THE PLAYWRIGHT'S MUSE

edited by Joan Herrington

THE PLAYWRIGHT'S MUSE

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This edition published 2011 by Routledge:

Routledge Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group
711 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017
Taylor & Francis Group
2 Park Square, Milton Park
Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Published in 2002 by Routledge 29 West 35th Street New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by Routledge 11 New Fetter Lane London EC4P 4EE

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.

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10987654321

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publishing Data is available from the Library of Congress.

The playwright's muse / edited by Joan Herrington ISBN 0-8153-3779-5 — ISBN 0-8153-3780-9 (pbk.)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the many people who have supported my work on this book. I have learned much from its contributors and I appreciate the opportunity to bring their work to you. I also extend my thanks to the playwrights who shared their thoughts with us. Theirs are the voices which can shape the future of the American theatre, and we must listen.

In addition, my gratitude goes to my colleagues in the Theatre Department at Western Michigan University for encouraging my work on this book.

Finally, and most importantly, I thank my family: my two daughters, Emily and Sarah, who patiently shared their mother with these pages, and my husband Rick, whose devotion and faith enabled me to complete *The Playwright's Muse*.

INTRODUCTION

Joan Herrington

To study that which inspires the playwrights who inspire us is to dig deeply into the mystery of drama, not to unmask it, but rather to revel in its glory. What we learn about their most fertile imaginations will not enable us to "understand" the playwrights; rather, it will enable us to see, for a moment, our world as these writers see it. What stimulates those first words of dialogue? Which images help form a character? Which events inform the plot? Which heartaches inspire the theme? How does the pulsing world of people, places, and events distill itself in the mind of a writer who then rebirths this world in an extraordinary play?

The most recent recipients of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama present a wide perspective on their art in form and content, tone, and style. These winners have included extraordinary plays of social commentary in a dazzling array of forms: How I Learned to Drive (Paula Vogel, 1998) is a frighteningly funny exploration of sexual abuse in which Vogel rejects causal, linear structure in favor of episodic, circular dramaturgy; Rent (Jonathan Larson, 1996) is a radical rock opera examining the AIDS epidemic and the dehumanization of society. August Wilson's The Piano Lesson (1990) continues his chronicle of a century of African-American history in a lyric drama exploring a race's relationship with its past.

Angels in America: The Millennium Approaches (1993) is Tony Kushner's provocative epic in which reality and fantasy readily intertwine in a complex commentary on sex, religion, and politics. Robert Schenkkan's The Kentucky Cycle (1992), a unique series of nine com-

pellingly honest plays, each written in a different style, reveals the darker realities of the history of rural America.

From the most political to the most personal, the list includes exceptional plays which probe the human soul: Donald Margulies's *Dinner with Friends* (2000) is a wry and clever commentary on contemporary relationships, a seemingly straightforward comedy of manners with profound insight on intimacy; Margaret Edson's *Wit* (1999) is a haunting story of redemption before death made all the more unnerving by its metatheatrical approach; and *Three Tall Women* (1994), Edward Albee's brilliant exploration of the life of one woman, is an experiment in perception as the central character is simultaneously manifest onstage at three different ages.

For several writers, the Pulitzer was awarded for a work that specifically characterized career-long artistic pursuits. Wendy Wasserstein is at the height of her comedic form as *The Heidi Chronicles* (1989) examines issues of women's achievement and independence and the ramifications of their pursuit. *Lost In Yonkers* (1991) embodies Neil Simon's successful attempt to redefine his own work by venturing into deeper thematic waters. *The Young Man from Atlanta* (1995) is the culmination of Horton Foote's development of a singular style whose seeming simplicity belies the complexities of his transcendental vision of the American family.

What drives these plays are the writers' relationships with music and painting, their passionate responses to world events, the deep impact of personal drama. The inspirations and influences on the development of these plays are as diverse as the plays themselves.

