

## In Conversation:

# J.T. Rogers &

**J.T. ROGERS:** John Guare and I are both currently in previews.

**JOHN GUARE:** You with *Oslo* at the Vivian Beaumont.

**J.T. ROGERS:** You with *Six Degrees of Separation* at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre.

**JOHN GUARE:** Let's toast those two great ladies.

**J.T. ROGERS:** Vivian.

**JOHN GUARE:** Ethel.

**J.T. ROGERS:** The marvelous serendipity is both plays had the same trajectory, starting life in the Mitzi Newhouse and then transferring upstairs to the Beaumont.

**JOHN GUARE:** What's your experience so far in *Oslo*'s transfer upstairs?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I'm fascinated watching how the spatial relationship the architecture of the 'large theater' to the play actually changes the play. It's epic. The actors have to learn to speak out of the back of their heads, as that great director Garland Wright used to say. Physically, the stage is a little

higher than the stage in the Mitzi, so the audience is on more of an eye level with the actors. While you lose some intimacy upstairs, somehow the ideas of the play are lifted. All of a sudden the play becomes more Shakespearean in the sense that the language and the actors have to rise to that epic size. And they are. We're very happy there. For decades, it's been the great church for seeing a play.

**JOHN GUARE:** Don't forget the Beaumont was once considered unworkable, closed for years, marked a tear down. The opera and ballet and Philharmonic needed a garage.

**J.T. ROGERS:** It's hard to imagine that.

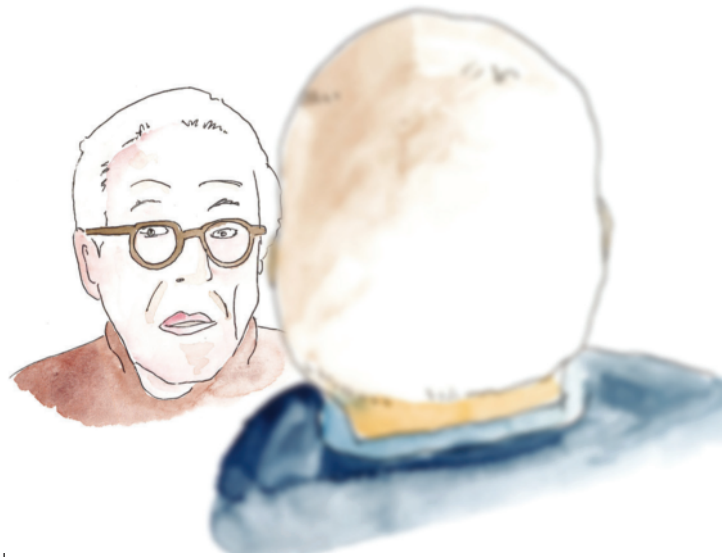
**JOHN GUARE:** Thanks to vocal board members like Andrew Heiskell and Linda Janklow and Elizabeth Peters, Lincoln Center gave the building to Gregory Mosher and Bernard Gersten for a one year trial. Their first production in 1986 was at the Newhouse: David Mamet's *The Shawl*. For the second, they revived *House of Blue Leaves* with Jerry Zaks directing Stockard Channing, Swoosie Kurtz, John Mahoney, Ben Stiller, Julie Hagerty and Christopher Walken. It got a dream reception. It would have to transfer. Should Bernie and Gregory move it to the dread Beaumont?

**J.T. ROGERS:** Which they did.

**JOHN GUARE:** At the first performance on that ill-starred stage, Stockard Channing made her en-

# John Guare

edited by John Guare



trance, got her first big laugh, the audience roared. Hearing that sound was ice cracking. The Beaumont was liberated. It was one of the great events of my life. No one ever talked about eradicating the Beaumont again.

**J.T. ROGERS:** What had happened?

**JOHN GUARE:** Tony Walton. His set for *Blue Leaves* was a disc that thrust the play far downstage into the audience's lap. He expanded the disc for the Beaumont; the relation between stage and audience was electric. Peter Brook had said the Beaumont could be the best stage in New York if they ever found its center. Tony had found the center of the stage.

