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The Boys
from Siam

JOHN AUSTIN CONNOLLY

Foreword by Edward Albee

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This is for
Margaret
who believed and encouraged,
good times and bad;
another baby, to add to the five

Why was the human race created? Or at least why wasn't something creditable created in place of it? God had his opportunity. He could have made a reputation. But no. He must commit this grotesque folly—a lark which must have cost Him a regret or two when He came to think it over and observe effects.

—MARK TWAIN

Truth sits upon the lips of dying men.

—MATTHEW ARNOLD

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Foreword

Judgment Day

I am not certain that the play which I have chosen to win this inaugural year's Yale Drama Series competition, and the accompanying David C. Horn Prize, co-sponsored by Yale University Press and Yale Repertory Theatre, is necessarily the best play of the five hundred and eight submitted.

How can this be? Well, I did not read all of the plays. There are two reasons for this—my sanity and my time. My sanity first: I have judged enough play contests and read enough new plays generally to know that maybe one in twenty of the plays submitted to any contest is worth the reading, and that we playwrights are in sufficient despair over the condition of theatre without having our tenuous grasp on life-force diminished by the pummelings of the mediocre and the truly hopeless.

My time second: see “my sanity” above.

What to do? What I *did* was, choose six young theatre professionals—playwrights, mostly—whose work and minds I respect and whose objectivity I trust to winnow the pile down to a relative “precious few” and have me read *them*—thoroughly and carefully.

This is not an ideal solution, but what is one to do? During the fifteen years I was teaching playwriting at the University

of Houston, in Texas, I read all the plays submitted to my class each year—seventy-five or so, usually—and then chose the ten I found most interesting, or, perhaps better put, least uninteresting. I learned during this decade-and-a-half-long process that “most interesting” does not necessarily mean most professional, most complete, most organized, or even most coherent. Indeed, some of the playwrights I chose to work with knew little about “the craft of playwriting.” They were incapable of slick (or even sincere) imitations of Ibsen, Williams, Shepard, et cetera, did not necessarily know how to fashion a script ready for the stage, but what they *did* have—these ten I chose each year—was that hard-to-pin-down combination of individuality, freshness of approach, a sense of “necessity”: that the play, however imperfect, “needed” to be written, was not just “a good idea.” I began to understand the crucial difference between an individual voice and one which copied others, that the proper shape of a play is, ultimately, *its* proper shape, not necessarily the expected.

Of the ten I chose each year (the minimum permitted by me) I would have been happier with five of them, some years two, but I could rig the game only so far. Some of my students have gone on to theatre careers; a few have defected to film and TV, where quality is judged by popularity rather than its proper reverse. And some of my students have abandoned the uncertain track of a playwright—no matter *how* accomplished—for a happier passage as a civilian. I wish them all well, and I thank them for teaching me as much as I may have taught them.

(*Insertion of unnecessary anecdote:*)

Back in the late-sixties and early-seventies, when my producers Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder and I were pouring much of our (ill-gotten?) gain from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* into the Playwrights Unit—a decade-long workshop and performance space for the world premieres of

new American plays, where we did over one hundred new scripts during our tenure—I was—at one period—becoming disaffected with the plays being selected for production by our resident “reader,” a bright fellow, though more of a director than anything. Good plays were, I thought, *must* be, getting rejected while their lessers were going on to production under our banner.

So, one day, I made a test. I had just completed an eleven-minute-long solo play—the performer (preferably) onstage but the performer’s voice on amplification. I had been as secret about it as I am about *all* of them until I write “End” on the last page, and I had shown it to no one. It was a rather experimental piece and I was quite proud of it. (It turns out to be widely admired, if infrequently performed.) I submitted it—finished, of course—to our organization, under an assumed name—Rayne Somebody-or-other, as I recall—took a post office box, and awaited a reply. When none had come after several months I grew impatient and went to our offices, to the room where our reader was reading, and asked him what was up. “A lot of shit” was his response. I went to the file where he kept his evaluations of the submitted plays—found my play—*Box*—under Rayne Somebody-or-other’s name—and read the evaluation: “Boring, incoherent and empty.” “Boring, incoherent and empty” I false-laughed, showing him his evaluation. “A piece of shit!” he said (everyone is a critic), turning back to the probably true piece of shit he was chuckling over.

Rayne What’s-his-name and I were unhappy to receive our dismissal letter a week later.

The guy (the reader) quit a couple of months later—fully unaware—and it wasn’t until much, *much* later—years!—that I told him of the ruse. Oddly, he wasn’t amused.

So—to return to our dilemma—there is no perfect way around five hundred and eight scripts and one final judge, but I feel we solved it as wisely—if imperfectly—as could

be done, and if there were finer plays than our winner and two runners-up in the four hundred and seventy-eight plays I *didn't* read, my congratulations to their authors. They are extraordinary writers, and their time will come.