All of Wendy Wasserstein's most well known plays, Uncommon Women and Others, Isn't It Romantic, The Heidi Chronicles, The Sisters Rosensweig, and An American Daughter, focus on female characters struggling with difficult personal and professional decisions in an environment that is changing quickly with each new decade. The characters' experiences and conflicts reflect Wasserstein's relationship with the women's movement as it developed over thirty years. The plays explore the conflicts between career ambition and personal fulfillment and are a response to the changing cultural and social positions of women. In her chapter on Wasserstein, Angelika Czekay explores Wasserstein's relationship with the women's movement, recognizing that

the visibility and success of her plays has caused her to be "tokenized as one of the central feminist playwrights of the past twenty years." Czekay points out, however, that many feminists have critized Wasserstein for "creating a questionable representation of feminist politics, theory, and activism." Interestingly, this has served not only to redefine the continuing debate on women's issues but also to redefine Wasserstein's plays themselves.

After Wasserstein, the Pulitzer Committee turned to August Wilson, who had won three years earlier for *Fences*. (Interestingly, *The Piano Lesson*, the 1990 Pulitzer winner, had been a finalist the year before.) In naming what he terms his four "Bs," Wilson identifies his artistic muses, pointing toward his creative spark and leading his critics straight to the visual and aural images that inspire him. Playwright Amiri Baraka, Argentinian short-story writer Jorge Luis Borges, and painter Romare Bearden have all heavily influenced Wilson's style and content. But it is his fourth "B," the blues, that serves both Wilson's artistic and his political goals.

Blues music has provided Wilson's play titles, determined his dramatic plots, and powered the underlying emotional content of his work. There is blues music at the heart of all Wilson's plays, in his musician characters, his music industry settings, and the continued presence of song in the plays. Music is integral to the lives of the playwright and his characters. The music finds its way into Wilson's work not only as subject but also as technique—he writes his plays as if he were creating blues: improvising, repeating, leaving open phrases, evoking mood with every note. The plays, like the music, are metaphorical, lyrical, loosely organized.

For Wilson, survival of the blues is central to the survival of the African-American community; the blues link past and present and a shared cultural heritage. But Wilson also focuses his work on the blues because they must be reclaimed by the community, saved from the White co-opting of African-American art, which Wilson fears is strangling a cultural identity. Thus, Wilson simultaneously confirms the value of the blues by placing them within his plays and reminds his audience of their precarious state. The blues are useful to Wilson as a social tool and a political tool, for he believes that "All art is politics. I'm one of those warrior spirits" (Rosen 1996, 31).

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In 1991, the Pulitzer Committee recognized the career of Neil Simon, awarding Lost in Yonkers the coveted prize. In her chapter on Neil Simon and popular culture, Bette Mandl explores not only what makes Simon write his plays but also what makes him rewrite his plays. Focusing on Simon's consideration of the definition of a writer—or at least the definition of an "important" writer—Mandl follows Simon's efforts to influence popular opinion through his Brighton Beach trilogy as the character of Eugene, himself a writer, learns that you don't have to fulfill the traditional stereotype of the tortured artist in order to make your mark on the literary world; indeed, being "too popular," as Simon puts it, does not necessarily negate the possibility of serious work.

Mandl argues that Simon felt a freedom to expose these perspectives on his own career partially as a response to a changing audience expectation for art. She quotes Michael Lind (1999, 39), who comments, "In the 21st century, the fact that a writer, dramatist, composer or visual artist is as law-abiding, successful and well paid as, say, Shakespeare, Haydn or Raphael will not be ground for suspicion." Indeed, Simon's finger on the pulse of the convergence of high culture and mass culture significantly influenced the themes of his later plays.

Simon started his career with light comedies, which he wrote for the same audiences who had enjoyed his writings for early television. But Simon's own desire to "write darker plays" was eventually satisfied as he redefined the focus of his work not only to please himself, but also to accommodate the ever-changing audiences with whom he felt such close rapport.

A chance meeting with a doctor from Eastern Kentucky was the catalyst for Robert Schenkkan's epic work, *The Kentucky Cycle*. Schenkkan was acting in a play at the Actors Theater of Louisville when an offer came to visit rural Kentucky. The poverty and environmental devastation he saw there compelled him to research the area further. Meditations on the nature of the frontier myths that influence American culture, and anger over the rollback of social programs and environmental protection during the 1980s, impelled Schenkkan to write. One single short play was soon followed by eight more as Schenkkan strove to illustrate the historic forces that set in motion the cyclic patterns of greed, deceit, and the resulting vengeance that corrupt the moral order both in the Kentucky Cumberlands and in America as a whole.

