

DRAMATISTS
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Doug Wright on *QUILLS*

Actor/Playwright
Laurence Fishburne

Wit on HBO

atplay

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HOLLYWOOD ISSUE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEFF DANIELS

Director of Professional Rights Robert Vaughan has a conversation with Jeff Daniels, star of stage and screen, founder of Chelsea, Michigan's Purple Rose Theatre Company — and now a DPS playwright.

VAUGHAN. *Purple Rose is about to have an anniversary.*

DANIELS. *Oh yeah, we're ten years old now. We're real happy with not only the level of talent and the development of the talent out here but also with people like Lanford [Wilson] coming through and Steven Dietz and others. We're really developing into a nationally recognized regional theatre company that does new work.*

Continued on page 2



Courtesy of International Creative Management, Inc.

What was the first experience you had here in New York? Was it with Circle Rep?

Yeah, I moved to New York and went straight to Circle Rep. Marshall Mason had found me out here in a college production that he was directing. And I met Lanford right away. This was in the fall of '76.

What was the first play you worked on with Circle Rep?

It was David Story's *The Farm*. I went right into a play.

Wow. What was the first play of Lanford's you worked on?

Fifth of July. We did it the spring of '78 at Circle. Everybody was abuzz, "Lanford's writing a new play." Then all of a sudden he handed you the

And [Lanford] said, "I'll give you a hundred bucks for the jokes."

pages, and you saw your name on it — it was like suddenly he was writing for you. And he's kind of taken the essence of who you are and spun it into a character that works for a story. It was interesting, because Jed Jenkins in *Fifth of July*, I mean, he's basically a silent character. That was me the first two years at Circle. I was terrified to say anything in acting class, you know, for fear they might find out how stupid I am. I'd just sit in the corner and not say anything, just do the exercises, do the work and not really talk to anybody, because I was completely intimidated.

How long were you a member of the company?

As long as the company was there. I came in '76 and was made a member, and I think it was about '80 or '81 that Marshall said, "Look, in the next season there really isn't anything for you," and I said, "Oh, okay, I'm gonna focus on film." My agent, Paul Martino, and I made the decision to shift that focus — as opposed to, you know, "What are they doing at Circle next?" Though, I would come back in and do some things down the road with them with *Johnny Got His Gun* and then years later *Redwood Curtain*, which wasn't really Circle, but it was Marshall and Lanford. I basically chased after the films after that.

Were you writing then?

Danton Stone, who was in *Fifth of July*, and I ... well, Danny and I wrote a comedy, an epic three-hour-long comedy called *42 Cities in 40 Nights*, and we thought we were playwrights. We were ad-libbing and then transcribing and then trying to structure this thing, this epic journey across the country, into a play. And we finally coned Marshall into giving us a Friday reading at Circle, which was just like gold for playwrights. Here were these two idiots with this comedy. And we read it, and we thought it was, you know, going to Broadway. It had taken us five years just to get to this point, and it was three hours long, and people laughed, but my God, it was just endless. So we were in the bathroom after the talkback, and I was at the urinal, and Lanford came up. So I said, "So, what did you think?" And he said, "I'll give you a hundred bucks for the jokes."

(Laughs heartily.) That's great!

But he was right! We didn't know anything, but we were learning. We ended up doing two benefit performances at Circle, and it was a lot of laughs, but you learn just how difficult playwrighting really is.

Did he influence you at all? He must have.

Oh, yeah, yeah. The way he would hide structure. It's there, it's in every play he's got. When you read a lot of screenplays, and you see the formula, you see all the Syd Field workshops, just, "There it is, plot point number one ..." (*Gun shot sound from Daniels*.) It lands like a ton of bricks. Lanford is brilliant at hiding all of that, but it's still there, and his use of dialogue to tell story and all of that is just a huge influence. It's

all over the plays that you guys have published, and if you look, you can see his influence on me, the way I overlap. You know, you create action at times by overlapping dialogue.

Exactly, especially in *Escanaba in da Moonlight*.

Oh yeah, it's chaos at times.

What was your first film? *Ragtime*?

Yeah, I had two or three scenes in *Ragtime*.

That's what I thought. Now when did you settle back in Chelsea, or did you always just live there?

I came back here in '86. We'd been in New York ten years, and Kathleen and I had at the time a two-year-old boy, who is now, whatever he is, sixteen, and we knew we were gonna have more kids. I didn't want to move to LA at all. The films were happening. I'd done about five or six at this point, but we wanted to operate out of here. I never expected the film career to continue. I expected to be kind of "a ten-film guy" and then: "Whatever happened to me?" I was destined for that book, you know, that "Whatever Happened to Jeff Daniels?" thing.

I don't think so. You obviously don't know how great you are on film.

Well, you never know, it's Hollywood. You're here today, gone tomorrow. So we came back here, knowing this was where we'd land, and after three years of playing golf and not really doing anything creative while I was between films, I decided to buy this building and create a regional theatre company with the dream being that we would be what Circle Rep used to be — a place where you had not only actors, directors and designers but living and breathing playwrights working on their next play. That was the thing about Circle that just blew me away. I'll be the first to admit how naive I was at twenty-one, walking in there and then realizing that Lanford Wilson was actually alive. He wasn't some dead playwright that had done this years before.

What was the first play of yours that was done in Chelsea?

A play called *Shoeman*, about a woman whose husband's cheating on her, so she kills him. It's a comedy. The last thing I had done in New York was Lanford's *Lemon Sky* at Second Stage, where you talk to the audience in scenes, or you're in the scene, you're out of the scene, all this stuff, it's very unconventional as far as what people were used to out here. So *Shoeman* is very inspired by that format.

So back to *Escanaba*, now, are you going to be doing that again? I think you should do it once a year.

