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Annie Baker

> I've seen people destroy their plays, their beautiful and mysterious plays, because they're worried the audience isn't going to get something, so then they make it really explicit and obnoxious. I really respect my audiences and I don't feel like they need to have things explained to them.[1]
>
> – *Annie Baker*

Graham Greene once said of *A Burnt Out Case* that he hated it, finding it muddled and shapeless. Of *Our Man in Havana* he offered the opinion that 'it stinks'. Perhaps he was expecting disagreement. It is more likely that they seemed to him to fall short of some unacknowledged sense of perfection or that, like many writers, he was no longer sure what it was he had produced. Annie Baker is her own harshest critic with a tendency to distance herself from plays she later judges disappointing. Asked about an early work, she refused to answer because 'I hate *Body Awareness* and wrote it when I was 25 . . . I don't think it's a good play. I think it's pretty cheeseball'.[2] One of her best known, and best received, plays, *The Flick*, garnered similar treatment. Essentially, she wants to move on, try something new, sensing that she might have settled for less than she should have. Even after winning a Pulitzer Prize, her first response was that she could do better, like a runner breaking the tape first but regretting that her time fell short of a record.

For some audiences, she could be disappointing in a different sense, as her plays extended in length, including pauses that irritated those looking for plot momentum. Language, in Annie Baker's plays, is not fully transitive. It contains the lacunae, phatic communion, blank silences of ordinary speech even as it is carefully crafted. The British poet Lavinia Greenlaw has said that 'the most powerful experience of the real can be the most contrived'.[3]

The fact is that Baker can urge audiences out of their comfort zones as she takes herself into territory that comes into view as she is creating it.

I am slow and before I start writing a play I take notes for years. I have about a hundred pages of notes on my computer about every single play I have written. It is just details like, he went to this summer camp and this thing happened to him when he was a baby, crazy super specific details about their lives and once that document is long that is the template for the play. I then know everything about that person and I put them in a situation and see what they do. There is very little planning

about what is going to happen in the play . . . My plays are very psychological but I try not to be overly psychological while writing them . . . My fear of therapy for so many years was that by talking about my childhood I [would think] that's why I couldn't commit to that thing but actually I would be further away from self knowledge because the moment you can pin something down like that it is probably wrong . . . I think a play is going well when a character does something I didn't know they'd do and I would never have predicted they would do.[4]

There can be something disturbing in her work as characters are revealed in their insecurities, their identities under pressure. What is denied, evaded, has a way of edging to the surface. Relationships are liable to offer comfort and threat in equal proportions, silences being charged with meanings not confronted. She deals in those never quite in command of themselves or the world they inhabit, often situated in places that fail to offer the security they seek. In *The Flick*, they are like Plato's philosophers responding to the flickering images cast not on a cave wall but a cinema screen in a building itself in a state of disrepair. Reality can be hard to grasp not least because her characters' needs, desires and anxieties shape their sense of it. In *John*, the world is mysterious because the everyday carries a threat difficult to define – not merely psychological but metaphysical as she dabbles with the gothic, itself a genre in which the repressed returns, internal fractures extending out into the world, the merely imagined taking concrete form. There is a tension in her work, her characters walking the edge, assured statements always seeming to contain a disturbing doubt. Looking for trust her characters are liable to find it denied or fragile, wishes seldom being granted as humour fills the spaces left open by a sense of alienation never quite grasped.

Annie Baker was raised in Amherst, Massachusetts, once home to Emily Dickinson, whose oblique poems for the most part stayed in a drawer (although not wholly by her choice), and also to Robert Frost, a poet who tried his hand at drama. The town is named for Jeffrey Amherst, who distinguished himself by proposing that smallpox-infused blankets should be used to eradicate Native Americans, whom he regarded as an execrable race. It is a college town, and Annie Baker's father worked as an administrator for the five colleges in the Connecticut River Pioneer Valley. Her mother was a therapist in a clinic in Northampton, working with abused children while studying for her PhD in psychology before becoming a teacher at Keene College in New Hampshire, until 2014. Annie Baker bears her mother's maiden name, while her older brother bears his father's last name.