**J.T. ROGERS:** Did you ever have any problems with it?

**JOHN GUARE:** Stockard Channing said the only secret to playing the Beaumont is learning to do triple takes. House Right. House Center. House Left.

**J.T. ROGERS:** That's a good note.

**JOHN GUARE:** You and I got to know each other doing the *Oslo* issue of the *Lincoln Center Theater Review*.

**J.T. ROGERS:** – of which you're editor.

**JOHN GUARE:** Co-editor. But we only talked

ideas. I know nothing about how you were raised or are from. You went to the University of North Carolina but you're not from North Carolina.

**J.T. ROGERS:** I went to the School of the Arts at North Carolina as an actor. It was immensely valuable. They had no playwriting department.

**JOHN GUARE:** Where did you come from?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I came from central Missouri but my mother moved to New York in the East Village in the late 70s. She would take me as a ten year-old to see everything, most memorably, Charles Ludlam at the Ridiculous Theater. I got to see La MaMa and Joe Papp's Public. And then at the Beaumont and Newhouse. I got to see what I wanted to do—to come back here and do things like that.

**JOHN GUARE:** You've carved out a whole area for yourself. I don't understand how you take real events—ripped, as they say, from the headlines—and make them not docu-dramas but real human dramas. *The Overwhelming*, *Blood and Gifts* and *Oslo* are factually based but they don't have the feeling of being docudramas. You said Shakespearean before. How do you take real events and turn them into theater? How do you determine the point of view that allows the audience into the historical

event, that gives us the information we need to continue?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I think it's two-fold. I think that it's sort of in the nuts and bolts of our craft—the tension of matching up a character's personal story against the larger event. You've got to have a great event but you have to focus on the personal drama that's happening against the big event.

Often it takes me a while to figure out—to use the Josh Logan phrase—who is the “learning character” the audience is going to learn with and also who is the point of view that the audience will go with so that they can be taken into a situation that they would be interested in or would be put off by but then, in fact, find interesting.

**JOHN GUARE:** You're not Norwegian or Jewish or Palestinian. How did you come to *Oslo*?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I was doing *Blood and Gifts* here with Bart Sher. We had a tremendous time together and were thinking about what to do next. I had something else completely in mind and was talking to journalists and spies to find a context for that play.

**JOHN GUARE:** Where do you find spies?

**J.T. ROGERS:** Often in the Whole Foods down on 59<sup>th</sup> Street. For me, one of the pleasures of writing plays is that you write about things and people come and they enjoy it and you say, “Oh, can I take you out for coffee and ask you what you do?” I'm always more interested in the lives of people who don't do what I do. For example, when I was doing research for a play I ended up not writing for the National Theatre, I was writing a play about black box. Secret torture. And so I was meeting all of these people who had been tortured in Cairo.

**JOHN GUARE:** Did you have a contact when you went to Cairo for that abandoned play?

**J.T. ROGERS:** A school friend from North Carolina had married a journalist who knew journalists in Cairo. I asked her to call them and I ended up

staying on someone's couch. They knew someone who hired a ‘fixer.’ So I hired this woman to introduce me to people.

And it turned out that Lawrence Wright, the great writer for *The New Yorker*, was there and we had the same fixer. I asked if he and I could have a drink in a bar in Cairo and it turned out that he wanted to be a playwright. So we talked about politics and playwriting and it was off to the races.

**JOHN GUARE:** What happened to that play?

**J.T. ROGERS:** It was traumatic and fascinating but ultimately there wasn't a play. Because a play should be an argument between two sides. Torturing people is horrific but not an argument. I let that play go but I met all these interesting people.

