play done with a mixed-race cast because it takes place in New York City. I leave it to the director and to whatever actors are available to decide who's best for what role and who is what. And I think there are people who assumed because Sandra Oh played Sara in the premiere production that Sara is Asian-American. And for me, I don't want that assumption, because Callie could be Asian-American.

Exactly. That was a great cast.

It was. I have such a fondness for those guys. You know, I sort of wrote the role for Jessica Hecht, because I saw Jessica in another play when I was halfway through the first draft [of STOP KISS]. And what struck me was the incredible trust that she showed in her performance, trust of the audience. And she allowed herself to be vulnerable in a way that was just so new to me.

What was the play?

Christopher Kyle's PLUNGE.

Oh, PLUNGE ... Another play that we have!

Is that right? See, I'm hitting them all. I'm hitting all the marks here. (laughs) So, rather than really writing to "Jessica's good at this" or "Jessica's good at that," I wrote this character. It helped me to know that I could trust somebody like Jessica to play the role with

These rejection letters were basically valentines, but the last line would always be, "Unfortunately..." You know, whatever.

both the wit and the vulnerability that it needed.

It's what your play's about: a sense of community and a sense of trust. And you're building that with the actors.

Yeah. I would work with any of those actors in a premiere production again. I mean, I would write just to

include them. In anything.

Were you really there every night at the Public?

Oh, no! Did somebody say that?

I heard a rumor.

I was there a lot, I was there a lot. But certainly not every night. I would go when I had friends coming to the show, which was often. Because, suddenly, people you haven't seen in ten years call you up and say, "I'm going to see your play."

Oh, that's fun.

Yeah. So I would meet friends. And I just love to watch the audience. I love to see how they respond differently one night than they do another. How they'll laugh at different places or be upset at different places. And I also really loved watching everybody's performance get richer, you know? *Nobody stunk.*

I saw it early on, and then I saw it later after they extended it, and it was just wonderful.

Rick Holmes, who played Peter—his performance just got more and more layered as it went on. And somebody said to me that that's the hardest role in the play because you've already decided how you want to feel about him before he enters. Which is basically, you don't want him there. You want him out of the picture. And then Rick would show up, and people would just *die*, because suddenly their sympathies swung in a way that they didn't expect and didn't want them to. Because *there's nothing wrong with him*. Sometimes I just hung out in the green room, but I would go down to watch certain scenes, and Rick's scenes were certainly two that I would go down to see. Because, he just made the fullest art out of that role.

Do you want to go on record with giving any future producers advice about how to approach STOP KISS?

It seems that everybody, at least once or twice, rehearsed the play in chronological order. And I think that's very helpful, because you want to help the two actresses playing Callie and Sara to really trust that relationship. And to know that the comfort they have with each other, both to challenge each other more, and to enjoy each other more, has to grow incrementally. By the second scene, they *can't* be that threatened. So, I think that rehearsing in chronological order helps them measure that out, the growth in the relationship.

I guess we should remind people that they can't produce it or perform it that way ...

Yeah. The interesting thing is, everybody always says, "Wow, that was so helpful, I'm so glad we did that, but the play is infinitely more interesting the way you wrote it."

So, I think I should ask you some dopey questions.

What magazines do you read?

I read *Harpers* and *The New Yorker*. I think that's pretty much ... Oh, I read *Health* magazine. I also read *Cook's* magazine. That should have been the first one I mentioned.

No trash?

You know, the occasional *People*. Whenever I'm flying

to New York and L.A., I always read *Vanity Fair*. Because it's the whole trip. The whole flight. I rip out all the ads, and then the magazine is about 12-pages thick.

That annoys the hell out of me.

Rip 'em out, rip 'em out. You'll be shocked. The thing is, like, as thick as a nickel. I recommend it as a practice.

What about Movieline?

I don't see that one very often.

Really? They would ask interview questions like, "What's the one thing that's always in your refrigerator?"

Oooh. My refrigerator is relentlessly full. We've got everything in there. Yeah, it's pretty Y2K ready all year round.

So, what are you writing for Meg Ryan?

I'm writing a movie tentatively called *The Rain Chime*. It's an adaptation of a foreign movie. It's a lovely story, I'm having a really good time. You know she has a production company, Prufrock Pictures? And it's a pleasure to tell you this, but there are producers in this industry who are really great dramaturgs. Certainly for my first experience writing a screenplay, I'm not getting those notes like, "Can the best friend become ... a dog?" I'm getting really smart, really thematic notes.

That's cool. I like her.

She seems to be very smart. She's certainly hired really smart women to run her company. And they're very respectful of the writer.

In Hollywood?!

No, no, *these* folks.

Well, you're going to give Hollywood a bad name.

Meeee? I don't think I would be the first. But, I haven't had the experience yet that's going to make me say, "I've had a terrible experience writing this film." Right now, I'm probably having a pretty positive one. I think you have to choose your projects carefully, and for me that begins with the fact that I have to be really invested in the story in the first place. Even when I'm just taking a gig, anything that I take in film or TV is just to supplement my playwriting career.

I was going to ask you about that next. When do we get to see BOY?

I have to rewrite Act Two. I have such affection for that play, and I would love to see it done, but it's so formidable with a thirteen-member cast.