Her parents, one Catholic, one Jewish, had met at a commune and divorced when Baker was six years old. She was raised by her mother and felt less disturbed by the divorce than by having to deal with those subsequently introduced to her as potential stepparents, even as, in turn, they disappeared. Her parents' multiple marriages later left her 'really depressed . . . immobilized by regret and self-hatred'.[5] With her psychologist mother, she has explained, she spent every evening dissecting their emotions; with her father, she read Oscar Wilde plays out loud.

Amherst, she has said, was a weird mix of people, including the pseudo-homeless. She was 'lonely and sad, and didn't have anything to do . . . I was crazy, angry and thought I was

smarter than anybody else'. At ten she wanted to be a novelist, being an avid reader of Anne Tyler. At thirteen, she was an enthusiast for films, seeing the not very age-appropriate *Pulp Fiction* and covering her bedroom walls with film posters. She was also, though, fascinated by theatre, that same year being taken by her father to see a production of Richard Foreman's *Permanent Brain Damage*. Theatre, she has explained, became her religion in high school, the thing that got her up in the morning. She wrote her first play at sixteen. Titled *Taking Orders*, it was about the relationship between a daughter and her father. She submitted it to a play festival at her school, only to rush to take it back. In high school she acted, although with no ambition to become an actor. She appeared in *The Merchant of Venice* at twelve (they cut her only kiss, except once in rehearsals) and *Hamlet* at fifteen, playing the role of Horatio. She was, she confesses, 'a theatre nerd'. In her senior year, she was Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls*, choreographing her own dances and keeping a journal in character. She also wrote short stories without showing them to anybody. She has confessed to hating everything she wrote at that age, the beginning of that self-criticism that would characterise her career.

She was, she has said, 'raised by hippie feminists in a hippie town, with a lot of identity politics woven into education. As little girls, we were supposed to talk about a woman who inspired us and I wouldn't . . . I wouldn't name a woman and it was really important to me that I didn't have to'. It was a feeling that would later be reflected in *Body Awareness*, which she sees as in part 'investigating the hypocrisies of the modern-day feminist'.[6] She confessed to hanging around at age seventeen with thirty-year-olds who had drug problems and wrote their own music. She was 'nerdy with glasses'[7] and had no particular ambitions, reconciled to having a series of jobs. The word 'nerdy' recurs, itself suggesting an element of self-criticism or perhaps merely self-awareness.

Also at age seventeen, she recorded and transcribed people's conversations, even then seemingly fascinated by the language she overheard. Later, teaching at NYU, she would say, 'I can hear my students' voices through just the way they listen . . . I always tell them, if you lose track of your voice as a writer, go back, eavesdrop, write down everything you hear, and that's it. That's you listening to the world.'[8] She herself would read early drafts of plays aloud 'because it's so important to me that I capture the cadences of painful, ordinary speech, and it's hard to tell if it's believable when it's on the page . . . I record myself reading all the parts and sitting through all the pauses, and then I listen to it a bunch of times. If I can hear the writer writing, like if there's thinly-disguised exposition or a nudge to the audience or some kind of obvious point made, I go back and change it.'[9]

She loved reading and art and wanted to leave her small town to go to New York City where her father lived, see films and work in the theatre, having had an impressive drama teacher at school. In her freshman year at NYU she worked as stage manager at LaMaMa. At the Tisch School, she studied playwriting, although she later said, 'My plays got much, much worse after I started studying writing seriously at NYU . . . I became obsessed with Structure . . . which meant that we started plays that had clear PROTAGONISTS and QUESTS and TURNING POINTS and INSTIGATING EVENTS and THIRD ACT REVERSALS but not one believable or truthful line of dialogue.'