Well, I mean, that's the joke! We'll bring these guys that created these characters out every three or four years. And then they'll be geriatrics doing it. We ran it for thirteen weeks, six shows a week, and it sold out. And we moved to the Boarshead Theatre in Lansing, where it sold out for five weeks. I was writing a play a year, and then in the fall of '97 I was burned out. They said, "Well, let's just bring *Escanaba* back. Everyone's still screaming for it at the box office." So we put it on sale, and the run sold out in a week. And then we went up to the Boarshead Theatre again, and it sold out again. And then when we decided to renovate our theatre, basically a demolition, we were gonna be dark for over a year, but I wanted something where I could still hang onto the staff. I didn't want to lay them off, so we said, "Let's put on *Escanaba* down in Detroit at the Gem Theatre," a 500-seater. We opened it in September of '99, hoping to get three to six months out of it, and it ran for sixteen months. We closed it, and it was still selling out. After that, we made a film of it. We created an independent film company called Purple Rose Films. It was privately financed, meaning we didn't have a studio, nor distribution ahead of time. We released the film of it, which I'm in. I wrote, acted in and directed it. Harve Pressnell was in it. He was in *Fargo*. And then all of the Purple Rose actors are in it. The guys that created their roles are doing those roles in the film.

That's great.

Yeah, and even the guys I had to replace, because of the age factor, even those two guys ended up in the film. So everybody that was in it on stage is in the film. While we didn't get picked up for national distribution, we released it ourselves, and it's a huge a hit here regionally. We'll recoup our investment which for your first film for your production company is the goal.

What experiences in theatre and film mean the most to you in your career? Can you think of examples? The best, the worst?

Well, I think, the best, hmm. I really loved *Fifth of July*, especially by the time we were on Broadway, because it really was magic. The ensemble was there, the writing, directing, everything was there. You had these people who knew each other as actors for years, and we knew these characters. By that point, it was the third production of this thing, and we really had it down to each moment. Doing that show night after night was really special.

It was an amazing production.

Yeah, we were really happy with it. Well, Circle's had some others — *Talley's Folly* and others — that have obviously done really well. *Hot L Baltimore*, the original *Hot L*, I wish I'd seen that.

Yeah, that would have been something.

Film, oh, *Purple Rose of Cairo*. To be handed this job and realize, "My God, it's the two leads!" And Woody's there, and to be on the set and to be encouraged to ad-lib and improvise. In this one scene in particular I go to see Mia, and we're on the porch, and I'm talking about what it means to be a star. There were only three or four lines written, and he just said, "Go on, improvise." He would let me go for a minute and a half, and we'd do take after take after take. And he'd just go, "Just do more, keep going, it's working." And to be doing that and then, out of the corner of my eye, to see Woody cracking up off camera. That was a thrill. *Gettysburg* was a big deal, because of the importance of what we were doing. There are so many people, forget the critics, but the people of the state of Maine think of Chamberlain as a saint. I still remember

Debra, Shirley, Jack ... Oh, they all scared me to death.

going to Gettysburg for the first time before shooting and going to Little Round Top, where Chamberlain had his first battle, on a Sunday morning, and it's raining. There is nobody there, and I'm standing on this hill, and I promised him, his spirit, that I wasn't gonna screw this up.

Were you treated badly after *Terms of Endearment* because people thought you were a creep?

No, well, yeah. You kind of hope, you're a young actor, and you think everyone's gonna think, "Oh, you were brilliant!" and they're going, "No, you were a creep!" Kind of what you burst out with the first time is what they decide you are, whether it's the studio or the audience.

Yeah, but you were so good, because you weren't just a creep, you made him human.

Yeah, but, you know, and that's kind of why I got those offers for years to come. It took awhile to get out of that, but whatever, whatever. That was a great opportunity, Debra, Shirley, Jack and me. What's wrong with this picture?

Did Shirley scare ya?

Oh, they all scared me to death. Yeah, they were all, we're talking mega stars, and when they start vying for position and power and whose set it's going to be, and whose movie it's gonna be, all that stuff, and you're however old I was.

You're this kid from Michigan.

I've got 1,000 bucks in the bank and a wife in an apartment in New York, and I'm wondering if these people are gonna walk out the door, and there's gonna be no movie. I mean, I've got no money, and

HOLLYWOOD STAR PLAY SERVICE AUTHOR



Courtesy of Landmark Artists Management

An Excerpt from RIFF RAFF

MIKE. You don't know? Come on Tony, you just now said you was gonna kill me. Me ... Godfather to your first-born! Remember me? I can't believe that you'd kill me over some dope. I know you more than half my life. You like family to me. From Erasmus Hall, to the flim-flam, to Rikers Island, the whole nine. Too much crime ... too much time ... Like this! Now you standing here telling me that all of that shit don't count? Like it don't mean nothing?

Laurence Fishburne is best known for the intense characters he's

portrayed in films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Boyz n the Hood*, *Event Horizon* and *The Matrix*. He's no stranger to New York theatre audiences either, having won a Tony Award for his role as Sterling Johnson in the Broadway production of August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*.

But to typecast Fishburne as only an actor would be a mistake. He's also a noted playwright and screenwriter. *Riff Raff*, Fishburne's first play, opened to critical acclaim in Los Angeles and was subsequently produced Off-Broadway by New York City's famed Circle Repertory Theatre. On the surface the play is about a drug heist gone sour, but Fishburne has woven from that familiar setup a surprising and gripping tale of friendship, family and loyalty among the junkies and hoodlums who inhabit the graffiti-spattered wastelands of the inner city, and — as you might expect from Fishburne — it's intense.

Not content to leave *Riff Raff* a play, last year Fishburne adapted it for the screen. Retitled *Once in the Life*, the film, like the play, drew critical praise from coast to coast. The *New York Times* observed that Fishburne makes "people on the margin real," and the *Los Angeles Times* called it a "handsome, graceful film," in which "Fishburne has found the stuff of tragedy in an urban streetwise melodrama."

