CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

CAMBRIDGE

more information - www.cambridge.org/0521661080

This page intentionally left blank

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS

Beginning in the cafés, lofts and small spaces of Off-Off-Broadway, and continuing in the Off-Broadway and regional theatres of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, new American playwrights emerged committed to exploring the potential of their craft, the nature of American experience and the politics of gender and sexuality. In this study Christopher Bigsby explores the works and influences of ten contemporary American playwrights: John Guare, Tina Howe, Tony Kushner, Emily Mann, Richard Nelson, Marsha Norman, David Rabe, Paula Vogel, Wendy Wasserstein and Lanford Wilson. Bigsby examines, in some detail, the developing careers of some of America's most fascinating and original dramatic talents. In addition to well-known works, Bigsby discusses some of the latest plays to reach the stage. This lively and accessible book, by one of the leading writers on American theatre, will be of interest to students and scholars of American drama, literature and culture, as well as to general theatre-goers.

Christopher Bigsby is Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia and has published more than twenty-five books covering American theatre, popular culture and British drama, including *Modern American Drama* (Cambridge, 1992). He is also an award-winning novelist and regular radio and television broadcaster.

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published in printed format 2000

ISBN 0-511-03340-0 eBook (Adobe Reader)
ISBN 0-521-66108-0 hardback
ISBN 0-521-66807-7 paperback

Contents

	Preface	*page* vii
1	John Guare	1
2	Tina Howe	47
3	Tony Kushner	86
4	Emily Mann	132
5	Richard Nelson	165
6	Marsha Norman	210
7	David Rabe	252
8	Paula Vogel	289
9	Wendy Wasserstein	330
10	Lanford Wilson	369
	Index	431

Preface

There has been a tendency, perhaps now beginning to change, for American drama to find itself marginalised in academe. The novel, a form virtually coterminous with America's development and a principal mechanism for investigating its amorphous nature, has been seen as central. The Great American Novel shared a national hubris. It was large, all-encompassing, because the nation itself was expanding and expansive, itself an imaginative enterprise that seemed to require a form commensurate with its ambition. Its achievements, meanwhile, have been acknowledged by a cluster of Nobel prizes, some more explicable than others.

Theatre, however, seemed not quite at the centre of the culture. Its history lay outside the country while for several centuries the principal lament was its failure to engage American talents, the American mind or American reality. To many, indeed, it seemed principally a twentieth-century invention and hence curiously unrooted. In fact, America's hunger for theatre, at the popular no less than the elite level, was strikingly apparent from the earliest days. For much of its history, indeed, it was precisely to the theatre, in its many forms, that Americans turned for an understanding of a society whose changing nature was both its central promise and the cause of anxiety (see Richard Nelson's *The General from America*). If that is less true today, when the popular dimension of theatre has been ceded to Hollywood and television, drama remains not only a sensitive barometer of social change, reponding to shifting moral and intellectual pressures, but also an internationally respected aspect of American cultural life.

Nonetheless, even in the present century the canon has proved remarkably restricted. Given drama's marginal role in the syllabus only a limited number of playwrights have an assured place in the intimidating piles of set texts to be found in campus book stores, along with the T-shirts and posters. In terms of the postwar theatre, Edward Albee,

Arthur Miller, August Wilson and Tennessee Williams are predictable figures, but, despite long and impressive careers, not John Guare, David Rabe or Lanford Wilson. Sometimes individual plays find their way in by way of courses stressing ethnicity, gender or sexual preference but otherwise major talents, whose work has often been acknowledged by prizes and productions, remain if scarcely unknown then largely unstudied. This book is an attempt to look at the work of a number of such writers.

The immediate and legitimate question is why these and not others? Certainly, if there were no constraints of space (and Cambridge University Press frequently and gently reminds me that there are) I would have added many more, and did before such chapters had to be sacrificed to the twin necessities of length and price. There must, inevitably, therefore, be an element of the arbitrary. Where, you might ask, are Constance Congdon, Christopher Durang, Maria Irene Fornes, A. R. Gurney, Romulus Linney, Donald Margulies, Terrence McNally, Rochelle Owens, Wallace Shawn, Megan Terry? The list is, if not infinitely extensible, then at least a good deal longer than this, and it is that sheer length which explains such absences.

For the moment, then, and for the purposes of this study, I have chosen a heterogeneous group of ten writers who, for different reasons, seem to merit greater attention or whose public reputation has attached itself to certain plays at the expense of others. Thus, John Guare is best known for *The House of Blue Leaves* and *Six Degrees of Separation* while *Lydie Breeze* and *Women and Water* seem to fall below the critical threshold. Tony Kushner is admired for *Angels in America* while *A Bright Room Called Day* seems to me to be undervalued. David Rabe still tends to be thought of as primarily a Vietnam writer, and Marsha Norman as the author of *'night Mother* and little else. Richard Nelson, meanwhile, seems to escape attention because, for the last decade, he has chosen to open his plays in England and to address an international theme. Others – such as Tina Howe and Paula Vogel – have had to battle for recognition, their idiosyncratic approaches initially proving unpopular with directors and critics or, like Wendy Wasserstein, have fallen foul of the suspicion that humour and inconsequence are organically related. There are, of course, those embraced by academe but largely ignored by the theatre. Susan Glaspell, from earlier in the century, would be one such, and Adrienne Kennedy another. But for the most part it is the other way around and it is that phenomenon which has led to this book.

These are, admittedly, scarcely unknown or unacknowledged writers.

Far from it. Between them they have won most of the available awards and experienced considerable success in the theatre. Several have been writing plays for more than thirty years but, to date, only one has been the subject of a critical monograph, and that is the point. Academe would benefit not only from allowing American drama a more prominent position in the syllabus but also from a more generous definition of the canon. Whatever else it may do, therefore, I hope that what follows may serve to underline the strength in depth of the American theatre and the sheer quality of American dramatic writing.

Without treating every play by every author I have, within the constraints of length, tried to give a sense of the trajectory of individual careers. I have also endeavoured to allow the writers to speak for themselves and in that context must acknowledge more than the usual gratitude to the editors and compilers of the various books of interviews on which I have drawn. Hence, my thanks go to Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, to Jackson R. Bryer, Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, and to David Savran. I have been a beneficiary of their shrewd and sympathetic questioning. I am also grateful to Paula Vogel who submitted to an interview on the eve of the opening of the London production of *How I Learned to Drive*.

The American theatre, at the turn of a century and a millennium, remains one of the most vibrant in the world. I hope that this book gives at least a flavour of what makes that so.

CHAPTER 1

John Guare

John Guare is something of a paradox in the American theatre. He has been writing plays for forty years, more than thirty of them professionally. His work has been staged on and off Broadway. He is not only prolific but, in his early works, frequently wildly inventive and extremely funny. He has had a number of significant successes, picked up awards and established himself as a familiar part of the American theatrical scene. Yet if critics have sometimes been exhilarated they have also occasionally been baffled, and he has never quite established himself in the canon, except, perhaps, for *The House of Blue Leaves*, from the early seventies, and his 1990 play, *Six Degrees of Separation*. He has been called the Jackson Pollock of playwrights, a recognition of the wildness of a talent which splashes itself apparently randomly as well as of the vibrancy and energy of his work. He has equally well been accused of diffuseness and self-indulgence, of a failure to shape the apparent spontaneity of his invention into fully coherent drama.

It is hard to agree. Few writers have matched his exuberant inventiveness but few have aspired to, or achieved, the lyrical intensity or intellectual astuteness of a man with a vivid sense of the physical and linguistic possibilities of theatre. Acknowledged as a moralist, he has nonetheless been chided for burying his social and ethical critique in plays whose roots fail to sink deep enough into the human psyche. Initially a comic writer, a *farceur*, he has been seen as deflecting his moral concerns into extravagant physical actions or dispersing them in a deluge of language and bizarre plotting. His defence, akin to that of Joe Orton, was, at first, to see in farce the only form adequate to address a crisis in experience and perception: 'I chose farce because it's the most abrasive, anxious form. I think the chaotic state of the world demands it.'[1] Yet farce is not antithetical to moral concern and would later give way to a different kind

[1] John Harrop, '"Ibsen Translated by Lewis Carroll": the Theatre of John Guare', *New Theatre Quarterly* 3 (May 1985), p. 152.

of play for there is also another side to John Guare – poetic, profoundly metaphoric. In his Nantucket plays, in particular, he explores history and myth in dramatic metaphors of genuine force and originality, metaphors which offer an account of the fate of American utopianism and the self's struggle for meaning. Indeed in *Lydie Breeze* and *Women and Water* he has written two plays of great linguistic and theatrical subtlety, plays which sharply contrast with those which first attracted attention a quarter of a century before. What links the different phases of his career, however, is a resistance to naturalism in all its guises.

For Guare, escaping naturalism has always been a central objective. Regarding Stanislavsky's impact on the American theatre, at least as interpreted by advocates of the Method, as almost wholly baleful, he insists that, for him at least, 'theatrical reality happens on a much higher plane'. Actors exist 'to drive us crazy'.[2] His chief obligation as a playwright, indeed, he believes, is to 'break the domination of naturalism and get the theatre back to being a place of poetry, a place where language can reign' (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 102). This does not mean a return to verse drama – though it is a declared interest of his – but it does suggest the degree to which he is drawn to the lyrical and the metaphorical, the extent to which the energy, the inventive possibilities, the shaping power of language, as well as its plastic ambiguities, are a way equally of engaging and transforming the real. The epic ambition of the artist necessitates a commensurate language. Theatre poetry, he explains, 'is a response to the large event, events that force the poetry' (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 102). It can be felt in the structure of an Ibsen play no less than in the substance of Greek drama. Naturalistic acting, meanwhile, belongs on a television or movie screen because acting is 'about finding truth on the large scale with the recognition of the actor as performer' (p. 102). It is on this level, perhaps, that the actor connects with an audience in that to some degree we all recognise and acknowledge that we, too, are performers, finding in that truth not a mark of insincerity or the inauthentic but a confession that we too take pleasure in the language we use, feel the energy in a coded rhythm, aspire to a truth not reducible to prosaic veracity. Performance, on stage or in life, lifts us into a world of possibility which stretches the envelope of the real.