She was resistant to the idea that drama was about the intent of characters. Chekhov interested her because of the vulnerability of characters who were unclear as to their objectives. Indeed, in 2012 she would stage her own adaptation of *Uncle Vanya.* It was not until she was introduced to the plays of Maria Irene Fornes and Caryl Churchill, along with Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, that she realised there were other possible approaches, something underlined when she took courses at Brooklyn College with the playwright Mac Wellman: 'he had such an insidious and fantastic effect on my writing – he never told me what to do, but in his quiet, glass full way he encouraged me to be a little stranger.'[10]

She did not, however, see herself as a playwright, filling in time after graduation with a series of odd jobs as she was writing. She had, she explained, given up on the idea that anyone would read her work until she submitted an application to the Ensemble Studio Theatre's emerging playwrights group. She was accepted, and that was where she worked on her first play, *Body Awareness*, which found its way to the Off-Broadway Atlantic Theatre Company's Stage 2, a ninety-eight-seat black box theatre, on West 160th Street. The company was founded in 1985 by David Mamet and William H. Macy, an ensemble group dedicated to new writing.

For Henry James, character was action. So it is in the work of Annie Baker, whose plays have an oblique quality. There is something of O'Neill's figures talking past each other, contained within their own privacies yet conscious of the need to reach out. *Body Awareness* is like a seminar in which each of the characters has read a different book. They inhabit their own discrete linguistic worlds. The temptation is to condescend to them, trapped as they seem to be in their own limitations, and yet by degrees they make their demands on our attention. They are in thrall to ideas that have commandeered them, offering a frame to a disordered existence. It is easy to recognise ill-digested theories and fashionable cant, and yet there are moments when they sense the inadequacies of their own rhetoric or are challenged by those whose points of reference differ. It is their vulnerability that compels, although they seem assured of their own interpretation of experience. There is evidence of damage, a limited perspective.

The play, which opened on June 4, 2008, is set in 2005 and takes place in a kitchen and bedroom whose naturalism – 'There's a sink and a stove, a table with chairs, and a bookshelf with a multi-volume set of the OED'[11] – is balanced by instructions that the characters should 'wander freely in and out of the sets during the scene transitions, turning on lights, removing props, etc.' It is set in the small Vermont town of Shirley, the first, it transpired, in a series of plays that came to be known as her Vermont Plays. Shirley, she explained, was 'a combination of Amherst with a bunch of Vermont towns that fascinate me. Vermont fascinates me, period. The remoteness and the self-congratulation and the embracing of diversity and the fear of diversity and the beauty and the good intentions.'[12] The occasion is Body Awareness Week at the local college. The characters are Phyllis, a fierce feminist; her partner, Joyce, a school teacher whose son Jared may or may not have Asperger's; and a visiting artist, Frank, whose speciality is photographing nude women. *Body Awareness* does not advertise itself as a comedy, but in many ways it is, as its characters are caught in their contradictions, occasional bewilderments and confining languages.

It was a play, Baker has explained, that had both an immediate context and its roots in aspects of her family life, albeit transformed. She started writing the play

> after this very scary period of self-hatred and crippling depression, and it . . . cheered me up. It was my first Vermont play, and coming up with this imaginary town and its confused residents was not only a real comfort and escape but also an opportunity to forgive – or at least laugh at – myself for being such a flawed human being. The issues in that play that my characters were grappling with were also all issues that I'd watched my mother grapple with while I was growing up . . . At some point during the rehearsals . . . I . . . realized that the play was about me and my mother – if we were a lesbian couple.[13]

The play begins as Phyllis marks the first day of the week on a blackboard and addresses her audience, and hence the play's, setting the agenda for subsequent discussions and the arrival of artists, including Frank, whose own artistic interests are not without a suspect dimension. As the week passes, tensions emerge – between the two women, between Phyllis and Frank and between Joyce and her son, Jared, whose lack of social awareness means that he has a tendency to an embarrassing frankness. It is not simply that his conversations are without grace notes but that he lacks an awareness of the impact of his remarks on others. In a house where body awareness is a point of discussion, he accesses pornographic websites while Frank tempts Joyce to pose for a nude photograph.