Fishburne himself recalls of his early years as an actor, "I had to make a living playing pimps and pushers and dope fiends. They were relegated to the outside of story lines, and they were delivered as fairly stereotypical creatures." He continues, "I guess I always had a desire to create a piece where these people were the focus. My job here was to make them interesting, real, breathing, living people." To judge by the receptions both *Riff Raff* and *Once in the Life* have received, Fishburne has achieved exactly that. The acting edition of *Riff Raff* is available from the Play Service. □

—Michael O. Fellmeth

this was a huge break. I spent a lot of my career being the guy brought in to work with the major stars, from Meryl to Demi, all the way down. I just did a film in London. I had two or three scenes with Meryl. It's a movie called *The Hours*, based on Michael Cunningham's novel. David Hare wrote the screenplay; Stephen Daldry, who directed *Billy Elliot*, is the director. And it's Meryl, Julianne Moore, Ed Harris, Nicole Kidman, I mean, it's loaded; it's like being invited to an all-star game. But my career is full of having worked with those people. But by this time, when I'm walking in, and there's Meryl Streep, one of the greatest actresses we've got, at least I can spell my name.

You commissioned a new play from Lanford — *Book of Days*. Isn't there another one?

Yes. It's a play called *Rain Dance* that he wrote for us. We commissioned him to do it, and we got great reviews. The critics just went nuts for it. I think it's one of the best plays he's written. And the production is really strong.

It's great that you can go back there and open up a theatre, and you don't have any intention

of giving theatre up. It just seems ... you should get a medal or something.

Well, you know what it is? The basketball players, gym rats, they call them?

Yeah.

I've always been a theatre rat. I mean, it goes earlier than Circle. It goes to the community theatre days, where I was Harold Hill, and yet I was building the set and hanging the lights and doing all of that stuff. I was one of those guys. And then through college doing it, and then going to Circle and doing it. I've just always been that. And then the movies were kind of, that was something I really wanted to get a chance to do, and to learn the art of film acting, that's just ... I've loved it.

Any advice for a kid from the Midwest who wants to be like you when he grows up?

Well, there are so many more avenues where you can take this creative energy and apply it that they have that I didn't. One is digital video. If you're in high school, you can create your own film festival. You can have ten films that were shot and edited, and you've got a film festival at your high school. And

you write the script, you shoot it, and you get the actors and all that stuff. You can edit, which is something that I couldn't do back then with the 16mm or 8mm cams. That's a great avenue to channel this energy. You can also, while your school is doing a play, you can also ask for the stage. You could write your own play, sell tickets to it, do your own productions if you really want to chase the theatre. You don't have to wait for them to do the next play or musical. You could create your own theatre, whether it's stuff that you've written, and I highly encourage you to write your own stuff, because you do learn so much more when you're up there trying to figure how to make that second act work. I mean, that's where you find the writers. And we've had great success with writing about stuff here in the Midwest. If you write about where you are and who you are and what you're seeing when you go outside your door, people will buy tickets, and they will sit and watch this thing. I'm rambling, but those are two things that you can do to find out if this is something you want to chase for the rest of your life. □

FROM STAGE TO SCREEN

Ever since Dramatists Play Service was founded in 1936, the film industry has looked to our authors for adaptations and original works for the screen. The marriage has often been a happy one. Some of the films, like *A Streetcar Named Desire* or *Auntie Mame* or *Harvey*, are known and loved throughout the world. Some, such as *Children of a Lesser God* or *M. Butterfly* or *Six Degrees of Separation*, are a little less well-known but equally artistically successful.

Both the critics and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences have expressed their admiration for our authors' adaptations on a number of occasions. In 1981 Ernest Thompson adapted his moving *On Golden Pond* and took home an Oscar for his efforts. Translator of 'Art' and *The Unexpected Man*, Christopher Hampton was awarded the 1988 Oscar for Best Adaptation for *Dangerous Liaisons*. And Doug Wright, interviewed in this issue, adapted his provocative *Quills*, which has garnered critical and audience acclaim across the nation.

Play Service authors also have a distinguished record of creating original material and adapting the works of others. William Inge (*Bus Stop*, *Picnic*) won the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay in 1961 for *Splendor in the Grass*. Horton Foote (*The Young Man from Atlanta*, *Talking Pictures*) won the Oscar for Best Adaptation in 1962 for his classic version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and twenty-one years later won another Oscar for Best Original Screenplay for *Tender Mercies*. John Patrick Shanley (*Psychopathia Sexualis*, *Italian American Reconciliation*) won the 1987 Oscar for Best Original Screenplay for his delightful *Moonstruck*. And Ted Tally (*Terra Nova*, *Silver Linings*) won the Oscar in 1991 for his adaptation of *The Silence of the Lambs*. Recently, Alan Ball (*Five Women Wearing the Same Dress*) was awarded the 1999 Oscar for Best Original Screenplay for his superlative *American Beauty*.

Perhaps no author so impressively embodies success in both theatre and film as does Alfred Uhry, whose first straight play, the beloved *Driving Miss Daisy*, won him the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and whose screenplay adaptation of it won him an Oscar in 1989. In 1997, with his second play, *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*, Uhry walked away with a Tony Award and became the only author ever to win the "Triple Crown" of a Pulitzer, a Tony and an Oscar.

A brief list of DPS plays that have lit up the silver screen appears below (with the year of the film's release in parentheses). □

