

John Guare's Theatre

John Guare's Theatre:
The Art of Connecting

By

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John Guare's Theatre: The Art of Connecting, by Robert J. Andreach

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For Kevin, Jason, and Thelma; George and Elaine;
and Jim (in memoriam) and Mary

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INTRODUCTION

THE EARLY ONE-ACT PLAYS

In a 1992 interview, John Guare was asked, “Do you see a theme to your work?” He replied:

Don’t make it sound like English 101. Each play is a part of the one long play that is a playwright’s life. I know the way each play came out of the previous play. People don’t have radical shifts of consciousness in the course of their lifetimes. I can look at a play I wrote at 2:00 A.M. in 1963 the night before I went into the Air Force—*The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year*—and say, isn’t that funny. I’m still dealing with the issues in that play—identity, faith, the desperation it takes people to get through their lives, the lunatic order we try to put on the chaos of life, and, technically, how to get the play out of the kitchen sink and hurl it into the Niagara Falls of life.¹

“The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year” is one of seven published one-act plays Guare wrote between 1966 and 1969. Since the five issues are spread throughout the seven plays, showing how they are connected in these early plays is a good way to introduce Guare’s theatre because as the playwright said, he was still dealing with the five issues thirty years later. Only six, however, will be examined. The seventh, “Kissing Sweet,” was originally presented on public television as part of a program on pollution and conservation to which ten playwrights were invited to contribute short pieces.²

The author’s note to the script of “Something I’ll Tell You Tuesday” addresses the first of the issues—first, that is, in reverse sequence. Beginning, “The play is written to be performed with the barest minimum of scenery; two chairs are all that are needed,”³ the note establishes the mode of production for the six plays as non-naturalistic. In addition to setting scenes with sound and lighting rather than naturalism’s exact details, these plays set scenes with banners in the style of Bertolt Brecht’s theatre; cut rapidly from scene to scene in a cinematic style; suddenly shift from one genre, style, or tone to another genre, style, or tone, disrupting naturalism’s modal consistency; have the actors break into song,

interrupting naturalism's linear narrative; and have the actors speak directly to the audience, violating naturalism's invisible fourth wall.

"Muzeeka," the longest of these early plays, illustrates the second issue in the reverse sequence. A lunatic order that society imposes on life's chaos so that it does not upset society's values is conformity, inculcated by the Muzak music that the protagonist's, Jack Argue's, corporate employer, Muzeeka, pipes into America. The music is so bland it "deadens the pain and everything" in the dentist's office, putting "novocaine out of business."⁴ A lunatic order that society imposes on life's chaos so that it affirms society's values such as the glorification of celebrity as life's highest, most rewarding development is exploitation, inculcated by the media. When war erupts, as it does periodically because it is "God's invention to make us remember we are animals" (132), television crews cover the war with exclusive contracts for selected soldiers to participate only in battles that the particular media corporation is filming. Before participating, combatants must apply makeup so as to be photogenic, but the application is no more than an inconvenience for an activity that offers the opportunity to be featured in the filming or on a news magazine cover—to be a celebrity. In fairness, however, to society operating through its corporate structure, it is not the sole force imposing order. Evolution has covered "fifty percent of the human brain" with a "cortical overlay" that deadens "instincts" (118).

Desperation to get through life, the third issue, takes different forms that in Guare's theatre are interrelated, but here they will be examined separately. Desperation to connect with another person is at the heart of "A Day for Surprises," which takes place in the New York Public Library and involves two librarians designated A, for Miss Jepson, and B, for Mr. Falanzano, who is pasting books when the play opens. The first surprise is A's discovery that one of the library's stone lions left its perch, entered the building, and devoured another librarian, a Miss Pringle. The second surprise is B's revelation of his relationship with the dead woman. As he tells the story, one night he returned to the library to get a book to read because he could not sleep and in the darkness came upon a weeping Miss Pringle. "'If I don't become a member of the human race soon, I'll kill myself,'" she confessed to him, pleading, "'Please love me. I'm here. I'm ready.'"⁵ They became lovers the only way they knew how: by reading about sex for months to learn about it before copulating. When she thought she was pregnant, they chose to have an abortion, only to discover that she was carrying a "small undeveloped volume" and not a fetus, for he had "not semen at all." Having passed his life in books, he "had become a book" (111). A also has a confession. Not only has the stone lion devoured

other staff members, for “there’s a lot of lonely girls in this town” (108), she spends her nights reading, watching television, and hoping the phone will ring, even if the call is a wrong number. The play ends with the two connecting, the implication being in a more meaningful way than he and Miss Pringle did, because the lion returns to its perch as A pastes her “hand” to B’s “cheek” and “*his hand to her breast*” (111).

To recover the buried self-past is the desperation in the first half of “Muzeeka,” verbalized by Argue in his confession: “I want to connect. Therefore, I must cut. Cut off all the ties just for a while, so I can get back to what I was, am, am down deep. Establish my relation to all the Etruscans, all the animals” (126). Thankful for being drafted and sent to Vietnam because the war got him away from the Muzeeka Corporation, his wife, and his child, he can rejoice having recovered his instinctive, animal nature: “I’ve killed many people in the four months I’ve been here. I’ve finally broken through the clay pot that covers my brain. I dance and sing when I shoot and kill. I thank God for war” (132).