Well, you're at Seattle Rep now with STOP KISS, so maybe we should talk to Ben and Sharon about that.

Yeah, maybe ... I mean, we've had great luck with BOY. I think that every theatre that read it sent a really nice letter. I would have to *look up* words just to understand these rejection letters that were, basically, valentines. But, you know, the last line of the letter would always be, "Unfortunately, we don't have the resources to produce the play ... " you know, whatever. And I was lucky enough to have that wonderful production at La Jolla with Michael Greif directing. Who is a fantastic director. But I continued to work on the play, and I hope that

people will become enthusiastic about it again. It's a fun play; it's a very, very theatrical play. If people only know STOP KISS, the assumption is I'm a naturalistic writer, and BOY is not naturalistic at all. It's so much fun putting that show together ... There's dog-poo.

For my first experience writing a screenplay, I'm not getting those notes, like, "Can the best friend become...a dog?"

There's frogs. There's secret places. At least, from my experience at La Jolla, it was like camp. It was so fun to put it on.

We wanted to publish it, but we have to wait, I guess.

Until I fix it?

Yeah.

Yeah. I'm going on a Sundance playwrights retreat next weekend, and I am going to be writing my new play for the Public there, but I hope to be able to put a couple hours in on BOY. Just fixes. It's only two or three scenes, but ...

That's going to be fun.

It's going to be great fun. Doug Wright is there, Paula Vogel is there ...

Two more of our playwrights!

Seeee? I'm a *company girl*, Robert!

Well, my first interview for our newsletter was with Paula, and now my second is with you.

I don't personally know Paula ...

You'll love her.

She has been so encouraging to me in the press, or through other people. I met her a couple times. You know what? The first time I met her, I introduced myself and she said, "Oh, I'm Paula. I love BOY!" (laughs) You know, so kind, so generous. And encouraging. And Doug is so lovely, too. Honestly, I cannot wait to have a stretch of eight days to just work on a new play. I have the idea, I have the idea for the structure. I know enough about the story to feel like I can get started. In both TV and film, they want to know beat by beat what's going to happen before you even start writing. And you've just gotta say, "You know, I have to *discover* something." And with this play, I know I have enough plot and ideas to know who the characters are, to know what the situation is. But, it's got to become ... the *characters* and *me*. And I've got to find out everything after that. When I'm in that stage, and I'm given the time and the place to do it, I just feel like I am the luckiest person in the world, that I have the best job in the world. And that the only thing that's going to make it better, and that *drives* me through the whole writing process, is knowing that when I'm done, the collaborative process is just beginning. □

"DINNER" IN NEW YORK, "DÎNER" À PARIS by Donald Margulies

For the first time a play of mine was opening abroad before opening in New York. The production, despite its distinctly French flavor, made a persuasive argument for the universality of *Dinner with Friends*. In a production that leaned more toward boulevard entertainment than rueful comedy, the play I saw was still very much the play I wrote.

I don't get out much. I'm basically a social person and yet, paradoxically, I have chosen a profession that insists that I spend most of my days alone. So, when a new play of mine is about to go into rehearsal, I feel as if a party is in the offing, one that will provide a refreshing tonic for the months of collegial deprivation I endured.

My euphoria will last three, four days, tops. I know playwrights who can't stay away from rehearsal; I'm not one of them. As soon as the actors feel sufficiently comfortable to start making the play their own, I begin my own process of separating from the play and disappear for about a week.

My current play, *DINNER WITH FRIENDS*, was no exception. We — the actors, Matthew Arkin, Lisa Emery, Kevin Kilner and Julie White; the director, Daniel Sullivan, and I — began rehearsing on the stage of the Variety Arts Theater in New York last Sept. 15, and on Sept. 17 I was on a plane to Paris. The occasion for this leave-taking was the premiere of *Dîner Entre Amis*, the French-language version of the play, the first time a play of mine was opening abroad before opening in New York.

DINNER WITH FRIENDS, which concerns marriage and friendship in midlife, began as a commissioned work for the Actors Theater of Louisville and had its world premiere in the 1998 Humana Festival of New American Plays; a revised version was produced later that year by South Coast Repertory in California.

The play's arrival in Paris came about serendipitously. It would not have occurred if a distinguished French stage actress, Micheline Boudet, had not happened to visit a friend in, of all places, Huntington Beach, Calif., in the fall of 1996.

Instead of going out to a movie, Ms. Boudet insisted that her friend take her to see some theater. The work they chose was my two-woman play about a writing teacher and her protégée, *COLLECTED STORIES*, then having its world premiere at South Coast Repertory in nearby Costa Mesa. Ms. Boudet recognized in the character of Ruth Steiner, the older writer, a role for herself and moved quickly — as she tells it, she phoned her daughter, Marie, in Paris that very night — to secure the French rights. The younger Ms. Boudet wrote a faithful translation, and the play, given the more lyrical title *Comme un Écho* ("Like an Echo"), found a home at the Studio des Champs-Élysées, the smaller, second stage of the Comédie des Champs-Élysées.

