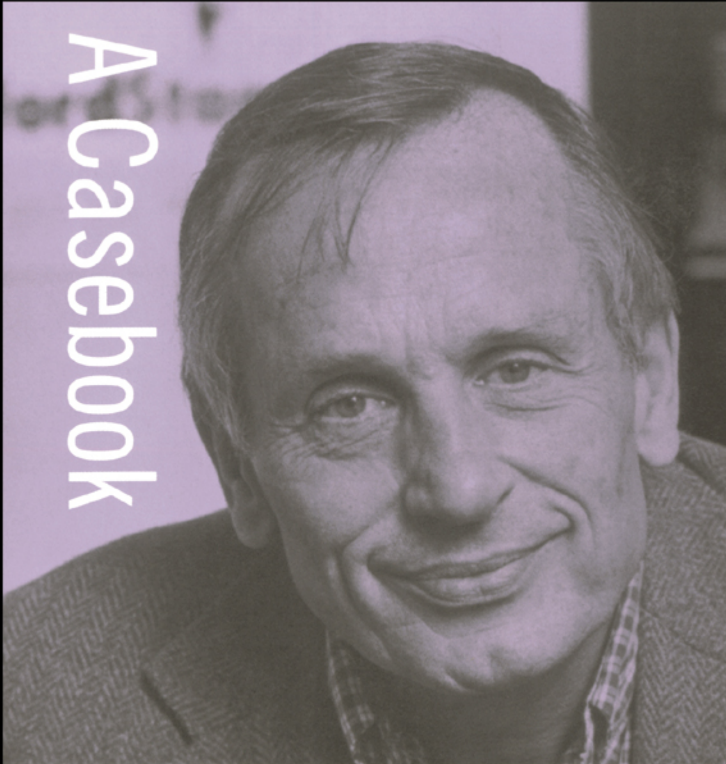
A.R. Gurney



Edited by Arvid F. Sponberg

Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details

A.R.GURNEY

Casebooks on Modern Dramatists

Kimball King, *General Editor*

PETER SHAFFER
A Casebook
Edited by C. J. Gianakaras

SIMON GRAY
A Casebook
Edited by Katharine. H. Burkman

JOHN ARDEN AND MARGARETTA D'ARCY
A Casebook
Edited by Jonathan Wike

AUGUST WILSON
A Casebook
Edited by Marilyn Elkins

JOHN OSBORNE
A Casebook
Edited by Patricia. D. Denison

ARNOLD WESKER
A Casebook
Edited by Reade. W. Dornan

DAVID HARE
A Casebook
Edited by Hersh Zeifman

MARSHA NORMAN
A Casebook
Edited by Linda Ginter Brown

BRIAN FRIEL
A Casebook
Edited by William Kerwin

NEIL SIMON
A Casebook
Edited by Gary Konas

TERRENCE MCNALLY
A Casebook
Edited by Toby Silverman Zinman

STEPHEN SONDHEIM
A Casebook
Edited by Joanne Gordon

HORTON FOOTE
A Casebook
Edited by Gerald. C. Wood

SAMUEL BECKETT
A Casebook
Edited by Jennifer M. Jeffers

WENDY WASSERSTEIN
A Casebook
Edited by Claudia Barnett

WOODY ALLEN
A Casebook
Edited by Kimball King

MODERN DRAMATISTS
A Casebook of Major British, Irish, and American Playwrights
Edited by Kimball King

PINTER AT 70
A Casebook
Edited by Lois Gordon

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS
A Casebook
Edited by Robert F. Gross

JOE ORTON
A Casebook
Edited by Francesca Coppa

BETH HENLEY
A Casebook
Edited by Julia A. Fesmire

EDWARD ALBEE
A Casebook
Edited by Bruce J. Mann

A. R. GURNEY
A Casebook
Edited by Arvid F. Sponberg

A.R.GURNEY

A CASEBOOK

Edited by

ARVID F.SPONBERG

Routledge New York • London

Published in 2004 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001
www.routledge-ny.com

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane London EC4P 4EE
www.routledge.co.uk

Copyright © 2004 by Taylor & Francis Books, Inc.

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of A.R. Gurney, who permitted the reprinting of the following works: "A Sacred Place," "Pushing the Walls of Dramatic Form," "The Dinner Party," "Conversation Piece," "Critical Condition " "When the Final Act Is Only the Beginning," "Shaw, the Eternal Schoolmaster, Can Still Be Wise," and "Coming Home to a Musical That Sounds Like America."

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A.R.Gurney : a casebook/edited by Arvid.F.Sponberg.
p. cm.—(Casebooks on modern dramatists; v. 34) Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-415-92998-9 (hardback: alk. paper)
1. Gurney, A.R. (Albert Ramsdell), 1930—Criticism and interpretation.
I. Sponberg, Arvid F. II. Series.

PS3557 .U82Z53 2003
812′.54–dc21 2003006067

ISBN 0-203-49268-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-57514-8 (Adobe eReader Format)

It's the toughest thing in the world to get a good conversation going with one's kids. On the other hand, it's worth working on, since I knowfrom experience that it can be one of the best.