**JOHN GUARE:** Did you do the same kind of research in Rwanda when you wrote *The Overwhelming*?

**J.T. ROGERS:** No. It was a steeper climb because I didn't know anyone.

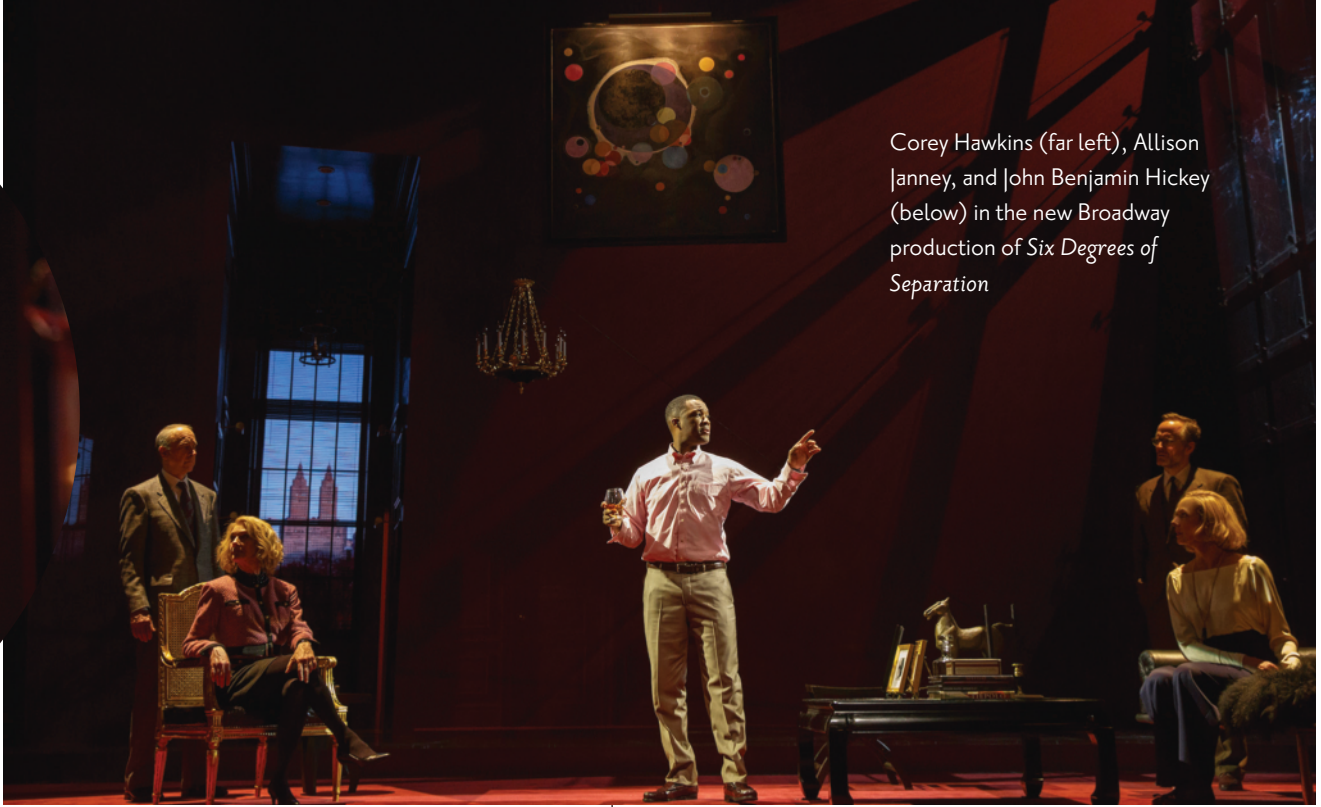
**JOHN GUARE:** Did you go there?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I didn't go until I had written the play. I was sent by the National Theatre to basically do field research. I was going with great trepidation to see if the play could pass muster when confronted with reality. It did. It became an unintended twelve hours a day listening to the most Edward Bond-like stories of horror. People would read it and say “Yes, your play is good. Now I want to talk to you about how my children were murdered in front of me.”