The play, co-starring Liana Fulga, opened to good reviews in October 1998 and ran for 100 performances. Its director was Michel Fagadau, the

theater's formidable artistic director. On the strength of the response to *Comme un Écho*, my French debut, Mr. Fagadau asked to read my newest play, *DINNER WITH FRIENDS*. His reply was swift and decisive: He would translate the play himself and direct it the following summer on the 630-seat main stage for an open-ended run.

Mr. Fagadau and I forged a friendly working relationship over the telephone. (While my French is nonexistent, his English is quite good.) A typical early morning conversation would begin with, "Donald, I need another word," and he and I would try out a variety of synonyms until he formulated a more satisfactory translation.

Mr. Fagadau discussed the challenge he was having in unifying the playing styles of his four actors, all of whom had trained in different genres. French actors, he told me, tend to play either comedy or drama but do not easily traverse both, as American plays like *DINNER WITH FRIENDS* require. Only when he equated the style with that of the films of Woody Allen, whose work is revered in France, did his actors seem to find the play's tone.

The play requires seven discrete settings. Because so much of the action centers on domestic rituals like cooking and dining, a certain reality is called for. In its American productions, the play's directors (Michael Bloom in Louisville, Mr. Sullivan in Costa Mesa and New York) and scenic designers (Paul Owen, Thomas Lynch and Neil Patel, respectively) all took a realistic approach. When I asked Mr. Fagadau how his production had solved these scenic concerns, he replied that his designer, Florica Malureanu, had devised a system of "white cubes." I was skeptical. I had visions of a sterile, European-Futurist environment that had no relation to the world of my play.

More fundamentally, I had my doubts that *DINNER WITH FRIENDS* — about two Connecticut couples in their 40's, longtime friends, whose lives are shaken by a marital breakup — would be of any interest to the French; the French, with their famously sophisticated attitudes toward domestic life, whose leaders are buried with both wives and mistresses in attendance, who found our national obsession with our own president's sexual indiscretions terribly amusing. How could the play's American attitudes toward fidelity seem anything but quaint?

I was curious to see for myself how it played to French audiences. Having been unable to attend *Comme un Écho*, I was determined not to miss *Dîner Entre Amis*. Seeing my play performed in French would



Harold Shapiro

either be a rare treat or a dubious one, like watching an Eric Rohmer film without subtitles. My wife, Lynn Street, a physician, took time off to join me.

As we rode by taxi into central Paris, we saw several kiosks with red, white and blue *Dîner Entre Amis* posters emblazoned on them, with my name displayed along with those of the cast: Didier Sandre, Catherine Frot, Jean-Pierre Malo and Ms. Fulga. Then, the theater itself came into view: the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, an elegant, early 20th-century Modernist structure on Avenue Montaigne.

The box office personnel were markedly unimpressed by the arrival of the American playwright with his paltry French. I was brusquely shooed away so that French-speaking patrons could be assisted. Finally, a security guard responded to my wife's more successful efforts at communication, and gave us entry to the administrative offices. With his assistant Valerie's help, we found Mr. Fagadau anxiously waiting for us in the theater. We embraced like old friends.

The magnificent three-tiered jewel box of a playhouse was packed for this Saturday night preview; chairs had to be brought in from the bar for my wife and me. Word of mouth had been strong, I was told, and the last of the reduced-price previews were virtually sold out. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Parisian audience was extremely well-dressed for a night out at the theater, certainly by New York standards; the scent of perfume was remarkably pungent.

The lights dimmed, the pre-show music began and I was instantly confused: The music filling the house was Dixieland! What possible association did it have

with my play? My vexation subsided when I concluded that this seemingly odd choice must be Mr. Fagadau's homage to Woody Allen. If this evocation of Mr. Allen's films helped establish a cultural reference point for French audiences viewing my play, so be it.

I had to make similar adjustments all evening. As the play began, I was confronted with an opening scene — in which Gabe and Karen recount for their friend Beth details of their culinary tour of Italy — that was taking place not in the couple's kitchen, as in the script, but in their living room. Moreover, the renamed Gregg and Karen were playing host to their friend Lisa. ("Gregg," I was told, was more euphonious in French, and "Beth" would translate, unattractively, as "stupid.") Some beats of dialogue seemed to go on longer than I had remembered, and it dawned on me, to my momentary dismay, that Mr. Fagadau had translated the Louisville draft, which had since undergone two revisions.

My pleasure increased as the evening progressed. The white cubes, it turned out, worked far better than I had imagined. They were actually modules which, when placed in different configurations and with fabric draped over them, became sofa, chair, bed. It was instructive to see how well the play could work with a minimum of scenery. Ms. Malureanu's most audacious scenic element was saved for the final scene, which takes place in Gabe (Gregg) and Karen's bedroom. Because so much of the intimate dialogue is played with the characters in bed, the designer, concerned about sight lines, came up with the idea of placing a mirror over the bed. This was momentarily worrisome to me, because it might suggest that the homebody couple had a heretofore hidden kinky side.

But the spare, stylized production design somehow permitted the use of the mirror (a more literal design probably would not), and it even served to reflect the pervasive image of the scene: two versions of a couple — both young and middle-aged — sharing a marital bed.