To create a new self or identity is Argue’s desperation in the play’s second half as it is for most of the six plays’ characters. He knew he had to go “down deep” (126) to recover his old, Etruscan, self repressed beneath the homogenized modern culture. He also seemed to know that he must go “down deep” to recover the faculty with which to combat the conformity and create a new self, imagination, for it is fluid imagination that can release the unruly “blend of Rock and Mozart and Wagnerian Liebestods . . .” (119) hidden under the cortical overlay to dissolve away the ruling Muzak. Yet he fails in this adventure. Having read in the men’s room of a Greenwich Village bar an ad for a trick by an Evelyn Landis, he goes to her apartment, where she gets into a basket that is attached to a bed’s upper bunk and he gets into the lower bunk and assumes a coital position in which he pumps up and down while stagehands spin the basket. The activity should stimulate the imagination, but it does not. Instead of descending into his subsurface to awaken the dormant faculty, Argue went to a prostitute who elevates above the surface to create the illusion that he is underground while still on the surface. That he remains on the surface is evidenced by what he says while pumping. He talks about the superficial, materialistic facts of his existence: his house, mortgage, and lawn. Since he also betrayed his wife’s faith in him by going to the apartment while she is delivering their child in an area hospital, Evelyn calls him a “phony” (129). Ready to betray his wife again by divorcing her upon his discharge from the army for a career opportunity another soldier offers him, Argue commits suicide when he learns that the business venture applies atomic

power to the cesspool principle for cleaning up America. “Is that all we’re fighting for?” (139) he asks before stabbing himself.

“Home Fires” has phonies who by using their imagination banally invent false identities. With the play set at the end of World War I, a father and daughter come under suspicion of being German. Policeman Peter insists they are American, although alone with his daughter, he explains that he changed the family name from Schmidt to Smith when war was declared between the two countries. Since avoiding discrimination is a legitimate reason for changing an identity—that plus his desire to escape an unsavory past in Germany—he is not a phony, not to the extent his son is, who changed his name from Rudy Smith to Rudyard Smythe. Taking advantage of the New World experience that is a “whole new beginning,”⁶ unlike the Old World experience in which ancestry and class determine a lifetime identity, Rudy intends to be a celebrity. “I’m going to be King Somebody” (34-35), he tells Peter. Furthermore, he needs the new identity to impress his fiancée, whom he believes to be an heiress and to whom he introduces his father and sister as family servants. As it turns out, she too invented a fake identity, quitting her position as a servant because she believes she is marrying Rudy’s wealth.

The protagonist of “Cop-Out” allows his imagination to run wild with a consequence that is not comic. He is a policeman who while assigned to crowd control encounters a girl, one of the crowd at the police barricade. That they are nameless indicates that they have not created individual, personal identities. Nevertheless, she falls in love with him and makes her feelings known to him. He, however, is carried away by a fantasy life in which he becomes the “*supercool*”⁷ Brett Arrow, modeled on Hollywood detectives. And as the image of the “world’s toughest superstar” (2) comes to dominate his personality, he loses faith in her, even though she had an abortion so as not to complicate their relationship. Believing she is a “Commie Dope Dupe” (22), one of the increasing number of enemies of America that Arrow is determined to destroy, he shoots and kills her, someone real who wanted to connect with him, and their connection could have given them identities.

The two characters, He and She, in “The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year” fail to create identities in the three meetings that the play spans, although her response to his overture at the first meeting reveals the desperation of lonely, alienated life in the city: “I have been in this city eleven months now and you are the first person I’ve spoken to. That’s spoken to me.”⁸ Failure to use imagination does not seem to be the explanation. Rather, failure to connect with the past does seem to be it, for both “A Day for Surprises” and “Muzeeka” establish the pattern whereby

the quester connects with the old self-identity before attempting to create a new self-identity. Yet according to him, they “never mention the past” (95) and know nothing about each other beyond the three Sunday meetings in the park. At the first meeting, He told her he was married, but She did not want to believe him. His stories are bizarre, and at that meeting he slipped the Cracker Jack “*ring on her finger*” (95), an act that implies he had not slipped a ring on someone else’s finger, although before the play is over, his past will surface with a vengeance. He may be breaking off the budding relationship because he feels guilty for breaking faith with her by not being more forthright, though he broke faith with his wife and children by meeting her in the park, and the wife breaks faith with their children by throwing them from the perambulator to the ground to get the rifle she conceals in the perambulator with which to shoot and kill the couple. Yet his wife and his sister have identities; they are Maud and Lucy. What is indisputable is that He and She do not connect even in death. Despite reaching for each other, they “*fall dead on either side of the bench*” (102).

“Something I’ll Tell You Tuesday,” the last of the six early plays to be examined, takes place in New York City on an April afternoon. A couple, Andrew and Agnes, are preparing to leave for the hospital where she is scheduled as an inpatient when they are joined by their daughter Hildegard and son-in-law George, who have driven into the city to be with Agnes when she checks into the hospital. Granted that when they arrive at the apartment they are arguing, that he is described as “*on the brink of either murder or an ulcer*,”⁹ that she tells her parents that not only did he call her ugly names on the drive in, he punched her, and their arrival so depresses Andrew and Agnes that they would prefer not to have to open the door, these details do not complete the picture of the younger couple. Arguing is part of the dynamics of their relationship. If George were physically violent, Hildegard would not run after him when he leaves to bring the car around to the brownstone for the trip to the hospital. “Don’t you dare leave without me,” she calls to him. After patting her mother’s hand and kissing her father, she calls a second time: “George, if you step one foot in that car, I swear you’ll be sorry” (83-84). She will start the fight!