Corey Hawkins (far left), Allison Janney, and John Benjamin Hickey (below) in the new Broadway production of *Six Degrees of Separation*



PHOTOS: |JOAN MARCUS



**JOHN GUARE:** Did those scenes end up in the play?

**J.T. ROGERS:** No. The play ends before, showing all the causes. Maybe the most crucial argument I have with myself is where in the slipstream of



history do I put the brackets around what's most interesting and what gives the most dynamic personal possibility? So for *The Overwhelming*, the first *Aha!* moment was realizing the end has to happen right before the genocide because otherwise you get into Grand Guignol.

**JOHN GUARE:** Just to go back—London is such a closed shop. How did an American end up at the National?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I couldn't get arrested before that play. I couldn't even get workshops in theatres. I was completely unknown; I'd been doing it on my own for years. Then I wrote this play. I had written a couple of plays that I thought were quite good and had small productions. But they were three character/no set plays that you'd think would be the ones that would get done. So, I decided to write *The Overwhelming*—an eleven actor play, eight have to be French speaking Africans, with endless scenes set in Rwanda.

And I thought no one is ever going to do this. I wouldn't even show it to my agent.

I did the play in Philadelphia. I never showed it to my agent. And finally he said, "People went to that reading." So I gave him the play and he said you're a fool, this is the best play you've written. In a fit of exuberance I said, "You should send it to the National Theatre."

And a few months later I'm changing my son's diaper and Nick Hytner calls me. He says, "Hi this is Nick Hytner. Can you come to London to talk about your play?" I said, "I'd love to." He said, "Can you come tomorrow?" I said, "I have a temp job, can I come next week?" I thought I was going over to have a discussion about a reading that would happen in nine months and instead he immediately launched into 'we'll do it in six months and we'll get Max Stafford Clark to do it and we're gonna open on this date.'

Then I realized I was only being flown over because they needed to make sure I wasn't a sociopath because they didn't know anything about me. They just put it in the pipeline. An associate,

Tim Levy, was going through a slush pile of over the transom submissions, found this, went to Nick and said, "You have to do this play."

**JOHN GUARE:** I want our DG members reading this to know that such things are possible.

**J.T. ROGERS:** A *Six Degrees* moment. Tim Levy is one of the producers of your current revival.

**JOHN GUARE:** Sometimes it's a small aquarium we swim in. How valuable was the London production for the life of the play?

**J.T. ROGERS:** It gave me the wonderful experience of different theaters wanting to do *The Overwhelming* in New York. I went from not being able to get a phone call from the literary manager's assistant to the actual artistic director wanting to do my play. Lincoln Center couldn't do it for a year and a half. I chose Roundabout who did it immediately.

**JOHN GUARE:** It wasn't your New York debut, was it?

**J.T. ROGERS:** It was. In the 90s, I had run a tiny theater you couldn't even call off-off Broadway where I'd write little plays and twenty people would come. *The Overwhelming* really was, in all senses, my debut.

**JOHN GUARE:** When did *Blood and Gifts* start?

**J.T. ROGERS:** The Tricycle Theater in London was doing this enormous project called *The Great Game Afghanistan*. Twelve 30-minute plays about the history of the west in Afghanistan.

Most of the twelve were British so they decided they should have one American writer. They'd seen *The Overwhelming* and basically said, "Here's what's left, what interests you?" I said, "The 80s, spies..."

I wrote a short play that was really hard because I was trying to cram an enormous story into a short play. In essence, what went up at the Tricycle was three short scenes from *Blood and Gifts*, and I im-

mediately knew I had to expand it. Lincoln Center Theater read it and produced it and Bart Sher directed.

After it opened, Andre Bishop gave me another commission for a play to be directed by Bart and this feels like what used to happen in the days of old that one hears about. I had the trust of the artistic director and the stage director. I knew the physical space the play would be in. Before *Blood and Gifts*, I had never worked with a thrust. Working in the Mitzi Newhouse was a revelation how fast you can do scene changes. Just like in Shakespeare, characters pop up and say ‘now I’m here’ and the audience goes, okay. The thrust allowed me to speed everything up.