—A.R.Gurney, "Conversation Piece," p. 183

To our children,
John and Erica,
Whose conversation we cherish.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

General Editor's Note x

Preface xi

A.R.GURNEY: AN INTRODUCTION 1

PART I: INTERVIEWS

AN INTERVIEW WITH A.R.GURNEY 17

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN CUNNINGHAM 35

AN INTERVIEW WITH HOLLAND TAYLOR 47

AN INTERVIEW W WITH DEBRA MOONEY 57

AN INTERVIEW W WITH JOHN TILLINGER 69

PART II: ESSAYS

INDETERMINACY AS TRAGIC FATE: ISSUES OF RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUAL ORBENTATION IN GURNEY 81
MARK WILLIAM ROCHA

WHERE DOES THE WASP KEEP ITS STING? THE DYNAMICS OF ANGER IN THE PLAYS OF A.R.GURNEY 95
ERVENE GULLEY

***THE DINING ROOM:* A TOCQUEVILLIAN TAKE ON THE DECLINE OF WASP CULTURE** 101
BRUCE MCCONACHIE

***WHAT I DID LAST SUMMER:* REALIZING ONE'S POTENTIAL** 111
LAURA MILLER

ABSENT FATHERS, TRANSIENT SONS: MILLER, INGE, AND GURNEY 121
ARVID.F.SPONBERG

ENTERING THE FOURTH DIMENSION: A.R.GUKNEY'S *SWEET SUE* 129
BRENDA GORDON

THE ALLUSIVE A.R.GURNEY 137
BRENDA MURPHY

GURNEY'S *SYLVIA:* WHAT OFT WAS THOUGHT 145
JOALLEN BRADHAM

PICNICS AND PARTIES: INGE, GURNEY, AND THE ARGUMENT OF COMEDY 155
ARVID.F.SPONBERG

PART III: ARTICLES BY A.R.GURNEY

A SACRED PLACE 165
***JOURNAL OF ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION,* NOVEMBER 1975**

PUSHING THE WALLS OF DRAMATIC FORM 169
***THE NEW YORK TIMES,* JULY 27, 1986**

THE DINNER PARTY *AMERICAN HERITAGE,* 39 (SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1988) 173

CONVERSATION PIECE *NEWSWEEK,* JUNE 26,1989 177

CRTTICAL CONDITION *AMERICAN THEATRE,* JUNE 24–7,1991 179

WHEN THE FINAL ACT IS ONLY A BEGINNING *THE NEW YORK TIMES,* OCTOBER 27, 1991 183

SHAW, THE ETERNAL SCHOOLMASTER, CAN STTLL BE WISE *THE NEW YORK TIMES,* JANUARY 31, 1993 187

COMING HOME TO A MUSICAL THAT SOUNDS LIKE AMERICA *THE NEW YORK TIMES,* SEPTEMBER 8,1996 193

HIGH TIME FOR COMEDY (AND POLITICAL OUTRAGE) *THE NEW YORK TIMES,* NOVEMBER 10, 2002 197

Afterword: A Cue for Gurney Studies 199

Chronology 203

Bibliography 207

Contributors 211

Index 213

Acknowledgments

"...time as long again Would be filled up...with our thanks; And yet we should, for perpetuity, Go hence in debt: and therefore, like a cipher, Yet standing in rich place, I multiply With one 'we thank you' many thousands more That go before it."

Polixenes, *The Winter's Tale,* I.ii

Bonnie, my wife, has encouraged and supported this work in ways too many to number and too meaningful for words.

Valparaiso University supported the initial work for this book by awarding me a University Research Professorship and a sabbatical leave.

Kimball King, the general editor of this series and professor of English at the University of North Carolina, encouraged this book and demonstrated patience beyond any author's reasonable expectations. The editors at Routledge have guided the book through production with thoroughness, sensitivity, and unwavering support.

Jackson Bryer, professor of English at the University of Maryland, has taken an abiding interest in A.R.Gurney and in this book. Both as an editor and the director of the scholar's conference at the William Inge Theatre Festival—an institution uniquely celebrating the art of playwriting—he gave me opportunities to research and write about Gurney and his plays.

The scholars, actors, and director who contributed to this book believe, as I do, that A.R.Gurney's plays merit the most serious attention from performers, critics and historians. The strengths of the book derive from their bestowal of experience and wisdom. Attribute the weaknesses to the editor alone.

Along with thousands of other playgoers, I am most grateful to A.R. Gurney for his gifts to the arts of the theatre and the literature of the stage. The pleasures of talking and writing about his plays almost equal the joys of reading, performing, hearing, and seeing them.

Thank you all.

General Editor's Note

A.R. Gurney is a highly respected American playwright whose life in the theatre has spanned four decades. Because he so frequently has set his works in an upper-middle class or upper-class white milieu, he has become known as America's premier "WASP" dramatist. This may be an unfair designation as Gurney has, in effect, chronicled a wide segment of American life and its changes in the twentieth century. His instinct for accurate dialogue, his intriguing plots, and his trenchant satire of mores make audiences rethink both their assumptions and prejudices. Still vital, Gurney attracts a large segment of the population that appreciates his wit and humanity. Arvid Sponberg, professor and former chair of the English department at Valparaiso University in Indiana, knows Gurney personally and has written extensively about him over the years. The present volume contains not only Sponberg's appraisals of Gurney's work, but also the critical analyses of other major American scholars. In particular, interviews with the author himself, as well as with directors and actors who admire Gurney's work, make Sponberg's volume a valuable addition to Routledge's ongoing series of Casebooks on great American playwrights.