John Guare was brought up in a family with a tradition of theatre. From 1880 to 1917 two of his great-uncles toured with their own stock company, producing such plays as *Pawn Ticket 210* and *The Old Toll House*.

[2] Anne Cattaneo, 'John Guare: The Art of Theater IX', *The Paris Review*, 125 (Winter 1992), p. 99.

His uncle had also been part of the act and, as he explained to Jackson Bryer,[3] went on to be an agent and head of casting at MGM from 1934 to 1956. Thespianism then skipped a generation. His father worked on Wall Street, but hated it so much that he was happy to support his son's somewhat precocious dramatic ambitions ('Whatever you do, never get a job,' he had warned his son, advice he was happy to take). Enthused by a *Life* magazine report of a film of *Tom Sawyer* made by two boys, at the age of eleven he wrote three scripts. Hollywood did not beat a path to his door but at twelve he was given a typewriter by his parents which he still owns and uses.

Despite his fascination with theatre, Guare has claimed that he learned as much about dramatic structure, as a teenager, from record sleeves as he did from studying plays:

> for learning about the structure of plays, I read the record jackets of show albums. I recognized that the first or second number will always be a 'want' song. 'All I want is a room somewhere.' 'We've got to have, we plot to have, because it's so dreary not to have, that certain thing called the boy friend.' 'Something's Coming.' It was such a revelation, in the record store, reading those notes. You really can tell how the story is told through the songs. 'Guys and Dolls' contains the three themes of that show. Recognizing that was a revelation. Therefore, beginning a play, what is my 'want'? I came to Stanislavski through record jackets, at the age of twelve, thirteen, fourteen. So I always approach plays in a practical way.[4]

Following his father's attack of angina in 1950 he and his mother moved briefly to Ellenville, in upstate New York, where the local school's resolute secularism led to his being educated at home where, on reading a report of Joshua Logan's success on Broadway in *The Wisteria Tree*, based on *The Cherry Orchard*, the twelve-year-old Guare set himself to read the latter, along with other Chekhov plays. He also saw the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and typed a play in which, as he has explained, he substituted New Orleans for Moscow. Back in New York he saw more plays, continuing his theatrical education.

Guare spent the last four years of the 1950s at Georgetown University, moving on to Yale for three years, graduating with a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1963, a period of study prolonged by fear of the draft. As he has explained, both locations were valuable for an aspiring playwright: 'When I was at Georgetown, Washington was a strong tryout town. I

[3] Jackson R. Bryer, *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995), p. 71.
[4] David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York, 1988), pp. 88–9.

went to plays all the time. Then I went to Yale Drama School. New Haven was also a tryout town. We spent all our time arguing because every play that came in was a play in trouble. You never saw a finished play' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 89).

At Georgetown, in 1957, he entered a one-act play contest and decided that his future lay as a dramatist, not least because his family history suggested to him that 'the theatre was something very possible' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 71). Thereafter he wrote a play a year, and was editor of the literary magazine. In his final year he wrote a musical called *The Thirties Girl*, later using the songs from it in *The House of Blue Leaves*.

At Yale he studied drama with John Gassner but, more importantly, in his opinion, studied design with Donald Oenslager learning valuable lessons about lighting, set design and differing styles of presentation. As he has said, 'I work with the director and the lighting designer, the set designer, the costume designer, to focus in so that everybody's telling the same story. That to me is what the theatrical experience is – the audience watching a group of people all trying to produce the same effect' (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 88). The central lesson, however, was 'the fact that everything that appears on the stage comes from the writing' (p. 89).

His own family's Irish background led him to the work of Wilde, O'Casey and Shaw while a college production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* prompted him to write a play in emulation of Wilde. Feeling that *The Plough and the Stars* was unfinished, he provided an extra act. He also admired the work of Irish-American Philip Barry, particularly for the rhythm and artificiality of his high comedy and for its sudden mood changes. He worked on a number of shows and read widely. Several of his plays received campus productions and he won a prize in a Washington play contest. *Theatre Girl* and *The Toadstool Boy* were produced in Washington, in 1959 and 1960, and *The Golden Cherub* and *Did You Write My Name in the Snow* in New Haven in 1962–3. Following a year in the services, which he regarded as rendering everything that mattered to him valueless, he was ready for the theatre, boosted by a ten-thousand dollar gift from his aunt, who offered the money on condition that he turned his back on a job offer as writing trainee at Universal Studios, and devoted himself to playwriting.

It is still true that without the Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway movement of the 1960s Guare's prospects, along with those of so many other writers, would not have been bright. He regarded these as per-

forming the function for young writers that Paris had in the 1920s. His breakthrough came with a play performed at the Barr–Albee–Wilder workshop. As he has explained, 'Edward Albee was a saint . . . With the money that he made from *Virginia Woolf* . . . he took a lease on a theatre in Vandaam Street and for six months [of the year, for six years] did a new play every week-end, full productions!' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 72).

Success, or at least exposure, here in turn led to the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference, in Waterford, Connecticut, of which he became a founder member. The piece he presented was the first act of what was to be *The House of Blue Leaves*, which he had begun writing in 1965 while on a trip to Cairo where he received a newspaper clipping describing the Pope's visit to New York. At that moment, he has said, he 'heard the sound of my life' (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 89) and was no longer a secret Southern writer, intent on writing Chekhovian drama set in New Orleans. He was a New York author.

The essence of Off-Off-Broadway, as Sam Shepard was to find, was that it was possible for a new, young writer, with no track record, to have a play read or produced, sometimes before the ink was dry. As Guare recalls:

> I once wrote a play on Thursday and gave it to a friend. She said, 'Come down to Theatre Genesis. They're doing new plays on Monday.' My play was done that very Monday. There was a real energy in the air. Writing a play was a thing of great pleasure and fun – more like singing. The theatre was not Broadway, not so serious. The plays were not reviewed. That, in retrospect, gave one a great deal of confidence. (Savran, *In Their Own Words*, p. 87)

Among his earliest plays were *Something I'll Tell You Tuesday* and *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year*, performed as a double bill at the Caffè Cino, in October 1966. Cino was a Sicilian steam presser who worked at his regular job until late afternoon and then ran a theatre on Cornelia Street in New York, in a café decorated with Christmas tree lights, religious statues and pictures of Jean Harlow and Maria Callas. The 'theatre' was small, narrow and long, a theatre, in other words, that did not lend itself to large casts. Cino also operated on a somewhat bizarre basis, insisting to Guare that he was only prepared to stage plays by Aquarians. By luck Guare is an Aquarian: 'He looked at my driver's licence and he said, "All right." He checked his chart and he said, "These are the dates when you'll open, and you run for two weeks because of Saturn, and I think we'll give you a one-week extension," and we ran three weeks' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 72).

Something I'll Tell You Tuesday, described by Guare as ideally a play about old people to be played by young people, concerns an elderly couple, Agnes and Andrew, preparing for the woman's hospitalisation, who are visited by their daughter and son-in-law, Hildegarde and George, whose energy seems to go mostly into arguments. Requiring nothing more than two chairs – elaborate stagings were, anyway, not practicable at the Caffè Cino – *Something I'll Tell You Tuesday* is a character study in which the contrasting rhythms and tones of the conversations – those between Agnes and Andrew are deliberate, quiet, those between Hildegarde and George fast and hysterical – establish the nature of the individuals and their relationships to one another. Agnes is apparently romantic, Andrew practical; Hildegarde is self-regarding, George potentially violent. Yet for all their apparently settled life there are tensions between the older couple that are no less real for being subtly displayed.

Agnes wishes to walk to the hospital, not for romantic reasons but because she wishes, finally, to justify their decision to live near a hospital and remote, it is implied, from other things. It is, moreover, the first time they have been out together for some time. Neither is their relationship as close as it once was. Indeed, it is implied that the young couple may be no more than a version of the older one, their fight mirroring those of Agnes and Andrew. What makes them seem so devoted now is in some degree simply a loss of energy and will, a realisation which brings home to them their advancing age.

No more than a sketch, the play nonetheless reveals a commitment to character, an awareness of the significance of nuances, of tone and rhythm, a sense of currents which can flow in different directions within a speech, a sensitivity to irony, as dramatic method and subject, which would surface more powerfully in Guare's later work.

Its companion piece, *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year*, is equally slight, almost anecdotal. It features two figures, in characteristic Off-Off-Broadway style called simply He and She, who, in equally Off-Off-Broadway style, address the audience from time to time. They conduct a flirtation in a park, he telling apparently outrageous stories about his relatives, including his wife, who he alleges will kill them with a high powered rifle if she discovers them. She does.

A further work for Caffè Cino, *A Day for Surprises*, shrinks the character names still further – to A and B – in an absurdist work about two librarians who lament the death of a fellow librarian (eaten by a stone lion) before conducting a curious love affair. In other words, Guare

began his career by writing derivative works, influenced now less by Chekhov and Williams than Ionesco. These early plays are not particularly significant in their own right, but they do suggest Guare's commitment to experimenting with character, language and plot, his taste for the oblique, the ironic and even the surreal as well, incidentally, as the openness of Off-Off-Broadway to stylistic variety; though, to his mind, by the mid 1960s some of the energy and inventiveness had begun to dissipate. He dates the decline to the moment newspapers began to review it: 'a recklessness and a sense of it being underground . . . went out of it' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 76). The death of Joe Cino, who stabbed himself to death, marked a further stage in that decline. But, by then, Guare had moved on.

