Maggie Edson — the celebrated playwright who is so far Off-Broadway, she's below the Mason-Dixon line — is performing a daily ritual known as Wiggle Down.

"Tapping my toe, just tapping my toe" she sings, to the tune of "Singin' in the Rain," before a crowd of kindergarteners at a downtown elementary school in Atlanta. "What a glorious feeling, I'm — nodding my head!" The kids gleefully tap their toes and nod themselves silly as they sing along.

"Give yourselves a standing O!" Ms. Edson cries, when the song ends. Her charges scramble to their feet and clap their hands, sending their arms arcing overhead in a giant "O."

This willowy 37-year-old woman with tousled brown hair and a big grin couldn't seem more different from Dr. Vivian Bearing, the brilliant, emotionally remote English professor who is the heroine of her play WIT — which has won such unanimous critical acclaim in its small Off-Broadway production.

Vivian is a 50-year-old scholar who has devoted her life to the study of John Donne's "Holy Sonnets." When we meet her, she is dying of ovarian cancer. Bald from chemotherapy, she makes her entrance clad in a hospital gown, dragging an IV pole. "It is not my intention to give away the plot," Vivian tells the audience, "but I think I die at the end."

In this fierce, funny and unforgettable play, the uncompromising scholar becomes herself an object of study, as her doctors put her through a grueling course of experimental treatments. In scenes in the hospital and flashbacks to her past, we watch wry, caustic Vivian struggle with her ultimate lesson: how to face her own death. "I know all about life and death," she tells us. "I am, after all, a scholar of Donne's 'Holy Sonnets,' which explore mortality in greater depth than any other body of work in the English language." It is one of WIT's triumphs that Vivian makes us see exactly what she means. Caught in this play's powerful searchlight, poems such as "Death be not proud" spring to life — with the very placement of a comma crystallizing mysteries of life and death for Vivian and her audience. For this feat, one critic demanded that Ms. Edson be handed the Harvard English department.

But she'd never take it. Kindergarten is where the action is.

"Learning to read — that's the biggest thing you learn in your whole life," she says over dinner after a long day of teaching and lesson-planning. "Alphabet letters represent sound, text maps speech — once you learn that, that's the hardest thing. It's the thing that opens your mind the most, that gives you the most power."

Ms. Edson — Miss Edson, to her students — grew up in Washington, D.C., and studied history at Smith College in Northampton, Mass. After graduation, she worked in an Iowa bar pouring drinks for hog farmers, then spent a year living in a Dominican convent in Rome. Back home in Washington, she got a job in the oncology/AIDS unit of a research...
WASHINGTON TO PLAY

1999 Pulitzer Prize for Drama
BEST PLAY
NY Drama Desk Award
NY Drama Critics Circle Award
NY Outer Critics Circle Award
NY Drama League Award
Lucille Lortel Award

SIDE MAN
by Warren Leight
1999 Tony Award, Best Play
DEATH OF A SALESMAN
by Arthur Miller
1999 Tony Award, Best Revival
THE WEIR
by Conor McPherson
1999 Olivier Award, Best Play
London Evening Standard Award
for Outstanding New playwright
London Critics Circle Award
for Most Promising playwright
CLOSER
by Patrick Marber
1999 NY Drama Critics Circle Award
for Best Foreign Play
1998 Olivier Award, Best Play

Playbill On-Line: The jazz world, which you capture in SIDE MAN, the upcoming GLIMMER BROTHERS and a bit in STRAY CATS, is a rather neglected milieu in recent American drama. Warren Leight: I find it appalling. It is America's only native art form, and completely neglected. There have been a few interesting things that have caught on, but if you compare the number of plays about painting and painters to the number of plays about jazz musicians, it must be a hundred-to-one ratio, and you can't tell me it's any more exciting to watch a painter onstage than a musician. And even plays about writers, plays about dancers, plays about actors; for some reason — partially racial — jazz, in particular, has been [ignored]. I had a hard time getting a first production of SIDE MAN because jazz was considered a bad topic for a play.