In the play, the character Tom, the wayward husband (played in New York by Mr. Kilner), tells his best friend of the loneliness he experienced in his marriage. Women in the Louisville audience responded to Tom's confession with derisive laughter and heckling ("Dog!" at least one woman spat out), as if they were at a taping of "The Jerry Springer Show." In Paris, Didier Sandre's Tom was more irresistible rake than anguished adulterer; the audience seemed to accept his foibles as archetypal male behavior.

The rendering of my dialogue in French lent it a mellifluous rhythm. I had no problem following it: The laughs, which seemed to be falling in all the right places, provided a welcome series of touchstones. The laughter persisted throughout the evening, interspersed with moments of palpable attentiveness, and the curtain call was thrilling. The sophisti-

cated Parisian audience had proved me wrong: It clearly enjoyed my meditation on marriage.

The production, despite its distinctly French flavor — the kissing of both cheeks, the bedside glass of wine, a Martha's Vineyard summer house that seemed curiously Provençal — had made a persuasive argument for the universality of *DINNER WITH FRIENDS*. In a production that leaned more toward boulevard entertainment than rueful comedy, the play I saw was still very much the play I wrote.

The following Monday: Opening night in Paris is a much more civilized ritual than its New York equivalent. Instead of crowding into smoky, impossibly noisy restaurants with strangers, the company — the immediate family — convenes for a late meal (in this case, very late: Dinner was not served until 1 AM). The four actors, their significant others, the director, various producers, the designers, my French agent, my wife and myself, gathered around a U-shaped table in the plush rear dining room of Le Relais at the Plaza-Athénée.

Of notable interest was that the party included the drama critic for a major Paris newspaper. (Try imagining such a guest at an opening night celebration in New York.) I enjoyed chatting with him, but I must admit I was a bit unnerved. Had he enjoyed his evening in the theater or was he just being perverse? The critic's appreciation of the play was made clear when his review ran a few days later; no mention was made of the dinner we had shared.

On Nov. 4, *DINNER WITH FRIENDS* opened in New York, while *Diner Entre Amis* extended its run into the spring. During a weeklong hiatus, Mr. Fagadau, accompanied by Ms. Fulga, visited New York, and on Jan. 4, I took them to see *DINNER WITH FRIENDS*. The last time I had seen them was on the elegant Avenue Montaigne, and there we were on scruffy Third Avenue, in the rain. The juxtaposition could not have been more absurd.

Mr. Fagadau found the Off Broadway production, which I consider definitive, too naturalistic for his taste. He felt that it wouldn't work in Paris. He agreed that both audiences laughed at many of the same things but that the quality of the laughter was different. "Americans," he concluded, "are able to see themselves and laugh at what they see. The French see their in-laws or their neighbors. They have a much easier time laughing at other people than at themselves." □

Donald Margulies' current projects include an adaptation of Sholem Asch's 1906 play "God of Vengeance," which will have its world premiere at A Contemporary Theatre in Seattle, and an NBC mini-series based on Tom Wolfe's novel "A Man in Full." His other plays include "Collected Stories," "Sight Unseen," "The Loma Family Picnic" and "The Model Apartment." This article originally appeared in the Jan. 16, 2000 New York Times and is reprinted by permission of the author. All rights reserved.

APARTMENT 3A by Jeff Daniels
A Public Television fund-raiser questions the possibility of an afterlife.

BETTY'S SUMMER VACATION by Christopher Durang
Summer housemates turn a cheerful cottage into a bloody media circus. Literally.

BOOK OF DAYS by Lanford Wilson
A small town actress playing St. Joan struggles to expose a murder.

BOOM TOWN by Jeff Daniels
A searing drama mixing small town love, politics and the consequences of betrayal.

THE BUNGLER by Molière,
translated by Richard Wilbur
Molière's first verse comedy, and the one that Victor Hugo considered his finest.

THE COUNTESS by Gregory Murphy
Obsession strikes an art critic, his wife and the Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais.

THE COUNTRY CLUB by Douglas Carter Beane
A group of lonely young WASP friends reunite over twelve consecutive holidays in this satirical new comedy by the author of *AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN*.

COYOTE ON A FENCE by Bruce Graham
An emotionally riveting look at capital punishment.

A DEVIL INSIDE by David Lindsay-Abaire
Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* drives a Russian literature professor to extremes.

DINNER WITH FRIENDS by Donald Margulies
A married couple comes apart, causing their best friends to question their own relationship.

EPIC PROPORTIONS by Larry Coen and David Crane
The Broadway comedy about a DeMille-like biblical epic being filmed during Hollywood's heyday.

ESCANABA IN DA MOONLIGHT by Jeff Daniels
A slapstick farce about deer-hunting men in northern Michigan.

EVERY SEVENTEEN MINUTES THE CROWD GOES CRAZY! by Paul Zindel
A family of exuberant and startled kids are left to fend for themselves by their mother and father.

THE EXACT CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE
by Joan Vail Thorne
A dominating Southern matriarch meets the new woman in her son's life.

EXACT CHANGE by David Epstein
A male-bonding comedy about three bar-buddies trying to pull off a kidnapping.

AN EXPERIMENT WITH AN AIR PUMP
by Shelagh Stephenson
Two English families separated by 200 years confront the impact of science on morality.

FUDDY MEERS by David Lindsay-Abaire

A whimsical and dark comedy about a woman amnesiac who wakes each morning only to have forgotten the day before.