Kimball King

Preface

A.R. Gurney became a playwright because he discovered when he was young that plays lead interesting lives, and so do the people who stage them, watch them, and write about them. He also learned that among artists who have final authority over the presentation of their works, playwrights occupy an especially public and insecure position. Their works are judged not once or twice but perhaps as many as eight or nine times between inception and your encounter with them. Playwrights, of course, as do all artists, continuously evaluate their own work. Friends and family may offer their views. Then agents and producers may make suggestions. Nowadays, many directors believe themselves licensed not merely to stage but to improve plays. Actors may be depended on to offer insights. Designers of sets, costumes, sound, and lighting give most specific recommendations. Reviewers and critics deposit their accounts in the media. Audiences, then, having no professional or financial interest in the success or failure of plays, levy the most objective opinions, voting with their hands and often with their feet. Finally, scholars and anthologists weigh playwrights' achievements, nominating some plays as worthy of continuing discussion and also study in the schools. A negative opinion at any point in this chain of judgment may dispatch a play to oblivion.

Whichever role you may take in these proceedings, A.R. Gurney regards you as a citizen in the "community of the play." The interviews and essays in this collection take you part of the way into that community so that you may feel its form and pressure. Of course, casebooks are a species of reference work and you will have your own agenda that will guide your use of this one, just as when you use a dictionary or encyclopedia. So you may ignore this suggestion: start the book with the introduction and read through to the end. First, you will meet A.R. Gurney himself and become familiar with his background and the general nature of his works. Then you will meet four artists—three actors and a director—who have known him and worked closely with him for many years. Then you will read essays by scholars who are interested in placing Gurney's plays in the context of your broad cultural heritage. Finally you will read articles by Gurney himself about the nature of theatre and its place in American life. By the end, you will know how Gurney creates plays that interpret our lives. His vision is complex and his voice is as distinctive as his characters and their stories.

This is a book about a serious business—writing comedy for live actors performing for live audiences. In fact, this is such a serious book that I have to reassure you: Gurney's

comedies are so good that they have the power to make you forget every thing you will read here—and just laugh.

A.F.S.

A.R.Gurney: An Introduction

ARVID F.SPONBERG

A Sense of Community

Gurney's youth in Buffalo, New York, focused his attention on ideas that concern him today. Foremost are the twins, fairness and responsibility. As he recalls his early life, Gurney sees that his awareness of these ideas came, in part, through rituals of family life. His mother's family and his father's family arrived in Buffalo in the 1850s and succeeding generations remained there pursuing careers as attorneys, real estate brokers, and merchants. By Gurney's birth in 1930, the long strands of the family circle had braided intricately. Some family rituals seem simple and ordinary. The evening meal, for example, always three courses long, anchored each day in Gurney's home.[1] Sunday and holiday visits to his grandmothers' houses knitted together the extended Gurney relations. And even though the divorce and remarriage of his maternal grandmother, Marian Perkins Spaulding, disturbed and complicated these rituals, they were not disrupted. Rather the rituals accommodated the new order of relations as you can see in Gurney's play *Ancestral Voices*. That experience—of the social fabric stretching and containing the strongest emotions—shapes Gurney's thinking about his art.

Other rituals had more complicated and striking aspects. They bound him more closely to his brother, sister, and parents even as they connected the family to trends in national life. The proliferation of recreational activities, the automobile, and the mass media often have been named as culprits in the so-called decline of family values. However, in Gurney's memory, skiing, an automobile, and a radio program intensified the emotional warmth of the family:

> There's another very important ritual in our family which was due to Buffalo being in a snow belt. Skiing was just starting up right before World War II. And we'd take the car, the whole family, and go down to the Boston Hills which are small mountains south of Buffalo right in the center of the snow belt and there were just beginning to be rope tows. And my father loved to ski and my mother did, and the family loved to ski, so we'd all pile in the car and we'd go down there and my father would teach us. We'd all have to follow him like little quail following the father quail. We'd have to follow the exact turns that he made. And then we'd drive home at night, and on Sunday there were certain radio programs we'd always listen to in the car. I've

> written about it a little bit in *Scenes from American Life*. We listened to *The Shadow* and then we'd have to listen to *Jack Benny*. It was very cozy. The cars then were smaller. You'd all huddle around the driver more and the kids in back would lean forward to hear the radio. We didn't have any speakers in back. I just remember this kind of family nucleus, all hanging together over *Jack Benny,* because the more you listened to him, the more you built up the rituals of all the things that occur in *Jack Benny*. His tightness, his car, his relationship with Rochester, as they became more familiar, they became funnier, just as with *Cheers* today. The characters were very specific. That I remember very strongly as a very binding and warm aspect of our family life.[2]