Were there any jazz-themed plays that influenced you? I wish there were. There were all those bad jazz movies when I was a kid, which I was very aware of. Musicians hated them, whether it was "The Benny Goodman Story" or "The Glenn Miller Story" — a bunch of guys saying "Hey, man! Dig it!" At the age of eight, I knew that stuff to be "jive." I think Maynard G. Krebs was about as close as America ever got to depicting jazz.

After years of knocking about, did you begin to feel like a side man yourself? Yeah. I was able to make a living writing screenplays that didn't get made, or, if they did get made, were humiliating. There was a period in the early eighties, when every nightclub act, every bad cabaret act, every girl singer, I had written their act. I used to hope they wouldn't go see each other's shows, because they'd hear the same lines. I got $10 an hour; that was my rate. But that's not a great way to spend your life. Ultimately, that's pretty dispiriting. For whatever reason, I couldn't crack one Off-Broadway theatre in New York; none of the not-for-profit institutions. There were a few people who were looking out for me, but they were struggling: There was Alice's Fourth Floor, on Dyer Avenue right by the tunnel; or John McCormick, when he was at Naked Angels — he now runs All Seasons Theatre; and the West Bank Cafe. But that was it. Every institution just seemed like a closed set. Apparently Margaret Edson sent WIT around for eight years before she got a New York production. It did feel like there was no way into New York theatre. I'd been doing one-acts here and there for the last ten years and I'd get the occasional reading, but nobody would give even a workshop production of a full-length play. I just wasn't in whatever their group or loop was. I didn't fit their profile or agenda, or I just hadn't gone to college with them. I don't know what it was. I knew my father to be a beautiful trumpet player, and for whatever reason, he didn't get asked to record as much as some other guys who, in retrospect, weren't any better or any worse than he was. I did begin to worry whether I'd get a shot at it, like a 34-year-old minor leaguer. "I swear if they let me up to the bigs, I could hit .260."

In all those years, you must have had some interesting experiences as a playwright. What's the most embarrassing thing that ever happened in connection to one of your productions? Well, I did STRAY CATS, that evening of monologues, at a Starbucks on Astor Place, with really good, lovely actors. And the entire time that the actors were doing it, they were being drowned out by the
THE WEIR: Weaving Stories into Drama

Conor McPherson turned 27 only slightly before THE WEIR’s triumphant engagement at London’s Royal Court Theatre. That makes three curtain calls for the young Irishman, who has already enjoyed success with two other acclaimed productions, ST. NICHOLAS and THIS LIME TREE BOWER, both of which premiered in New York at the Off-Broadway theatre Primary Stages. And now McPherson has received nothing less than a Broadway encore for THE WEIR.

THE WEIR is also McPherson’s first success at writing a play that unfolds through dialogue. Prior to this production, McPherson wrote mostly monologue-based plays, challenging audiences to find drama in the most direct form of storytelling. His signature was endorsing one single, continuous voice with a truly interactive theatricality. The success of McPherson’s earlier plays, ST. NICHOLAS and THIS LIME TREE BOWER, in London Fringe venues caught the attention of Ian Rickson, Artistic Director of the Royal Court. Rickson commissioned McPherson to stretch his talent into a play based in dialogue, which resulted in THE WEIR. Still, McPherson continues to rely on his strength in dramatic monologue to fuel the ghost stories in THE WEIR, which provide the most stunning moments of the play.

McPherson’s inspiration for the piece was his widowed grandfather, who lived on his own in a rural Irish town called Leitrim. McPherson remembers “him telling me once that it was very important to have the radio on because it gave him the illusion of company. We’d have a drink and sit by the fire. And he’d tell me stories. When you’re lying in bed in the pitch black silence of the Irish countryside, it’s easy for the imagination to run riot.” The play is also set in a pub which recalls the Leitrim pub McPherson used to visit with his grandfather.

Like Leitrim, the world of THE WEIR is “a remote, tough place where there were so few women around that if one appeared, twenty men would be swarming around her in minutes.” There’s Brendan, the landlord and barman who pulls the pints, and two of his regulars, Jack and Jim. The talk that evening is of Finbar, the town big shot, who arrives at Brendan’s with Valerie, the new owner of an old manse in town. During the night, the men compete jovially for Valerie’s attention with ghost stories.