FULLY COMMITTED by Becky Mode

The Off-Broadway comedy hit about trying to book a table at the most exclusive restaurant in the city.

GIVE ME YOUR ANSWER, DO! by Brian Friel

An egocentric author and his wife battle against his failing fortunes.

A HOTEL ON MARVIN GARDENS by Nagle Jackson

A dominating editor tries to reign in the staff of an ultra-trendy magazine.

IN-BETWEENS by Bryan Goluboff

A newly released parolee tries to pull his life together against a harsh urban reality.

IN THE BLOOD by Suzan-Lori Parks

A modern-day *Scarlet Letter* pits a single mother against the Welfare system.

LAKE HOLLYWOOD by John Guare

The author of *SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION* examines life in America since the 1940s.

LAST TRAIN TO NIBROC by Arlene Hutton

Like many an old-fashioned love story, this one begins with two mismatched innocents falling in love on a train.

LIVES OF THE SAINTS by David Ives

Hysterical new one-act comedies by the author of *ALL IN THE TIMING*.

ROMANCE IN D by James Sherman

A suicidal woman complains of noise to her piano-playing neighbor. Can love be far behind?

SHYSTER by Bryan Goluboff

A wayward son returns to his late father's tenement to evict the friend who assumed his place.

TAKINGLEAVE by Nagle Jackson

A Shakespeare professor and his family face their own *King Lear* when the man is struck by Alzheimer's.

THISDAY AND AGE by Nagle Jackson

A timely comedy about two adult children moving home again to care for their mother.

THE THREE SISTERS and **UNCLE VANYA**

adapted by Brian Friel

Two Chekhovian master works freshly crafted by a contemporary Irish master.

THE VAST DIFFERENCE by Jeff Daniels

A comedy about vasectomies, a female urologist and a flight attendant named George.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

by Donald Margulies

A grief-stricken dry cleaner mourns his late wife until Shirley decides to reappear in the flesh.



The editor gets personal with **Craig Pospisil**,
our director of Non-Professional Rights

What brought you to the Play Service and what were you doing before that?

Oh, I can't remember that far back.

You're a playwright, so that must have had something to do with it. When did you first suspect you were a writer?

I grew up wanting to be an actor. I acted all through high school and college. I was an apprentice at the Williamstown Theater Festival one summer and did some showcases in New York. But I wrote a play as a thesis project at Wesleyan University, and in the couple of years after graduating, I came to realize that I was a storyteller. So I dropped acting and went to graduate school in dramatic writing at NYU.

Do you remember the first play you ever saw?

The earliest one I can remember was *MAN OF LA MANCHA*. I can still remember what the set looked like. It was really striking. And my parents had the cast album. I used to listen to that and *MY FAIR LADY* over and over again to help me learn an English accent. Why a six-year old needed to perfect an English accent, I can't remember.

If you could be anything else, what would it be?

Given another lifetime, I'd love to be an architect. Growing up in New York, I always loved looking at the buildings, picking out the different details. The Chrysler Building was (and is) my personal favorite. I threw in a couple of references to it in my play *SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN* because it epitomizes how I see New York itself: tall and elegant.

When you recommend plays for acquisition, what are you looking for?

I think I'm looking for the same thing as any theatre-goer: a good story that is well told. You want an author with a distinctive voice, too. I see and read a lot of plays that could be by anyone. But only Albee writes the way he writes. Or Williams, or Lanford Wilson, or Sam Shepard.

Those writers all have a lyrical bent. Is that something you admire?

Not specifically, no. In fact, those writers are pretty far from my own style, which is more naturalistic. With a good dose of New York cynicism. I guess I'm drawn to comedies more than dramas. My own writing tends toward the comic side of things. Personally, I'm not interested in plays or playwrights who just want to shock me or say, "life is terrible." That's too easy. Tell me why life is worth living despite the fact that it's terrible. That's a story. Plays that are unrelentingly serious are missing a huge slice of the human experience.

Are you one of those horrible writers who write

every day?

Oh, how I wish the answer was yes. The trick, I think, is to focus on writing something each day, even if it's not very much, rather than always thinking, "I have to finish this play." Writing a whole play is a daunting task. Writing a few pages is manageable and gives you the sense that you're working towards a final goal.

What are you working on now?

I recently finished a play called *MONTHS ON END*, which is about a circle of friends and family. The twist is that the play has one scene for each month of the year, and each scene takes place during, and is somehow inspired by, that month. I'm sending it out to different theatres and competitions (fingers tightly crossed), and I'm at work on something new.

A screenplay, maybe?

Actually, yes. I find I think very differently when I'm writing a screenplay. The stories are much more plot driven, and most of my ideas for movies seem to be mysteries or thrillers.

You deal with plays all day long. How does that influence your own work?

Working at the Play Service has definitely been an education in the business side of being a playwright. And that is something that I think a lot of writers have little interest in or knowledge of. Certainly working here allows me to see what contributes to a play's success.

Ah, the "secret formula." Okay, let's have it.

There's no secret formula, but you can see patterns in what gets done. Small cast; lots of parts for women; simple sets. The thing is not to see "commercial considerations" as obstacles, but as tools you can use to keep your play as tight as possible. An early draft of *SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN* called for eight actors. I realized that might hurt its chances in some areas, so I looked over what I had done and found a way to reduce the cast size to a minimum of six actors. I think it's a better play than it was before, and it's made the play more produceable.