**JOHN GUARE:** And that commission was *Oslo*.

**J.T. ROGERS:** Yes.

**JOHN GUARE:** But how did you settle on *Oslo* as the subject of the commission?

**J.T. ROGERS:** Bart knew this high up UN diplomat named Terje Rod-Larsen and Mona Juul—the main characters of *Oslo*. They were then living in New York. Their kids went to school with Bart’s daughter. Terje had read *Blood and Gifts* and was super complimentary and came to see the play. We went out for drinks at PJ Clarke’s which is a couple of blocks from where we’re sitting here. And he said I have a story for you.

And he started telling me the fact that there had been a secret back channel behind the Oslo accords that included Johnnie Walker Black and rental cars.

And it was one of those moments where the hairs go up on the back of your neck and you think this is my wheelhouse.

I went to Norway for five day with a notepad absorbing everything. Michael Yeargan’s set is based on photos I took. I spoke to everyone. I went to all the places where these meetings happened. I stalked the participants, reading everything they wrote but I never heard their dramatic voices. The

engine on stage is the metronome of the human voice so I didn’t want to hear their actual voices. I didn’t want to talk to the Norwegians anymore, I didn’t want to talk to the Israelis or the Palestinians. I had to find their stage voices.

**JOHN GUARE:** How did you find its theatrical structure and tone?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I realized the best model for tone would be an intellectual thriller. I love those Graham Greene entertainments that he used to dismiss as the books he wrote to make money so he could make his serious books.

But of course, we only read those ‘entertainments’ now, because they’re so lean and surprising and human.

Figuring out the structure? Without being artificial, I had to locate the external pressure on the characters. I went through the events, looking for the constant ticking clock, compelling the characters not only to need something from the other character on stage but to get it before the bell rings.

In *Oslo*, the pressure was on the group of people who had started secretly meeting. If anyone found out what they were doing as they’re getting ready for the first meeting—as Beilin from the Israeli side says, “If people find out, my government will fall and people will be killed.”

**JOHN GUARE:** One technical question: as you sift through your voluminous research, how do you find the scene? Do you build a timeline on a yellow pad and then like a truffle hound, search out your scenes?

**J.T. ROGERS:** Anytime I can act like a truffle hound I call it a triumphant day’s work.

**JOHN GUARE:** The larger question: how do you not get swamped by research?

**J.T. ROGERS:** You get to the heart of my preoccupation as a playwright: how do you move from re-

search and world building and attempted “expert-hood” to pivoting to tell a story where all of that is buried and all that matters is the audience leaning in, wanting to know, “Yeah, yeah, and *then* what happens?”

What helps for me is to place hard brackets around the history, politics, and world I’m exploring and then only allow myself to write about that narrow piece.

When I’m researching, I’m really looking for telling details—tastes, jokes, smells, weird images that set my imagination churning—really a spark, or building block that makes me write play dialogue, as opposed to journalism...which, frankly, I don’t know how to do.

I do at times get swamped by research. I abandoned a play I’d worked on for two years because I realized, far too late, that I’d never drawn the box around what I was going to research. I just kept reading, and writing, and thinking and interviewing and traveling...until I was completely untethered from the play’s initial impulse. For *Oslo*, I didn’t let myself start any research before I’d drawn the box.

When I was doing research for what would become *Blood and Gifts*, I interviewed the legendary US foreign correspondent Steve Coll, who told me, as an afterthought that he thought it strange that at the Irish Embassy in Islamabad in the 80s, St. Patrick’s Day was rung in with green beer. That little fact opened up an entire world for me. It’s in the play but, even more, in some ways that I can’t articulate, it set me racing down a rabbit hole that made the story I wanted to write a *play*.

**JOHN GUARE:** Back to structure: How did you find your first act curtain?

**J.T. ROGERS:** The first act curtain happens when the Norwegians tell their boss what they’re doing and he says “I’m shutting it down. You are fucking dilettantes. You work for me and this is over.” And we realize that we’ve leapt back to the first scene of the play and the play we just saw was actually happening before the first scene. We’ve done a circle and then –

**JOHN GUARE:**

And the second act?