Granted that the play opens on Andrew and Agnes at the “*tail end of a fight*” (75), that the apartment wall bears testimony to an argument years earlier, and the something the mother wants to tell her daughter when she visits on Tuesday is that she, Hildegard, is “*lucky they still fight*” (88) because as people age, they lose the energy to fight, these details do not complete the picture of the older couple. Fighting was and to a diminished degree still is part of the dynamics of their relationship,¹⁰ but that does not

mean that Andrew and Agnes have not formed a bond or do not have affection for each other. She wants to walk with him to the hospital, “*takes his arm*” (86) as they walk, teases him about the neighbor Mrs. Hasselbach, and recalls a joke on a favorite radio program. He is not unresponsive. When she suggests that she may be in the hospital for a longer period than he expects, he interrupts: “Don’t say that—” (75). To remind her that they must get going after George and Hildegard leave for the car, he rubs her knee, laughs “*in spite of himself*” (88) at the recalled joke, and when she asks if he is hesitant about stopping for coffee because he wants to be rid of her, he is emphatic: “NO!” (88)

Why is Andrew described as looking “*morosely ahead*” (86) as they walk? In a 1999 interview, Guare gave a strong clue when he talked about proofreading scripts for the forthcoming collection in *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun and Other Plays*: “I had included in it a short play I wrote 35 years before about an old couple walking to the hospital for the last time.”¹¹ The play gives even stronger clues. When George and Hildegard arrive at the apartment and no one immediately opens the door, the daughter is “*panic-stricken*” (77), obviously because she is afraid they may be too late. Later when she slips and says to her mother that they “won’t always have this chance” to be together, there is a “*horrifying pause all around*” (81). Andrew’s moroseness indicates a depth of feeling for his wife brought to the surface of his face by her condition. Since Andrew and Agnes are not attempting to create new identities, the absence of imagination is not an issue in the play. Its presence, however, is an issue in Guare’s theatre as are the issues of connecting with the past as a basis for connecting with another character and connecting with the past as a prerequisite for creating an identity, individual and personal, collective and artistic, as this study undertakes to demonstrate.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES, CHAUCER IN ROME, AND MARCO POLO SINGS A SOLO

Garnering awards, *The House of Blue Leaves*, which premiered in 1971, established Guare's reputation.¹ Toward the end of act 1 of the two-act play, speaking on the phone to his Hollywood director friend in California from his apartment in the New York City borough of Queens, Artie Shaughnessy proclaims himself a "new man."² Exhilarated because his girlfriend, Bunny, has gotten him to make the call, which is going well, and because he is planning to have his wife, Bananas, institutionalized, freeing him to marry Bunny, he knows that his feeling himself new notwithstanding, he has yet to actualize the newness in a career. Hence the phone call to Billy to open doors for him in Hollywood as a songwriter. "I got to make a start before it's too late" (41), he continues the monologue. Yet as act 2 dramatizes the events following the phone call, he does not make the start. Since I have written on the play elsewhere, I will confine the examination to Bananas, Artie, and Bunny in their connection to the past as it relates to identity, adding, however, how the play's connection to the past relates to its identity.

Bananas is disconnected from her past with Artie, who tells Billy that she is "dead" (40) for him. She is disconnected from herself. Since she easily becomes hysterical, Artie has to force pills into her mouth. Although they calm her, she complains that they stifle her emotions. "For once," she pleads with him, "could you let my emotions come out?" (26) What comes out of the "sick woman" (21), in addition to the hysteria and erratic behavior, are comments that are lucid, perceptive, and risible. Swoosie Kurtz, who won a Tony playing Bananas in the 1986 revival of the play, gave an insight into the character in an interview when she related that she had gone into the rehearsals having "'no idea who she was or how she got that way,'" but had "'most of'" the "'answers'" by opening night. Kurtz went on to say that Bananas "'knows she's losing'" her husband,³ yet that knowledge has to precede Bunny's arrival because Artie tells Billy that he met Bunny "two months ago" (40). The girlfriend's

arrival on the scene can aggravate Bananas' condition, but it cannot cause it because Bananas has been ill for some time. Although she cannot precisely date when "her troubles all began" (45), he refers to "six months" of "taking care" (44) of her before a pivotal event occurred.

We, however, can reconstruct her situation culminating in the pivotal event. A zookeeper, Artie was and still is desperate to create a new identity as a celebrity. The play does not state when he began to think of himself as a songwriter, but it had to be years earlier because when Bananas forces him to play "White Christmas" and he realizes that the song he wrote as "I Love You so I Keep Dreaming" is the "*same tune*," he accuses her of intentionally humiliating him: "All these years you knew that and made me play it" (63). Yet her keeping silent is an indication of her not wanting to humiliate him. When he tries to explain to her why he is leaving her—"I got to take this chance. You stay in your room. You're crying"—she counters, "I never stopped you all these years" (35). Her faith in him as revealed in the silent support must have made her apprehensive about his continued effort to reinvent himself in a culture that puts tremendous pressure on people to create themselves. Their eighteen-year-old son Ronnie tells the story of his humiliation at the age of twelve trying to impress the visiting Billy by performing all the routines he could in an attempt to win the role of Huck Finn in a film Billy was scheduled to direct.

During the six months that Artie was taking care of an ill Bananas before the pivotal event, the feeling that she was losing her zookeeper husband must have intensified. She herself recounts the event, though it could not have happened as she tells it, further indication of her deepening illness. In her narrative while she was driving the family car in Manhattan, she came to the intersection of Broadway and Forty-second Street, where four celebrities, each on one of the corners, were trying to hail a cab. She offered to drive them to their destinations only to have them so resist her that fighting resulted. Back in the apartment, she turned on the television and saw two of them, Cardinal Spellman and Bob Hope, regaling host Johnny Carson on his talk show with the encounter with her. Not only was the laughter humiliating, she knew she could not reinvent herself and therefore did not belong in the company of celebrities. "I'm nobody. . . . Why can't they love me?" she concludes the narrative before adding that following the experience of being humiliated in front of "thirty million" television viewers (46), she went up on the roof in the snow.