The bounds of the imagination are the thematic anchor of this piece, and McPherson’s stories remain unalteringly dynamic. It’s ironic that in his challenge to write a dialogue-based play, McPherson’s monologues emerge richer than ever. McPherson stands behind his trademark: “I love monologues, because they are intrinsically more theatrical than ‘conventional’ plays. You’re not pretending the stage is a battle field or a courtroom; you’re saying, ‘Here we all are, in a theatre, and the actor is going to use this space to take us on a journey.’”

His ghost stories offer us twinges of laughter, a playful touch of supernatural, and yet carry a curiously mournful tone. McPherson states, “When I got the commission to write a play for the Court, I thought people in a pub telling stories was a stonking idea. But soon after I started writing it, my grandfather died. That imbued the play with a sense of loss which I hadn’t initially planned to give it.”

“People say it’s the best play they’ve ever seen,” says McPherson. “I think it’s because it’s not a play which needs the fuel of argumentative characters to keep it going.” Instead, this gentle chamber play is full of stories through which characters invoke each other for company, for community, and for a little escape from the gray desolation of a rural winter in western Ireland.

With a dramatic palette of monologue, dialogue and silence, McPherson cradles and unravels basic human desires with both the poetic sensibilities of a storyteller and the theatrical craftsmanship of a dramatist.

by Alyse Rothman/Manhattan Theatre Club
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sex, lies and cyberspace

broadway's nasty-talk season continues with patrick marber's tony-nominated and olivier award-winning closer, about two pairs of deceptively honest lovers.

is it a coincidence? that just twelve days after the blue room closed, another friskily hyped british import washed ashore to take its place? closer, which began previews at the music box theatre on march 9, also promised a glamorous cast (one fourth natasha richardson, one fourth rupert graves, one fourth ciaran hinds, one fourth anna friel) and, more important, delectable filth: its best-publicized scene, cited endlessly in reviews and the copious literature of coming attractions, involves a cybersex encounter between its two male characters, who sit at individual terminals while their ribald dialogue pops up on a big screen behind them. one, pretending to be a woman, says he fantasizes about tending to strangers and ends the scene by faking a virtual orgasm, pounding out a string of "oh-oh-oh’s and qwerty nonsense to show his rapture.

closer, it should be noted, isn't nearly as shallow as the blue room, a mere slip of a play starring nicole kidman in a mere slip. it won its 34-year-old author, patrick marber, london's most prestigious awards, including the critics' circle, the evening standard, and the olivier. but closer does seem to invite the same lurid headlines, and like the blue room, it isn't nearly as bawdy as advertised. in fact, to american audiences, the most striking thing about closer probably won't be its explicit language — there really isn't all that much, aside from that brief cyber scene — but the aggressive candor with which its characters discuss their sexual and romantic indiscretions. it's as if they've all come down with a heartless disease.

sample exchange between a married couple:

i slept with someone in new york. a whore. i'm sorry. please don't leave me.

why?

for sex. i wanted sex. i used a condom...

was it...good?

yes.

in the context of the recent impeachment proceedings, such talk, and there's a lot of it, is almost unimaginable. it inflicts so much pain, it makes clinton's lying seem virtuous. by disclosing what they truly think and feel, the characters of closer seem familiar but also stylized: how many people really speak this way? isn't the ability to euphemize what separates us from beasts?

"i'm a bit more repressed than the characters in the play," says marber, "but i believe people would behave in this way. they just don't necessarily exist next door." his characters aren't your friends and neighbors, in other words — or, for that matter, in your friends and neighbors, a heartless movie to which closer has sometimes been compared. (in fact, closer made its debut in may 1997, long before neil labute's film, and the play is much funnier and more forgiving at its core.) for all their emotional guerrilla tactics, it's also clear that marber's characters deceive one another as much as they come clean; it's just that we don't see it. the play, which takes place over the course of three years, spotlights a series of pivotal moments in relationships — which happen here to be literal moments of truth.