Now to the chase.

What standards did I employ in judging the plays I read? Well, the predictable, of course:

Have I read this play before? (Interesting how often the borrowings were from minor plays.)

Can I read to the end of it without losing consciousness? (How often I would refresh myself—coffee, perhaps; stand up, walk around.)

Is it wise in a three-act play to have Act Three one-quarter the length of Act One, one-third (at most!) the length of Act Two? (Indeed, is the three-act play not now anachronistic? Is not proposition/solution not now a preferable method?)

Am I learning anything from this play? (Anything provocative and illuminating, that is?)

Are the questions the play poses sufficiently interesting to warrant the paucity of answers provided? (Often—perhaps oddly—the questions are almost always more interesting than the answers provided. In theory, at least, a play of only questions can be profoundly involving.)

Does this play stretch my mind, open vistas of yet unexplored dramatic concepts? (Well, *that* doesn't happen very often, *does* it!? And when it does we are grateful beyond thanks.)

Is this play just so “good” at what it does that we are tricked (almost!) into thinking it matters?

Is this absolutely chaotic and anti-dramatic mess of a play really as exciting as it seems?

And so on.

Ideally a play should be so fresh in its ideas and execution that we are breathless, for it is clearly the first play we have ever read! Or is it merely honorable, and intellectually and emotionally engaging, structurally persuasive on its own terms, and worthy of a mumbled “Well, now, *that* wasn’t bad!” This last describes most of the “good” plays one reads. The exceptional is truly rare—one out of a hundred, maybe? One out of two hundred?

The plays submitted to me ran the gamut, of course. Some were tiresome rereads; some indicated no intuitive understanding of dramatic structure; some were really essays in borrowed clothing; two were laughable in their efforts to be shocking; some others were intelligent and sincere but hampered by their belief that playwriting ended with middle-Ibsen; a few were all emotion and nothing else; a few were hobbled by crippling Mametisms, some by (intended?) stylelessness; and some (the majority) were . . . OK, if hardly exceptional.

And then there were the three that really took my attention and retained it.

The Boys from Siam, by John Connolly, is, in its final version, a beautifully realized concentrated universe. It takes big chances along the way, unhesitatingly assuming it knows what it’s doing (which is almost always), and makes us care—really care. Put all this together and you have a winner.

(Insertion of second unnecessary anecdote:)

When I was sixteen I read a novel, *Memoirs of a Midget* by the British post-Victorian poet Walter de la Mare, which was exactly what its title proclaimed it to be. Around the same time I saw the extraordinary German film *Freaks*, which was harrowingly also about its title. These fascinated me and it was a few years later, the more I read, the more I saw, that I realized that writers are attracted to the extraordinary for its dramatic intensity and endless possibility. We are equally attracted to the unextraordinary for the same reasons. We

write about the doomed, the damned, the lost, the afflicted, first because we care about them and then because they are fine dramatic subject matter.

Four years ago I began a play about—among other things—identical twins. Critics remind me it is a subject I've treated often and variously: The Young Man in my early play *The American Dream*, for example.

The play—*Me, Myself and I*—is heading toward production as I write this. Was I surprised when I realized that in *The Boys from Siam* I was reading a play about Siamese twins (as they are almost always incorrectly called)? Of course not! What a subject!

It did cross my mind that a few sour or careless minds might conclude that I was swayed toward *The Boys from Siam* by its subject matter, just as a few others might think I should have denied the play its due for the same reason. But there are only—what?—seven plots and twenty-seven subplots available to us, and fertile minds like rich soil. No, I gave the prize to Mr. Connolly because I found his play the best of the bunch.

(By the way, as judge I was given the option of awarding no prize if I found none of the submissions worthy. I would have hated to have had to do that and I'm glad it wasn't the way out of an embarrassing situation.)

As for the two runners-up: *The Secret Agenda of Trees*, by Colin McKenna, intrigued me by its confluence of reality and fantasy, though incompletely realized. The red dirt concreteness of the situation doesn't fully mesh with the unreality of the young girl. Alas, she occupies a different play. Had the author been able to meld the two we may well have had a tie for first place.

Lazarre Seymour Simckes' *Open Rehearsal* has an outrageous premise and an even more outrageous twist on *that*. While the play doesn't always transcend its premise, it is intelligent and witty and frequently moving.

Close call!

I look forward to seeing all three of these plays in production—good productions worthy of their creators' imaginations. And some day soon, I hope. After all, only mediocrity deserves mediocrity, and our theatre is far too occupied with perpetuating mediocrity as it is.

Edward Albee

London

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