—Michael Q. Fellmeth

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| ABE LINCOLN IN ILLINOIS (1940) | THE GLASS MENAGERIE (1950, 1973, 1987) | ORPHEUS DESCENDING (1990) |
| ALL MY SONS (1948) | GOLDEN BOY (1939) | PICNIC (1955) |
| ALL THE KING'S MEN (1949) | HARVEY (1950) | THE ROSE TATTOO (1955) |
| ARSENIC AND OLD LACE (1944) | HASTY HEART (1949) | SABRINA FAIR (SABRINA, 1954, 1996) |
| AUNTIE MAME (1958) | IDIOT'S DELIGHT (1939) | THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH (1955) |
| BANG THE DRUM SLOWLY (1973) | INHERIT THE WIND (1960) | SIMPATICO (1999) |
| BEAUTIFUL THING (1996) | JUNIOR MISS (1945) | SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION (1996) |
| BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE (1958) | KEY EXCHANGE (1985) | STAGE DOOR (1937) |
| THE BEST MAN (1964) | KEY LARGO (1948) | STEEL MAGNOLIAS (1989) |
| BUS STOP (1956) | LEMON SKY (1987) | A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE (1951) |
| CARNAL KNOWLEDGE (1971) | LIFE WITH FATHER (1947) | SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER (1959) |
| CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF (1958, 1984) | LILLIES OF THE FIELD (1963) | SUMMERTREE (1971) |
| CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD (1986) | THE LITTLE FOXES (1941) | SUNRISE AT CAMPOBELLO (1960) |
| THE CHILDREN'S HOUR (1962) | LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT (1962) | SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH (1962) |
| THE COUNTRY GIRL (1954) | LOVE! VALOUR! COMPASSION! (1997) | TEAHOUSE OF THE AUGUST MOON (1956) |
| CRIMES OF THE HEART (1986) | M. BUTTERFLY (1993) | TENDER TRAP (1955) |
| THE CRUCIBLE (1958, 1996) | MADWOMAN OF CHAILLOT (1969) | THAT CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON (1982) |
| DANCING AT LUGHNASA (1998) | THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER (1941) | THREE MEN ON A HORSE (1936) |
| THE DARK AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS (1960) | MARVIN'S ROOM (1996) | TOYS IN THE ATTIC (1963) |
| DEATH OF A SALESMAN (1951, 1985) | MARY, MARY (1963) | TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL (1985) |
| DEATHTRAP (1982) | MASS APPEAL (1984) | UNDER THE YUM YUM TREE (1963) |
| DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS (1958) | THE MISS FIRECRACKER CONTEST | A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE (1962) |
| DETECTIVE STORY (1951) | (MISS FIRECRACKER, 1989) | WAIT UNTIL DARK (1967) |
| DIAL M FOR MURDER (1954, 1981) | MISTER ROBERTS (1955) | WATCH ON THE RHINE (1943) |
| DODSWORTH (1936) | MR. HOBBS' VACATION | THE WHALES OF AUGUST (1987) |
| DRIVING MISS DAISY (1989) | (MR. HOBBS TAKES A VACATION, 1962) | WHAT A LIFE (1939) |
| THE EMPEROR JONES (1933) | NATIONAL VELVET (1944) | WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? (1966) |
| FOOL FOR LOVE (1985) | 'NIGHT, MOTHER (1986) | THE WINSLOW BOY (1950, 1999) |
| FRANKIE AND JOHNNIE IN THE CLAIR DE LUNE | THE NIGHT OF THE IGUANA (1964) | WINTERSSET (1936) |
| (FRANKIE AND JOHNNIE, 1991) | ON GOLDEN POND (1981) | YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU (1938) |

Fresh from his success with the film adaptation of his play *Quills*, playwright Doug Wright corresponded by e-mail with Director of Professional Rights Robert Vaughan about Hollywood, theatre and an elderly East German transvestite named Charlotte.

VAUGHAN. What did you know about Philip Kaufman before *Quills*? Did you know how picky he was about choosing his film projects?

WRIGHT. I knew Phil had a penchant for literary, erotic tales like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Henry and June*. But the film which I felt made him especially well-suited to direct my adaptation of *Quills* was his 1977 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. There's a gleefully malevolent wit at work in that flick; it's ruthlessly terrifying and sardonic at the same time. Only one thing frightened me about entrusting my script to Phil: He has a long-time habit of adapting his own material. I worried that, at our very first meeting, he'd tear the pages from my hand and start rewriting my poor play. Instead, he brought a fellow writer's empathy to the proceedings and was scrupulously respectful of the text — surprisingly, more so than some theatre directors!

Were you very involved in the making of the film?

I had such an atypical experience. Phil treated me like a playwright on-set. Usually screenwriters are miles away, their noses deep in fresh projects while old scripts are being filmed without their sanction, without their participation and sometimes without their knowledge. I had a deck chair right next to Phil's; I approved every word.



Photo by Lisa Sullivan

Often, Phil challenged me to rewrite, but always in the spirit of a great theatre director or dramaturg: to further my own aesthetic vision, not willfully impose his own. I was involved from the very first rehearsal to the final edit. When the film was in post-production, he even phoned me from the sound studio in London to ask me to write "ambient dialogue" for the lunatics in the movie. In the film's sound mix, you can barely discern their words, but I have the pleasure of knowing I scribed each one! Of course — because I was so deeply engaged in the stage-to-screen transfer — I've abdicated the right to bitch in future interviews: "Oh, frivolous, lightweight Hollywood! How they massacred my play!" Fortunately, I (blush) really love the flick. And I sanction Phil's choices, from the color of the Marquis' faded bed sheets to the casting of the Goat-keeper to the final shot of the hapless Abbe de Coulmier, scribbling into oblivion, a writer born anew.

Your writing seems to get to people in ways they can't even dream of. *Watbanaland ... Quills ...* What are you thinking, and why are people attracted to it?

Oh, man. My ambition is to write plays that continue long after the final curtain call, well into a nice post-theatre supper and all the way into an audience's dream-life. I think theatre has the potential to shift the continental plates in our souls; to disrupt the subconscious in productive and surprising ways; to exorcise our appetites. Some people adore having their organs rearranged at the theatre; others deeply resent it. So I think my work will always divide people; it's certainly divided critics. The film of *Quills* actually made *both* the Ten Best List and the Ten Worst List in the New York *Post*; I found that perversely gratifying. I hope each play I write has the urgency of a suicide note. I try and

write about the things that vex and confound me, not about the things I know to be true. And I try to keep my sense of humor, even in the darkest terrain. Ideally, I'd like my plays to be the theatrical equivalent of laudanum or absinthe. Is that a lofty or a common goal? I'm not sure. I think I love high art and populist melodrama, especially when they're dished out in unison, like in the work of Charles Ludlam, Douglas Sirk or Steven Berkoff.