"on some level," muses marber, "you could say that closer is about love as a poker game. i'm obviously interested in the dynamic of power, the way people operate with and against each other, and how your best friend might be your worst enemy." the analogy makes sense. marber's first and only other play, dealer's choice, is all about the interpersonal politics of gambling.

patrick marber has a pretty good poker face himself. while studying at oxford, he would sneak away to the golden nugget on shaftesbury avenue in london and lose more money than he now cares to think about. today, as he sips on a coke at the paramount (the butt of one of closer's funniest jokes), he seems determined to remain as vague as smoke. "i disclaim this interview," he jokily says at one point. "there's always a deception in an interview;" he adds at another. still later: "you feel alive when you tell a lie. you lie to someone, you have a little secret."

so the question eventually arises: does marber lie to journalists? "oh, yeah," he says, unexpectedly. "i've told the odd little lie." such as...? "i can't remember. i've been doing it for years. everyone lies in interviews." he smiles and reaches for a piece of cheese. he's a nice-looking man with an open smile and several charming nervous habits, including the tendency to play with whatever scraps of paper are available to him — napkins, empty sugar packets.

"i've determined that from now on, i'm going to lie a bit more in interviews," he continues. "what i want to do is invent an alternative back story for my life.

the company of closer, whom marber is also directing, probably wouldn't find this admission terribly shocking. "every time he gives me a note," says hinds, the only cast holdover from the london production, "i say to him, 'you're cajoling me, you're seducing me. what am i to believe?'"

marber grew up in a middle-class jewish family in wimbledon, near the tennis club — at least, that's what he tells journalists. after graduating from oxford in 1986, he tried for several years to be a stand-up comic, but he wasn't especially funny. "i was a very dark version of pee-wee herman," he says. "my routine was a bit absurd. it was stupid." he moved on to writing for television and radio, and in 1995, the royal national theatre gambled on dealer's choice. it paid off big-time, earning both great notices and profits. (the play also did well here, albeit on a more modest scale, at the manhattan theatre club in 1997.)

but with closer, marber earned himself comparisons to harold pinter. "i'm a newcomer with two plays," he marvels, "and yet i'm being treated as someone whose opinions are of value. i'm still developing a style — i'm not a full-grown writer yet — and as you've found out, my opinions are nonexistent, or they're of no value, because i'm a fledgling. i demand to be treated like a fledgling!"

at playwriting, perhaps. but in relationships, the subject so brutally examined in closer, marber appears to be excelling, which should give his fans some hope. the playwright dedicated the work to his girlfriend, an actress he has been seeing for three years. "it's weird," he says, "because i worked on this play, which is about the horrors of it all, but i couldn't be happier myself."

by jennifer senior

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hospital in 1985. "I was a unit clerk, which is a very low level job — scheduling appointments, keeping supplies going," she says. "Because it was very low level, I got to see everything."

She left after a year, but the experience haunted her. So in January 1991, Ms. Edson quit her job at a mental health organization to write a play inspired by her time in the cancer unit. Why? "Because I wanted to go see it," she says simply, "and I thought someone has to write it."

She had less than a year. The following fall, Ms. Edson was to begin a master's degree in literature at Georgetown University — the kick-off, presumably, to an academic career. As she began work on her play, she started thinking that maybe her heroine would be an academic, too. "I wanted to write about someone who would lose their power. I saw that in the hospital. You build up a certain set of tools. What happens to you if those tools don't serve you anymore?"

Ms. Edson decided to make Vivian a specialist in the poems of John Donne, for the simple reason that she'd always heard that they were the most demanding in English literature. Not that she had read any of them: Her own formal studies of poetry were limited to one college course — "a very good class, but I don't think I read any John Donne." So she hit the library. "If you know how to study something, you can study anything," she explains.

But her first reading of Donne baffled her. "The harder I worked, I didn't get an answer," she says. "Some of these poems are too complicated. What's the point if they don't flow as poems?" She began a "pretty comprehensive study," which eventually led her to an understanding that "Donne is being suspicious of simplicity" — much like Vivian herself.

At the same time, she delved into medical texts on cancer, both at the public library and at the National Library of Medicine. The more she read, the more she was struck by the unlikely correspondences between poetry and medicine — correspondences that are used to great effect in WIT. "When you really study a poem, you anatomize it," Ms. Edson says. "If you know how to study something, you can study anything," she explains.

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By the author of THE WEIR. Includes ST. NICHOLAS, A poker game inspires three friends to cut all that male bonding stuff and start getting real.