It was the O'Neill Centre that seems to have been the most significant experience for him in the middle-late 1960s, in that he wrote a series of plays there from 1965 through to 1968. Guare was one of a cluster of talents identified by the Centre. Others included Lanford Wilson, Leonard Melfi, Terrence McNally and Sam Shepard. It was here that one of the most successful of his early works was performed in 1967 and then, the following year, at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York. As he has explained, 'I wrote *Muzeeka* about all those undergraduates I saw around me, so free and happy but wondering what in adult life would allow them to keep their spirit and freedom? How do we keep any ideals in this particular society? Vietnam was starting to become a specter' (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 91). And the war in Vietnam, with its distorting pressure on the self, its political corruptions, its moral corrosiveness, is, if not the subject, then the distorting lens through which Guare invites his audience to view a culture itself dedicated to unreality and whose media homogenise and commodify experience. The play begins as its protagonist reads from an American coin, reciting the very principle which his society seems in process of denying: E Pluribus Unum. In God We Trust.

The central character, Jack Argue, is a man who can arrange but not compose music. He applies for a job with Muzeeka, a company which produces the bland music played in restaurants, elevators and rest rooms, intending, eventually, to sabotage it with his own work so that the whole of his society will begin to dance. We follow his adventures with a prostitute and then in war, as he goes to serve in Vietnam, a war presented as being run primarily for the advantage of competing American television companies. While there he anticipates his return when he will be able to recount the details of his killings, content to re-enter a world

in which such events are easily smoothed away: 'I'll go back and be convinced, the *Reader's Digest* will convince me, and the newspapers and *TV Guide* and my Muzeeka will stick their hands in my ears and massage my brain and convince me I didn't do anything wrong. And life will be so nice.'[5] Unable, finally, to face the prospect, Argue stabs himself, while the man who had hoped to enrol him in his atomic cess pool company dies as a prostitute dressed in a bikini sings a song which jumbles together the names of politicians with those of other icons of the day.

Muzeeka is scarcely subtle. The fact that Argue's name is an anagram for Guare perhaps suggests some of the personal anger behind a work that satirises contemporary America, a play in which, Brecht-like, stagehands hold up banners announcing each scene. One of the comparatively few plays to engage with the issue of Vietnam, it offers a picaresque account of the hero's journey less into the heart of darkness than into a society whose principal achievement is to drain experience of moral and social content and replay it as entertainment. Argue invokes the Etruscans as a civilisation once vivid and alive and now preserved only in its art. A similar fate, he seems to suggest, awaits America, which has already surrendered its vitality and betrayed its ideals.

Yet if here, and in his later work, Guare was concerned to offer a critique of American values, his theatrical models lay elsewhere. As he explained:

> Durrenmatt's *The Visit* . . . had a profound effect on me. To have a play draw you in with humor and then make you crazy and send you out mixed-up! When I got to Feydeau, Strindberg, Pinter, Joe Orton and the 'dis-ease' they created, I was home. Pinter's plays had the rhythm of high comedy trapped in the wrong surroundings; I identified with that. I loved the strictures of farce, besides liking the sound of an audience laughing . . . And Feydeau's hysteria opened the door to Strindberg. I always liked plays to be funny and early on stumbled upon the truth that farce is tragedy speeded up . . . The intensity puts it on the edge. (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 85)

High comedy trapped in the wrong surroundings certainly seemed to characterise the play which first established Guare's reputation, *The House of Blue Leaves*, whose opening act he wrote in 1966 and presented the following year at the O'Neill Centre, with himself playing the central role. At that stage it only involved three people because, as he later explained, he lacked the skill or experience to handle the nine characters who would constitute the final play, and could not then sustain the

[5] John Guare, *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun and Other Plays* (New York, 1993), pp. 136–7.

complexities of farce. It took him a further five years to complete it. The central problem seemed to lie with the character of Corrinna Stroller, an actress who appears in the second act and whose nature changed from draft to draft. Since it seemed central to the plot that she should know what had happened in the first act, too much time was spent with exposition. The problem was solved by making her deaf, a decision which also facilitated a new line in comic action and which underlined the extent to which none of the characters in the play listens to any of the others.

Guare insists that the play has its roots in autobiography. His father (who died the day he finished it) had worked for the New York Stock Exchange but called it 'the zoo' (Artie is a zoo keeper); his uncle had been head of casting at MGM and had engaged in precisely the conversation about Huckleberry Finn which opens the second act. Beyond that, it is fantasy, inspired, so he suggests, by seeing Laurence Olivier in *The Dance of Death* and *A Flea in Her Ear* on consecutive nights, a wedding of two apparently opposing theatrical traditions which led him to abandon an earlier version in favour of the play first performed in February 1971, at the Truck and Warehouse Theatre in New York, which won an Obie Award, an Outer Circle Critics Award and the New York Drama Critics Award as Best American Play. Revived in 1986 at Lincoln Centre it won four Tony Awards.

The House of Blue Leaves (1971)is a farce. It tells the story of Artie Shaughnessy, a composer anxious to break into show business. His wife Bananas is, as her name implies, slightly crazy and Artie is in process of trading her in for Bunny Flingus, profligate with her sexual charms but saving her culinary skills for marriage. In the outside world the Pope is visiting the Queens district of New York and there is general hysteria. As the parade goes by Bunny holds up Artie's music to be blessed, in the hope of divine intervention, while a group of slightly crazed nuns fight for a view of the pontiff. Into this scene intrude Billy Einhorn, Artie's one-time friend and now a Hollywood producer, and his twenty-two-year-old girlfriend, Corrinna Stroller. Artie's son, Ronnie, meanwhile, plans to assassinate the Pope, but succeeds only in blowing up Miss Stroller and a high percentage of the nuns.

The first director, somewhat incredibly, saw this as a naturalistic work, but was replaced by Mel Shapiro, who responded to what Guare himself characterised as a blend of Feydeau and Strindberg, farcical in style but, as he saw it, with a more serious dimension. Indeed, when a decade later an attempt was actually made to assassinate the Pope Guare remarked

that, 'I felt as if a protective wall had shattered and the audience had tumbled onto the same side of the mirror as the play.' The effect, it seemed to him, was that 'their perception allowed them to see the characters' needs and hungers with much more directness than in 1971'.[6]

It is hard to take the observation entirely seriously since the world of *The House of Blue Leaves* is so evidently and unrelentingly farcical, death being reduced to an off-stage plot device, the occasion for jokes. Like Joe Orton's plays, which preceded it, but which had more of an anarchic edge to them, it does, perhaps, say something about a world of lost dreams and failed ambitions. However, it lacks Orton's detached cruelty. Its surreal humour never quite matches Orton's, whose characters exist in a world beyond morality. Orton was not a satirist who held up an alternative model of human behaviour. He revelled in the deconstruction of character, being himself a consummate role player for whom performance was the essence of being. He had no commitment to values and no nostalgia for a society in which such values might once have operated. Far from presenting the two-dimensionality of farce as reflecting the decay of private and public form, far from yearning for the order which farce momentarily disrupts only to re-establish, he celebrated chaos. Guare, by contrast, is a moralist who simultaneously stages and laments the reduction of character to role and offers a prognosis of a society substituting appearance for reality. He is a satirist, identifying and mocking a culture which dedicates itself to the pursuit of happiness with no clear idea of what might constitute such happiness, beyond the saccharine ballads of true love or the projections of the media, a dream as imprecise as it is pervasive. As Artie sings at the beginning of the play:

> I'm looking for Something.
> I've searched everywhere.
> I'm looking for Something
> And just when I'm there,
> Whenever I'm near it
> I can see it and hear it.
> I'm almost upon it,
> Then it's gone.[7]

For Orton, society was a decaying corpse inhabited by human lice determined to deny evidence of putrefaction. He was an absurd *farceur*, having little in common with Feydeau and still less with the cruder British tradition. If the British were liable to take mysterious pleasure in

[6] John Harrop, 'Living in the Dark Room: the Playwright and His Audience', *New Theatre Quarterly* 3 (May 1985), p. 155. [7] John Guare, *The House of Blue Leaves* (New York, 1971), p. 6.

the sight of vicars dropping their trousers it was a way of playing with authority and disorder that depended on an underlying confidence in the unchallengeable rightness and continuing power of that social system. For Orton, in contrast, that system was the enemy while the absurd was liberating. He did not yearn for transcendence or for a restored society which would find a place for him. His work rigorously excludes all sentiment, as it does a yearning for expressive language or transitive relationships. His resolutions are all deliberately ironic.

Guare is a horse of a different colour. He, too, is capable of creating surreal scenes and bizarre juxtapositions. He, too, has an eye for the absurdity of the world which his characters inhabit. Thus, Bunny recalls one of Billy's movies in which, 'Doris Day comes down that flight of stairs in that bathrobe and thinks Rock Hudson is the plumber to fix her bathtub and in reality he's an atomic scientist' (*The House of Blue Leaves*, p. 26). Yet, since this is a scenario hardly remote from other Doris Day/Rock Hudson movies, Guare is dealing here with satire and not absurdity. The Pope and movie stars are equivalents in his play but so they are beyond the confines of the theatre. There is virtually nothing in *The House of Blue Leaves* that does not have its equivalent in American society, from trendy nuns to crazed movie producers and vacuous movie stars, from wannabe composers to bewildered assassins. Guare's problem is that, as Don DeLillo points out in relation to *Mao II*, American reality is liable to outstrip anything a writer can invent. Nonetheless, there is in *The House of Blue Leaves*, and beyond the pleasure which Guare plainly takes in the contrivances of farce, an instinct to root events in the real, no matter how transformed, distorted or ironised. Indeed, he has explained the setting as itself a part of that reality which lies just beyond the cartoon frenzy of the action.

For Guare, the very decision to set the play in Queens was especially significant. It was never, he insisted, a borough with its own sense of identity. It was either a stepping stone to something greater or the place where hopes stalled and the whole web of ambition unwound. Its location, close to but never really a part of a hustling, lively and successful New York (read Manhattan), is reflected, in *The House of Blue Leaves*, in lives which are similarly marginal or spiralling down into apocalypse. He sees the inhabitants of Queens as asking themselves why their dreams are the source of humiliation, why they never achieve what ought to be so securely in their grasp, living, as they do, so close to the centre of power and possibility. New York is, after all, the symbol of tomorrow (to be replaced, as in the play, by California). But, as he has remarked,

'Fourteen minutes on the Flushing line is a very long distance' (Foreword, *The House of Blue Leaves*, p. ix). This play is, in his mind, more than anything, therefore, about humiliation, and certainly, as he suggests, there is virtually no one in the play who escapes such a fate.