What are your most requested plays right now?

ART and *WIT*. Basically, any play with a one-word, three-letter title. But both of those are completely restricted.

What about last year's Tony winner, *SIDE MAN*?

We get lots of letters on that too. But if Warren Leight had just named it *MAN*...

Finally, the most important question. If you were a breakfast cereal, which one would you be?

Could I be a cinnamon roll instead?

Dramatists Play Service licenses hundreds of professional productions each year. For your convenience, here's a schedule of some of them. You can access an even more comprehensive list of professional and select non-professional productions by visiting www.dramatists.com and viewing PAGE TO STAGE.

ARKANSAS

THE GRAPES OF WRATH adapted by Frank Galati. Arkansas Repertory Theatre. Little Rock. September.

CALIFORNIA

AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN by Douglas Carter Beane. Ensemble Theatre Project. Santa Barbara. June.
BED AND SOFA music by Polly Pen, lyrics by Laurence Klavan. International City Theatre. Long Beach. May.
CLOSER by Patrick Marber. Berkeley Repertory Theatre. May.
CORPUS CHRISTI by Terrence McNally. New Conservatory Theatre. San Francisco. September.
THE DEAL by Matthew Witten. International City Theatre. Long Beach. June.
DEALER'S CHOICE by Patrick Marber. Actors Theatre of San Francisco. October.
DEATHTRAP by Ira Levin. PCPA Theater-fest. Santa Maria. August.
HAVING OUR SAY by Emily Mann. Adapted from the book by Sarah L. and Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth. San Jose Repertory Theatre. May.
MASTER CLASS by Terrence McNally. Willows Theatre Company. Concord. October.
MASTER CLASS by Terrence McNally. TheatreWorks. Palo Alto. August.
THE MINEOLA TWINS by Paula Vogel. Actors Theatre of San Francisco. June.
THE MISANTHROPE translated by Richard Wilbur. A Noise Within. Glendale. May.
THE OLD SETTLER by John Henry Redwood. TheatreWorks. Palo Alto. July.
OLD WICKED SONGS by Jon Marans. Old Globe Theatre. San Diego. May.

COLORADO

AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN by Douglas Carter Beane. Arvada Center. Arvada. September.

CONNECTICUT

THE OLD SETTLER by John Henry Redwood. TheaterWorks. Hartford. August.
SNAKEBIT by David Marshall Grant. TheaterWorks. Hartford. May.
ST. NICHOLAS by Conor McPherson. Hartford Stage. July.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

THE BEST MAN by Gore Vidal. Arena Stage. Washington. October.

FLORIDA

THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE by Martin McDonagh. Orlando Theatre Project. Sanford. May.
COLLECTED STORIES by Donald Margulies. Asolo Theatre Company. Sarasota. May.
THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN by Martin McDonagh. Stageworks. Tampa. May.
GREAT EXPECTATIONS adapted by Barbara Field. Seaside Music Theater. Daytona Beach. October.
SNAKEBIT by David Marshall Grant. Gable Stage. Coral Gables. August.
STEEL MAGNOLIAS by Robert Harling. Alhambra Dinner Theatre. Jacksonville. July.
SWINGING ON A STAR The Johnny Burke Musical by Michael Leeds. Riverside Theatre. Vero Beach. October.

IDAHO

WIT by Margaret Edson. New Theatre Company. Sun Valley. June.

ILLINOIS

CLOSER by Patrick Marber. Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Chicago. July.
JEST A SECOND by James Sherman. Timber Lake Playhouse. Mt. Carroll. June.
STUPID KIDS by John C. Russell. Roadworks Productions. Chicago. July.

INDIANA

THE FOREIGNER by Larry Shue. Wagon Wheel Theatre. Warsaw. July.

IOWA

DEATHTRAP by Ira Levin. Old Creamery Theatre. Amana. June.

KENTUCKY

WIT by Margaret Edson. Actors Theatre of Louisville. October.

MARYLAND

THE LONESOME WEST by Martin McDonagh. Rep Stage Company. Columbia. September.

MASSACHUSETTS

THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE by Martin McDonagh. Vineyard Playhouse. Vineyard Haven. August.
LOVE LETTERS by A.R. Gurney. Summer Theatre at Mount Holyoke College. South Hadley. June.
MONDAY AFTER THE MIRACLE by William Gibson. Shakespeare & Company. Lenox. August.
SPUNK by George C. Wolfe. Vineyard Playhouse. Vineyard Haven. June.

MICHIGAN

THE OLD SETTLER by John Henry Redwood. Plowshares Theatre. Detroit. September.

MINNESOTA

DRACULA adapted by Steven Dietz. Park Square Theatre. St. Paul. May.
THE FOREIGNER by Larry Shue. Minnesota Festival Theatre. Albert Lea. June.
THE LAST NIGHT OF BALLYHOO by Alfred Uhry. Park Square Theatre. St. Paul. July.
SIDE MAN by Warren Leight. Guthrie Theatre. Minneapolis. May.