BEAUTIFUL THING by Jonathan Harvey
In the desperate atmosphere of a London housing project, two teen-age boys discover their first loves: each other.

THE BIG SLAM by Bill Corbett
A '90s satire about corruption, seduction and infomercials.

BLESSED ASSURANCE by Laddy Sartin
During the Freedom Summer of '64, a lone black cook stages a sit-in at the cafe where she has worked her entire life.

THE CIDER HOUSE RULES by Peter Parnell, from the novel by John Irving
A majestic, two-evening stage adaptation of Irving's Dickensian novel about orphans, New England, parental love and abortion.

CLOSER by Patrick Marber
Nominated for the 1999 Tony Award. Winner of the 1998 Olivier Award for Best Play. "...a brilliant and bracingly adult new play from London...brutally and beautifully, stunningly funny and devastatingly sad..." — Variety

THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett
This darker version of the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning play of 1956 incorporates both material originally edited from the diaries and actual survivor accounts from the Holocaust.

DIMINISHED CAPACITY by Tom Dulac
A corrupt justice system comes apart during a hostage crisis.

THE ENGLISH TEACHERS by Edward Napier
A flamboyant community theater actress thrusts her town into chaos over Allen Ginsberg's "Howl."

THE EROS TRIOLOGY by Nicky Silver
Three short plays about which feels better: emotional intimacy or simple sex.

FOUR PLAYS by Conor McPherson
By the author of THE WEIR. Includes ST. NICHOLAS, THIS LIME TREE BOWER, RUM & VODKA and THE GOOD THIEF.

FREEDOMLAND by Amy Freed
Finalist for the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Three quarrelsome siblings have a long overdue showdown with their father.

FROM ABOVE by Tom Donaghy
An affecting comedy about a widow and the handsome stranger who might be her husband reincarnate.

THE GENERAL OF HOT DESIRE by John Guare
Includes GREENWICH MEAN, TALKING DOG and NEW YORK ACTOR.

GINT by Romulus Linney
An Appalachian retelling of Ibsen's PEER GYNT.

HYSTERICAL BLINDNESS by Laura Cahill
A woman's stress-induced blindness forces her to confront her life.

IMPOSSIBLE MARRIAGE by Beth Henley
A misguided wedding flies off the rails in this wildly funny and moving play about a balmy southern family.

LABOR DAY by A.R. Gurney
Faced with his family's criticism over a script he has written, it becomes obvious to an aging playwright and father that he doesn't know much about his family or himself.

Players and painted stage took all my love, / And not those things that they were emblems of. — William Butler Yeats

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THE MEMORY OF WATER by Shelagh Stephenson
Three very different sisters reunite for their mother’s funeral with a healthy dose of booze, dope and festering resentments.

MERCY by Laura Cahill
A dinner party deteriorates when two ex-lovers dine through their tears.

M.R. PETERS’ CONNECTIONS by Arthur Miller
A smoky old club serves as the dreamscape for Harry Peters’ ruminations about the end of his life.

THE MOST FABULOUS STORY EVER TOLD by Paul Rudnick
An all-gay version of the Bible, complete with floods, plagues, and no less than two lesbian nativities.

MY BOY JACK by David Haig
When Rudyard Kipling’s son is prohibited from serving in World War I, Kipling secures him the commission that leads to his death.

OUR LADY OF SLIGO by Sebastian Barry
Barry’s meditation on his grandmother’s life also reflects the political and spiritual destitution of the Irish 1950s.

OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS by Joe DiPietro
Two sets of Italian-American grandparents scheme to keep their beloved grandson from taking a job on the other coast.

SEVEN ONE-ACT PLAYS by Wendy Wasserstein
Includes MEDEA, written with Christopher Durang.

SIDE MAN by Warren Leight
Winner of the 1999 Tony Award for Best Play.

...captures the pulse and climate of the New York jazz scene, with crisp dialogue and clearly drawn characters.” — Variety

SNAKEBIT by David Marshall Grant
...o-rins like a boa constrictor with a great sense of humor...an extraordinarily acute ear for the way people talk and a shrewd, handsomely workable theatricality. Not to be willingly missed.” — NY Post

STAGE FRIGHT by Charles Marowitz
A venomous theatre critic receives his comeuppance when kidnapped by a husband-and-wife team of actors.