It is tempting to see something of Guare himself in the figure of Artie. More than a decade after writing his first play, and despite positive response to his work, he had still not achieved the breakthrough that had come almost immediately to Edward Albee, to Jack Gelber and LeRoi Jones. He was at the centre of the new theatre in America and yet, like Artie, was still waiting for the success which, ironically, *The House of Blue Leaves* offered. But, beyond that, the play exposes a more general frustration as all the characters face being humiliated 'by their dreams, their loves, their wants, their best parts' (Foreword, *The House of Blue Leaves*, p. x). Rejecting accusations of cruelty, in his portraits of characters whose fantasies are so manifestly unrealisable and whose treatment of one another is so casual, he objected that,

> I don't think any play from the Oresteia on down has ever reached the cruelty of the smallest moments in our lives, what we have done to others, what others have done to us. I'm not interested so much in how people survive as in how they avoid humiliation. Chekhov says we must never humiliate one another, and I think avoiding humiliation is the core of tragedy and comedy and probably of our lives. (p. x)

In *The House of Blue Leaves* Artie loses both his hopes of Hollywood success and his lover, who transfers her attention to the Hollywood mogul, Billy Einhorn. His wife has already lost his affections and, to a degree, her mind. Corrinna and several nuns, more radically, lose their lives in a spasm of violence. Guare recalled being in Egypt in 1965, when the Pope left for New York where he was to plead for peace in the world. By the time of the play's production, however, the war in Vietnam was edging towards its violent conclusion. Peace was far from being evident, any more than it had been in 1965, the year of the Watts riot, or, indeed, in the years which saw the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and Malcolm X. The play, in that sense, did not require the attempted assassination of a Pope to validate its random violence.

At the same time, Guare insists, 'The Pope's no loser. Neither is Artie Shaughnessy, whom *The House of Blue Leaves* is about. They both had big dreams. Lots of possibilities. The Pope's just into more real estate' (p. xi), and, despite the irony of these remarks, the play does, indeed, end on a sentimental note, which seems almost a parodic version of the con-

cluding scene of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Artie and his wife are reconciled and Artie sings a song as blue leaves appear and he steps into a blue spotlight. But despite Guare's reference to Artie's big dreams he is a performer, with no more substance than the Hollywood he aspires to join. References to the 'needs' and 'hungers' of the characters in the end carry little conviction precisely because these are no more than figures in a farce, and if its cruelties go beyond those of Feydeau they do not go as deep as Orton's. A comment on a society in pursuit of dreams, trading truth for illusion, and with a paranoid impulse buried at the heart of its sentimentalities, it stops short, nonetheless, of the savage and maniacal intensity which Guare saw as having given it birth. It does offer an ironic perspective on a national obsession with success, on a consumerism which extends into human affairs. The links between his characters are tenuous, their grasp on reality uncertain, as movies and television define the real and the possible and they step into a fantasy believing it to have substance and transcending purpose. This is Albee's *The American Dream* wedded to *Hellzapoppin*. But claims for its moral seriousness would seem to impose a greater weight than the play can bear.

Guare's response to such accusations, however, was perhaps implicit in his observation, on the occasion of the first production, that the audience's sense of reality would have to catch up with the play. It was an ironic remark, but it could, perhaps, be plausibly argued that, Papal assassinations aside, a presidency in which a former actor brought the fantasies of Hollywood to Washington (from *Star Wars* to a Disneyfied version of family and social life), did eventually turn *The House of Blue Leaves* into a realist drama. Certainly it offered a portrait of a culture whose sense of the real was thoroughly infiltrated by fantasy and myth. But Guare's claims went further than this.

For him, the play was centrally concerned with limits, in the depiction of people limited by a lack of talent, limited economically, emotionally, geographically. But if Artie and the others, rooted in a Queens they wish to escape, desperate to break out of fixed roles and determined circumstances, are frustrated and deformed by a world less expansive than their dreams, then Billy, the man they hope will release them from their constraints, has the opposite problem. He has the power to create possibilities, to give substance to dreams. Indeed, he lives in a world where dreams are the stuff of everyday life and the generators of reality, albeit a reality itself metastasised with illusion. He has what the others lack: power, wealth, mobility. What he in turn lacks is limits and, as Guare has

asked, 'What do you hang onto in a limitless world?'[8] His answer is 'yourself', but in *The House of Blue Leaves* there is no self. Billy succeeds by feeling nothing, being nothing but a series of gestures. One woman dies, another is at hand. Why not, in a world in which reality is simply projected light? Why not, when all is possible?

This is hardly the world of Camus's *Caligula*, not least because Billy is an unlikely source of existential angst, but the absurdity explored by Camus does share something with that presented by Guare, for when there are no limits there are no values to affront, no codes to breach, no principles to abandon. Camus's central character explores the implications of inhabiting an antinomian world, piling up experiences as if the simple accumulation of those experiences will precipitate meaning, stir a blunted sensibility. Guare's characters are not allowed this degree of self-awareness. The blood is not real; the pain is a momentary neuralgia. There is, in truth, no dark shadow which might have led to the territory explored by Camus. But then this is America, not postwar Europe, in which the absurd had a perfectly recognisable historical referent. Indeed it could, perhaps, be argued that it is the absence of that historical pressure which deflects so much of American drama into the personal and the psychological rather than the social and the metaphysical, though Vietnam bred its own sense of a world in which American insularities and national myths deferred to more profound slippages in the sense of the real. True or not, Guare was to take up the issues he saw raised in part by *The House of Blue Leaves* in a later work, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*. For the moment, though, he had written a play in which farce performed a more consoling than disturbing role. This was not the sad vaudeville of *Waiting for Godot* or the linguistic echo chamber of Ionesco. It was a play which owed as much to the Marx Brothers as to Feydeau.

Guare followed *The House of Blue Leaves* with a highly successful, though loose, musical adaptation of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* which managed to reflect something of the social protest of the era, combined with Guare's off-beat humour. First performed in Central Park, in July 1971, it transferred to Broadway in December of the same year. But if these two productions taken together seemed to indicate that he had broken through on to a new level of success and popularity this was not quite the case.[9]

[8] John Guare, 'Author's Note', *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* (New York, 1977), p. 4.
[9] John Guare, *Rich and Famous* (New York, 1977), pp. 10–11.

Following the death of Joe Cino, Guare and others, including the director Mel Shapiro, moved to Nantucket and started a theatre where he staged *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*. The move was to prove less significant for that fact, however, than for the transformation it was to work in his career. He wished, he has explained, to stop focussing on New York, to 'draw water out of a different well' (Cattaneo, 'John Guare', p. 93). That well produced a series of plays of genuine lyrical power, beginning with *Lydie Breeze*, though these still lay several years in the future. A more immediate result of the move was a play that, in his own words, was 'so freeform that you could put anything into it' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 84).

Marco Polo Sings a Solo, a play set near the Arctic Circle and first staged by the Nantucket Stage Company, in Bicentennial year, 1976, was Guare's somewhat premature millennial play, the one anniversary perhaps reminding him of another. As Guare has explained, 'it was a play that got me realizing that structure was not a cage. I understood from that play . . . that Ibsen was a great playwright because he made the machinery work in a poetic way rather than being formulaic' (Bryer, *The Playwright's Art*, p. 84) It was also, however, a play with so many layers that he confessed he could himself no longer see it clearly. In an author's note he explained:

> Each character in 'Marco Polo Sings a Solo' is yearning for an ever greater glory, an ever greater beauty, a greater power, a greater love, a greater truth, and moving into such intense territory by yourself, that very same self becomes all the more important. Everyone in the play is a Marco Polo, travelling out by himself, herself or both selves as in the case of one character. The people's very freedom makes them terrified. All walls are down. They are by themselves. They each are forced to search out for some kind of structure, whether it be a chemical formula to end cancer or a film to ennoble the world or a love to hang onto at night. ('Author's Note', *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, p. 4)

This obsession with self is, Guare suggests, the basis of the comedy in a play that he wished to see presented as if it were 'some 21st century reworking of *The Philadelphia Story* with all kinds of Katharine Hepburns and Cary Grants littering the stage' ('Author's Note', p. 4).

The curtain rises on a surreal scene, with a number of characters gathered together in a seemingly domestic setting but in fact on an iceberg. They are, it appears, in Norway to shoot a film about Marco Polo. The year is 1999. The world appears to be disintegrating, Hawaii having been destroyed in an earthquake and part of Italy disappearing into the sea.

In space, meanwhile, launched from Cape Kissinger, is a spaceship captained by one Frank Schaeffer, charged with locating and securing a new planet. The greatest scientific achievement, meanwhile, seems to be the decoding of dolphin language, an accomplishment only muted by the discovery that their variegated squeaks can be adequately translated as: 'Sun goes down, Tide goes out, darkies gather round and dey all begin to shout' (*Marco Polo Sings a Solo,* p. 16). No wonder, you might think, that Guare himself was hard put to disentangle the play's various layers, even while offering such an elaborate description of its theme.

A baroque extravaganza, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* is a high voltage work, full of energy and invention but finally falling somewhat short of his own claims for it. Thus, there comes a moment when a series of cosmic lightning bolts shoot randomly down from the sky in an attempt to impregnate Frank Shaeffer's wife. They hit a piano, a baby carriage and a flask containing a cure for cancer. Guare's note informs us that 'The bolts from heaven come down to wake these people up, to purify them, to restore nature to some kind of balance before this new century comes into being' ('Author's Note', p. 4). The gulf between this interpretation and the action is a little too wide to be bridged. Guare's utopianism, which is a significant aspect of his writing, extends, apparently, to his faith in the ability of audiences to impose or perceive a meaning not always immediately apparent.

