

films and works of literature, and borrowings from other people's plots all add to his ability to get his points across while minimizing his deficiencies as a storyteller. And, as it turns out, most critics have praised him for the bandages without noticing the wounds.

This formal eclecticism, however, is a disadvantage to him as a filmmaker in two important ways. First, the devices don't always work: in *Annie Hall* the voice-overs add insight to the characters while moving the story along, while in *Hannah* they are merely used

to impart information which the author is unable or unwilling to fit into the dramatic context. Second, the devices serve as a crutch and distract him from what he does best. If Woody Allen has one tremendous talent, it's his ability to create memorable, enlightening characters: Alvy Singer, Annie Hall, Leonard Zelig, Danny Rose, Lou Canova, Mickey—any aspiring comic artist would kill to be able to create such a gallery of characters. But Allen feels pressed to "grow," so he creates self-conscious homages to Bergman, Fellini, Shakespeare, etc.

The more ambitious he becomes, the more his films suffer.

When Woody Allen has trusted his characters to lead us wherever they want to go, as in *Annie Hall*, *Stardust Memories*, and *Broadway Danny Rose*, he has created some of the finest films of the post-Hollywood period. One can only hope he tunes out the critics and tunes in again to his own characters.

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## STAGE

### The House That John Built

by David Kaufman

In the 1980 film *Atlantic City*, Burt Lancaster, portraying a has-been racketeer, turns to a young companion while they're walking along the Boardwalk and exclaims, "You should have seen the Atlantic Ocean in the old days." According to Louis Malle, the film's director, the producers wanted to cut that line: "They said it didn't make any sense, the ocean hadn't changed. Mais oui! But that was pure John—the way the Lancaster character lived in the past." (Actually, it's pure Oscar Wilde who describes an old Confederate's response to a full moon: "You should have seen it before the war.")

The "John" here is John Guare, whose screenplay for *Atlantic City* has been, according to received opinion, eclipsed not by any subsequent work but by his 1971 opus, *The House of Blue Leaves*, currently revived in New York. Although the new production has been welcomed as a play for all seasons, the implicit message to the rave reviews is that they don't write plays like they did in the good old days—15 years ago—when not only the ocean, but also our theater, was still something to behold. With its references to the war in Vietnam, its extended subplot involving an assassination plan, and its zany characters



Swoosie Kurtz in a scene from John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves* at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Center.

who seem distinctly "60's," *The House of Blue Leaves* already strikes us as an artifact.

Even the circumstances which Guare recalled some years ago to describe the writing of the script seem to refer to another epoch, one which put its trust in arcane, Eastern mythologies: "I was writing this play and I was completely lost. . . . All these characters kept growing up around me, and I didn't know where I was going. So in desperation I threw the I Ching and asked it what the play was about. 'The

family is the microcosm,' it said. Everything came into focus, I finished the play, and then someone told me I'd made a mistake, I'd thrown the I Ching sideways or upside down—I'd gotten the wrong hexagram! . . . But wrong turned out right for me."

"Right" in this case produced one Artie Shaughnessy, a Central Park zoo-keeper and mediocre singer who has dreams of making it big as a songwriter in Hollywood. Artie resides in the Sunnyside section of Queens (a familiar habitat for Guare) with his wife, Bananas. Bananas went what her nickname designates: "A year ago—two years ago today—two days ago today? Today." In a monologue, she recalls that fateful day when at the intersection of 42nd Street and Broadway she impersonated a gypsy cabdriver and gave Cardinal Spellman, Jackie Kennedy, Bob Hope, and President Johnson a lift. But their "suitcases spill open and Jackie Kennedy's wigs blow down Forty-Second Street and Cardinal Spellman hits me and Johnson screams and I hit him. I hit them all. And then . . . [the car] blew four flat tires and sinks and I run to protect the car. . . . And cars are honking at me to move. I push the car over the bridge back to Queens. You're asleep. I turn on Johnny Carson to get my mind off and there's Cardinal Spellman and Bob Hope whose nose is still bleeding and they tell the story of what happened to them and everybody laughs. Thirty million people watch Johnny Carson and they all laugh. At me. At me. I'm nobody. I knew all those people better than me. . . . I know everything about them. Why can't

they love me?"

On the subject of sanity versus insanity, Guare is—and therefore we are—far more sympathetic with Bananas. In all of his works, Guare focuses on paradoxes and regards them frequently by inverting our expectations. In *Bosoms and Neglect*, for example, Scooper tells Deidre, his new "girlfriend," that "you become saner much quicker than you go mad."