The event was a pivotal one for Artie, who with the police searched frantically for her until he found her on the roof in a blizzard with the "dead look" (45) on her face that she has had ever since. She lost faith in

herself: her ability to keep pace with him as he changed from the man she married. He lost faith in her as a partner in his quest to change his identity as a zookeeper. Their lives diverging, they have less and less to share. Twice he remarks on missing her, the person she used to be, and once he remarks on the fun they used to have. He even wishes that she and Bunny could be friends so that he would not have to put her away and the three of them could stay together. She still loves him and, terrified of being institutionalized, tries to please him but to no avail because the shared past has receded and he cannot relinquish his goal of creating a new identity, from which her illness excludes her. As he and Billy, who arrives for act-2's second scene, look at photos from the years when Billy lived in New York, she comments on her love for one of the clubs in a photo, to which he says, "It's closed, Bananas. Finished. Like you" (76).

Artie's situation is the opposite of his wife's. He wants to disconnect from the past with her so that he can reconnect with the past he shared with Billy before the latter became a director and connect with a future with Bunny. He therefore wants to disconnect from the self or identity he is as a zookeeper in New York with Bananas so that he can connect with a new self or identity as a songwriter in California with Billy as friend and colleague and Bunny as wife. Bananas' illness is her disconnection from the past with him and her disconnection from herself because her identity is with him in the past. Since she feels her disconnection and her humiliating failure to connect with a new self or identity, she admits to roaming "around the house all day crying about the way my life turned out" (29). Artie, on the other hand, "*yelps triumphantly*" (43) after the phone call to Billy. Whereas Bananas is "*very depressed*," he is "*jubilant*" (44). To the audience he sings as if to Billy, "I'm here with bells on, / Ringing out how I feel" (43). As a songwriter, however, he too is finished, though he does not yet know he is. He is alone in not knowing. Even the audience has an inkling as a result of Guare's war against the naturalistic play. In the 1986 revival, John Mahoney's Artie performed the prologue's songs to ticket holders taking their seats as if they were the amateur-night patrons in the local bar before bolting from an unresponsive audience disconcerted by the performance. The strategy dispels the naturalistic illusion of an invisible fourth wall, and it engages the audience as participants in the action rather than observers of it. Thus when the play proper starts, the audience suspects that Artie is not an accomplished songwriter.

Bananas' flight to the roof was a pivotal event in the past. Bunny's flight to Australia with Billy is a pivotal event in the present. She tells Artie that a song such as "Where Is the Devil in Evelyn?" is a classic, but

whether she believes the statement is moot. She may believe it, or she may not, believing instead that friendship with director Billy, which she accuses him of “dangling” over her “head” to “take advantage” of her (37), rather than talent opens doors in Hollywood. She and Artie share the American Dream of reinventing themselves, and, unlike Bananas, she sees herself keeping pace with him as he changes. In the opening scene, she “*ecstatically*” actualizes the Dream for him: “Our whole life is beginning—my life—our life—and we’ll be married and go out to California and Billy will help you. You’ll be out there with the big shots—out where you belong—not in any amateur nights in bars on Queens Boulevard. Billy will get your songs in movies. It’s not too late to start. With me behind you!” (21-22) She too wants to be disconnected from her past identity—or identities—that she claims range from astronomer’s assistant to travel agent, librarian to telephone operator, to name a few positions she has held. Other than these positions, though, she says little about her past prior to meeting Artie so that she resembles She in “The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year” in that she is enjoying the present as a prelude to the future, which is marriage to a Hollywood celebrity.

The future comes sooner than expected with widowed Billy’s arrival in New York to identify the body of his fiancée, killed by the bomb Ronnie intended for the visiting pope. Bunny betrays Artie’s faith in her by leaving with the director, but she is not a villain.⁴ She is a kook in a culture whose most lunatic order imposed on chaos is a fraudulent Dream, fraudulent because the Dream has become the promise of wealth, fame, and therefore fulfillment for those who persevere in the quest, yet only an infinitesimal number of questers achieve wealth and fame, and because even if achieved, material rewards do not satisfy the human being’s spiritual needs. The satire is inescapable. In the opening of act-2’s second scene, the audience hears the pope commending the American public for its spiritual values and loyalty. Satire, however, is not the play’s sole informing genre. With a set reproducing its real-world counterpart and, despite their zaniness, characters circumscribed by their real-world determinants such as environment, the play blends naturalistic elements with the non-naturalistic elements already cited. Guare’s introduction gives another union, that of Strindberg and Feydeau. “Home Fires” is farce and satire without tragedy. Although the final scene of “Muzeeka” has the look of tragedy, the play lacks the feel of tragedy’s inevitability in the farce and satire. As the offspring of Strindberg’s conflict in which characters are trapped in their marriages and Feydeau’s frantic pace in which characters seek temporary release from their marriages, *The House of Blue Leaves*

blends satire and farce, black comedy and tragedy with tragedy dominating the final scene.

Billy's arrival, which Artie sees as his good fortune in that he can play his songs for his friend, instead is Bunny's good fortune in that the director invites her to accompany him to Australia. Her acceptance of the invitation is a pivotal event that causes a reversal of Bananas' and Artie's situations. The wife and husband are disconnected from themselves and each other, she in an epitomizing visual image in which she vacuums with the appliance's unattached hose "*wrapped around her shoulders*" (70) and he in an epitomizing aural image in which he plays and sings "I Love You so I Keep Dreaming," the same tune as that of "White Christmas." With Bunny's acceptance of Billy's invitation, they are reconnected, but for Artie, the connection is with an intolerable reality. Now that his hope of being a songwriter is dead, Bananas is "*thrilled*" (86) to have her husband back as a zookeeper. Sitting on her haunches and rubbing up against him, she will be an animal he can care for, a pet he can love. She has reconnected with her old self or identity. But he cannot reconnect with his old self or identity; it is suffocating and humiliating. In the 1982 interview, the interviewer asked Guare, "Do you write with endings in mind?" to which he replied: "No. If you knew where you were going why would you bother writing? There'd be nothing to discover. I can still remember throwing up when I realized what the ending of *The House of Blue Leaves* would be—that after the songwriter realized the true worth of his work he would have to kill his wife because she saw him as he was."⁵ The final scene is another reversal, that of the prologue. In the institution to which he was sending Bananas but in which he is committed, Artie performs his songs to an appreciative audience, the theatre audience applauding an excellent production.