**J.T. ROGERS:**

The second act curtain was the Israeli and the Palestinian sides realizing they’ll change the world, they’ll take a leap together. And then the third act opens with the cold water of reality being thrown in their faces and we’re down the chute.

**JOHN GUARE:** About your structure, I wanted to talk to you today to thank you. I’d wrestled with a play for a long time and right after I saw *Oslo* a year ago, I went out to the beach for the summer and said, “I’ve been with this play for too long. I’m going put it aside. I won’t let it torment me. I’ll have a nice quiet summer.”

And that first day as I walked on the beach, my mind went all over the place. I thought, “What plays did I like this year and why?” When you like something, you’re saying how can I make that mine? One of the reasons I loved *Oslo* was its three act structure, the room you gave yourself to open up the play.

And I thought what would happen if my play that’s been driving me crazy was in three acts?

And walking on the beach, I found the first act curtain, the second act curtain, the sudden oxygen of a third act and I could handle the play. The play became manageable and I finished it just before we went into rehearsal for *Six Degrees*.

**J.T. ROGERS:** I warn you. I took out the second act curtain. I’ve made it two acts at the Beaumont. I had no intention of doing it but we’re in previews at the Beaumont and realized the audience down-





Jennifer Ehle and Jefferson Mays (far left), Michael Aronov (center), and the Broadway company of *Oslo*



PHOTOS: T. CHARLES ERICKSON



stairs loved the two intermissions but upstairs you feel the audience wanting to keep going. So we made the change two days ago. And what's amazing is after two performances I can't believe we had an intermission there.

**JOHN GUARE:** I'm happy I saw *Oslo* at the Mitzi where it saved my life.

**J.T. ROGERS:** You won't miss it.

**JOHN GUARE:** When did you say I don't want to

write my obligatory memory play about my mother coming with two small boys to find life in the East Village?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I knew about me. I wanted to find out about the world.

**JOHN GUARE:** The first time I became aware of you was hearing about a gauntlet of a speech you gave at a TCG conference.

**J.T. ROGERS:** I spoke about writing plays that pushed out internationally and looked outward in the world as opposed to what I still find about so much inward American playwriting as if what's going on in the rest of the world does not exist. Both kinds of plays are equally valid and brilliant plays are written in both of those traditions.

I started off writing little plays, truly little plays and I had all these great young actors to do them and you had all these facilities you could use. And it was before the internet so when you did a short play on Saturday night, 300 people showed up. And you had this phony idea that it would work. And then I came to New York and started a little theater company and I would write little plays. I was writing ersatz David Mamet plays. I think they were pretty darn good, but they were juvenilia and they weren't me. So what happened was I went to see a student production of *Angels in America: Perestroika*. People have it in their bios still, it was so legendary. A tiny black box—no set, no costumes, nothing.

I didn't know the first part of the play hadn't yet come to New York and it was just *Perestroika* and it was a crossing of the Rubicon for me, watching it and saying, "Oh, you can actually have smart people on stage talking." In a weird way I had been trying to write plays about inarticulate people struggling for the word "yeah, because, you know." And that's not me and that's not really what I'm interested in writing. Somehow seeing Kushner's *Perestroika* started the process where I could write plays about people who are articulate and are willing to die for what they believe.

**JOHN GUARE:** What's the next one?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I'm writing a play for Lincoln Center to be directed by Bart that's going to be quite big. Historical event. I know more, but what I'm looking forward to in that play is—in *Oslo*, everyone in the play has been my version of a real person, from a Norwegian secret service agent to the leads. The duality of holding the real people in my head and my version is so much more real to me than the real people, so when I meet them it's still jarring. So I'm looking forward to writing a play where no one in the play is still alive. I think it'll be nice.