Although Bananas is the certifiable looney who is about to be carted off to the eponymous House of Blue Leaves, according to Guare's subtext, Bananas is the sanest character of the bunch, while all those who pass through Artie's apartment are the real residents of this peculiar, poignant House of Blue Leaves: Bunny Flingus, Artie's downstairs neighbor, with whom he's having wild and frequent sex but who refuses to cook for him until they get married ("My cooking is the only thing I got to lure you on with and hold you with. Artie, we got to keep some magic for the honeymoon"); Artie and Banana's son, Ronnie, who has gone AWOL from Fort Dix in order to carry out his plan to assassinate the Pope during his visit to New York to plead for an end to the war (Bunny shows up near the end of Act I with a large "I Love Paul" button: "They ran out of Welcome Pope buttons so I ran downstairs and got my leftover from when the Beatles were here!"); Billy Einhorn, Artie's childhood pal who is now a successful Hollywood producer; and Corrinna Stroller, Billy's concubine actress who went deaf during an accident on the set.

Superficially, *The House of Blue Leaves* is an updated version of *Arsenic and Old Lace* or *You Can't Take It With You* or that genre of theatrical comedy which has prompted more than one critic to liken Guare to George Abbott. But as Frank Rich has claimed, "At its best [*The House of Blue Leaves*] often seems like *The Day of the Locust* as rewritten by Tennessee Williams."

Beneath the laugh-riot chaos, each of the inmates of Guare's Blue Leaves asylum is lovable and ostensibly harmless. And lest it seem like the dismissable black comedy it ultimately proves to be, Guare weaves a theme into the shenanigans, a message about the motivation to be recognized, the ambition

to be famous. It appears early, when Bunny says in one of the more memorable lines, "When famous people go to sleep at night, it's us they dream of, Artie. The famous ones—they're the real people. We're the creatures of their dreams. You're the dream. I'm the dream. We have to be there for the Pope's dream." It reappears later as the pivotal cause of Banana's breakdown. For Artie, it serves as his *raison d'être*. But it's Billy who has the final say on the matter, in a reversal of logic which typifies all of Guare's work: "Bananas, do you know what the greatest talent in the world is? To be an audience. Anybody can create. But to be an audience . . . be an audience . . ."

*The House of Blue Leaves* finally is both more and less than Guare's homage to the Common Man. Its limitation is that a mere 15 years after it was written, it already seems dated by its relentless references to a specific era, if not to the sentiment that seemed peculiar to that era. Even Ronnie's assassination plot attaches the work to that same three-year period that spawned *Taxi Driver* and *Nashville* and countless other vehicles that bore a manufactured self-importance for dwelling on so "relevant" a topic. While it is hard to imagine a more effective Bananas than Swoosie Kurtz, the more enduring qualities that Guare might have achieved in this work are now dwarfed by the distance from which we have to view the entire enterprise. Our perspective is now that of an anthropologist observing a foreign culture—in this case, our own recent past.

In fact, one of the more consistent, if less pronounced, themes in Guare's work revolves around the past and how it is glorified and romanticized as a way of avoiding a less than satisfactory present. Guare himself is obsessed with the past, either as a retreat or as an inevitability, a shelter or an inescapable source informing the present. In *Bosoms and Neglect*, a mother tells her (obviously autobiographical) son, "I'm this old woman who does not want to live in the past and I have this son who is like living in a time capsule. They call it the past because it's over with, done, passed. Bury him with his copy of *Gone With the Wind*." (*Bosoms and Neglect* had a mere four-day run when it opened on Broadway in 1979, but it deserved far wider attention. As Ross

Wetzsteon claims in his 1982 profile on Guare for *New York Magazine*, "Although it ran only four days on Broadway, a hundred thousand people claim to have seen it, one of those smash hits everywhere but at the box office.")

Unfortunately, it was far from a "smash hit" with the critics. Even the more modest but outstanding Off-Off-Broadway revival of the work this past spring, in the midst of what can be viewed as a Guare renaissance, was surprisingly ignored or renounced as a failure for what was perceived as an unresolved incongruity between Acts I and II.

The reference to *Gone With the Wind* indirectly confirms the suspicion of autobiography even as it prefigures and alludes to Guare's most ambitious project to date—his great dramatic epic, a trilogy of plays, depicting America's moral evolution and deterioration following the Civil War. But Guare's grand opus has yet to be seen in the perspective for which it was intended. In *Gardenia*, *Lydie Breeze*, and most recently *Women and Water*, Guare conceived of a late-19th-century, self-contained utopian community that was undermined by its naiveté, its innocence, and its inherent corruption. The most powerful and influential force in these plays is not the set of ideals which brought these figures together before we meet them, rather the past, which becomes a series of somewhat mysterious and impulsive events that victimize the characters in the present.

In *Lydie Breeze* the year is 1895, and we're on Nantucket, where their Aipotou ("Utopia backwards") has been established. While one character exclaims that "the curtain is about to go up on a new century," a key figure in forming their glorious community is already bemoaning its dissolution, "We came here after the [Civil] War. You thought Walden was a dream? Walden was a Buffalo Bill Wild West Show compared to the austere moral splendor of our model community."