Do you think that "entertainment" can prompt a person, of any age, to do something they wouldn't ordinarily be inclined to do?

Not really. We all have a range of appetites, and some of them are wholesome while others are profoundly destructive. Art nourishes our appetites, but I think the appetites themselves pre-date the art. They're formed in childhood, maybe in infancy. Maybe they're genetically coded, in part. We seek out the kind of stimulation that most satisfies our true natures. And different people



Courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures

Photo by David Appleby

are attracted to different artists for varying reasons. Some teenagers I know adore Marilyn Manson because he speaks to their insolent, adolescent rage. Some adults I know adore him because he's camp. Aberrant minds — dangerous individuals — will seek out negative stimulation in the unlikeliest places. Remember David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam? He committed murder after murder and claimed he was only taking orders from his dog. I look at a dog, I see a house pet. Berkowitz looks at a dog, he sees a Dark God, pushing him inexorably toward mayhem. It's largely about perception, isn't it? We think of art as inciteful, but we too often ignore its purgative value. Give a violent, unstable teen a paintbrush, and you might get some pretty garish work. You might also help to purge that child of antisocial impulses. Give the same kid a hunting rifle, and you get Columbine.

De Sade had to write and went to the extreme in order to do so. What is it about human nature that drives your writing?

Drama — by definition — presents individuals at extreme (or at least decisive) moments in their lives. Hyperbole can be a great comfort; when we see fictional characters in truly dire situations, our own dilemmas often seem more manageable. Whenever I'm stuck in a narrative rut and can't write another word, I have one dramaturgical question that always fires me forward: "What's the worst thing that could possibly happen next?" Be it comic or tragic, that's usually the soundest plot choice.

You've worked with some terrific actors on stage, Rocco Sisto in *Quills*, Lisa Emery in *Watbanaland*, and now the cast in the film of *Quills* ... lucky man. Do you have a dream cast for a dream project?

Happily, I'm in the middle of just such a project. Ten years ago, I met an elderly East German transvestite named Charlotte von Mahlsdorf — a seventy-odd-year-old man who openly cross-dressed under both the Nazi and Stasi regimes. Talk about your iron butterflies! I spent about two years visiting Charlotte, and now I'm writing a play about our sessions together.

Continued on page 8

NEWPLAYS

THE BEGINNING OF AUGUST

by Tom Donaghy

When Jackie's wife abruptly and mysteriously leaves him and their infant daughter, a pungently comic reevaluation of suburban life ensues.

THE DEER AND THE ANTELOPE PLAY

by Mark Dunn

A serious comedy about the value of family and friendship.

AN EMPTY PLATE IN THE CAFÉ DU GRAND BOEUF

by Michael Hollinger

No menu necessary for the owner of the world's greatest restaurant who intends to starve himself to death at his own table.

GOD'S MAN IN TEXAS

by David Rambo

When a young pastor takes over one of the most prestigious Baptist churches from a rip-roaring old preacher-entrepreneur, all hell breaks loose.

HIGH HEELED WOMEN

by Cassandra Danz, Mary Fulham and Warren Leight

A hilarious musical about a female sketch comedy group striving to succeed in show business against the odds ... and its own members.

IN ARABIA WE'D ALL BE KINGS

by Stephen Adly Guirgis

An episodic drama that examines the lives and struggles of ex-cons, prostitutes and drug users on the dark side of urban America.

INCORRUPTIBLE

by Michael Hollinger

When a motley order of medieval monks learns their patron saint no longer works miracles, a larcenous, one-eyed minstrel shows them an outrageous new way to pay old debts.

JESUS HOPPED THE A TRAIN

by Stephen Adly Guirgis

A probing, intense portrait of lives behind bars at Rikers Island.

KIT MARLOWE

by David Grimm

Hungry for adventure and a way to make his mark, playwright Christopher Marlowe becomes a spy for a dark wing of the British government and seals his heroic Sir Walter Raleigh's fate and his own.

A LESSON BEFORE DYING

by Romulus Linney, based on the novel by Ernest J. Gaines

An innocent young man is condemned to death in backwoods Louisiana and must learn to die with dignity.

POOR FELLAS

by Marc Palmieri

Six short tragicomedies with hilarious and unexpected crises that conclude on somber, thoughtful notes.

RED HERRING

by Michael Hollinger

Three love stories, a murder mystery and a nuclear espionage plot converge in this noir comedy about marriage and other explosive devices.

SAVED OR DESTROYED

by Harry Kondoleon

A challenging, ethereal, celebratory play about the staging of a play.

SHERIDAN by David Grimm

The famed playwright Richard Sheridan, enmeshed in political intrigue during the reign of George III, faces the classic choice between doing the right thing and suffering personally, or betraying his conscience and profiting from it.

THE SUITORS by Jean Racine, translated by Richard Wilbur

A laugh-out-loud charmer that blends elements of farce and commedia dell'arte into a plot that skewers the human inclination to sue anyone and everyone at the drop of a hat.

THE SYRINGA TREE

by Pamela Gien

A breathtakingly beautiful tale of growing up white in apartheid South Africa.

TABLETOP by Rob Ackermann

The making of a TV commercial yields acidly funny results as pressures build, tempers flare and egos collide.

TINY ISLAND

by Michael Hollinger

Two estranged sisters square off in the projection booth of a fading movie palace, exploring the limits of love and the limitless magic of the movies.

THE UNEXPECTED MAN

by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton

Two strangers on a train: one a famous author, the other a great admirer of his — will she have the nerve to bring his latest book out of her bag and read it; or better still, will she have the nerve to speak to him?

VALPARAISO

by Don DeLillo

An ordinary business trip to Valparaiso, Indiana, turns into a mock-heroic journey toward identity and transcendence.

