

A black and white portrait of Terrence McNally, an older man with thinning hair, wearing a dark plaid shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and out of focus. The text is overlaid on a dark rectangular area in the lower right portion of the image.

Terrence McNally

A Casebook

Edited by
Toby Silverman Zinman

TERRENCE MCNALLY

CASEBOOKS ON MODERN DRAMATISTS
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A CASEBOOK

EDITED BY
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Cover photograph of Terrence McNally © Susan Johann.

For my daughter, Phoebe

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General Editor's Note

Beginning with *And Things That Go Bump in the Night*, written when he was only twenty-three, Terrence McNally has been a prolific and controversial playwright for three decades, admired by theater audiences well as by academicians. He has garnered his share of Tony awards and several of his later works, especially *A Perfect Ganesh*, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and *Master Class* are now considered “mainstream” American plays.

Toby Silverman Zinman is the perfect scholar to assemble a collection of essays on McNally. Just as she had the full cooperation of Rabe in her previous Garland volume, *David Rabe: A Casebook* (1991), Zinman received advice from McNally, and the volume includes her interviews with him and two of his major actors, Zoe Caldwell and Nathan Lane. A professor of English at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, she is respected for her direction of Summer Seminars of Samuel Beckett's plays for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and she has written many articles for publication in periodicals like *Modern Drama* and *Theatre Journal*. She reviews Philadelphia theatre for *Variety* and *City Paper* and is a frequent contributor to *American Theater* magazine. In this volume, she offers students, critics, and admirers of McNally's work a panoply of his ideas and achievements.

Kimball King

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Introduction

Terrence McNally's life in the theatre began when, at the age of twenty-three, he opened his first play, *And Things That Go Bump in the Night*, at the Guthrie Theatre and then on Broadway to scandalized and disastrous reviews. Since then he has won Tony after Tony, prize after prize, achieving a significant position in American drama, both on Broadway and Off. Through more than three decades of a career that continues to be prolific and progressively more serious, his plays have been death haunted and music vitalized.

Music is the abiding passion of McNally's life and work. His earliest journeyman work was on an adaptation of *The Lady of the Camellias* (1963)—which is, of course, the same Dumas story Verdi used for *La Traviata*; the characters in *And Things That Go Bump* are named for opera characters; *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (1987) opens with Bach and closes with Debussy. *The Lisbon Traviata* is, of course, filled with opera, as is *Master Class*. The opening stage directions of Act One of *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991) is a perfect example of how crucial music is to McNally's dramatic imagination:

At rise, tableau; Sally painting at an easel; Chloe standing at the kitchen sink, within; John reading a newspaper; Sam testing the chlorine level of the pool.

No one moves. Silence.

*Music begins: the farewell trio from Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.*

As the trio progresses, the stage and the actors will slowly come to "life."

The first movement will be the gentle stirrings of an ornamental flag in the early-morning breeze.

Then SALLY will begin to paint, CHLOE to drink coffee in the kitchen, JOHN to turn the pages of his New York Times, SAM to retrieve the chlorine indicator—but all in time to the music, not reaching naturalistic behavior until the end of the piece.

By the time the trio ends, we will be in “real” time.

It is as though music is the life force, that which precedes the theatrical givens of speech and gesture.

And if music is the redemptive, invigorating force, death is always the fact, the point of a play's departure, that which makes not only the action of the play but the writing of the play necessary. Just as the death of her brother brought Sally and the three others to the inherited beach house on Fire Island for the Fourth of July holiday, so the play begins with a musical farewell. The plot of *A Perfect Ganesh* (1993) is generated by the two women's secret sorrows over the deaths of their sons, and their grief, however obliquely, generates the trip to India which is the action of the play. (As of this writing, McNally is working on a screenplay of *A Perfect Ganesh* for Merchant Ivory Productions, although he has no say about casting or final approval of the screenplay; as he put it: “They could read mine, think it was terrible and say, let's give it to Sam Shepard to rewrite. That's the huge difference between writing a play and writing a screenplay—you write a play on spec, but when it's done, every word in it is yours. When you write for Hollywood, they give you a lot of money up front, but what comes out on the screen you might not want to have any responsibility for. I think it's a fair tradeoff.”) Benilde Montgomery's essay on *A Perfect Ganesh* illuminates the play by discussing its roots in the myth and religion of India, and in his essay on *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, Stephen Watt discusses McNally as a postmodernist in light of current critical theory.

The early one-acts were products of their times: the anti-war plays, like *Botticelli* (1968), *Bringing It All Back Home* (1969), and the anti-establishment protest plays, like *Next* (1967), *¡Cuba Sí!*

(1968) and *Witness* (1968), all suggest that McNally is not at heart a political playwright. Howard Stein, in his essay on the early plays, discusses *And Things That Go Bump in the Night*, the subsequent one-acts, and the final play of that first stage of his career, *Where Has Tommy Flowers Gone?* (1971), concluding that the radical promise of the first work was not fulfilled.

McNally has not relinquished his affection for the one-act, and *Prelude and Leibestod* (1989), a hilarious, horrifying theatrical aria, and *Andre's Mother* (1988), which was subsequently revised and lengthened for television and for which he won a 1990 Emmy, show how his skill with the short form has grown. His newest one-act, which opened Off-Broadway in June of 1996 is "Dusk," one of three short plays under the umbrella title of *By the Sea, by the Sea, by the Beautiful Sea* (the others are by Joe Pintauro, "Dawn," and Lanford Wilson, "Day"). It is not yet published.