As a metaphor for the infection that would prove the undoing of his hypothetical community, Guare introduced a rampant strain of syphilis. Syphilis courses through these plays even as it connects the various characters and serves as the community's

only identifiable legacy. The choice of syphilis was ineluctable for Guare, since it not only conjures up Ibsen (to whom Guare is paying deliberate homage in this series of plays), but it also suggests comparison with the more recent sexual utopianism of the 60's. But what is most useful to us today in Guare's grandiose scheme has been either overlooked or ridiculed by the critics who were singularly unimpressed. Both *Lydie Breeze* and *Gardenia* received devastating reviews when they opened within months of each other in New York early in 1982. The response was so fiercely negative, in fact, that Guare probably had no recourse but to withhold the third play in the trilogy. Though *Women and Water* has just this past year, or four years later, played at the Los Angeles Actors' Theater and at the Arena Stage in Washington, it has yet to even open in New York.

For the most part, the critics dwelt on the references to Ibsen and other literary giants, as well as on the general loftiness of Guare's aims; but all at the expense of even considering what Guare was driving at. On the basis of the critics' diatribes, one might conclude that Guare "borrowed" even his characters' names by lifting them from some literary context or other—Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore*, for example—rather than deriving them from the tombstones at a cemetery in Queens, as he did.

As Robert Brustein was quick to point out in his review of *Lydie Breeze*, not since O'Neill had an American playwright undertaken so massive a project. But when Brustein rhetorically asks, "What should one do—admire Guare's audacity or worry over his momentary loss of reason?" he answers, "The latter, alas. . . . Guare still brings his unfailing bounce and good nature to such lugubrious subjects as murder, suicide, death, and disease, but here his tone is at war with his intentions, as if he were featuring Bugs Bunny in an animated version of *War and Peace*."

John Simon concurred in his response to *Lydie Breeze*. "There are also numerous allusions to or quotations from Poe, Hawthorne, James, Whitman, and other ottocento Americana [where, I wonder, are Poe and James?], but neither solid relationships

nor soaring dialogue to hold together this disjointed, garish, and vacuous claptrap." Frank Rich was equally inhospitable in his more crucial response for the *Times*: "*Lydie Breeze* seems to choke on literary references."

*Gardenia*, which occurs earlier in Guare's conceived cycle, even though it premiered after *Lydie Breeze*, fared no better. Frank Rich seized it as an opportunity to declaim once again against the first work: "Distressingly enough, it manages to diminish the earlier play, such as it was, retroactively." Brustein despaired even further: "I await the third play in the trilogy, less out of expectation that it will produce something significant than out of hope that John Guare will finally have gotten this damned *Lydie Breeze* business out of his system."

But for both of these works, the problem may have less to do with what Guare actually offered and more with the climate that was there, or not there as the case may be, to receive them. One of Brustein's remarks suggests as much inadvertently: "To judge by *Lydie Breeze*, the task of encapsulating historical material within a theatrical anecdote has grown even more problematic today than in the time of O'Neill." The sad fact of the matter is that Guare's best plays—his most ambitious, most dense, and most instructive works—have yet to receive fair or proper analysis. The *Lydie Breeze* cycle was perceived as a pretentious or pseudoliterary exercise. But that response reflects not what Guare had to offer, so much as the frantic state our critics are in, behaving here like a band of starved detectives who finally had some clues to which to apply their trade. Not even subsequent productions (for *Lydie Breeze*, in Washington, DC, and just this past spring at Steppenwolf in Chicago; for *Gardenia*, in San Francisco, Pittsburgh, and at the Goodman in Chicago) could slough off the dead weight of the initial pans.

In the meantime, Guare's fluffier, more digestible *The House of Blue Leaves* reigns supreme in revival. It was, it should be said, well-enough received in 1971 to win the New York Drama Critics award as Best Play. But since it played at the time in an Off Broadway theater, it was not qualified for Tony Awards consideration. The

move of the current production last April to the Vivian Beaumont Theatre, technically a Broadway house, from the more intimate Mitzi Newhouse space downstairs at Lincoln Center where it had opened a few months before, seemed engineered to qualify it for Tony deliberations. Indeed, the great scandal of the 1985-86 Tony Awards was the nomination of *The House of Blue Leaves* no less than Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot* for Best Play, since both works were literally more than a decade old. Many saw the Tonys as a confirmation of the dismal state of American drama. What the awards really indicated was that the Tony Awards organization is an outmoded enterprise—at this point the only theatrical awards association that refuses to look beyond Broadway.

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## ART

### The Genius of Redundance

by Andrei Navrozov

"Simplicity," the Russian proverb tells us, "is worse than theft." Meaning, economy is just another name for sterility.

This is an easy thing to believe as I write this in the middle of London, the Old World piling up stone all around me in a paean to the unnecessary. But what is necessary? As Tolstoy calculated in his famous story, no man needs more than six feet of ground.

It is the same when not just life, but expression, is in question. In college, we were always asked to write essays on Donne's "A Valediction of weeping." Remember?

On a round ball  
A workman that hath copies  
by, can lay  
An Europe, Afrique, and an  
Asia,  
And quickly make that, which  
was nothing, All . . .

I could never convince my professors that a "ball" is always "round" by