He followed *Marco Polo* with an altogether more focussed work, *Landscape of the Body*, first produced at the Academy Festival Theatre in Lake Forest, Illinois, in July 1977, and then, three months later, by Joseph Papp's Public Theatre in New York. The play opens on the open deck of a ferry boat sailing from Hyannisport to Nantucket. A woman is writing messages on pieces or paper and throwing them, in bottles, into the ocean. A man, in heavy, but patent, disguise, engages her in conversation, the subject of which is the death of her child some months earlier. She identifies him as Captain Marvin Holahan, a homicide detective. The play then reprises the circumstances of the death of the child, decapitated and abandoned in New York.

If this description makes the play sound like a conventional whodunnit, it is, in fact, anything but that, though there is a mystery to be unfolded. Guare deploys his usual alienating devices, from quick-fire humour to flashbacks and musical numbers. Characters return from the dead, comment on the action, explicate their motives. Yet, beneath this kaleidoscope of fractured images the play is a lament for lost values, for the decay of hope and the destruction of innocence.

Betty and her son Bert come to New York from their home in Bangor, Maine (a limited world, mundane, but with its own coherences). They come to find Betty's sister Rosalie, who works for a fraudulent travel agent while making pornographic films on the side. With her eye on stardom and success, she celebrates her alienation: 'I live here on Christopher Street. A lovely building. Lovely neighbors. Leave you alone. Nobody knows me. I don't know anybody. I'm flying high.'[10] To succeed in persuading her sister to join her would be to win a victory over her mother and thus justify her own lifestyle. Betty is accordingly pulled into this world, as her son takes to a life of petty crime mugging gay men.

Landscape of the Body is a play littered with dead bodies. Rosalie dies in a freak accident, her employer as the result of a prank. Characters only have to be mentioned for their death to be confirmed. But, as Rosalie affirms, 'The good thing about being dead is at least you know where you stand. You have one piece of information in life and you think life means this. Then you get a new piece of info and everything you knew means something else . . . Life was always wriggling out of my hands like a fish you thought you had hooked' (*Landscape of the Body*, p. 16). The New York in which these characters live and die is a hell in which the only still point is their desire to serve the self. The ambition of Raulito, head of the fraudulent travel agency, is to appear as the principal guest on the Johnny Carson Show. Meaning is deferred. Rosalie sings an ironic song in which she celebrates the American dream of a bright future which will redeem an empty past: 'It's amazing how a little tomorrow/Can make up for a whole lot of yesterday' (p. 35).

Betty, meanwhile, is crushed by a sense of failure which prevents her intervening in her own life. When a man appears to redeem her, a figure from her past who becomes an embodiment of that hope celebrated by Rosalie, he turns out to have recently emerged from a mental hospital, an expression of the dementia which infects the world she inhabits. His observation that 'the only landscape worth looking at is the landscape of the human body' (p. 41), seems like an invitation to intimacy, an acceptance of the value of the individual. In fact it is evidence of his derangement as what seems a poetic celebration of beauty spirals down into madness:

I kiss your Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. I kiss your Missouri and Monongahela and Susquehanna and Shenandoah and Rio Grande. I kiss the

[10] John Guare, *Landscape of the Body* (New York, 1978), p. 21.

confluence of all those rivers. I kiss your amber waves of grain. I kiss your spacious skies, your rocket's red glare, your land I love, your purple mountain's majesty. But most of all I kiss your head. I kiss the place where we keep our resolves. The place where we do our dreams. I kiss behind the eyes where we store up secrets and knowledge to save us if we're caught in a corridor on a dark, wintry evening. And you, with your mouth, kiss my head because that's the place where I kept the pictures of you all these years. (p. 41)

He follows this slowly dislocating encomium with a refusal to accept Betty's son, forcing her to leave him behind, abandoning him to his death. Her hope comes to nothing as she travels with a man locked inside his own madness.

Bert, meanwhile, turns from his banal but coherent existence in the no man's land of adolescence and joins a group obsessed with violence, devoid of values and frightened of a world they barely understand. As one of the girls in the gang remarks, 'Can I walk with you? I don't want to go home yet. My mother's watching television. My father's kicking ass in the living room. I got to talk to somebody. Something happened to me this afternoon . . . Something is happening to my body' (p. 53).

This account may seem to suggest that *Landscape of the Body* is a naturalistic play. It is not. John Guare works by indirection. Betty's sense of shock is reflected by a dislocated prose, albeit one which makes a kind of sense as she regrets that spoken language lacks the emphasis and authority of the printed word: 'I cannot cannot cannot – draw underlines under the cannot – cannot cannot cannot – six negatives make a positive – cannot understand' (p. 9). The play, indeed, is framed by her attempts to write down the facts of the case in the hope that such words will shape themselves into meaning – 'Sentences. Places. People's names. Secrets. Things I wanted to be. I thought maybe out of all that I'd find the magic clue who killed my kid. I'd say I see' (p. 55). These are the messages which she puts in bottles and throws into the sea.

Something analogous is true of Guare's play in which seemingly random events, words, images are deployed, messages are thrown out, in the hope that they will form into a revelatory meaning. As Holahan, the detective, observes, 'dossiers . . . All disconnected. All disjointed. Still I know more' (p. 56). The process whereby the crime is slowly exposed mirrors that by which Guare edges towards his own revelatory truth which has little to do with the violence of urban life. For at the heart of the play is a fear, born, he suggests, at the moment of puberty, that we are not fated to live for ever in a protected environment, that we are not, in short, born to live for ever and that the journey on which we go is sol-

itary. As Rosalie explains to her sister, at the very moment that sister is on the verge of adulthood:

> the planet Earth has these fishing hooks on it . . . and all the nice things in the world are baited on those hooks and our spirits floating up there all loose and aimless spy these baited hooks and we bite . . . we spend the rest of our stay on this planet trying to free our mouths of that hook, fighting, fighting . . . You travel alone because other people are only there to remind you how much that hook hurts . . . Wait for that one day we can bite free and get back out there in space where we belong . . . Only the taste of blood to remind us we ever existed. (pp. 56–7)

Guare deals in metaphors. He has a poet's faith in the power of language to create as well as to describe. The twists and turns of the plot, its movement through time, its assonances and dissonances, reflect his attempt to build meaning through accretion. The play begins and ends with a journey, a journey which he suggests should be brightly lit at the opening to capture 'the zest when journeys begin'. For the rest, he sees the characters as moving in and out of darkness 'where dreams and memories and mindless violence can take their turn' (p. 58).

He praised the play's original set design, a series of black boxes from which people entered and exited as if in a dream, because 'it made manifest the central theme of the play: people fighting against death in all our lives' (p. 58). Yet the play ends, paradoxically, as Betty and Holahan edge towards one another, as if, once the truth were exposed, some kind of reconciliation and relief might be possible, an ending not untypical of Guare's work in which, more often than not, epiphany is permitted, in which absurdity is wished away in a gesture that sometimes lacks conviction because of the power of the images which have preceded it.

Guare's next play, *Bosoms and Neglect* (1979), an ironic comedy which plays with the idea of fictiveness – 'We're the subsidiary characters in everybody's lives. That's the joke, the joke of our lives'[11] – marked another stage in a development which began, perhaps, with *Landscape of the Body*, away from the more bizarre images and exuberant prose of the earlier plays towards a more spare and affecting, though still witty and occasionally farcical examination of characters rooted if not in a wholly real world then at least in one which bears more directly on the real. The flattened characters of farce give way to figures with a history and, at least in part, a psychologically convincing sensibility. Pain and violence still feature but are aspects of private and public lives which press closer

[11] John Guare, *Bosoms and Neglect* (New York, 1980), p. 37.

to a sense of the real. The first production closed after a few days but a 1999 revision, staged by the Signature Theatre in New York, revealed the real strength of the piece.

The play features two patients of the same psychiatrist who compete with one another with respect to their separate neuroses. The man, who has been having an affair with his best friend's wife and is about to go off with her, is now drawn to a woman he encountered in a book store and, indeed, much of the play's humour comes from their obsessive references to literary texts which act as a stimulus, correlative and substitute for their passion. But a third character haunts them – the man's blind mother who suddenly reveals that she has been concealing her breast cancer, a revelation which now threatens her son's plans. The first act ends with the man and woman fighting one another, their subsequent hospitalistion creating the bridge into the second act.

This features a conversation between mother and son, which, while brilliantly funny, slowly exposes a human pain that is no less felt for the relentless humour with which it is conducted and through which it is expressed. Indeed, *Bosoms and Neglect* is the answer to those critics who supposed that moral concern was driven out by physical humour and a facility with language. Guare has the ability to switch from one dramatic mode to another, from one concept of character to another, from seemingly irrational arias to moving speeches in a fraction of a second. *Bosoms and Neglect* never succumbs to sentimentality but is never content to rest in its own ironies, indeed never content to rest at all, its frenzied pace, like its neurotic articulateness, offering a commentary on lives which have become performances, texts. This is a juggler's work in which everything is kept in play – a satire of psychiatry and intellectual pretensions, a sometimes moving but relentlessly funny account of family relationships, a staging of human vulnerabilities. In many ways the best of his early works, *Bosoms and Neglect*, which ends on a moment of painful abandonment, the humour stilled, anticipated one of his next plays, though it is tempting to say that nothing in Guare's work really prepares one for *Lydie Breeze* (1982), tempting but not entirely true. The poetic prose is foreshadowed in his earlier plays, along with the compassionate view of individual suffering. But never before had all elements come together in a work of such affecting power.

To come upon *Lydie Breeze* after Guare's earlier work is like wandering out of a nightclub on New Year's Eve and into a nearby chapel. It is not that the earlier experience is inferior and, indeed, sounds from that other building are faintly audible, but what strikes one most is the calm air, the

lyrical language, the sense of enacted ritual, the pressure of metaphor, the respect for human vulnerabilities, fears and fallibilities. The closest analogy would be the works of Synge, Yeats or O'Casey as they might have been absorbed by Eugene O'Neill. There is something of Chekhov here, as there is of Susan Glaspell. By virtue of the subject matter there is also an echo of Ibsen. But this is a play not best understood by reference to its ingredient parts, still less the shadow of other writers. For it is Guare's consummate achievement.