The bonds of affection in his immediate family remained as strong and as taut as tow ropes. Harder to chart were the twisting lines of emotion that tied him to those carrying the heaviest burdens of fairness and responsibility. Tracing the relationships in his extended family proved more difficult than following his father down a ski trail, especially when neither his father nor his mother chose to show the way:

> My mother's mother is a very interesting story and I'm just beginning to think about her more. She was married to a Spaulding and that Spaulding was only interested in guns and dogs and camping out and pulling in the salmon and the trout. She fell in love with his best friend. And just suddenly left. Just ran off. Shocked my grandfather who was a kind of innocent, sweet man, beautiful athlete. But that had never occurred to him, didn't read many books, wouldn't have known who Anna Karenina was, for example. But my grandmother was kind of Anna Karenina. She didn't run very far away. She ran out to a place in the country near Buffalo where she lived with this guy.
>
> Her name was Marian [Perkins] Spaulding and she married a man named [Charles] Goodyear who was a kind of scion of another branch of the family in Buffalo. It's all very complicated and intricate. She was totally ostracized by Buffalo society. All her friends would not speak to her. She lived out there with this guy and was frantic for the kind of social life that she once had in this small but, at that time, energetic town. So she gave a lot of parties and she was very concerned about her grandchildren. She didn't pay much attention to her children but, because she was now a kind of Anna Karenina, an ostracized woman…she was very concerned about her grandchildren, and she would give parties for us. She had a tennis court and a pool out there because the guy she married was rich. And she'd give sports parties. She just was very good about keeping her eye on us. And a very warm woman. You could understand why she ran off from my grandfather, who really probably didn't give her much attention.
>
> But she lived a kind of sad life. She never really earned back the trust of her children. They all thought it was a betrayal. She destroyed my grandfather who took to drink immediately after this happened. He never remarried and kind of drank himself to death. And she was never ultimately happy with the guy that she ran off with, who was a kind of cold—he was a very good looking guy but a kind of snob—and who was a little embarrassed. A little like Vronsky. Always looking over her shoulder. One time she said to me, "Before I die, I want to tell you my story. I've

got a lot to tell you. I know a lot more about life than you think I do." But she never did get around to telling me.

[My parents] didn't tell us that much. And my mother was terribly wounded by it and adored her father. My mother was married quite young. She was twenty-one, she had two little kids by that time, me and my sister, and she suddenly had to deal with this major rift that was occurring in her family. My mother was already an adult, though her younger brothers weren't, and my mother was the oldest of four kids. So my mother, who was trying to raise two little kids, suddenly had to deal with her mother and her father, move her father to an apartment. My mother suddenly grew up. And my father, who didn't like to discuss anything that was unpleasant, just didn't deal with it.

So we had to go out to my grandmother's for lunch a lot. My mother never liked to do it very much because she really was angry at her mother and remained angry all her life. But we had to do it. They were both good sports, my mother and my father. And we had to go out and my grandmother, I remember, would say, "Now make sure you say hello to your Uncle Charlie." That's what we called this guy. We had to be very polite to this guy who we knew had somehow aced my grandfather out of his job. And it was weird. But nobody ever sat us down and said, "Now here's the story. This is what happened." As kids, we just had to put this strange scandal together in our own way.

But the redeeming side of this was that both [my] grandmothers were very, very warm women and very good grandmothers in the sense that if we were sick, they'd give us presents. If we went away, they'd write us letters. And they were always concerned about our life. They were very hands-on grandmothers. Our family on both sides was very close despite that rift. Easter, Christmases, many Sundays, we had to go from one grandmother nucleus to the other.

Gurney has not written autobiographically in the manner of Tennessee Williams (e.g., *The Glass Menagerie*) or William Inge *(The Dark at the Top of the Stairs)* or Neil Simon *(Brighton Beach Memoirs)*. Some plays draw situations and characters directly from his own life. *Scenes from American Life, What I Did Last Summer, The Dining Room, The Cocktail Hour, Far East,* and *Ancestral Voices* may be included in this category. But all his characters and predicaments draw upon the knowledge of the heart that he acquired at home. His congenial and prominent family flourished socially while struggling privately with the effects of painful separation and loneliness. Unspoken social rules gave a person in the position of Gurney's mother far less leeway than they do today to seek help coping with anger, resentment, and frustration even if such help had been available. Occasional participation in formal worship characterized the family's religious life rather than focused, observant faith. The psychological professions had scarcely begun to develop in the 1930s. The ideas of Freud, Jung, and Adler, which now appear less sophisticated by contrast with the therapies of the 1990s, were still establishing themselves among elites of major cities. In Buffalo society, during Gurney's childhood, as in the United States generally, people coped with emotional pain more stoically than we are accustomed to do. We may think of them as taking Socrates' advice to "quiet yourselves and endure." As the young Gurney learned the differences

between private and public experience, he began to form both the desire to tell stories and the comic sensibility that perceives the discrepancy between the ideal and the real. In this regard, his parents became infallible guides:

> I think my father and my mother were the ones who introduced me to the delights of literature. Both were big readers and my mother particularly. They would always be reading something good. My mother has a kind of an addiction for detective stories [in] the way somebody might watch the news on television. But they would always say, "You've got to read this. Yoif ve got to read Dickens. You've got to read Shakespeare." My father would be reading the Bible or Dostoevsky. He wasn't a religious man but he'd always have a good book by his bed and he'd read a little of it every night. My mother would always be urging us to read and they'd give us so much money when we finished a book. We'd get a quarter, not very much. And they were always discouraging us from reading comic books, which were the equivalent of junk TV today. So they were constantly touting the importance of literature.

