

## CHAPTER I

*John Guare*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> Jackson R. Bryer, *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995), p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York, 1988), pp. 88–9.

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

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

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

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

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

John Guare

5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>5</sup> John Guare, *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun and Other Plays* (New York, 1993), pp. 136–7.



John Guare

9

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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