Play “MISTY” for me

It takes a great song to inspire an entire film genre, and that takes a truly great songwriter. In 1971 Clint Eastwood starred in and directed *Play Misty for Me*, arguably the first psycho-stalker movie. As radio disc-jockey David Garver, Eastwood attracts a woman named Evelyn who calls repeatedly requesting “Misty” by Johnny Burke and Erroll Garner. Evelyn, played by Jessica Walter, turns out not to be the romantic music lover she seems. In fact, though she didn’t boil any bunnies, let’s say that her actions proved inspiration for Alex Forrest, Glenn Close’s character, in 1987’s *Fatal Attraction*.

As for Johnny Burke — the great songwriter of “Misty,” his career in movies was already stellar. Burke wrote all the songs Bob Hope and Bing Crosby made popular in their “Road Movies.” Not only that, but Burke and Jimmy Van Heusen won the Academy Award for writing “Swinging on a Star” for Crosby to sing in *Going My Way*. Crosby knew a good thing when he heard it. He hired the team of Burke-Van Heusen for himself and made them the highest paid songwriters of their time.

Burke’s list of hit songs is the Hit Parade itself: His songs have sold millions of copies of sheet music and have broken records for their weeks and months at the

tops of the charts. But for Burke there was always one thing missing — he wanted to write a Broadway musical. His first effort, *Donnybrook!*, was not a success, and it broke his heart. At the time of his death in 1964, Burke was working on his next musical, which was left uncompleted.

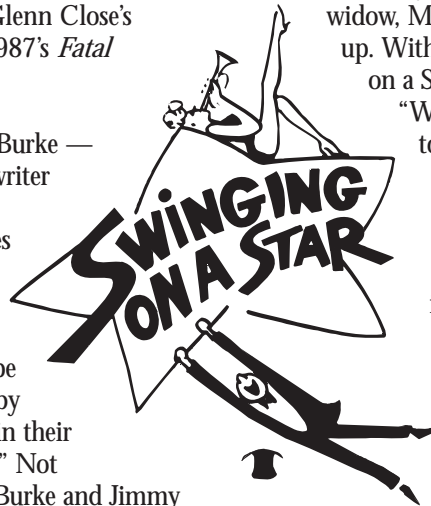
In 1995 Burke’s wish came belatedly true, and Broadway had a hit Johnny Burke Musical in *Swinging on a Star*, which racked up Tony nominations, including one for Best Musical. The road to Broadway was a long one, but Burke’s widow, Mary Burke Kramer, never gave up. With songs like “Misty,” “Swinging on a Star,” “Pennies from Heaven,” “What’s New?” “It Could Happen to You,” “Imagination,” and so many more, producers Richard Seader, Ms. Burke Kramer and Paul Berkowsky knew that they had the makings of something special.

Rather than approach the piece as a straight “... and then he wrote ...” revue, Mr. Seader, Ms. Burke Kramer and Mr. Berkowsky

worked with writer/director Michael Leeds and fashioned the musical into sections, carefully placing each song in the era in which it was written. *Swinging on a Star* is a music lover’s dream come true, just as its making it to Broadway would have been for Burke himself. □

—Robert Vaughan

Swinging on a Star is available from the Play Service. Please check the catalogue or our web site for details.



Playwrights on Film

Theatre actors work very hard to get each line exactly as written. If they have problems, they say, “I’m having problems,” and I try to do something else. The big difference between a screenwriter and a playwright is that a playwright is asked questions. “What do you mean by this?” A screenwriter is given a list of demands, like a hostage negotiator. —Douglas Carter Beane

Prelude to a Kiss, my one studio experience, was antithetical to what you usually hear: They were reverential toward the play, but I wanted to rethink it. I thought it wouldn’t work as a movie as well as a play. —Craig Lucas

Financially, if you’re working for Hollywood, one job can support you for two years. So you can do a lot of theatre writing in that time ... It’s just a really good day job, you know? It’s like just better than speech writing, for me anyway. And it’s fun to work on movie scripts ... —Kenneth Lonergan

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 nonprofessional productions by visiting www.dramatists.com and viewing PAGE TO STAGE.