By connecting his plays to plays by Strindberg and Feydeau, Guare invokes a tradition to which his theatre belongs. He does the same thing another way too. The early one-act plays have allusions to musical comedies, nursery rhymes, and comic books. They have allusions to works by Émile Zola, J.D. Salinger, and Ring Lardner. There is also an extended passage reminiscent of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. But the allusions do not function in the plays; they are simply present as details. Guare's introduction to *The House of Blue Leaves* refers to the *Oresteia*, and Billy's "different drummer" (73) alludes to Thoreau's *Walden*, neither of which functions in the play. Two allusions do function, however, thereby strengthening the connection to the tradition.

Shortly after Bananas emerges from the bedroom in act 1, she drops to her haunches so that she can be fed as an animal. Catching in her mouth

the food Artie throws to her, she “*rolls on her back*,” prompting Bunny to remark, “What a work of art is a dog. How noble in its thought—how gentle in its dignity—” (30). The allusion is to the act-2 scene in *Hamlet* in which the prince confides in Guildenstern and Rosencrantz that gloom has so overtaken his mind he no longer perceives a man as “noble in reason” but as the “quintessence of dust.”⁶ Like Hamlet’s speech, Bunny’s speech, which makes Bananas less than the work of art that is a dog, is self-revealing. She is callous, for the woman on the floor is not feigning madness but really is sick. Act 2, scene 2, opens on a sobbing Billy. Instead of flying to Australia with his fiancée to direct a film, he will fly back to Los Angeles with her body. “I can’t work. Not for a long, long time, if ever again” (73-74), he protests, devastated by the loss. That is, until gourmet chef Bunny enters the apartment carrying a steaming casserole and, tasting the veal, he feels his creative powers returning, so much so that he invites her to accompany him to Australia. “Chekhov was right,” he declares. “Work. Work. That’s the only answer” (82). The allusion is to the closing scene of *Uncle Vanya*. A weeping Vanya is in despair. Having dedicated his life to furthering the career of his late sister’s husband not only without reward but also without gratitude, he feels he has fruitlessly sacrificed any chance for happiness. Attempting to console him, his niece Sonya tells him that their lot is to “work for the sake of others, now and when we are old, never knowing peace or rest” in this life but being rewarded with peace and rest in the afterlife.⁷ Regardless of what one thinks of Vanya, his despair is genuine. Billy’s recovery, on the other hand, reveals him to be a phony.

The allusions to Shakespeare’s and Chekhov’s plays, though not so developed as to shape the play’s action, nevertheless help to identify Guare’s theatre. By connecting his theatre to the past, they give ballast to his highly individual, contemporary experimenting. The need for a theatrical connection, like the need for a character’s personal connection, can be forced, however, as in a play that does not follow chronologically in the playwright’s canon but is examined now because it is connected to *The House of Blue Leaves*. Guare recorded the germination of *Chaucer in Rome* in the afterword to the published text, the afterword being excerpts from his journal of the late 1990s. While in Rome in 1997, he saw the possibility of a play about a visiting artist at the American Academy having to change his identity as a painter because he is susceptible to cancer from the toxins in paint. The first two issues of the five extracted from “The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year” in the 1992 interview came quickly. The play’s action would be the desperate attempt of an artist, Matt, to change his medium, enabling him to remain an artist because he

sees himself as one and because if he must create a pedestrian identity, he will forgo the expectation of celebrity as a prize recipient at the Academy. As these two issues evolved, Matt is assisted by his fiancée, Sarah, and a friend, Pete. The reinventing of the identity becomes desperate for them too, also Academy prize winners though in different disciplines, because Pete bets Matt that he, scholar Pete, can discover the needed medium, thereby satisfying Matt and proving himself to be an artist.

Learning that the year 2000 would be a Holy Year bringing millions of pilgrims seeking redemption to a Rome that could not accommodate them, Guare realized the result would be chaos. The lunatic orders imposed on chaos in the third issue are religious hypocrisy, materialism, and the fraudulent Dream. Examples are some of the play's pilgrims come to the city seeking a quick fix for their sins, and one of the characters is a priest selling commemorative t-shirts. The afterword does not discuss the fourth issue, combating naturalism, but it does not have to. The play actualizes the non-naturalistic mode in characters speaking directly to the audience and changing a scene by rearranging chairs.

Most of the afterword is devoted to the fifth issue. Since the play requires pilgrims, the thought of reversing the situation in *The House of Blue Leaves* occurred to Guare. In the earlier play, the pope comes to New York; in the new play, Artie and Bananas' son Ron and his wife would be Pete's parents, and they would come to Rome. By violating their privacy and sanctity by encouraging Matt to videotape their confessions as the new artistic medium in which to create, Pete betrays his parents' faith in him. This issue of faith engenders two sections in the afterword. The playwright asks himself whether he betrayed his parents by using them as a basis for transformation into art in *The House of Blue Leaves*, and he asks himself whether in writing *Chaucer in Rome* he is writing a sequel to the earlier play.