But Gurney believes that his parents' own upbringing had not been literary. In fact, his mother's choice not to attend college reveals an attitude of her social class that we would not associate with her present-day counterparts:

> My mother and my father were both very well educated. They both went to very good boarding schools. And then my father went to Yale. He read Latin and Greek. He was a well-educated man. My mother never went to college, because in that time, in that town, going to college was considered a little middle class. She really regrets it because she would have been an excellent scholar. She regrets that her parents never encouraged her to go to college. She got caught up in the party life. It was in the late twenties and she just thought, well, it'd be more fun just to kind of goof around. She got married quite young, too, nineteen or twenty when she married my father. But she kept up with her reading and she organized these book reading clubs in Buffalo, and they'd read serious things. They'd read Faulkner and Swift and Joyce. So she passed on that passion to me and my sister, I think, more than to my brother.

Some of Gurney's earliest memories of the theater connect his grandmother, Evelyn Ramsdell Gurney, and musical theater:

> I adored her. She was terribly warm. She had a big house down on Summer Street in Buffalo and three maids. She never, until the day she died, lived without three maids. And she was not very nice to these maids. I don't know why I adored her but I did. She always made me feel good when I saw her. She made me feel important and good. She was very warm. She took me to the theater a lot, I think. She thought the theater was part of any person's education. She'd take me to the Erlanger theater on Saturday afternoons when I was a little kid, and things like road companies of

> Sigmund Romberg and Gilbert and Sullivan, that kind of thing. She'd never take me to Tennessee Williams or anything like that. She was a kind of Victorian woman and really perceived herself as a kind of Queen Victoria, but, for reasons which are still not clear to me, I loved her. She's that old lady in *The Dining Room,* who's going kind of gaga at the end of the first act. So she kind of lost her marbles at the end.

His parents played their role, too, though they did not forsee the outcome of their theatrical adventuring:

> My parents loved the theater and occasionally they'd take me to theater but not so much in Buffalo. They used to make these theater excursions to New York and in those days Buffalo was hooked to New York by the New York Central Railroad. They could take a sleeper down, stay in a hotel, take a sleeper back. It was very easy and rather comfortable. They'd be staying at a hotel and they'd tell the bellboy to deliver their bags to the railroad station so they could go right from the play to the railroad station, get on the train, the bags would be in the stateroom, and then they'd sit in the club car with their friends who'd got on and talk about the play until Albany and then they'd go to bed and get up in Buffalo. So they'd tell me about the plays they'd seen. And I'd always ask them. They'd say, "Oh, we saw the best play" and they'd describe who was in it and everything. That plus the fact some of these plays would come through Buffalo at the Erlanger theater and my grandmother would take me to some of them made me feel that the theater was something extremely exciting.
>
> When I got into it myself, they backed off a little. Sort of, you know, what have we done? What have we created? They knew that I was a rather bright student but they didn't see any particular talent emerging as a writer. I wrote a prize-winning story at school and that kind of perplexed them. They didn't think it was that good. They thought it was kind of anecdotal. I don't want to speak for them, [but] my feeling is they didn't think I was good enough to make it in the theater. And they didn't think the theater was reputable enough.... The theater people they knew, and they knew a few, seemed rather vulgar and disreputable. My father's roommate from Yale, for example, married Adele Astaire. So that when they went down to New York...my father would want to have dinner with his buddy, whose name was Kingman Douglas, and Adele Astaire [was], I guess, a tough cookie and she used a lot of four-letter words, and I think my mother and my father thought, oh god, theater people just aren't really the kind of people you want to associate with.

His family also provided two models for young Gurney's sense of humor: his father and his father's brother, Uncle Charles, not to be confused with "Uncle Charlie," his step-grandfather. Gurney remembers his Uncle Charles as a "very distinguished, stuffy, but highly amusing kind of litterateur. He read a great deal and got very deft at bons mots. He was a kind of an image of ultimate civilization for me...." It was Uncle Charles who first awakened Gurney to the possibilities of "...high comedy. He was always very amusing and adept at describing events, telling a story. He was a great raconteur, but extremely stuffy.

But also an excellent uncle. He would write us letters at school, if we stepped out of line. He was a very good uncle."

Gurney's father revealed another side of the humorist's art—the side we now label as "performance" art:

> I think my father had the best sense of humor of anyone on both sides of the family. He had a great sense of humor, a particularly public sense of humor. He was a great public speaker. He could get up and make a toast at a small family gathering and have people in stitches. Or he could speak to a really large group—I'm not talking about two thousand—but a big banquet of two hundred—and he would be equally professional. And if anybody heckled him, and, of course, everybody liked to because that was another ritual, he would deal with the heckler in a brilliant way. I really admired the man. He could think on his feet quicker than anyone I've ever met. So he became kind of a master of ceremonies, toastmaster, for a large number of functions in Buffalo and sat on a great many boards simply because he was the one who could give the best speech.