Although Joyce and Phyllis are partners, they view the world differently, and there is a tension between them: Joyce is sensitive about her status as a schoolteacher, which Phyllis insists does not make her an academic, lacking, as she does, a PhD. Phyllis may have body awareness but clearly lacks other kinds of awareness.

The same could be said of Jared, who obsesses over etymology (he believes that women will be impressed 'by how much etymology I know') (418), carries an electric toothbrush in his pocket, occasionally turning it on and off, and resists the notion that there is anything wrong with him, particularly that he might be suffering from Asperger's among other things, the evidence for which is his lack of empathy. On the other hand, this is a play in which empathy is something of a rarity. He makes threats of violence, which his mother is evidently used to and which seem never to be preludes to actual assaults. For him, language has its own fascination independent of its meaning and certainly of its effect.

This is a house in which no one drinks anything but milk and water. They eat organic soup. Phyllis is lactose intolerant and insists on getting away from the male gaze, while the words 'body awareness' substitute for eating disorder. Political correctness is enshrined here, although Joyce insists that she and Joyce pride themselves on being 'politically sensitive without being overly PC' (432). 'You're the one who's, like, the language police', (402) Phyllis accuses her partner of being, even though she is equally linguistically sensitive. Likewise, she is anxious to be in tune with politically correct policies, having, Joyce points out, brought an African-American woman to the event who is 'actually part Native American, too, I think', as if she were ticking the necessary social boxes (402). Jared's directness acts as an antidote, in a play in which language becomes subject as well as mechanism.

There is something of an isolato about Jared, but then much the same could be said of the other characters, trapped as they are in their own sensibilities. Indeed, for Joyce her son echoes something of the culture at large: 'America is very strange. We're so focused on independence. It's like, you can't need anybody. You have to be this totally autonomous . . . *person*' (380). With a meeting about self-image and body awareness underway, there is the potential for a drift towards a degree of narcissism. Perhaps it is not irrelevant that Joyce is a teacher of cultural studies with 'an anthropological perspective' (389).

Joyce, whose father was guilty of some unspecified abuse, had once been married. Phyllis is her first female partner, although it is not a partnership without strains. Frank, the interloping stranger, is not entirely wrong when he observes that 'You really feel like you know each other after three years. But then one day the person says something really weird, and you're like: Do I actually know you? Or are you this total stranger?'(390–1). Joyce nods after the first sentence but fails to respond after the second, having just been taken by surprise by Phyllis's demeaning of her academic status. Frank, indeed, becomes a wedge between the two women. He, like Joyce, had been married to a Jew for ten years, and when he stages an impromptu Shabbat, albeit on the wrong day, Joyce (herself a non-practicing Jew) is enchanted and Phyllis alienated, not least because the ceremony brings tears to Joyce's eyes, reminding her of what was presumably her husband, whose pet name she invokes. Responding to Frank's singing, she says, 'Phyllis never sings. She's too self-conscious.' A stage direction observes that '*Phyllis stares at Joyce*.' (410). Indeed in the course of the play a tension between the two women develops. Phyllis accuses Joyce of flirting with Frank and not fully embracing what she takes to be her sexual identity.

For Phyllis, any man travelling the country taking nude pictures of young women should be eliminated 'from the face of the planet' and must be someone who 'chops women up and buries them in his backyard!' (414). Sensitive to other people's use of language, she has no restraint in her own while recycling jargon as if it were newly minted. When introducing a visiting psychiatrist who specialises in sexology and sex therapy, she begins a lecture of her own about women's identity being 'determined by her onlooker' and the fact that some women are prone to 'exposing and depersonalizing' themselves (420). While claiming to be 'anti-ideology', she is as prescriptive as Jared, even while laughing at his description of a fellow worker as a 'retard', her claimed sensitivity evidently having its boundaries. Her opposition to Frank derives not only from the fact that he photographs naked women and that Joyce wants to pose for him but from the fact that he is a white man and 'This is about POWER' (444).