Once Guare decided on pilgrims seeking redemption, he had to have a past because redemption presupposes a past. This given is the source of the play's problems. To get Ron and Dolo Shaughnessy, the son and daughter-in-law of Artie and Bananas Shaughnessy, in Rome, he made them pilgrims seeking redemption like all the other pilgrims while visiting their son Pete. For Christians, redemption is deliverance from sin, made possible by Christ's atoning sacrifice. For Catholics, the vehicle is confession, made in a confessional by the penitent to the confessor, the priest, who absolves. Catholics, Ron and Dolo would know the significance of confession in the sacrament of penance and be familiar with the ritual. Nevertheless in the chaos they might be duped into thinking that Matt is a priest, since he is dressed in black with a taped white collar, and,

unaware that they are being videotaped, confess their sins behind a screen in a darkened room. What rings false is the past—the sins confessed—because they strain for parallels in *The House of Blue Leaves*, although Guare's connecting the two plays is evidence of the connection between identity and the past in the creating of his theatre. Part of the power of the earlier play comes from its psychological realism. Bananas is ill because she tried and failed to keep pace with Artie's pursuit of the American Dream of celebrity. The audience can sympathize with her, a woman who has lost her son to the military, is losing her husband to the Dream and another woman, and is going to be institutionalized—a woman who pleads with her old friend Billy to help her. Dolo writes poison-pen letters to herself accusing herself of all sorts of crimes that she did not commit and could not have committed, but there is no psychological realism in her confession. According to her, she has been receiving the letters since she was six or seven and as penance married Ron so that she could have her husband murder her as his father murdered his mother. She even confesses to a "secret sin so deep" she does not "know what it is."⁸ Strangled offstage, she is simply a crazy person whose wish to be murdered, which is a repetition of the past in the present, parallels Bananas' wish to have the past when she and Artie were happy repeated in the present.

Artie elicits the audience's sympathy because he pours his energy into the Dream that America inculcates in its people and not only fails to achieve it but in failing is humiliated. Unlike Artie, Ron recognizes his limitation, for although he likes to think of himself as an artist, he acknowledges that he paints signs. He also contradicts Dolo:

My father killed my mother. Why? I don't know—she was crazy—he made her crazy the way I made my wife crazy—the way Pete will when he gets married—that's the way we Shaughnessy men do it. We drive our wives crazy. And then we kill them because we can't stand to see what we've done to them . . . (154).

He cannot be responsible for her craziness if she started writing the letters to herself at age six or seven. If she is wrong about the age and he is responsible, *Chaucer in Rome* does not dramatize his driving her crazy. There is no psychological realism here either. Nevertheless he strangles Dolo and kills himself some time after viewing their videotaped confessions on the Charlie Rose talk show, the parallel to the earlier play's Johnny Carson talk show, which aired Bananas' humiliation. Ron does offer other explanations for his behavior; they are as crazy as he is: the killing is in the "bloodstream" and he and his wife are victims being swept away in an "undertow" (156) in the Sunnyside neighborhood of the

Queens borough of New York City. Though he says he “hate[s]” Dolo (156), the sole reason for the murder is the need for a parallel with Artie’s murder of Bananas.

The son’s estrangement snaps the straining for parallels. In *The House of Blue Leaves*, son Ronnie sets out to blow up the pope, the papal father, because he is a substitute for godfather Billy, with whom he suffered a humiliation at age twelve so traumatic that it is the subject of his monologue six years later, and because as a visitor to New York, the pope is accessible. In the reverse situation in *Chaucer in Rome*, Ron and Dolo, who won a pilgrimage in their church raffle, expect to visit with their son while in Rome. As soon as Pete, who is proposing new creative media to Matt and Sarah to replace the former’s painting, looks to verify the approaching voices he hears, he says to the audience, “I saw two of the reasons I had fled America” (129). Yet there is no explanation, stated or implied, why he fled them in the past or not having seen them in two years flees them in the present, as he does by alerting the gatekeeper to tell them he does not know anyone named Pete, or why he betrays them by proposing that they be videotaped, a proposal that initially repels Matt. All that the play gives for psychological realism, in addition to the statement above, is his statement one year later, when of necessity he has to return to his parents’ home for one night: “It was my home and, as much as I hated them and was shamed by them, I needed them” (164).

Ron and Dolo are foolish, irritating, and to a prize recipient at Rome’s American Academy, gauche. They are not, however, deserving of their son’s hatred, for they love him and are not ashamed to admit the love. Proud of the prize-winner, they carry his photo and refer to him as “our Peter” (129) and “my boy” (137). Not only have they been sending mail to him during the two years he has been gone, they have brought his “things” (128) with them, including his favorite food. Their motivation for coming to the Academy while on the pilgrimage is to “know he’s all right” (133). Although she participates in the deception, Sarah admits, “I love them” (148), and for one moment Pete confesses, “I loved them” (147). Yet Guare needs a betrayal to ensure that the son has a need for redemption. Coordinating the two needs creates a problem and some murky writing. When Dolo confesses that she married Ron because his father murdered his mother, Pete is described as “troubled” (150). Why is he troubled? In his confession Ron insists that although he did not tell his son of the murder, he “must know” (155) from learning about the murder in the neighborhood and as a boy accompanied his father on a visit to the grandfather in the institution. Even if he is lapsed, having been reared in his parents’ religion, he must know the significance of confession in the

sacrament of penance. It seems that Guare is trying to keep the unconscionable betrayal while simultaneously trying to mitigate Pete's role in it by giving him a conscience, even though his troubled conscience does not prevent him from hating his parents and being "shamed by them" or prevent him from returning to their home when he needs a place to sleep and "laundry done" (164).