STOP KISS by Diana Son
Seize the day is the message of this tender story that has already lapsed into the public domain and may be produced without the need to obtain written permission or to pay royalty fees.

WIT by Margaret Edson
Winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. An extraordinary first play that is as intellectually challenging as it is emotionally immediate.

THE KEY TO THE WORLD by Craig Pospisil
Director, Non-Professional Rights

I went to drama school with Meryl Streep; once she complimented me on a blue shirt I was wearing. — Christopher Durang
There was laughter in the back of the theater, leading to the belief that somebody was telling jokes back there. - George S. Kaufman

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

ALABAMA

ARIZONA

CALIFORNIA

COLORADO

CONNECTICUT

DELAWARE

FLORIDA
INDEPENDENCE by Lee Blessing. Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center. Tampa. February.

GEORGIA

ILLINOIS
HAVING OUR SAY by Emily Mann. Adapted from the book by Sarah L. and Elizabeth Delany by Amy Hill Hearth. Chicago Theatre Co. February.

LOUISIANA

MAINE
A CHRISTMAS CAROL adapted by Christopher Schario. Flat Rock Playhouse. December.

MARYLAND

MASSACHUSETTS

MICHIGAN
BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY by Pearl Cleage. Gray and Gray Productions. Detroit. December.


MINNESOTA

MISSOURI

NEW JERSEY

NEW YORK

NORTH CAROLINA
A CHRISTMAS CAROL adapted by Christopher Schario. Flat Rock Playhouse. December.

PENNSYLVANIA

TEXAS

UTAH

VIRGINIA
A CHRISTMAS CAROL adapted by Christopher Schario. Flat Rock Playhouse. December.

WASHINGTON
MASTER CLASS by Terrence McNally. Spokane Opera. December.

WISCONSIN
THE HERALD BED by Peter Whelan. Milwaukee Chamber Theatre. February.

OREGON
The officers, Board of Directors and staff of Dramatists Play Service fondly remember an esteemed colleague and friend, theatrical agent Flora Roberts, who died last December after spending a life in the theatre that spanned over 50 years and which resulted in the nurturing of an entire generation of writers, composers and lyricists.

A colorful, outspoken woman, Ms. Roberts was a native New Yorker who trained as an opera singer at the Manhattan School of Music. She even sang for Arturo Toscanini at one point, but her real fondness was for torch songs as they favored the gravelly depths of her voice.

After graduating, Ms. Roberts became an assistant to theatrical producer Kermit Bloomgarden where she rubbed elbows with the leading playwrights of the day. At one point, she was asked to critique a new play of Lillian Hellman's to the author's face. Fearing the worst, she was surprised that Hellman not only agreed with her assessment, but suggested that the fledgling agent be given a raise. Ms. Roberts later advised Bloomgarden to produce an early draft of Arthur Miller's ALL MY SONS, but Bloomgarden was overextended and not able to pursue the production at the time. Later he would go on to bring Mr. Miller's DEATH OF A SALESMAN to the stage.

By the 1950's Ms. Roberts had borrowed money from friends to open her own literary agency.

Discovering talent and arranging artistic marriages was Ms. Roberts' passion. At the urging of Frank Loesser, she invited an unknown composer named Sherman Edwards to her home to play some of his songs for her. Little did she realize she was hearing the musical she would take to Broadway: 1776. After reading a draft of D.L. Coburn's THE GIN GAME, Ms. Roberts was the one to call Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy about the play even though they weren't her clients. The play went on to win the Pulitzer Prize. When Alfred Uhry approached Ms. Roberts about writing a television mini-series, she suggested instead he write about his own background. The result? Another Pulitzer Prize winner, DRIVING MISS DAISY.

Ms. Roberts' clients included such other Pulitzer Prize winners as Stephen Sondheim (SUNDAY IN THE PARKWITHGEORGE), and Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett (THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK).

For her commitment to the theatre and to her clients, and for the unique personality she brought to our profession, we remember and miss Flora Roberts.