Body Awareness stages a quartet of characters, none of whom seem to have a secure grasp of relationships or indeed the world they inhabit. Failed marriages, ambivalent sexuality and confused views of social roles combine often generating a humour of which they themselves remain unaware. Phyllis's earnestness, her second-hand language and fashionable stance, are satirised. Body Awareness Week includes puppets, a multiracial husband and wife singing duo who sing everything from klezmer (a musical tradition derived from Ashkenazi Jews) to gospel, along with an art exhibition that she feels obliged to encourage those attending to visit, although she feels equally obliged to warn against, caught up

as she is in contradictory impulses. Her penultimate speech to those assembled for Body Awareness Week devolves into a barely coherent ramble.

Her own body awareness includes the conviction that she has a trembling eyelid, as her partner bleaches her moustache and shaves her legs and pubic hair in preparation for being photographed by Frank. This is the divorced Joyce who, in a lesbian relationship, is nonetheless drawn to a twice-married man whom she enlists to give her son advice on sex and relationships over cups of hot chocolate: 'try kissing them. If they kiss you back, you can touch their breasts', he suggests (453). This is a man who claims to see his dead mother 'everywhere'. Jared duly exposes himself to a girl, feeling this a legitimate path to a relationship, confessing as they sit eating frozen blintzes. Unsure what to do, they decide to celebrate Shabbat, improvising a prayer by reading from the book Phyllis has been reading. Unfortunately, the passage lacks a certain religious resonance as Joyce intones, 'Some menopausal women complain of vaginal dryness and thinning', (477) while Jared plays 'Jingle Bells' on a recorder he has stolen from Frank, who ends the play taking a flash photograph of them. A final stage direction indicates that Joyce, watching her son, 'is deeply sad' (480).

If *Body Awareness* is a comedy, there is an undertone of desperation. Jared is more than a figure of fun. Joyce wrestles with having a son whose future is bleak. She is uncertain of her own identity, while Phyllis, as Joyce suggests, is more at home with concepts than the messy reality of people and their lives. Frank drifts through the play, a naïf whose motives are not clear even to himself. If Annie Baker skewers the absurdities of feminist jargon, she is not invalidating concerns about how language itself operates or the emotional sensitivities involved in relationships and the manner in which they are negotiated. As she has said, 'My goal for the play is not to judge anyone, to get at that point where everyone is equally right and equally wrong, so the humor comes from that.' She wanted 'to write a play that wasn't an "issue play".'[14] It was the British television writer Paul Abbott who observed that 'Psychiatrists have known for years that neurosis is governed by the distance between what you think you are, and what others perceive you to be. Most good drama makes that gap visible, however small it may be . . . We should be able to have comedy and emotional truth in the same drama . . . Upsetting and funny in the same breath.'[15] This is something Annie Baker achieves.

Later, she was to be discontented with aspects of the play, confessing that '*Body Awareness* was written with very little thought about physical space and time and duration and design and all of the things that I think are integral to writing for the theatre – the first things I think about now when I sit down to write.'[16]

Her next play, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, opened on 13 October 2009 at the 42nd Street Playwrights Horizons, a theatre dedicated, in particular, to emerging talent. It was a play that came up against the theatre's subscriber base as the over sixty-five-year-olds in the audience shouted out their complaints. As Baker explained,

> At one matinee we had a class of NYU students and also the entire population of some senior center. Most of the old people hated the play. They hated it so much and they were talking about how much

they hated it while it was happening. Eventually the NYU students started yelling at them. A girl stood up and shrieked: 'If you don't like the play then just LEAVE!' I was cowering in the back row the whole time, humiliated . . . At first I was totally horrified. I felt disrespected, violated, etc. And then I kind of started loving it. It was a dialogue! It really was. Sometimes fights broke out.[17]

The play is set in a dance studio in Shirley with little more than a blue yoga ball and a mirror. Just as the days of the week had been spelled out on a blackboard in *Body Awareness*, so here the weeks are projected or displayed on stage. The play takes place over six weeks, the first four being divided into five scenes, separated by a blackout, the fifth into six and the sixth into three. The play begins after a designated fifteen seconds of silence, and silences are allowed to develop at key moments.