The busyness of his early plays falls away, the self-conscious displays of wit, the over-exuberant inventiveness. In their place is a simple metaphor in which utopian dreams are betrayed only to be renewed, in which innocence is destroyed and found again. *Lydie Breeze* is a tone poem in which individual lives render up their meaning, and private pain and its alleviation stand for larger issues having to do with broken contracts endlessly renewed.

Guare has explained that his move to Nantucket had stirred his interest in New England, his mother having originated in Lynn, Massachusetts, and his father having roots in Gloucester, Massachusetts and Montpelier, Vermont. His father's grandfather, indeed, had been a ship's captain working out of Gloucester. Both parents had been born in the nineteenth century and he wished to project himself back into that pre-Freudian time and make sense out of the fragments of family legends and myths he had absorbed, the tensions he had detected in overheard conversations. For him, the move to Nantucket opened up a new imaginative life and gave him access to half-formed memories and subconscious anxieties. The result was a play sequence, two of which are among the finest works of the last three decades.

Joshua Hickman, together with his friends, Dan Grady and Amos Mason, we learn, had formed a utopian community in nineteenth-century Nantucket. A misunderstanding led to Joshua killing Grady, an offence for which he was imprisoned. But Grady had already had his revenge on his killer by infecting Joshua's wife with syphilis. In *Ghosts* Ibsen made venereal disease a symbol for inherited characteristics. That is not how it functions here where it becomes both the literal source of an infection which spreads within the group and a metaphor for that cruelty which may contaminate love.

In revenge for his infecting her, Lydie passes on the disease to Grady's son, Jeremiah, before herself committing suicide. He, in turn, infects Beaty, the Hickmans' maid, who tries to pass the blame, though not the

illness, to Amos Mason, now a successful politician and would-be presidential candidate. And so the taint of corruption moves out from the centre.

The characters in *Lydie Breeze* are tied together by their hopes and failings. They are one another's fates, guilty of inflicting pain and destroying their jointly imagined futures, as well as pooling their anxieties, projecting their dreams beyond a troubled present. Love is the source of corruption and death as well as of a transforming ecstasy. Indeed the same moment engenders both. But that, it appears, is the nature of experience, the double burden of existence. Dreaming of a utopia, imagining with their country that innocence can be sustained, they learn that their Eden is flawed. For some that proves a knowledge too great to bear. For others it breeds a cynicism which, translated into national policy, justifies ambition and cruelty. For still others, it creates a new understanding of the nature of a life whose rhythms cannot be disrupted, whose necessities must be served. Theirs is a fortunate fall which brings with it an understanding of others and of a natural world which is something more than the backdrop to the drama of human life.

The play is set in 1895 in a sea-front house. The dunes disappear to the sea. An upended rowing boat, half-buried in sand, becomes a correlative for the past, itself half-buried and soon to be disinterred when Joshua Hickman's elder daughter, Gussie, arrives. Mistress to Amos Mason, she has persuaded her lover, and his friend and promoter the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, to divert their luxury yacht to Nantucket so that she can show off her new connection, flaunt what seems to her to be her success. Her younger sister, fifteen-year-old Lydie (named for her mother), meanwhile, is haunted by memories of her mother as recounted to her by Beaty. Beaty recalls and recreates the sound which the young girl's mother made as her feet banged against the bannister when she hanged herself, and invokes the sight of her naked father fighting to revive the woman to whom he has returned after his imprisonment, a woman who has allowed him no sexual contact but with whom he effectively seems to simulate intercourse as he tries to squeeze life back into her. Convinced that her mother is in some way still spiritually present, the young Lydie is partly consoled and partly terrified as she acts out this ritual with Beaty, who has reasons of her own for her behaviour.

The young Lydie, like the girl in *Landscape of the Body*, is terrified of the onset of puberty, associating everything that has happened to her with mysteries into which she has yet to be initiated and feeling that to give in

to love will be to break the bond which Beaty insists she must retain with her dead mother. Temporarily blinded by an accident with fireworks in a bottle, she is equally blind to the cause of the events which obsess her.

The opening scene has the appearance of a ceremony, a holy drama in which girl and maid recite responses in a secular mass. It has, it seems, been performed many times before. Lydie is the prompter. It is a ritual designed to keep the dead mother alive as the mass resurrects Christ to die again. Beaty feels herself a disciple, if not beatified. She believes the woman she served has left her with a double responsibility, to teach and to revenge. The blood she invokes, however, is not the stuff of redemption, a transubstantiation. It is the blood of menstruation which the young Lydie awaits and fears as Beaty hones her into a weapon which she can use against those she believes destroyed her own paradise ('I'm getting you ready for the blood between men and women,'[12] she tells Lydie). Yet she fears the change which will unsheathe this weapon (the weapon of sexuality) in that the price she will pay is to lose her last physical link with the woman she worships. So long as the young Lydie has not yet reached puberty she, Beaty, is a surrogate mother and hence one with the dead woman who gave her significance. For her part, Lydie contemplates suicide as a way of securing an indissoluble link with the mother she loves and fears.

Her sister Gussie returns, worldly-wise and with no sense of the mystery to which Lydie clings. Where Lydie has fantasies, Gussie has lies. For her, a cigarette becomes Dr Benson's Magic Asthma Stick, a mistress is a secretary while her lover's wife is confined at home 'with leprosy . . . Or something' (*Lydie Breeze*, p. 14). Her language is brutally direct and contrasts with the lyricism of Lydie. She returns with Amos Mason who is to give a speech on the future of America, a utopian who has retained the language but not the substance of his idealism. The golden future which he once thought to herald with a shared humanity he now sees as depending on the preservation of the gold standard and the provoking of a convenient war. On the brink of a new century, it seems that the future is in the hands of those who did not so much betray their utopianism as discover that utopianism can itself give birth to corruption.

Joshua, Amos and Dan were veterans of the Civil War. They bore its marks on their bodies, became part of the body politic. Their fate is thus intertwined with that of the country they saw suffer in the name of principle. The war was inscribed on them no less profoundly than Hester's

[12] John Guare, *Lydie Breeze* (New York, 1982), p. 8.

scarlet A was embroidered on to her dress (in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*), though where for her it was an arbitrary sign, to be reclaimed, transformed, for them, as they thought, it was rooted in their very tissue.

Now, as an ex-prisoner, Joshua has no vote, only perhaps a symbolic role as his daughter Gussie urges him to meet the man who secured his release from prison and who now seeks validation from a past from which he has severed himself.

Gussie herself, meanwhile, recounts the story of her visit to England with the putative Senator, and speaks of seeing *Frankenstein*, where the monster, made of people's dreams and nightmares, seems oddly attractive, which is hardly surprising since the young actor who plays him was himself such, and now turns up in Nantucket in search of her. That young actor is Jeremiah Grady, son of the man killed by Gussie's father. But the power which generates Frankenstein's monster is the power which, in another form, lures Gussie. She has in turn become a monster, a blend equally of dreams and nightmares. She is an amoral force, the creation of a new age.

Jeremiah Grady returns to Nantucket to confront a Lydie Breeze who, unknown to him, is long dead by her own hand. He wishes to kill her for betraying his love and tainting him with corruption. As a young man, he had loved her but she, in despair, had done him damage. For a moment, in his eyes, daughter becomes mother as he first offers to throttle the young Lydie Breeze and then embraces her. Distraught, Lydie rushes to Beaty, who recounts a secret which threatens to corrode her spirit. She tells of being infected by a man who she falsely names as Amos Mason. The bewildered Lydie tries to blot out the poison of this knowledge: 'I hear the ocean. I hear the sand. I hear the breeze. I don't want to hear this' (p. 26). But Beaty, with a vested interest in retaining her power over Lydie and hence her role in the family, her significance in her self-created myth, warns against a swift approaching maturity which she can only see as destructive. 'You're not poisoned this time. But sooner or later they find you. This sand. This beach. Here. All here' (p. 26).

The two women are drawn to one another in their fear, Lydie of a threatened loss of innocence, Beaty of a threatened loss of being, of identity. They encircle themselves in a language whose menaced lyricism is an image of their threatened selves. This is the poetry of spell and incantation. On the edge of a continent they balance, Lydie, more than Beaty, afraid of falling into life. Lydie is Beaty's apprentice in a dark magic designed to reverse the direction of time, to keep her a child. She is the instrument with which Beaty plans to unstitch the relationship

between Gussie and her lover by publicly charging Amos with infecting her with syphilis. The first scene of the second act ends as Beaty intones the mantra with which she seeks to consolidate her power over the girl, containing them within a fable of her own devising: 'When I was a child/ And you were a child/ In our kingdom by the sea.'

But romance does enter Lydie's life, in the form of Jude Emerson, a Christian Scientist who, ironically, arrives on an errand from the local doctor with drops for her damaged eye. He is employed to snare birds and band them which is, perhaps, what he plans for Lydie. The step into sexual knowledge, which Lydie and Beaty alike fear, seems imminent and, indeed, the pressure for revelation and change seems all but irresistible.

The house in which the action takes place is situated on an island where storms have already swept away much of the village. It is temporary ground, a no man's land which may well disappear with the end of this particular history. It is, at any rate, a place where resolutions are urgent.

In Act Two Joshua and Jeremiah, the son of the man Joshua murdered, the man whose company even now he misses, meet to act out a drama. 'I'm curious as to what kind of scene you want us to play '(p. 29), remarks Jeremiah. He offers a melodramatic scenario. But Joshua's burden is that he has only one role. He is a murderer. His act of violence has defined him as surely as an actor forced to play a single role throughout his life. Indeed he invokes James O'Neill, father of the playwright, who made his fortune and ruined his art and perhaps his life by repeatedly playing the Count of Monte Cristo until he was defined, as an actor, by that role. But he equally sees America settling into a role at the behest of Amos and William Randolph Hearst, surrendering its infinite possibilities to the myth of empire, to a dream of avarice. And *Lydie Breeze* is as much a play about America as about this group of characters gathered together in what is only a temporary refuge on the country's margin. The infection of innocence afflicts the nation no less than the individual. The corruption of the body is a reflection of the body politic. Utopia is as unnatural and unstable a state as total innocence, though the nostalgia for it is considerable. Jeremiah recalls lying in bed and hearing Joshua 'and Amos and my father talking about the universe being one and man willing utopias and finding new worlds in yourself' (p. 31). But they were expelled from this Eden as America was expelled from its.