Gurney himself credits a feature of his father's performance style as a source of his own fondness for using literary allusions in his plays: "My father would always do that. And he was very clever—he [would say], 'As we all know…' and then he'd give this obscure quote and he'd make the audience feel good. He'd assume they knew even though, of course, they didn't. And I follow, maybe, in that tradition."

A Sense of Perspective

How his formal education affected this comic sensibility is not entirely clear even to Gurney, but his memories yield some indications. To begin with, his teachers encouraged him to write and he picked up their cues. Not all of them liked Gurney or his taste in reading but he learned something helpful from each. His taste for writing plays emerged during his elementary school years:

> I liked to read a lot. I liked to read novels when I was little. But whenever I had a school assignment for a composition—and in those days we were always assigned compositions—I remember a number of times I'd say, "Can I write a play instead?" I always seemed to like the dialogue form. I remember as a little kid I used to hate what I called "I books," books that were told in the first person. I always felt as a kid that that was such a limited perspective. I liked the third-person narrative where you had an outsider. Now that's not necessarily dramatic. You can have a third-person narrative without going into drama, but the reverse is certainly true; it's very hard to write a play from an individual perspective. Tennessee Williams tries in *The Glass Menagerie,* but in the end that's not what it's about. The most significant scene in *The Glass Menagerie* takes place when the narrator isn't there. In any case, something about my sense of perspective made me veer toward drama, too.[3]

Notice Gurney's emphasis on fulfilling the assignment in a different way, on listening to dialogue, on not wanting to take the "I" position. Ruling out stories that put "I" in the limelight leaves stories in which a group or an ensemble holds center stage. Rather than one voice, many voices interest Gurney. As he matured, Gurney found additional ways to multiply voices. He mixed classical and contemporary characters in many of his early one acts *(The Comeback, The David Show, The Golden Fleece)* so that the past and present comment on one another. He uses this technique again in his 1996 play, *Overtime,* mixing modern and Renaissance sensibilities by extending into our time the lives of the characters from *The Merchant of Venice*. He mixed present and absent characters, underscoring the experience of separation and loss (*Children, What I Did Last Summer, The Cocktail Hour, The Old Boy,* and *Love Letters*). He wrote plays in which actors play more than one character, deploying the resources of acting to the greater delight of both actor and audience *(Scenes from American Life, The Dining Room)*. He wrote a play *(The Wayside Motor Inn)* in which multiple scenes play simultaneously. And in what remains his most striking experiment, even if it is not regarded as his best work *(Sweet Sue),* he wrote a play in which different actors play the same characters, so that the audience experiences alternating interpretations of actions and feelings within a single performance. More recently, he pushed theatrical boundaries beyond merely human perspectives and created a dog, the title role in *Sylvia.*[4]

For his primary education in Buffalo, Gurney first attended the Franklin school and the Nichols school. Then, in 1944, Gurney went to St. Paul's school in Concord, New Hampshire. There he immediately tried out for the school play and won a role. However, his classmates' reaction to his first appearance on stage nearly derailed his theatrical career even before it built a head of steam. The play was *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Gurney won the part of the ingenue (St. Paul's was then a boys' school). Dressed as a girl, he earned a dreaded nickname:

> 'Legs' Gurney—because in a skirt I had very good legs. You know what life is like in boarding school, and I got such a hard time about that I never wanted to go near the theater. I think I played the part very well, maybe too well. They kept asking me to be in other plays but at St. Paul's it just was so humiliating for me, and I was teased so much about that, that I just absolutely backed away from the theater.

But he continued to write—for the school magazine and for two memorable teachers, Frederick Arthur Philbrick—known to students as Fap because he signed notes with his initials—and John Richards, the grandson of Julia Ward Howe, called "sentimental John." Gurney recalls Philbrick as a martinet who made him attend to details and avoid clichés. However, Fap also encouraged his students to try different forms of writing so Gurney "experimented with humor and comic essays...He'd read them aloud in class, and when you're a young kid, and you get the class laughing with you, it turns you on."

Gurney remembers Richards as "absolutely the reverse" of Philbrick. Richards taught Gurney's honors English classes in his freshman and senior years. In the latter, the students read all of Shakespeare. Richards' teaching did not rely on brilliant scholarship but upon open, affecting vulnerability, an unashamed emotional response to the beauty of language:

> ...what struck me most about him is that he would read a passage from Shakespeare and he'd start to cry because it moved him so much...he'd say, "I can't tell you any more than this is wonderful," and we'd believe him just because he proved it in the fact that he became so emotionally wrought about it. And that wouldn't be simply true of Shakespeare. It would be true of Milton. It would be true of Keats. And then it would be true of second-rate things he'd also read that really weren't that great... *Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard Henry Dana was one of his favorite books. We had to study that endlessly. He didn't like Thoreau very much but there was another woodsman named Stewart Edward White, I think, who wrote books about how to start a fire in the woods and all that and he just loved this...he loved to walk, and St. Paul's is a very pastoral environment. He'd never take walks with students but you'd see him in the woods walking and communing with nature, so he became...a man who somehow was in tune with the vernal wood and with literature in a way that really turned him on... I kind of admired him for that. He never liked me very much. He didn't dislike me, he was a wonderful, gentle man. But he thought I was too sophisticated, at least in literature. I would like restoration comedy or *Much Ado About Nothing* where[as] he wanted me to turn on to *Romeo and Juliet* and things like that.