I'm thinking and noting to myself, what have I not done already that I could learn how to do structurally? What would be a challenge and would also make this particular play better? That's interesting to figure out.

**JOHN GUARE:** How do you look for structure?

**J.T. ROGERS:** I look for plays that I really like—either a new play or re-reading old plays—and wonder what do I steal from them. We've never talked about this and you should tell me if this is actually not a true story. But I was told you taught a legendary class at Yale, years ago, that was just about what happened in the first fifteen minutes of great plays. Just hearing that sort of pulled my head off and I'm constantly looking at the first fifteen minutes of plays.

**JOHN GUARE:** I took something our former DG President Moss Hart had said literally to the effect that an audience will go anywhere with you for fifteen minutes, but by the sixteenth minute, they'll decide whether to continue on with you or not. We read with a stop watch the first fifteen pages of the *Oresteia*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Homecoming*, *Waiting for Godot*... studying exactly what information the playwright gave the audience in that first quarter of an hour.

**J.T. ROGERS:** I think now we have seven minutes to get the play started, but I'm constantly obsess-

ing over them because of that anecdote. I spend so much time on first scenes—endlessly. I love them. Like the first scene of *Six Degrees of Separation*, it's the whole play. I kind of think that it's hard to balance this because when you're working on it you don't want to be judging it. The first scene of the play is the whole play—not necessarily literally, but the themes, the arguments, the counter twists. I remember a couple of years ago, I was reading *Six Degrees* and you introduced formally the devices you're going to use and, most importantly, the audience understands this is going to be a good time and we're going to be surprised by where it goes.

I think that is so crucial. I think we have to let the audience know they're going to be in good hands. Trust me, I'll pull the rug out from under you and I'll challenge you, but know you're in good hands. You can feel the audience go, "Okay, go."

**JOHN GUARE:** You have to be honest right from the beginning and put your cards on the table, to tell your audience what to watch for.

**J.T. ROGERS:** Here's what I want to ask you: You're going back to a play after years, so what is it like seeing this play, back in New York, in the environment you're from and wrote it—technically, are you changing things or seeing things? Are you there a lot?

**JOHN GUARE:** I'm there every day.

**J.T. ROGERS:** What do you do?

**JOHN GUARE:** Listen. I listen to our cast whom I deeply admire. It's also out of absolute curiosity about how they hear the play, I listen to them and strangely get that very vivid, ecstatic, 1990 production out of my head and sit there saying 'I've never seen this before. I am David Bowie. I am the man who fell to earth.' Learning to listen is a very liberating experience.

**J.T. ROGERS:** How does the space—going back to what we were talking about with the Beaumont—

**JOHN GUARE:** The Barrymore has an extraordinary intimacy. Plus history. *Pal Joey*. The original *Streetcar*. *Raisin in the Sun*.

**J.T. ROGERS:** Good ghosts.

**JOHN GUARE:** We've decided Allison Janney has Brando's dressing room where Marlene Dietrich came backstage after, locked the door and gave him her favorite kind of thank you. Or so they say.

**J.T. ROGERS:** Great ghosts.

**JOHN GUARE:** One last thing about the playwright facing outward: Do you think art changes things?

**J.T. ROGERS:** A few years ago at a talkback, when I expressed the belief that theater didn't really change people, an audience member responded, "But the theater changed you, didn't it? It changed your entire life, didn't it?" What do you think?

**JOHN GUARE:** I don't think art by itself changes anything. All we as playwrights can do is hope we might be fine-tuning the audience's perceptions to a point where they say, "Yes, I see what must be done, I see what I must do." Doesn't all change start from within?

**J.T. ROGERS:** The time. Back to previews. Best to Ethel.

**JOHN GUARE:** Regards to Vivian. Don't forget to toast Mitzi while we're at it.

**J.T. ROGERS:** Or Claire Tow up on the roof. 📺

## DRAMATISTS GUILD OF

**AMERICA** is the professional association of playwrights, composers, lyricists, & librettists. DPS was founded in 1936 by Dramatists Guild of America.