Through a brilliant use of storytelling, by both the playwright and his characters, a purposeful variety of styles among the individual plays in the *Cycle*, and a vision for the staging of his material which would emphasize the ritual dimensions of his stories, Schenkkan inspired in his audience both an empathetic response to his characters' plights and a sense of circumspection intended to ensure that the mistakes of our past were powerfully and clearly portrayed.

Although Tony Kushner has himself acknowledged the influence of writers ranging from Herman Melville to Samuel Beckett, Wallace Stevens to Monty Python, Framji Minwalla contends that the attempt to identify Kushner's most formative mentors would be fruitless. Truly, the great writers whom Kushner names have given him "permission" to write and to experiment with form and language. But Minwalla argues that the most integral focus must be on what Kushner writes, and he explores Kushner's relationship with a most powerful and elusive force: history. Through examination of A Bright Room Called Day and Slavs!, Minwalla explores contradictions involved in representing history, especially in the way this history creates the present, forcing us to reevaluate our role in shaping the future. He illuminates a playwright who, steeped in a fundamentally disappointing century and burdened by contemporary politics and attitudes, considers the revolutionary possibilities left on our stages in and outside of the theatre.

In his chapter on Edward Albee, Thomas Adler examines *Three Tall Women* as a continuation and culmination of the three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright's career. Adler explores the play as the next in a series through which Albee has undertaken a variety of stylistic experiments—what Albee terms "an act of aggression against the familiar and the 'easy'" (Albee 1980, 100–101). Citing the influence of modern art on Albee's work, Adler promotes consideration of *Three Tall Women* within the cubist tradition, citing its demand that the audience re-conceive traditional conceptual reality and point of view.

Albee also requires reconsideration of perception in his use of the techniques of the memory play with its roots in *Glass Menagerie* or *Death of a Salesman*. But *Three Tall Women* also bears the absurdist mark of Beckett, as it explores a simultaneity of existence that memory facilitates. The loss of such memory and the possibility for change, Alder notes, signal death.

Thus, in *Three Tall Women*, Albee returns to familiar territory in the creation of another of what Adler terms a "death watch" play. Like *Sandbox*, *All Over*, or *The Lady from Dubuque*, *Three Tall Women* reflects Ablee's continuing fascination with, and fear of, death and his profound portrayal of a human spirit as it faces the life it has lived.

Edward Albee was followed by Horton Foote, as the 1995 Pulitzer Prize was awarded for *The Young Man from Atlanta*. Horton Foote has spent his career immersed in the work of many of the most important creative visionaries of this century. From the artists of Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre to the great modern dance pioneers of the 1930s and 1940s to the poets of the modernist movement, Foote has consistently sought out artists who believed strongly in a spiritual component of great art and its ability to transcend human limitation. In her chapter, Crystal Brian notes that perhaps one of Foote's greatest influences is the iconoclastic American composer, Charles Ives, who singificantly impacted Foote's ability to combine all of these influences in forging a style uniquely capable of embodying the ineffable.

In considering Foote's style, Brian argues that critics and viewers have focused on Foote's continued regional settings or family-related material, rather than noting the thematic and stylistic issues with which the playwright is most concerned. Truly, Foote is a stylist whose pursuit of a transcendental style has led to him being called "our mystic of the theatre."

Horton Foote's Pulitzer crowned a career that spanned more than sixty years. When Jonathan Larson was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1996, audiences knew little about him and his previous work, and they assigned to him the romantic ideal of the artist who arises from nowhere with a brilliant virgin creation. But Larson, who had died from an aortic aneurysm three months earlier, had, in fact, written a brilliant creation that was the culmination of years of experimentation with musical form and content. Driven by his desire to "cultivate a new audience for music theatre," Larson had strived for years to create music and to tell stories that would appeal to younger audiences. He hoped that new trends in dramatic storytelling and play structure and innovations in style would help build the new audience that the theatre so desperately needed.