- ALASKA**
IN THE BLOOD by Suzan-Lori Parks. Perseverance Theatre. Douglas. May.
- CALIFORNIA**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Old Globe Theatre. San Diego. May.
THE BOYS NEXT DOOR by Tom Griffin. Rubicon Theatre Company. Ventura. May.
FUDDY MEERS by David Lindsay-Abaire. San Jose Repertory Theatre. San Jose. October.
THE LAST NIGHT OF BALLYHOO by Alfred Uhry. PCPA Theaterfest. Solvang. August.
THE MOST FABULOUS STORY EVER TOLD by Paul Rudnick. New Conservatory Theatre. San Francisco. May.
THE WEIR by Conor McPherson. Ensemble Theatre Project. Santa Barbara. June.
- CONNECTICUT**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. River Repertory Theatre/Ivoryton. Ivoryton. August.
STEEL MAGNOLIAS by Robert Harling. Tri-State Center for the Arts. Sharon. July.
- WASHINGTON, D.C.**
FUDDY MEERS by David Lindsay-Abaire. Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. June.
THE RIDE DOWN MT. MORGAN by Arthur Miller. Theater J. May.
- DELAWARE**
THE BALTIMORE WALTZ by Paula Vogel. Henlopen Theater Project. Rehoboth Beach. July.
- FLORIDA**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Asolo Theatre Company. Sarasota. May.
BETTY'S SUMMER VACATION by Christopher Durang. Red Barn Actors Studio. Key West. May.
COWGIRLS by Betsy Howie, music and lyrics by Mary Murfitt. Hippodrome State Theatre. Gainesville. June.
DRIVING MISS DAISY by Alfred Uhry. Jacksonville Stage Co. Jacksonville. May.
A PERFECT GANESH by Terrence McNally. Orlando Theatre Project. Sanford. May.
SNAKEBIT by David Marshall Grant. Gorilla Theatre. Tampa. May.
WIT by Margaret Edson. New Theatre. Coral Gables. July.
- GEORGIA**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Alliance Theatre Company. Atlanta. May.
THE FOREIGNER by Larry Shue. Springer Opera House. Columbus. May.
OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS by Joe DiPietro. Art Within. Marietta. September.
- IDAHO**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. New Theatre Company. Sun Valley. September.
- ILLINOIS**
THE BOYS NEXT DOOR by Tom Griffin. Timber Lake Playhouse. Mt. Carroll. July.
I HATE HAMLET by Paul Rudnick. Drury Lane Oakbrook Theatre. Oakbrook Terrace. August.
- WIT** by Margaret Edson. Goodman Theatre Company. Chicago. May.
- IOWA**
OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS by Joe DiPietro. Old Creamery Theatre Company. Amana. July.
- LOUISIANA**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Theatricks, LLC. New Orleans. October.
WIT by Margaret Edson. Theatricks, LLC. New Orleans. May.
- MAINE**
MASTER CLASS by Terrence McNally. Ogunquit Playhouse. Ogunquit. July.
- MARYLAND**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Olney Theatre. Olney. June.
VISITING MR. GREEN by Jeff Baron. Everyman Theatre. Baltimore. May.
- MASSACHUSETTS**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Merrimack Repertory Theatre. Lowell. May.
BETTY'S SUMMER VACATION by Christopher Durang. Huntington Theatre Company. Boston. October.
COLLECTED STORIES by Donald Margulies. Shakespeare & Company. Lenox. July.
LAST TRAIN TO NIBROC by Arlene Hutton. Coyote Theatre. Boston. June.
RED HERRING by Michael Hollinger. Summer Theatre at Mount Holyoke College. South Hadley. July.
TURN OF THE SCREW by Jeffrey Hatcher. Shakespeare & Company. Lenox. October.
- MICHIGAN**
STEEL MAGNOLIAS by Robert Harling. Red Barn Playhouse. Saugatuck. August.
STOP KISS by Diana Son. Performance Network. Ann Arbor. October.
- MINNESOTA**
COLLECTED STORIES by Donald Margulies. Minnesota Jewish Theatre. St. Paul. September.
INSURRECTION by Robert O'Hara. Pillsbury House Theatre. Minneapolis. August.
THE NERD by Larry Shue. Minnesota Festival Theatre. Albert Lea. June.
RIFF RAFF by Laurence Fishburne. Pillsbury House Theatre. Minneapolis. October.
- MISSOURI**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Ozark Actors Theatre. Rolla. July.
FUDDY MEERS. Mostly Harmless Theatre. St. Louis. September.
- NEBRASKA**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Nebraska Repertory Theatre. Lincoln. July.
- NEW HAMPSHIRE**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Peterborough Players. Peterborough. August.
DRIVING MISS DAISY by Alfred Uhry. Act One. East Hampstead. July.
- LATER LIFE** by A.R. Gurney. Act One. East Hampstead. August.
- NEW JERSEY**
THE HEIRESS by Ruth and Augustus Goetz. Two River Theatre Company. Red Bank. May.
- NEW YORK**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Adirondack Theatre Festival. Lake George. June.
'ART' Hangar Theatre. Ithaca. June.
'ART' Syracuse Stage. Syracuse. May.
DINNER WITH FRIENDS by Donald Margulies. Hangar Theatre. Ithaca. July.
DRIVING MISS DAISY by Alfred Uhry. Bristol Valley Productions. Naples. August.
HAVING OUR SAY by Emily Mann, adapted from the book by Sarah L. and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearsh. Hangar Theatre. Ithaca. June.
THE LARAMIE PROJECT by Moisés Kaufman and the Members of Tectonic Theater Project. Stageworks NY. Hudson. August.
A LESSON BEFORE DYING by Romulus Linney, based on the novel by Ernest J. Gaines. Stageworks NY. Hudson. August.
- NORTH CAROLINA**
DRIVING MISS DAISY by Alfred Uhry. Barn Dinner Theatre. Greensboro. May.
THE EXACT CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE by Joan Vail Thorne. Charlotte Repertory Theatre. Charlotte. September.
- OHIO**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Cleveland Play House. Cleveland. September.
BETTY'S SUMMER VACATION by Christopher Durang. Cleveland Public Theatre. Cleveland. May.
A SENSE OF PLACE by Lanford Wilson. ETC. Cincinnati. May.
STEEL MAGNOLIAS by Robert Harling. Human Race Theatre Company. Dayton. May.
- OREGON**
AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN by Douglas Carter Beane. Triangle Productions. Portland. August.
- PENNSYLVANIA**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Mountain Playhouse. Jennerstown. September.
'ART' Pennsylvania Center Stage. University park. May.
BOOK OF DAYS by Lanford Wilson. People's Light and Theatre Company. Malvern. May.
DR. COOK'S GARDEN by Ira Levin. Totem Pole Playhouse. Fayetteville. July.
DRIVING MISS DAISY by Alfred Uhry. Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival. Center Valley. May.
THE LARAMIE PROJECT by Moisés Kaufman and the Members of Tectonic Theater Project. Philadelphia Theatre Company. Philadelphia. June.
OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS by Joe DiPietro. Totem Pole Playhouse. Fayetteville. July.
- RHODE ISLAND**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Trinity Repertory Company. Providence. May.
- SOUTH CAROLINA**
THE COUNTRY CLUB by Douglas Carter Beane. Centre Stage — South Carolina! Greenville. June.
- FUDDY MEERS** by David Lindsay-Abaire. Trustus. Columbia. May.
SIDE MAN by Warren Leight. Centre Stage — South Carolina! Greenville. July.
- TENNESSEE**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Playhouse on the Square. Memphis. August.
'ART' Tennessee Repertory Theatre. Nashville. May.
GOD'S MAN IN TEXAS by David Rambo. Cumberland County Playhouse. Crossville. September.
HAVING OUR SAY by Emily Mann, adapted from the book by Sarah L. and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearsh. Cumberland County Playhouse. Crossville. July.
THE LARAMIE PROJECT by Moisés Kaufman and the Members of the Tectonic Theater Project. Playhouse on the Square. Memphis. September.
LOVE! VALOUR! COMPASSION! by Terrence McNally. Playhouse on the Square. Memphis. June.
SIDE MAN by Warren Leight. Playhouse on the Square. Memphis. June.
- TEXAS**
BETTY'S SUMMER VACATION by Christopher Durang. Stages Repertory Theatre. Houston. May.
DAYTRIPS by Jo Carson. Granbury Opera House. Granbury. September.
MASTER CLASS by Terrence McNally. Zachary Scott Theatre Center. Austin. May.
THE MUSICAL COMEDY OF MURDERS OF 1940 by John Bishop. Granbury Opera House. Granbury. September.
- VIRGINIA**
IMPOSSIBLE MARRIAGE by Beth Henley. Barter Theatre. Abingdon. September.
TALLEY'S FOLLY by Lanford Wilson. Theater at Lime Kiln. Lexington. June.
THE WAITING ROOM by Lisa Loomer. Barksdale Theatre. Richmond. September.
WIT by Margaret Edson. TheatreVirginia. Richmond. September.
- WASHINGTON**
THE BOYS NEXT DOOR by Tom Griffin. Express Theatre Northwest. Nine Mile. June.
- WISCONSIN**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Lake Pepin Players. Pepin. August.
DRIVING MISS DAISY by Alfred Uhry. Fireside Dinner Theatre. Fort Atkinson. May.
STOP KISS by Diana Son. Renaissance Theaterworks. Milwaukee. May.
- CANADA**
'ART' by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Citadel Theatre. Edmonton, Alberta. May.
'ART' Great Canadian Theatre Company. Ottawa, Ontario. September.
CLOSER by Patrick Marber. Western Theatre Conspiracy. Vancouver, BC. June.
DINNER WITH FRIENDS by Donald Margulies. Neptune Theatre. Halifax, Nova Scotia. October.
DRIVING MISS DAISY by Alfred Uhry. Sunshine Festival/Orillia Opera House. Orillia, Ontario. July.
SYLVIA by A.R. Gurney. Victoria Playhouse Petrolia. Petrolia, Ontario. July.