The parents appear once more when "*Ron comes slowly to Dolo, who smiles at him*" (166) in an image epitomizing the play's theme: that one must redeem the past, as opposed to repeating it, to create a new identity. Since the two are not repeating the murder-suicide in the afterlife, they are not in Hell; presumably their new identity is that of penitents in Purgatory. Neither is Pete in Hell but only because the betrayer is still alive. He, however, does not have an identity. When Matt and Sarah come upon him on an island off Sicily to which he fled, he denies his identity: "*Mi chiamo Pietro*" (171). Matt and Sarah have identities as the Charlie Rose figure reminds the audience by twice speaking their names: "Matthew Gee and Sarah McCarty" (166-67). In the afterword Guare contrasts the two males. Matt, who is redeemed, "discovers a pragmatic self who can adapt to life" whereas Pete is "getting to a point where he needs redemption" (181). Apparently he makes progress because the final image is his, "*in light*" (172), as pilgrims' voices ask for forgiveness.

The play's final image is not the book's final image, for the afterword can be read as a transition to Guare's theatre. A minor problem is the title that the playwright recognized as misleading but kept anyway. *The Canterbury Tales* has nothing to do with the play in that it contributes nothing to the structural design or understanding of *Chaucer in Rome*. Guare's nameless pilgrims, who have come to Rome for the Holy Year celebration, confess their sins in the expectation of having them forgiven whereas Chaucer's pilgrims, regardless of their motives for making the pilgrimage to Canterbury, do not confess their sins in the tales they tell to pass the time on the journey. Invoked titles of plays that form a dramatic-theatrical tradition to which Guare's play belongs are O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, although the O'Neill quotation is misleading. The afterword quotes Mary Tyrone as saying, in her desire to "get to the Ideal": "'We were so happy for a while'" (174). The correct quotation is the last line of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, spoken by Mary in her drugged state: "I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time."⁹ The Ideal for her is not getting back to happiness with husband James; it is the recovery of her faith, lost after the initial marital happiness

with James—that is, after Eugene’s death, her illness brought on by having Edmund, and her addiction. The mere mention of Mary invokes her position on the relationship between the past and the present. To James’ exhortation to “forget the past,” she responds, “Why? How can I? The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future, too” (765). Guare disagrees with Mary’s position. Matt is one of many Guare characters who find redemption in the present, and the final image intimates that Pete will in the future, and redemption implies change.

In another section of the afterword, the playwright cites Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* as “valuable . . . in the writing of this play” (181). Elsewhere he cites an image in the novelist’s aesthetic as a foundation in the creating of his theatre. To an interviewer’s comment that he bases his “work on historical details,” Guare chimed, “Reality! Everything you do is based on reality. Henry James once said you can soar as high as you can, but you’ve always got to hang onto a string—the string which holds onto that balloon—and that’s a very demanding image. I love to anchor things in reality.”¹⁰ The Jamesian image is applicable in two instances in *Chaucer in Rome*. For the first, as late as June 1999 with the play’s world premiere scheduled for July 1999, Guare felt desperate because the action is predicated on Matt’s cancer, yet he did not know the “specifics” (182) of the disease. He did not have the reality from which to fly the balloon, the play, until a friend took him to a dermatologist who showed him photos of the malignancy. The second is in Matt and Sarah’s medium after they exhaust videotaping confessions. They float dirigibles bearing maxims such as ““Accept change”” (166) over cities. Since much of the opening scenes have to do with defining art, the spectator or reader has to decide whether the couple’s latest medium is art grounded in reality or a balloon on a string that broke loose from its anchor.

Returning to chronology with a play begun in 1972, this study returns to *The House of Blue Leaves*, which premiered in 1971, because Guare connects the two plays. In the author’s note to *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, he points out that with one exception the characters in the earlier play are limited. The lone exception is Billy, who by virtue of being a Hollywood director can actualize his dream. Fascinated by the thought of that power, he imagined a play peopled with characters like Billy who have always realized their dreams. Thus even before we enter the play, it would seem that the characters are forever reinventing themselves: inventing new selves. Yet that is not the case for the simplest of reasons. Since they live freed from all limitations, their overriding reality, the source of their power, is the self. “What do you hang onto in a limitless world?” the author’s note asked. “The answer seemed to be obvious: yourself.”¹¹ That

is, every time the characters undertake a new project, they do not have to redeem or transform the past because their experience of the past was that of success. They therefore turn to themselves. "The play is a comedy, the comedy coming out of each character's complete obsession with self, the ultimate structure, the ultimate source of the need" (87). Even without the author's note, the study would resume with chronology. Up to this point, the plays examined name some of the works that form the reality of ground or anchor or tradition from which a new play soars connected to the reality or broken loose from it with the names most extensive in *Chaucer in Rome*. For the first time, the new play to be examined reimagines a work from the tradition without its being forced into the action.