But equally important to him was to educate those audiences socially and politically, and no work undertaken by Larson neglected

this goal. From his collegiate composition of political cabarets through the creation of his first full-length musical based on Orwell's 1984, Larson attended the inspirational words of Bertolt Brecht and Peter Brook as he used the popular theatre to spread "truth among the greatest number." Although, or perhaps because, 1984 and his next work Superbia garnered little commercial support, Larson was encouraged to work outside of the box, facilitating an independence that resulted in a "rock monologue." When the idea for Rent was brought to him by playwright Billy Aronson, Larson eagerly took on the project, which had the potential to combine his dual goals. Aronson and Larson soon parted ways, but Larson worked on Rent for six years, honing his skills as both a composer/lyricist and a social commentator.

In 1997, no Pulitzer Prize was awarded for drama and no explanation was provided. (The nominated finalists were *Collected Stories* by Donald Margulies, *The Last Night of Ballyhoo* by Alfred Uhry, and *Pride's Crossing* by Tina Howe.) In 1998, however, the Committee returned to recognize the brilliant commentary of Paula Vogel and *How I Learned to Drive*. According to Paula Vogel, if theatre is to capitalize on its unique potential to create an immediate and meaningful exchange between theatre artists and audiences, then it must foster sites of resistance that arise from grappling with difficult issues and experimenting with dramaturgical structures.

Ann Linden examines Vogel's explorations of the political dialogues focused on such highly charged issues as domestic violence and pedophilia. She considers the effectiveness of the plays in terms of their ability to inspire critical discussion through their discouragement of empathetic identification. Whether Vogel is reconsidering another author's work or responding to an element of the current political climate, her personal response to the topic at hand and her desire to experiment with formal elements combine to consistently create plays that Vogel hopes will confront "the disturbing questions of our time" and force us to do the same.

The 1999 Pulitzer Prize inspired a certain amount of hushed criticism as it recognized the very first (and, to date, only) play of Margaret Edson. So what was it that inspired a kindergarten teacher, who had never written a play, to rent an apartment, install a desk, and sit down for the sole purpose of writing a play? The answer is the play itself, for

it was "this particular play" that fueled the effort—only this play and none since.

According to Mead Hunter, a series of jobs and interests helped to frame Wit. Edson had spent time in the medical profession, mostly in positions that facilitated her observation, and she was a teacher, albeit of a different nature than her central character, and she had a certain familiarity with John Donne. So, Edson researched all of these areas and added the information she had assembled to the story she saw so clearly in her head and wanted others to see on the stage. Still, according to Edson the circumstances and details of that story could all be different, the play after all, is only "about redemption."

Donald Margulies had been a nominated finalist twice in the ten years prior to his receipt of the Pulitzer in 2000. In his chapter, Jerry Patch notes that the play for which Margulies won the Pulitzer, *Dinner with Friends*, "is best viewed as the most recent piece of an evolving mosaic of plays, one with some common thematic threads but an ad hoc variety of styles and strategies." Truly the study of Margulies' career reveals a search for an artistic identity; it is a journey that reflects the impression made on Margulies by writers ranging from Arthur Miller to Franz Kroetz.

While Margulies experimented with an assortment of styles—a mock-musical, stylized naturalism, flights of fancy and realism—he developed his voice as he defined his personal identity. Using his family and their community as the basis for much of his work, Margulies wrote first with the voice of the son about his experiences as a child. Heartbreaker, a play written in the mid-1980s with an autobiographical inspiration, likely represented a point at which Margulies the artist reflected the maturation of Margulies the man. (This play later became Sight Unseen.) As Margulies has said, "The canvas became bigger because my perspective on the themes is broader" (2001).

Margulies writes from the perspective of an outsider, but like Neil Simon, he is one of the more "mainstream" playwrights of his decade to win the award. Margulies writes from what he knows, with first inspirations and drafts that are heavily steeped in personal experience. But as the plays develop, over weeks or even decades, evolving in their own lives or paving the way to a new work, Margulies broadens their context and their appeal, creating complex explorations of moral questions and cultural conundra.