These memories illuminate two aspects of Gurney's mature work and responses to it. Gurney has been criticized for insufficient emotional power in his characters and predicaments. But his memory of Richards shows that a vulnerable openness to the power of literature impressed him as a young writer. At the same time, as a seventeen-year-old, he knew that his tastes favored stories more subtle in their delineation of personality and situation than those his teachers preferred. In this regard, the influence of Philbrick is likewise significant because Philbrick's teaching, as Gurney remembers it, coupled a disciplined approach to finding fresh words and images with a freewheeling exploration of form. These elements became cornerstones of Gurney's dramaturgy. As the interviews with Tillinger, Cunningham, Taylor, and Mooney show, *The Perfect Party* exemplifies particularly well this combination of verbal perfection and formal experimentation. Indeed, the predicament of the play's central character has a rather Philbrick-ian ambience and one wonders if Tony, an ex-professor, doesn't embody some remnant of the spirit of Philbrick.

A Sense of Craft

In the fall of 1948, Gurney entered Williams College, two years behind Steven Sondheim whose reputation was already established and growing:

> It was the fact that Sondheim was making such major strides even then with the student musicals. He was cracking open the whole form at Williams.... He'd already done one show, which I had heard about when I arrived, and then he did another one when I was there, which just amazed me. Prior to Sondheim the spring student musical consisted of, like the Hasty Pudding at Harvard, a parody show with a funny title and a kick-chorus of men with hairy legs. No girls, no women went to Williams

> College then. Sondheim said to hell with that. He knew people in New York. He got the rights to I think it was *Three Men on a Horse*. The title was *All That Glitters*. It had women singing in it because he got Bennington women interested in playing it. It had a story and interesting songs. Had a great set. Got a lot of good people to work for him. And I said to myself I want to do that, too. So the following year was his senior year, and I think he already had his eye on New York. I think he was taking courses in New York. He was the darling of the music department any way. We wrote a revue. Now he wrote a couple of songs in this revue and he gave me liberal advice on lyrics to the songs that I wrote. The revue was called *Where to from Here?* and of course it was a total backsliding after Sondheim's book musical, but nonetheless, Sondheim was partially engaged with it. He lent his name to it. I ended up writing most of the skits and the continuity. I tried to give it some kind of a shape and the precedent of having women in it was established so women came from all over to be in it. And it was fun and it worked. Then the next year Sondheim had graduated and I did the whole thing myself, again a revue, but a revue striving for a kind of story, and I had a couple of guys write the music with me. I wrote a couple of songs myself because I took a music course and figured out how to read music, so I picked them out on the piano. And then my senior year, I said all right now I'm ready for the big time and I proposed to [the director of the college's theater] that I do a musical version of Shaw's *Pygmalion*. And he rejected the idea.

Sondheim's influence on Gurney seems similar in two ways to that of Philbrick. Each emphasized attention to freshly minted words used in striking ways and each encouraged Gurney to break through the walls of existing forms of storytelling. Sondheim's influence may be seen as unique, however, because it placed Gurney for the first time at the controls of the premier American theatrical vehicle, the musical. Gurney's love of popular music has always been strong. Almost every one of his plays includes memorable tunes from the thirties, forties, and fifties.

The rejection of his idea to musicalize *Pygmalion* temporarily halted Gurney's progress as a librettist. During his senior year, he turned his attention once again to the classical theater. He wrote a senior thesis on *The Winter's Tale* under Professor James Clay Hunt, whom Gurney remembers as "very influential" on him and his love of literature.

After graduating from Williams, Gurney joined the navy—there was a draft in those days—and the ranks of distinguished American theater artists who found life in the armed forces was not merely compatible with a life in the arts but that, in fact, the armed forces comprise a de facto national endowment for the arts.[5] In Gurney's case the depth and configuration of his resources were particularly rich as they included not only musicians and a "performance space" but an audience. His circumstances might stir envy in the heart of any struggling nonprofit arts manager:

> ...because I'd done shows at Williams, I just lucked on to a large [aircraft] carrier [the Franklin D. Roosevelt] and I started doing shows. It had a built-in audience. When a ship came into port, at least two thirds or half of the ship's company would have to remain aboard the ship. At that time, during the cold war, you couldn't let

> the whole ship ashore. We'd raise the number one elevator that brings the planes to the carrier deck and we'd turn that into a stage. I had a huge ship's orchestra that [had] lots of arrangements because they would play for dances and had to play national anthems whenever we came into port. So the orchestra was there with arrangements and then I'd write these shows using these arrangements. I put new lyrics to these old songs that they had… I knew after having been in the navy that I could somehow entertain [or] reach a larger audience than just a collegiate audience.