Much of the second stage of McNally's career was devoted to farce—particularly sex farce—and the theme of homosexuality which had lurked in the earliest plays now moves downstage, but farce is farce, after all, and McNally is, at this point, not attempting to convey gay life authentically for a straight audience. *Whiskey* (1973), *Bad Habits* (1974), and *The Ritz* (1975) are all entertaining, but they shun the intimacy and gravity which now seem to be the keynotes of McNally's best work, although despite the growing seriousness of the dramas, the dialogue is always filled with laugh lines and wit. McNally's characters are always funny if not happy, and always articulate and self-aware.

After the deaths of his "two best friends and dearest collaborators" ("A Few Words," xi), Robert Drivas and James Coco, McNally wrote *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (1987). McNally's own screenplays for *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* and *The Ritz* raise problematic issues of evisceration which Helen Buttel addresses in her essay on the adaptations.

The Lisbon Traviata (1985, revised 1989) is pivotal in McNally's transformation into a mature and contemplative theatrical voice. This is the first of the longer plays about complex relationships among more fully-developed characters who are often desperate, damaged people. It is also the first of the plays which not only uses music but is *about* music, and Sam Abel's essay on the complicated history of

this play's conclusion—to murder or not to murder—is richly informed by the critic's own extensive knowledge of opera.

Love! Valour! Compassion! is, like the earlier work, death soaked and music redeemed. Although McNally is not in the avant-garde or on the cutting edge—despite the fact that his *Sweet Eros* in 1969 brought nudity to Off-Broadway (before the far more sensational *Che!* and *Oh! Calcutta*)—*Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994) generated huge critical controversy both within and without the gay community (with much critical ink spilled on its use of male nudity). Although much of the debate has centered on where this play falls in the history of gay theatre, as do the two essays in this volume, I hope this will not become the exclusive view of *Love! Valour! Compassion!* John Clum and Steven Drukman come to surprisingly similar conclusions although these critics often write from opposing poles in the sexual politics of gay/queer theory. I have included an interview with Nathan Lane who played Buzz in *Love! Valour! Compassion!*; McNally considers Lane his foremost interpreter and has written a number of roles for him.

Master Class is about Maria Callas, the great diva, and the legendary master classes she held at Juilliard in the early 1970s. It is interesting that McNally himself taught playwriting at Juilliard last year and used his own work-in-progress—the early script of *Master Class*—to teach *his* master classes. McNally is well known as an expert on opera, and he is frequently heard introducing the Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts—another lovely completion of another lovely loop, since it was on those radio broadcasts that McNally, as a boy in Texas, first heard Callas sing.

I have provided McNally's comments on Callas—extracted from the interviews—as a preface to Cary Mazer's groundbreaking essay on the play, John Ardoin's authoritative essay on Maria Callas, and Zoe Caldwell's conversation, in another interview, about playing Maria Callas in the world premiere of *Master Class*.

As of this writing, McNally has just finished the book for a musical adaptation of Doctorow's novel, *Ragtime* (score by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty), which opens in Toronto in December of 1996 and which, at press time, he expects to open in New York a year later. *Love! Valour! Compassion!* is being filmed with the original cast, directed by Joe Mantello (who directed the original

stage production) in Montreal where, McNally told me, they had found the ideal house. Most exciting is the news that a new play will open at the Manhattan Theatre Club in the spring of 1997—McNally is keeping the title and subject a secret.

It gives me pleasure to thank everyone who contributed to this volume. Thanks, too, to Kimball King, the general editor of this series, for letting me do it again, and to Chuck Bartelt, the computer wizard at Garland, without whose help I would have been stranded. I am grateful to Zoe Caldwell and Nathan Lane for taking time to talk with me and for the great pleasure their performances have given me. Finally, I am beholden to Terrence McNally, not only for the hours he spent talking with me, but for many fine evenings in the theatre.

T.S.Z.
June 1996

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Chronology

- 1939 Terrence McNally is born 3 November, in St. Petersburg, Florida, son of Hubert Arthur and Dorothy Katharine (Rapp) McNally. In early childhood, the family moves to Corpus Christi, Texas, where his father operated a beer distributorship.
- 1956–60 Columbia University, journalism major. Works several summers as reporter on the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*.
- 1960 Graduates with B.A. from Columbia University, Phi Beta Kappa. Awarded Columbia University Henry Evans Travelling Fellowship. Spends six months in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Sends play to Molly Kazan, wife of Elia Kazan, at Actor's Studio in New York.
- 1961 Stage Manager, Actor's Studio.
- 1961–62 World tour with the John Steinbeck family as tutor-companion to the two Steinbeck sons.
- 1962 Stanley Award for "This Side of the Door."
- 1963–65 Film critic, *Seventh Art*, New York.
- 1965–66 Assistant editor, *Columbia College Today*, New York.
- 1966 Guggenheim Fellowship.
- 1969 Guggenheim Fellowship.
Runner-up Drama Desk Award for most promising playwright.

-
- 1974 Hull-Warriner Award for *Bad Habits*. Most Distinguished Play, Obie Award for *The Ritz*.
- 1981 Vice-president of Dramatists Guild, an office he still holds.
- 1987 Hull-Warriner Award for *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*.
- 1989 Hull-Warriner Award for *The Lisbon Traviata*.
- 1990 Emmy Award for Best Writing in a Miniseries or a Special for *Andre's Mother*.
- 1993 Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical for *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (score by Kander and Ebb).
- 1995 *Love! Valour! Compassion!* wins Tony Award for Best Play, Outer Critics Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award and The New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play. Named "Person of the Year" by the National Theatre Conference for his contribution to American theatre.
- 1996 *Master Class* wins Tony Award for Best Play, [Philadelphia's] Barrymore Award for Best Play, [Los Angeles's] Ovation Award.

TERRENCE McNALLY

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