Gathered in this place is a group of people ostensibly brought together to try their hand at acting. Over the weeks, however, they are slowly exposed in their isolation, their failed relationships and thwarted ambitions, as acting exercises (of a kind Baker had experienced at the age of nine years) edge in the direction of therapy, Baker having read transcripts of therapy sessions at the Esalen Institute. These are people, Baker has said, who would never have signed up for a group therapy session, although in truth anyone who has attended rehearsals knows that therapy is in the air. They are not preparing for a production. There is no script to learn, no rehearsal for a final performance. They undertake exercises in empathy, seemingly not finding such in their own lives. By degrees a drama does develop both within the exercises and in the breaks between, as they are slowly stripped of their social performances. Here is theatre as evasion and as revelation, an interlacing of private pain and humour as we learn of adulterous affairs, alcoholic families, casual cruelties, betrayals, abandonments and fractured relationships in the context of exercises that, paradoxically, depend on trust and mutuality.

They begin with an exercise in which each person speaks a single number (all the exercises in the play are actual exercises used in the theatre, and Baker suggests that actors should use them in rehearsals). The point, Marty explains, is 'to be able to be totally present' (162). Following this prologue, James, a sixty-year-old man, addresses them in the guise of his fifty-six-year-old wife, Marty (a figure inspired by the leader of a tango class Baker took as a teenager), who, he explains, is 'into non-traditional healing', teaches pottery and jewellery-making (94) and now an adult creative drama class – perhaps not a guarantee of expertise. It is, in essence, an exercise in occupying someone else's sensibility and identity. Indeed the play consists of acting exercises (performing inanimate objects, speaking an invented language) interspersed with scenes in which we learn something of the background of those who are taking the class for a range of reasons, of which a career in theatre is perhaps not one. By degrees the privacies of the characters are exposed, the line between performance and being blurred.

Those taking the class range in age from sixteen to forty-eight years and are arranged in the circle of the title. The mirroring and transformation refer to the group reflecting a gesture or sound and then transforming it into a different gesture or sound. This is the only occasion in the play when there is genuine improvisation.

In the second scene we are introduced to Schultz, the sole character not referred to by a first name. Divorced, he has as a consequence been forced out his home and now lives alone in a condominium, although, as a fellow pupil, thirty-five-year-old Theresa, a deft hand, as it turns out, with the hula hoop, remarks, he is still wearing his wedding ring. In a situation in which they are going to be exploring stories, he plainly already has his own embodied in something as simple as a ring he has failed to remove. In a later scene sixteen-year-old Lauren speaks in the person of Schultz and, as he tries to attract her attention, reveals the truth he had evidently told her in confidence: 'We just Separated. Divorced. I'm in a lot of pain about it' (113). This may be a group of would-be amateur actors, but they discover the danger of exposed emotions.

When Schultz in turn plays the role of Theresa, he enacts what she has plainly told him, revealing that she has abandoned a potential career as an actress and is now studying for a certificate in acupressure and Rolfing (a way of maximising well-being in mind and body), having retreated from New York, a place where 'people didn't really care about each other' (126). She has broken up with her boyfriend after a toxic relationship, while her father has prostate cancer, and, for unspecified reasons, she is worried about her mother. Schultz and she are clearly drawn to one another, each bearing scars, and as the play progresses, their relationship ebbs and flows as they effectively mirror and transform one another and themselves. Acting exercises devolve into therapy sessions as they are severally exposed in their inadequacies, their repressed pain surfaces and their actual needs and desires begin to invade their performances. Set to enact a conflict, Schultz and Theresa play out their actual situation, Schultz insisting 'I need you to stay,' and she saying, 'I want to go' (166). In a subsequent scene, she steps forward less to prompt the actor playing her part than to intrude the truth. The scene is followed by a silence in which the implication of her intervention becomes obvious.