The contrast between the worlds of the two chronologically connected plays could not be more pronounced. Set in the "*living room of a shabby apartment*" (16), *The House of Blue Leaves* is the image of naturalistic restriction, bounded by a door secured by six bolts and a window crisscrossed by a locked gate: a prison to Bananas, who when she suggests that Artie remove the bars assures him that she is not planning to jump, and to her husband, who wants Bunny to leave before his wife wakes up and discovers her presence. The apartment is cramped; when Bunny tries to hide from Bananas, she "*pushes herself against the icebox*" (29) in the pullman kitchen. The living room is cluttered; a piano is covered with sheet music, manuscript paper, beer bottles, and Artie's clothes. Shaughnessy refreshment is mundane; Bunny breakfasts on a bowl of cornflakes. Set on a floating iceberg in the Norwegian Sea, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* is the image of non-naturalistic expansiveness: total freedom to those who have left the "real world" that is "down there" for what Diane McBride calls "Reality Heights."¹² On the iceberg when not "*floating in space*" (46), as is the play's first speaker, Diane's husband Stony McBride, the cast have no need for an icebox, and in this open atmosphere, space is not a consideration. Diane's guest, her lover Tom, had delivered to her Edvard Grieg's Baroque grand piano as a present ostensibly for her fifth wedding anniversary but actually for their reunion, which the two are celebrating when the play opens by having at a "*dining table . . . set quite elegantly*" (46) breakfast served by a country girl who pours wine for them. And when film-director Stony joins them, he is not a character who spends his days crying, and Tom does not try to hide. To the husband's question about why he is visiting, the lover is matter-of-fact. "Actually, I've come to see your wife. The first time we made love, she had just had a child. Your child" (55). Before plans go awry at the close of act 1, she expects to leave her husband for Tom. Stony's mother tries to warn her

son by calling his attention to his wife's constantly going to the theatre to see productions of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, but he is distracted by other matters.

The most telling contrast, however, is in each one's perception of the ideal existence. As Artie relates to his god, Billy, his meeting with Bunny, it occurred in a health club when he wandered into the steam room where a woman, Bunny, wearing only a towel started talking about food, an aphrodisiac for him, and he "kind of raped her." With the towels suggesting togas, the rising steam suggesting an ethereal atmosphere, and the liberty he took with her an unprecedented freedom, he likens the two of them for that experience to "gods and goddesses" on "Mount Olympus" (41). The characters in *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* float in a polar region north of the globe's main landmasses that is their Mount Olympus, for they are Olympians: film director, performing artist, statesman, astronaut, and the like. Able to come and go as they choose, they do not have to unlock gates or unbolt doors. They can even impregnate by having their sperm shot through the sky as "bolts" (51), as astronaut Frank Schaeffer does. In a play in which Frank's wife Skippy likens her flight from the trap her husband set for her to that of Icarus and Diane sees in the delivery of the grand piano the flight of Pegasus, the exaggeration is contemporary mythmaking as satire. Yet the characters are Olympians freed from the limitations of the physical world, including their bodies, which means they can be whatever they want to be unlike the limited Artie Shaughnessy, who can only dream of becoming a Hollywood songwriter and only until the dream is blasted. "You can invent yourself" (59), Diane says to husband Stony.

Only one of the characters invents himself anew and not until act 2. The others do not create new selves by reimagining themselves. They do not return to their buried pasts to learn who they are beneath the persona, the adored public self. When Diane returns to the past, it is to her child-prodigy career as a pianist, but in her recollection time is distorted. About Satie's "Gymnopedie," she says she recorded the work three times: "Once when I was twenty-eight. Then again when I was eighteen. Then again when I was eight" (69). Time does not flow forward because the past is frozen in her as the present. That is another meaning of the non-naturalistic set: the floating iceberg is an image of existence outside of life. When Diane tries to resume playing professionally after learning that she cannot leave with Tom, her piano teacher tells her she has been away too long to have an adult career. She is not disappointed. As she confides in her son, who she assumes is Stony, "We'll both swear we'll be different and both swear we'll change but our secret that holds us together is that we

secretly love and adore the way we are" (88), and the way they are is husband, wife, and lover because even though she cannot leave with Tom, she has no intention of forgoing her adulterous relationship with him. Character Larry, on the other hand, forgoes the new prosthetic legs that would allow him to be "free" to "go anywhere." For the others, he repeats a line that stunned the doctors in Helsinki: "'Doctors, why go anywhere when you're where you want to be.'" The iceberg is his "home" (90). Larry is the one who gets the tickets for productions of the play reimagined in Guare's play, *A Doll's House*, which he calls *A Doll House*, and the one who plays a video cassette of the closing scene of the most recent production that he, Diane, and Tom attended.

Disconnected from themselves, the world, and life by a fraudulent Dream that promotes the lunatic notion that one can fulfill himself/herself by adopting a false self that does not grow organically from the reality of his/her being, the characters are disconnected from one another in any but a superficial way by a perverted Dream that promotes the blasphemous notion that celebrity is divinity, an association that as Gene A. Plunka points out is present in plays as early as "Muzeeka."¹³ Frank arranged to have his wife Skippy held captive in the White House where she would deliver his child born of his bolts of semen. She rebelled and fled to the iceberg where he follows trying to persuade her to participate in the blockbusting media event: "Oh, it's the big production. You'll be a technological madonna. Me, Frank Schaeffer, I'll be a technological messiah" (77). Though she resists, she cannot escape a bolt or her husband's voice that adds sacrilege to arrogance. "Hail Skippy full of grace. Now you're filled with the twenty-first-century man" (79), the voice intones, mocking the traditional prayer, "Hail Mary," honoring the mother the fruit of whose womb is the Savior Jesus. His language reveals his obsession with self, for he conceives of the child as his self replicated with Skippy merely providing the womb for the gestation. Born a boy rather than an infant as a result of the catastrophically accelerated gestation, the son drowns when he joins a group of lemmings leaping into the sea.

Stony is also obsessed with Frank's self, desiring to emulate the achievement of the Arctic constellation's highest star who rose above Earth and its limitations in his quest to discover a new planet. "I will get to you, Frank Schaeffer. You are the best part of me!" (46) are among the first words Stony speaks in the play's opening monologue, and even before he dons the astronaut's discarded space suit, he declares, "I am Frank Schaeffer" (66). Since he believes he is adopted, the film director idolizes the superstar astronaut as a father figure, a combination pagan Zeus and Christian God, to whom he prays in a mockery of the "Lord's