Together Joshua and Jeremiah re-enact the death of Jeremiah's father,

prompting one another as Lydie and Beaty had done, performing another ritual, as much an exorcism as a trial with accuser and accused, prosecutor and defence attorney. It is an exorcism which requires that a hidden crime be exposed: Grady's infection of the first Lydie and her infection of his son, one crime prompting another in a tangle of despair and anger. And now that son returns not to kill the man who murdered his father but to destroy or embrace the woman who injured him, knowing nothing of the fact that she has already destroyed herself out of guilt and shame.

In England, it is suggested, Jeremiah's despair may have led him to murder. Certainly there are moments when he seems to recall such violence, memories which may be no more than dreams. It is this possibility, however, which leads him to acting, a profession in which he can lose himself in a multiplicity of roles. But the part he chose was Frankenstein's monster and it is this suspect role in which he is trapped until at last he receives absolution from the grave, for Lydie left a note when she committed suicide, a note presumed to be for her husband but now revealed as being for the man she so recklessly harmed: 'Little man, I take you to my grave. I gave as I was given and I regret that to my dying day which is today' (p. 36). It is a note which facilitates forgiveness and reconciliation. It is a forgiveness, however, which Joshua, her husband, rejects as a piece of theatre, a self-indulgence, a misdirected passion for, to his mind, the fault lies with the man who stole his wife and infected her, with the son who indulged his bitterness, indeed with all the utopian crew who betrayed one another and their dreams so casually: 'we all carelessly ruined each other's lives. How,' he asks, 'can you ever begin to find a path to forgiveness?' And again the leap is made from the private to the public: 'We used to dream here. America could have been great . . . but we never trusted our dreams. We only trust the itch in our pocket. Fuck what you want. Take what you want' (p. 36).

Whenever *Lydie Breeze* is set it was plainly a play for the 1980s, a decade in which greed was sanctified and the self made a primary value. The 'austere moral splendour' (p. 38) which typified the Nantucket utopia and the new-found land of America itself has now devolved into simple rapacity. The beauty of the American ideal has been destroyed as, in this bleak but beautiful play, hunters shoot a Baltimore Oriole in the nearby dunes, their gunfire an ironic comment on events.

The third act opens with Joshua dressed in part of his Civil War uniform as another world collapses around him. Beaty's ploy of accusing Mason of infecting her destroys his hopes of securing Hearst's

support for his presidential campaign as it does Gussie's of securing her future with him. The 'power that comes from being around power' (p. 42) is denied her. Jeremiah, meanwhile, apologises to Beaty for infecting her as a youth, a time when he had 'felt strength . . . power', not the power of authority (though that, too, he possessed, she being a servant), but that which was a product of youth, of feeling, suddenly, in tune with the world: 'We shimmered together' (p. 44). But power, he now feels, poisons, even a power born out of nature's gift of sexual autonomy, the puberty which the young Lydie fears. He had, after all, carelessly destroyed the woman he loved, sending her spinning into vengefulness and isolation. Now, together once more, they seek oblivion, dying together in the sea, thereby liberating themselves and Lydie from the spell of the past.

The play ends with love beckoning both daughters and Joshua reconciled with them and his life alike. As the lights fade to dark he recites a passage from Walt Whitman that his wife had read to him as they came to the island which was to be their hope and their doom, a passage in which dissonance and difference are subsumed in a greater harmony, in which all creation is seen as part of an eternal rhythm, a single creation: 'All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets, all distances of time. All souls . . . All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future, This vast similitude spans them, and always has spanned. And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them' (pp. 55–6).

The contrivances of plot, the potential for sentimentality, the patent metaphors, all clear and present facts in *Lydie Breeze*, never disturb the integrity of a play in which, for the first time, Guare allows his poetic sensibility full range. The lyrical language lifts fact into image, story into myth. The community he features was born out of a dream, and the play itself has features of a dream, as the characters move uneasily through memories, tumbling different moments together as they try to make sense of their fears, endeavour to expiate their sense of guilt, assuage a longing which they hesitate to address directly.

It is a play of echoes. The young Lydie's name reflects her mother's, as her life will shadow a familiar pathway out of innocence and into an experience in which the clarity of youth becomes obscured, just as the utopian instincts of these people (the community they form, the country they serve), defer to a knowledge that innocence and perfection are improbable and even destructive forces. Beaty and Jeremiah die rather than live with the knowledge of flawed motives and failed aspirations. Lydie, though tempted, will not.

Lydie Breeze is a comment on the destructiveness of power and the corruption at the heart of egotism. It is a lament over national arrogance as well as personal ambition and pride. Set in a place which is a geographical edge, it explores those who walk the edge of their sexuality, hesitating on the brink of a move which will be definitional. But it is also a play that reaches for a wider significance, exploring not just the problematic relationship between men and women, or the impulses which lead simultaneously to a common enterprise and a separate fate. It situates the confused reaching out of individuals – who scarcely understand themselves, their baffled needs, the terrible betrayals that make their lives such a whirl of exultance and depression – in the context of a cosmos which may not shine with meaning but does offer a containing shape, as a play itself offers the consolation of form.

There are echoes of O'Neill in this play, and those that followed. The lyricism is that of the sea plays, the sense of fatalism in the relationship between men and women familiar from *Desire Under the Elms*, the idea of history as myth reminiscent of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. There is, perhaps, a shadow of Chekhov, if only in his sense of capturing a culture at a moment of change, as it gathers itself to betray a past which is not without its ambiguities. But *Lydie Breeze* is of itself. Whatever its critical reception, which was not good, it marked not merely a significant advance in Guare's craft but also a genuine achievement in postwar American theatre.

Lydie Breeze turned out to be the first of a sequence of plays. Just as the characters at its heart had named their community after the word utopia spelled in reverse, so the action is put into reverse and subsequent plays take us back in time. In chronological order they are *Women and Water*, set in 1861 and 1864, *Gardenia*, which takes place between 1875 and 1885, *Bullfinch's Mythology*, whose text is yet to be finalised and set the year after *Gardenia*, and *Lydie Breeze*, 1895.

Gardenia, the second produced, opened at the Manhattan Theatre Club in April 1982. It begins with the lines that concluded *Lydie Breeze*, as Joshua recites what he had learned from Walt Whitman. But *Gardenia*, for all its felicities, is a retreat not only in time but craft as Guare makes explicit what was implicit, as he substitutes information for allusiveness and a somewhat arch language for the natural poetry of the first play.

The decision to fill in the details of the commune, to dissect the nature of the idealism at its heart, proved, I think, unfortunate. Left vague, it was a shared commitment, an ennobling enterprise destroyed by a

flawed human nature. Spelled out in detail it becomes no more than a naive and embarrassing project undermined by its innate contradictions and simplicity of conception. The wonder is not that it failed but that such supposedly intelligent people could ever have convinced themselves that it could succeed. It is reminiscent of Susan Glaspell's *Inheritors*, in which a similar idealism is slowly corroded by egotism and materialism, and which also fails to establish a convincing human basis for ideas that characters are prone, as here, to spell out in a language which seems rooted less in their own psychology than a dramatic necessity to explain their beliefs. We are also offered a superfluous symbol, the gardenia of the title, which has been allowed to shrivel because insufficiently nourished, as though the play's action required such a correlative. This is a hangover from Tennessee Williams's dried-up fountains, snakeskin jackets and captive iguanas. It is a nudge from the playwright determined to underscore what requires no such emphasis.

The first act is set in 1875, in the early days of the commune. We are on the beach at Nantucket. The house is out of sight. There is nothing but sand, with a few tufts of grass, some beach roses and driftwood. The characters are, appropriately enough for a community determined to turn the clock back, to start building afresh, out beyond the contaminating and seductive society of the nearby settlement. But the first blush has already gone off their idealism. Practicalities have begun to force them to contemplate a negotiation with the world which they had hoped to avoid. Lydie has been using her nursing skills to deliver a baby on the mainland (significantly born dead), though her bitterness at the materialism, corruption and sexual repressions of those she is there to help has ensured that this employment will be her last. Joshua has had the manuscript of his book returned by William Dean Howells, editor of *Atalantic Monthly*, the one man he thought might have published it and hence secured them some kind of financial independence. They even consider letting rooms, thereby allowing into their midst those they had chosen to flee, while an increasingly embittered Amos Mason has set his mind on leaving to begin a career in politics.

As Joshua tellingly remarks, 'maybe our moment of glory came in the moment we dreamed it'.[13] In that respect their utopia scarcely differs from that of the country they inhabit, and that is, indeed, the conceit on which this play sequence is based. It is a lament for a lost idealism and an acknowledgement that utopianism contains its own negation. As

[13] John Guare, *Gardenia* (New York, 1982), p. 11.

Gatsby's green light (in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*) seen across a bay had contained both mystery and purity, so their venture had seemed a selfless dream. But when Gatsby sought to invest that mystery in a living being and embrace his own vision, he discovered its fallibility. So, too, do these creators of a brave new world. The Platonic ideal founders on the reality of human imperfection.