They are actors in more than a theatrical sense, their social performances being a strategy to evade what really troubles them. Acting is simultaneously an escape and a route to truth. Becoming someone else may be a means not to be oneself but equally to expose suppressed realities. As Baker has said, 'I wanted the audience to learn about the characters through formal theatre exercises. I knew I wanted there to be excruciating silences. I knew I wanted a doomed class romance that left one character embarrassed and the other heartbroken. I knew I wanted characters to deliver monologues as each other. I knew I wanted information about these people to come out in the strangest places, and I wanted us to know them all intimately by the end of the play . . . [I] also wanted to show how beautiful (and noble!) it is when people throw themselves earnestly and unconsciously into something, even if it is a therapeutic re-enactment.'[18]

When Theresa plays the part of James, we learn that his father had been in the military and that, implicitly, he had disappointed him by avoiding the draft, dropping out of a job and embracing Marxism, although that same father had been emotionally abusive, the whole family being alcoholics. His first marriage (to an alcoholic) had failed, and he is evidently alienated from his daughter, suppressing an unfocussed sense of anger. Beyond anything, he fears that he may become his father. As the details pile up, so James becomes an audience to his own life.

Lauren's life seems equally bleak as the parts of her parents are played by James and Marty. She is lonely with no connection to them. As the scene plays out, however, so James begins to cry, the role he is playing mirroring his own life, Lauren's situation reminding him of his relationship to his own daughter who, he later confesses, has refused to speak to him since an affair he had conducted during his marriage to her mother, a fact revealed to her by Marty, with what motive is unclear. When Marty plays the part of Lauren still more revelations spill out: 'my father has had some problems with the, um, law . . . My grandmother thinks my mother should leave my father. They fight about it' (164). The membrane between art and life proves permeable.

Stories, it turns out, can be disturbing as well as comforting. When Marty tells of meeting her husband-to-be, she is followed by Theresa, who recalls meeting someone she is sure must have been Jewish – 'he had this humongous nose and this long white beard with these big glasses' – and who had been regaling those on the subway with anti-Semitic remarks. Hers is a story followed by a long, embarrassed silence.

Circle Mirror Transformation begins innocently enough. Slowly, though, and by indirection, truths begin to surface. In some ways it is a parody of method acting, which invites actors to explore and expose aspects of their own lives, potentially at the price of psychological equanimity. It was the Belgian director Jacques Huisman who remarked of Lee Strasberg, co-founder of the Actors Studio, that he was a 'talmudic destroyer'. In an exercise, everyone is asked to write a secret on a piece of paper, these to be distributed randomly and read out to the group. What emerges is disturbing as one confesses to the fact that he or she may have been molested by his or her father, while another admits to a problem with Internet pornography. In one note, clearly written by George, he admits that he might be in love with Theresa, leaving Schultz looking traumatised. There is a ten-second silence. Marty reads out what is presumably her own secret: 'Sometimes I think that everything I do is propelled by my fear of being alone' (186).

By week six, Marty, who suffers from night terrors, and James are at odds, she having left home. A final exercise has all of them look forward ten years to where they will be then. Shultz says he will have remarried, although he is uncertain what his wife's name will be. Lauren claims she will have become a veterinarian and Theresa a massage therapist married to an actor. The lights then fade leaving only Lauren and Shultz in a spotlight. Now what seems to be the truth emerges as Lauren asks, 'How many times your life is gonna totally change and then, like, start all over again? And you'll feel like what happened before wasn't real' (208). Ten years on, Marty and James, Lauren explains, are no longer together, she being in New Mexico, he still in Shirley teaching economics. Lauren's own parents have divorced, while she and Shultz both now live in Burlington and the play ends as 'perhaps, very very faintly, we hear the sounds of a street in Burlington', (208) although quite what distinguishes the sounds of Burlington is hard to know.

Arthur Miller once observed that we begin to act the moment we walk out of the front door. Performance is not restricted to theatre. The face we see in the mirror is not that which we offer the world. We are Protean, a series of roles, transforming with circumstance and those we encounter. Communication is imperfect, truth alternately relative and hard to access. In the words of John Donne's 'Satire III', 'On a huge hill, / Cragged and steep,