MISSOURI

MASTER CLASS by Terrence McNally. Missouri Repertory Theatre. Kansas City. May.
SIDE MAN by Warren Leight. Unicorn Theatre. Kansas City. June.

NEBRASKA

THE LAST NIGHT OF BALLYHOO by Alfred Uhry. Nebraska Repertory Theatre. Lincoln. July.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN by Douglas Carter Beane. Peterborough Players. July.
HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE by Paula Vogel. New Hampshire Institute of Art. Manchester. June.
OLD WICKED SONGS by Jon Marans. Peterborough Players. June.

NEW JERSEY

MASTER CLASS by Terrence McNally. Theatrefest. Upper Montclair. June.
SNAKEBIT by David Marshall Grant. Theatrefest. Upper Montclair. June.

NEW YORK

BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY by Pearl Cleage. Syracuse Stage. October.
DR. COOK'S GARDEN by Ira Levin. Bristol Valley Productions. Naples. July.
LOVE LETTERS by A.R. Gurney. Bristol Valley Productions. Naples. July.
THE MEMORY OF WATER by Shelagh Stephenson. Kitchen Theatre Company. Ithaca. September.
STEEL MAGNOLIAS by Robert Harling. Bristol Valley Productions. Naples. August.
THE TURN OF THE SCREW adapted by Jeffrey Hatcher. Hangar Theatre. Ithaca. June.
WIT by Margaret Edson. Syracuse Stage. September.
WIT by Margaret Edson. Adirondack Theatre Festival. Lake George. June.

NORTH CAROLINA

AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN by Douglas Carter Beane. Charlotte Repertory Theatre. May.
CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE OF JOY by Lynn Nottage. Actor's Theatre of Charlotte. May.
DEATHTRAP by Ira Levin. Barn Dinner Theatre. Greensboro. August.
STOP KISS by Diana Son. Manbites Dog Theater Company. Durham. September.

OHIO

PRIVATE EYES by Steven Dietz. Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati. May.
SPUNK by George C. Wolfe. Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. May.
STEEL MAGNOLIAS by Robert Harling. Human Race Theatre Company. Dayton. May.

OREGON

THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE by Martin McDonagh. Artists Repertory Theatre. Portland. May.
SHAKESPEARE'S R&J by Joe Calarco. Artists Repertory Theatre. Portland. May.
WIT by Margaret Edson. Artists Repertory Theatre. Portland. May.

PENNSYLVANIA

THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN by Martin McDonagh. Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre. June.
DIMLY PERCEIVED THREATS TO THE SYSTEM by Jon Klein. People's Light and Theatre Company. Malvern. May.
THE LAST NIGHT OF BALLYHOO by Alfred Uhry. Mountain Playhouse. Jennerstown. September.
OLD WICKED SONGS by Jon Marans. Act II Playhouse. Ambler. May.
PRIVATE EYES by Steven Dietz. 1812 Productions. Philadelphia. June.
SIDE MAN by Warren Leight. Philadelphia Theatre Company. May.
STEEL MAGNOLIAS by Robert Harling. Main Street Theatre. Quakertown. October.
VISITING MR. GREEN by Jeff Baron. Act II Playhouse. Ambler. May.

RHODE ISLAND

A SHAYNA MAIDEL by Barbara Lebow. Brown Summer Theatre. Providence. June.

SOUTH CAROLINA

HELLO AGAIN by Michael John LaChiusa. Trustus Theatre. Columbia. July.

TENNESSEE

COWGIRLS book by Betsy Howie, music and lyrics by Mary Murfitt. Tennessee Repertory Theatre. Nashville. May.
THE FOREIGNER by Larry Shue. Chaffin's Barn. Nashville. August.
GROSS INDECENCY by Moises Kaufman. Playhouse on the Square. Memphis. May.
WIT by Margaret Edson. Tennessee Repertory Theatre. Nashville. September.

TEXAS

CLOSER by Patrick Marber. Zachary Scott Theatre Center. Austin. July.
THE FOREIGNER by Larry Shue. Renaissance Center. Dickson. September.
VISITING MR. GREEN by Jeff Baron. Allied Theatre Group. Fort Worth. May.

UTAH

COYOTE ON A FENCE by Bruce Graham. Salt Lake Acting Co. October.
DRIVING MISS DAISY by Alfred Uhry. Utah Shakespearean Festival. Cedar City. September.

VERMONT

MOLLY SWEENEY by Brian Friel. Weston Playhouse. October.
THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES translated by Richard Wilbur. Weston Playhouse. August.

VIRGINIA

THE FOREIGNER by Larry Shue. Barter Theatre. Abingdon. October.
THE LAST NIGHT OF BALLYHOO by Alfred Uhry. Theatre Virginia. Richmond. September.

WASHINGTON

A SKULL IN CONNEMARA by Martin McDonagh. A Contemporary Theatre. Seattle. July.
TALLEY'S FOLLY by Lanford Wilson. A Contemporary Theatre. Seattle. May.

WISCONSIN

SIDE MAN by Warren Leight. Madison Repertory Theatre. October.
WIT by Margaret Edson. Milwaukee Repertory Theater. September.