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The piece stars one actor: the remarkable Jefferson Mays. Jefferson originated the role of the priest in *Quills*, so we have a rich history together. In this particular play, he's asked to portray Charlotte, me, a Texas-born journalist from *U.S. News and World Report*, a German cultural minister and a host of other people. The director is Moisés Kaufman. I can't imagine more thrilling collaborators. In the world of film, I'm just so incredibly lucky. Even if I never make another movie in my life, I can still say I've worked with five of the greatest actors in the English-speaking world! Geoffrey Rush, Michael Caine, Billie Whitelaw, Kate Winslet and Joaquin Phoenix ... Honestly, I should retire while I'm ahead.

What do you have to say about this: "What I really want to do is direct!"

I'll actually direct my own work in New York for the first time this fall. I have a triple bill of one acts, and we're producing them at the Vineyard Theatre. So many of us always dreamed of a life in the theatre. As children, we wrote plays, we painted scenery, we acted. It wasn't until those dreaded graduate school applications when we had to check a box: director, actor, writer. The crafts are so intimately linked; cross-over seems inevitable and healthy. **Please tell me you're writing another play.** I haven't abandoned theatre for film. I still feel like an

apprentice in both forms. I do think theatre is a richer exercise in the collective imagination. When audiences go to the theatre, a curtain rises on a hand-painted sign that says "Poland." Suddenly five hundred people sitting in the dark all perk up and say, "Okay! Great! We're in Poland." When you go to the cinema, folks are slouched deep in their seats, sucking on soda straws, thinking, "Prove to me it's Poland. I want to see Polish faces. Hear Polish voices. See Polish cars driving down Polish streets." Fail them even once in your literalness, and they'll start to distrust you. Theatre audiences participate in creating the experience of the play; film audiences just watch the movie.

I'm in high school, and I see the DPS newsletter. I think I wanna be a writer. I'm lucky to have Doug Wright's advice. What is it?

Don't fall too much in love with the idea of being a writer. Write. Don't obsess about procuring an agent or securing a production when the same time could be spent transcribing the voices in your head. I have a tiny quote from Balzac over my computer at home. I can't imagine more profound advice. When asked how he writes, Balzac responded: "I situate myself at the exact point where reason touches upon madness, and I can erect no safety rail." That's a truly glorious place for a writer to hover. □

I am surprised by how quiet the HBO film of *Wit* is. It is so close — close enough to hear breath. And it is so still. The film is like a friend: generous, not in a hurry, paying attention. The film is listening.

I never imagined the play as a movie. In my mind, Vivian Bearing walks on stage and addresses a live audience. The play was always a live event. I was reluctant to grant permission to make it into a film. I regretted what would

be lost in the translation: Professor Bearing looking her students — the audience — in the eye. I wasn't sure what would be gained.

Wit

Of course a film can show location. We can see Professor Ashford's office and the students in class. And the camera can move: Here we look down on Vivian from above;

there we roll alongside her in her wheelchair. Even I, so adamant for live theater, could have predicted this.

But I am astonished by the hush. I can hear the fluid moving through the solid as Vivian sucks on her popsicle. Jason's pen click is shattering. When the pages turn of *The Runaway Bunny*, I can feel a breeze. Every

consonant signifies, even at a whisper.

Here's another thing: memories. I see how they work now, in the way the flashbacks are intercut. Vivian recalls a scene from her past, and her present self is there in the past scene. Then — look! — the people from her past are here with her in her present. Her remembering self and her remembered self jump into one another.

Vivian trusts the camera. She has its complete attention. It barely moves.

I like to think that people will watch the film in their homes, with their families and their friends, sitting close on the couch, leaning on one another.

The cast dedicated the film to the memory of Derek Anson Jones, director of the New York production of *Wit*, and my schoolmate, who died a year ago. Thank you for that. This film is a labor of love. Thank you for that, also.

My favorite part is the typeface of the credits. It is Bembo, if I am not mistaken, named for the best fifteenth-century Humanist. How right. □

—Margaret Edson