Fifty years ago, apparently, mastering the elements of musical theatre in the Navy constituted appropriate taxpayers' support of the arts, while distributing dollars to nonprofit arts organizations today remains problematic for many legislators.

After he left the Navy in 1956, Gurney entered the Yale School of Drama. While he found the faculty there "not…erribly exciting," one teacher, Nikos Psacharopolous, proved to be extraordinary, influencing Gurney's development then and in later years at the Williamstown Theatre Festival. However, Gurney didn't work with Psacharopolous immediately. His first teacher was the redoubtable John Gassner and he and Gassner had decided differences in taste, rather as Gurney had with Richards. Gassner admired the social realism of writers such as Ibsen and Odets. Gurney liked the richer language and the more intricate plots of the Elizabethans. He based one of his projects for Gassner on Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Wild Goose Chase,* about a soldier who comes home from the wars. Gurney's hero was "a guy who comes home from the navy and is not sure whether he wants to get married."[6] It was a farce, with "rather elevated language" influenced by Christopher Fry.

> I read it aloud in class and the class liked it. We're talking about fifteen or sixteen people. So in the middle of the reading aloud, Gassner said, "Now hold it." He got on the telephone and called up Psacharopolous and said, "Come on over here, Gurney's reading this thing. I don't think much of it but you might like it." Psacharopolous…heard the rest of it and said, "I really like that. Let's turn that into a musical."

The result, *Love in Buffalo,* with music by fellow student Gilbert Leitinger, became the Yale School of Drama's first musical production. Psacharopolous mounted it on the main stage with "very elaborate sets." Gurney remembers that Psacharopolous "taught me a lot about [what] worked. He'd say, 'cut that, Pete. That doesn't work. That's boring.' Just tough, no-nonsense stuff. And I was very affected by that. And the show was very good. It's very dated now. But it worked like gangbusters at the time."

The success of *Love in Buffalo* yielded a phone call from Richard Halliday, Mary Martin's husband. Halliday invited Gurney to New York on the coming weekend to discuss the possibility of developing a project for Martin.[7] Gurney's parents were scheduled to visit Gurney that weekend and Gurney dutifully chose to host his parents rather than cancel their visit and accept Halliday's invitation. The meeting never occurred. "History does not disclose her alternatives" but….

A Sense of Timing

Following graduation from Yale, Gurney accepted a teaching job at the Belmont school in Belmont, Massachusetts, and then, in 1958, won a job in the humanities program at MIT. With a growing family and heavy teaching responsibilities, he found time for writing plays mainly during summers. His one-act plays date from this period. But in 1969, he began working on *Scenes from American Life,* a play with 140 different characters. Gurney's recollection of the genesis of *Scenes* evokes a brief period in the history of American playwriting that now appears to have been a turning point for scores of writers:

> I wrote that in 1969 and '70, a pretty tumultuous period. The Vietnam War was going on and I became aware more than ever before how different the world was that I grew up in from the way the world seemed to be going. So therefore this was the first time I really started writing about the world I knew. There were many reasons why things happen. I had been a part of a workshop run by Boston University at Tanglewood. And I remember we worked on *The David Show* there and that worked out very well even though the play ultimately didn't. But they had asked me back for the summer of 1970. And I had these scenes. They were just scenes.
>
> I think the first scene I wrote, one of the most satirical, was that mother and the daughter having lunch at the Plaza and the mother trying to persuade her daughter to get a diaphragm. I just knew that was a nice strong scene. What could happen to it? I submitted that scene and several others to this wonderful man named Mouzon Law...who ran the theatre department at BU and had some money that he used with this Tanglewood operation in the summer. Harold Clurman [who] was up there was also a big influence at the time [and] gave me a sense that I was better than I thought I was. They were all New York playwrights and me. Because it was BU they had to have one Boston play wright and so they picked me the first time and my play turned out to work better than the other ones. So then the second time they asked me back. And I had these scenes. So I said, "Can we just work on these scenes and maybe get them into some sort of shape?" The '60s and '70s were tumultuous times but there was a lot of money around, if you remember, for academic projects. They had very good directors, very good actors. Michael Moriarty was in this play. Rue McLanahan. Several really first-rate actors. So I got up there and I started writing more scenes. And they just started to come. For instance one of the best scenes in it, one of the most moving scenes in my opinion, is toward the end where that woman want[s] to sing *Lucia Di Lammermoor*. And that was strictly Rue McLanahan coming up to me on the side and saying, "Everybody else has got a big moment in this play and I don't have anything and I want something toward the end." Already Rue was a good actress and famous enough and so I wrote that in about a half an hour. We had rented a house up near Tanglewood and I had four children and they were all crying and I kept saying "Shut Up. I'm trying to write." And I remember having to put in some kind of a thread. Here were these scenes and how [could] I hook them together. I remember contriving it but what's the thread, I said to myself. The paranoia, the fascist takeover that was going on in the country at that time. So I got that in. One