The project, we learn, had been born in a Civil War hospital where Lydie had nursed all three men: Joshua, Amos and Dan. They had set out to buy land on the island which is thirty miles off the coast of America. In this place they would 'write manifestos and develop a society that will shine as a beacon to the world. A paradise of the mind. A garden of Eden' (*Gardenia*, p. 11). Here, spelled out, is the project alluded to in the first play. Here is that connection with the City on the Hill, the Thousand Points of Light, the new Eden, Manifest Destiny, implied but not specified in *Lydie Breeze*. Now, seven years on from its beginning, Joshua is forced to ask himself whether collapse is not 'a condition of Eden?' (p. 11) and Amos to tell Joshua what he plainly already knows:

> My only pride these past seven years is that you are here writing a treatise on the transcendental purpose of life and I am part of that endeavour and when it is published and the tumultuous roar quiets the great men of the universe will flock to our community . . . a model for the ages. I endured all the impossible winters and unending summers because we were building a hothouse for these orchids that would bloom out of your head. (p. 20)

It might be suggested that he is here rehearsing for the political speeches he intends one day to make, since Joshua is surely not an appropriate audience. He, after all, hardly needs to be told that he has been writing a book for seven years or what that book is about, nor does he need to be informed about the nature of the climate. Guare has also suggested that these are characters who feel obliged to recite to themselves, let alone others, the principles on which they have based their lives, as a mantra, a desperate recapitulation of the very values and history which they suspect themselves of having abrogated. However, he was to revise *Gardenia* for a planned production in 1999 (though that proved impossible to mount for financial reasons) and those revisions seemed likely to address an over-explicitness evident, perhaps, also in his use of the orchid as central symbol. Certainly the image of orchids blooming out of anyone's head is surreal, and a patent case of the author underlining an image which gets more than its fair share of attention from all the characters. Thus, Lydie ends the first scene with a speech which under-

lines the degree to which, in *Gardenia*, as opposed to *Lydie Breeze*, Guare's characters tend to substitute rhetoric for passion, point up the theme and underscore the imagery. Addressing Amos, she remarks:

> There is no choice. Let your loneliness lead you into town and let your loneliness join you up to men who find their perfect God in presidents like Ulysses S.Grant. Give into your loneliness and let your loneliness make you a spoke in the wheel of the machine that spews out human beings like Carnegie and Rockefeller and Jay Gould. Or stay here where the road is not strewn with joy, but where you shall find true heroism. Heroism to resist the doubt. Heroism to keep true to the ideals of justice. Not to be a precious gardenia that needs tending or it shall wither and die. Not to blossom without the water. To find the water in our hearts! We shall flower, Amos, whether you go into town or not. The path to town is that way. Your loneliness must know the way there. I hope you can find your way back. (p. 21)

There are no speeches like this in *Lydie Breeze*. Amos, remember, is a friend and colleague. They are together on a beach. He has just been surfing. Suddenly he is addressed as though he were the audience for a political speech. And if we are asked to accept it as a piece of rhetoric characteristic of this group of idealists, why is it being deployed in this context? The use of 'shall' is indicative. Where colloquial speech would use 'will' Lydie uses 'shall'. She is, strictly speaking, correct, in that determination may be indicated by such usage, and we are, after all, in the late nineteenth century, but it is a rhetorical trope deployed in a scene in which they have been addressing each other familiarly. The images, likewise (loneliness as a guide, Amos as a spoke in a wheel, endeavour as a road, and, of course, the gardenia as a spirit to be tended), belong less in a conversation than heard declaimed from a platform. It is true that politically committed groups have not been unknown to allow jargon to penetrate private conversations, but these are people who have suffered together in the war and lived together for years.

Even if Amos is threatening to leave he is unlikely to be held back by rehearsing for him the very principles he despairs of operating, in a language least likely to change his decision. But, then, he is equally infected by a language which increasingly seems to be all they share. 'We fought a war against false and cruel principles,' he informs Joshua. 'We were supposed to examine the purposes of being male and female . . . The search for something higher. Lightning rods for a greater evolution' (p. 15). This can scarcely come as much of a surprise to a man who has spent seven years explaining precisely this. It would not be worth labouring the point were it not for the fact that such explicitness is precisely what

undermines the poetry of *Gardenia*, along with the credibility of the characters. Later in the play Amos objects when Joshua begins recounting their shared past: 'You don't have to tell me the plot. I am the plot' (p. 49). It is a remark that Guare himself might have taken more fully to heart. Faced with the problem of writing a series of linked plays which also need to stand alone, he evidently feels the need to spell out what in *Lydie Breeze* he was content to imply, to explicate what he was there prepared to leave immanent. There is a price to be paid for that.

The commune is transformed when Dan Grady, a conductor on the Union Pacific Railroad, returns with a bag full of money he has stolen from two corrupt businessmen who, we are told, have killed one another on a train as they headed towards Washington where they were to bribe the president, Ulysses S. Grant. His name and address, indeed, are stencilled, in anagrammatic form, on the side of the bag, Grant's corruption being a leitmotif of the play sequence. The money saves the community, but at the price of compromise. Guare speaks of the third play in the series as being a melodrama but the melodramatic nature of *Gardenia* is scarcely less apparent, the whole circumstance surrounding the double murder coming out of a dramatic tradition which seems at odds with the symbolist drive, the poetic tone of the play. Yet these are characters who see the world in Manichaean terms. Their very utopian principles lead them to stage their lives as melodramas and to constitute a language which reflects the sharply delineated nature of the world as they see it. The images are perhaps best seen not so much as Guare's as his characters', looking, as they are, for a language which can contain and express the intensity of their feelings. The gardenia appeals to them because it is organic, since that is essentially the nature of the community they seek to found, of the paradigm they offer the world. The problem, of course, is that the organic is tainted with the logic of its own inevitable decay. Intoxicated with the beauty they identify, propose and pursue, they fail to detect the smell of putrefaction born out of the beauty they celebrate. *Gardenia* is, I think, overwritten at times but that judgement must be balanced by an awareness of the degree to which rhetoric, the poetic image, hyperbole, constitute the natural mode of those aware that they must invent not only a new society but a new language, a new grammar. Turning their backs on what they see as a prosaic society, they perforce charge their speech with poetry, press lyricism to the very edge of absurdity. These are people who live, literally and figuratively, on the edge. It is what defines them. The deeper irony is that they sustain their own supposed purity at the cost of isolating themselves

from those they would redeem with the force of their convictions and the nature of their beliefs.

The second act jumps forward in time, from 1875 to 1884. Joshua's murder of Dan, alluded to in *Lydie Breeze*, has now taken place and Joshua is in prison where, courtesy of Amos, he works at a printing press while, outside, preparations are under way for the execution of a murderer. In the interim Joshua has written a new book which this time, he now learns, meets with the approval of William Dean Howells, who supports its publication. However, being a memoir of the community, it exposes truths which Amos, now a successful lawyer, wishes suppressed. He offers to secure a pardon (corruptly) at the price of Joshua agreeing to the book's suppression, a plea seconded by Lydie who, we now discover, had attempted to kill both her children in a scene once again reminiscent of melodrama. Man and wife thus confront one another and their past in the prison cell where, ironically, Joshua has felt greater freedom than he had in a community dedicated to freedom. But even now they are obliged to address one another rather than converse, as Joshua remarks that:

> in all our dreaming we never allowed for the squalid, petty furies. We lived on a beach in a vast landscape. We mistook the size of the ocean, the size of the sky for the size of our souls. We were this great transparent eyeball trying to look into the mind of God. It's taken this prison to show me our true horizons. I want to look our petty furies in the face and name them and lose them. (p. 59)

This, we need to remind ourselves, is a man meeting the woman he once loved, in the privacy of a room. Whatever his tendency to elevated prose, the circumstances render his rhetoric at least ironic. When he continues by telling her that, on a visit to Europe, 'I stood in the Parthenon waiting for the connection of the ages to wash over me. I am ready for the ancient awe. Overhead, Athena and Zeus are trying to catch my attention. Sappho and Sophocles are about to sing their song. Yes! Plato and Aristotle are walking this very ground' (p. 59), any rational woman would suspect insanity, and indeed, he dangerously enquires, 'Was I mad?' To which she responds, 'Your vision's complete' (p. 60), perhaps in itself an endorsement of his suspicion on the part of a woman who has herself crossed the line between passionate intensity and insanity. Lydie finally tells Joshua to publish his book but, to protect her, he destroys it. The play ends as he begins to shred it, love for her conquering his ambition. Something, it seems, has survived.

Guare has explained that he wrote the first three parts of his

intended tetralogy 'each in a different style', meaning them to exist independently of each other.[14] That is patently true, though he links *Lydie Breeze* and *Gardenia*, both of which he contrasts with the third in the sequence, *Women and Water*. As he explained, 'in most modern plays, the poetry, the part which is "literary", that which is densely written, springs out of the act of remembering' (*Women and Water*, p. 3). *Gardenia* and *Lydie Breeze*, he suggests, 'deal with people trapped, thrilled and haunted by a specific golden time in their youth' (p. 3). The challenge of the third in the sequence was 'to write a play in the present tense' (p. 3). *Women and Water* was to be 'an adventure play where the people are moving too rapidly to remember, people so young they don't have anything to remember' (p. 3). The challenge was to 'write a play where the poetry lies not in the language but in the events themselves. To write not about the memory of a golden time but to write the golden time itself' (p. 3).

In fact, the poetry in *Gardenia* does not really 'spring out of the act of remembering' but out of a present need to raise the temperature of a language designed to sustain a wavering faith, to substitute words for the passion those words invoke. The poetry fails to convince precisely because the characters deploy it in place of action. The further they travel from the moment of epiphany, from the revelatory vision which set them on a path to utopia, the more they deflect into speech what was to have been achieved through action. They construct a myth only to discover that they cannot inhabit it, only to describe and celebrate it in images which contain their own dissolution. These are characters for whom the ritualistic recuperation and exorcism of the past are a priority, who reach, still, for an unattainable future but who in the present find themselves collaborating in compromise, confronted by ambiguity and failing in their most fundamental human necessities.

For me, *Gardenia* is not as successful as the other two parts of the trilogy. Images are explained rather than left to do their work on the subconscious. Past events are explicated, drained of the mystery that gave them force in the first play. On the other hand, the sight of characters wrestling with the fact of their failure, with the collapse of relationships and the attenuation of their youthful vision, lends an elegiac tone to a work in which inflated rhetoric and sententiousness are a temptation not only for the characters but also for the man who creates them and believes in their passion, their desperate desire for transcendence, if not

[14] John Guare, *Women and Water* (New York, 1990), p. 3.