CANADA

ARTICHOKE by Joanna M. Glass. Georgian Theatre Festival. Toronto. Ontario. June.
THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE by Martin McDonagh. Vancouver Playhouse. October.
CLOSER by Patrick Marber. Citadel Theatre. Edmonton. AB. October.
THE COCKTAIL HOUR by A.R. Gurney. Upper Canada Playhouse. Morrisburg. Ontario. August.
COLLECTED STORIES by Donald Margulies. Stratford Festival. Stratford. Ontario. July.
COWGIRLS book by Betsy Howie, music and lyrics by Mary Murfitt. Stage West. Calgary. AB. July.
THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN by Martin McDonagh. Belfry Theatre. Victoria. BC. September.
DRIVING MISS DAISY by Alfred Uhry. Chemainus Theatre Company. Chemainus. BC. September.
THE FOREIGNER by Larry Shue. Stirling Festival Theatre. Stirling. Ontario. July.
THE HERBAL BED by Peter Whelan. Yorick Theatre. Vancouver. BC. October.
THE LAST NIGHT OF BALLYHOO by Alfred Uhry. Winnipeg Jewish Theatre. Winnipeg. Manitoba. May.
LOVE LETTERS by A.R. Gurney. MindExpansion Entertainment. Montreal. Quebec. May.
MASS APPEAL by Bill C. Davis. Stirling Festival Theatre. Stirling. Ontario. June.
THE MEMORY OF WATER by Shelagh Stephenson. Arts Club Theatre. Vancouver. BC. May.
OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS by Joe DiPietro. Drayton Festival Theatre. Drayton. Ontario. June.
OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS by Joe DiPietro. Victoria Playhouse. Petrolia. Ontario. July.
OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS by Joe DiPietro. Mayfield Inn Dinner Theatre. Edmonton. AB. September.
SYLVIA by A.R. Gurney. Arts Club Theatre. Vancouver. BC. July.
TARTUFFE translated by Richard Wilbur. Stratford Festival. Stratford. Ontario. August.
THE THREE MUSKATEERS adapted by Peter Raby. Stratford Festival. Stratford. Ontario. May.
THE WEIR by Conor McPherson. Festival Antigonish Summer Theatre. Antigonish. NS. July.
WIT by Margaret Edson. Canadian Stage Company. Toronto. Ontario. October.

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logue of outrage makes Durang the clear winner of this year's Joe Orton "Our Lady of the Wand" Award. Orton wrote his ghoulish capriccios in the sixties; nowadays his bag of tricks — a corpse, a loose eyeball, a severed hand — seem an almost innocent way of shocking the audience. But Durang's characters, who are sitcom stereotypes pushed to the limit of their congeniality by the mischievous author, are beyond shock; they are mutants, whose hearts and minds have been warped by the collective tabloid unconscious into a bright media cliché. "We don't talk much because her father incested her when he was drunk, and I never did anything about it because I was co-dependent," the well-named Mrs. Siezmagraff says of her daughter, Trudy, who has invited Betty into a summertime-share at the beach. A seismograph measures the disturbances underneath the earth's surface; what Durang hears underneath the culture is the rumble of an infernal media emptiness.

A laugh track, which personifies this static, is the ghost in the house's attic: While Durang sets out the sensational externals of his plot in Act One, off-stage voices serve as a superego to the group, cheering them on and interrupting them. "Nothing's happening onstage. I'm getting bored," they say at one point. In Act Two, in a genuinely inventive piece of comic business, Durang has the voices materialize: They drop through the ceiling onto the living room sofa. Dressed in black flak jackets, with black bags on their feet and connected to each other by tubing, the voices judge, goad, and interject opinions as Mrs. Siezmagraff, in a *Court TV* rant, tries to defend Trudy and one of her wayward housemates, Keith, for their carnage. "We find him very disturbing, but he's also strangely sweet," the voices say in unison

Christopher Durang is manic and heart-broken; in other words, he's a comedian whose fury takes the form of farce. BETTY'S SUMMER VACATION, which is set in a cheap and cheerful beach house, turns into a never-ending tale of infamy: two murders, two rapes, two severed penises, one severed head, and an act of offstage incest. This cata-

about Keith and his habit of cutting up bodies. "We plan to nominate him for a People's Choice Award." When Keith complains of a headache, they add, "Why don't you kill someone, then?" The voices are the culture's unshakable appetite for barbarity: Like petulant kids banging the dinner table, they bleat for the gruel of decadence. Thrill is the antidote to emptiness. "Sex. Murder. Mayhem. Human interest stories about kittens. Kitty and Jose Menendez Served in a Casserole!" they shout.

Durang wants to purge his mind, and society, of this media pollution, and he contrives to blow the summer home and most of its inhabitants to smithereens. At the finale, Betty is left standing by the sea and reflecting on her summer vacation. The sound of the ocean is more important than what she says. The crashing of the waves works on the audience like the natural rhythm of breath; for a moment, before the curtain falls on Durang's cold but clever world, he lets us glimpse the mysterious peace that sensationalism makes us forget — the sweet shock of the eternal. □

"Christopher Durang is manic and..." by John Lahr. Copyright 1999 by John Lahr. Reprinted by permission of Georges Borchart, Inc. for the author. All rights reserved by the author. Originally appeared in *The New Yorker*, April 5, 1999.

Vacation Daze



Joan Marcus