So why do Margulies, Vogel, Albee, Wilson, and Kushner write

plays? Why do these writers not churn out Pulitzer Prize-winning short stories or novels? Many of these writers cite inspiration from writers of other forms; most admit to trying their hand at poetry or fiction. But they write plays because they are driven by a love of the form, sometimes instilled through early childhood trips to the stage, sometimes through an innate recognition of the extraordinary power of the live theatre, always, as Horton Foote puts it, through a profound "inclination toward dialogue (2000)." For these artists, the words and images spinning in their minds already exist as living, breathing beings that must be embodied as such. Overall, the reasoning is remarkably simple. As Edward Albee says, "I write plays because I'm a playwright. I think like a playwright, I walk like a playwright, I smell like a playwright and I write like a playwright (2001)."

Despite their commitment and, truly, their success, these writers continue to face creative struggles: fighting for those first words; finessing the last few. They are challenged by the extent of their creative inspiration. In their interviews, included here separately or incorporated into the individual chapters, they talk of the challenge of getting their stories out of their heads, of digging the good play out of the mass on the paper—and they revel in the struggle. As Foote says, "I just sometimes don't think I'm alive unless I'm writing." Paula Vogel sees a truly unique challenge in writing for the stage:

I actually think of writing for the stage as *not* writing. I think one writes fiction or poems, but playwriting is really about not writing. It's about structuring, about gaps between the language that are really filled in by the collaborators and the process. It's all about indirection rather than direct statement. It's about not writing. (2001)

Truly, the theatre offers an experience to its creative artists that few other art forms can match. As August Wilson describes:

It's unique. Of all the written art forms, film, short fiction, poetry, all the great art forms, theatre is unique among them. And I think the thing that's most exciting for me is the audience in the sense that if you write a novel, you may get on the bus, for instance and see some one reading the novel. But that is a solitary act. People read novels on buses, trains, in their bedrooms, their bathrooms. That's a solitary act.

With a play and an audience it's like having 700 people read your novel at the same time. And I just found that so exciting in that it's a communal experience as opposed to a solitary experience. That's intriguing (2001).

If there is disappointment with the creative world among these writers, it has to do with the state of the American theatre and the place of playwrights in it. (Words such as "wasteland" and "moribund" are abundant in their considerations of the commercial theatre.) Many of the playwrights expressed tremendous concern regarding a lack of opportunity for writers to develop new plays. (In the first half of this past decade, new play development dropped nearly seventy percent.¹) August Wilson feels that the prevalent attitudes are extremely dangerous to playwrights.

The trend has generally been to do new plays on the second stage and to give your main stage to productions of Chekhov and Moliere and Shakespeare. I think it should be the exact opposite. If doing a play on the second stage stigmatizes the playwright by signifying that he's not going to be as good as Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller, that he doesn't deserve the main stage, then that puts all of us in a place where we're not going to write "main stage" writing because we've already been relegated to the second stage. So good, bad or indifferent, this is the play, this is where we are and the playwrights should have access to the stages of the American theatre irrespective of whether they are as good as Arthur Miller or some others. This is what we've got and we still deserve the stages.

Speaking from personal history, these established writers recognize the essential need of playwrights to have productions—and not just readings or workshops—of new plays. But then even with such opportunities, they express concern regarding the "creative environment" in which the playwrights are forced to function. As Albee says:

They're trying to turn playwrights into the same kind of employees that they've turned movie script writers into—at the beck and call of the director and actors and the producer to alter things if they think that will be more commercial. That's one of the awful things that's happening to playwrights. Even though we have the protection of the Dramatists Guild in our contract, playwrights are still being urged and pushed to compromise, to simplify, to over clarify, to make plays pleasant rather than unpleasant, to use Shaw's phrase. (2001)

Kusher also bemoans the way in which the pressure of pursuing production impacts on the creative process: "In a way, the ruthless demands of stage-time, of modern attention spans, forces all of us playwrights toward the epigrammatic and terse, toward a classical severity; right now I'm hacking page after page off *Homebody* [Kushner's most recent play]."

Certainly many of these playwrights, during the course of their career, have experienced the pressure Albee and Kushner describe or the disenfranchisement inspired by a theatre that prefers dead playwrights. Despite their potential to contribute valuable insight into a production, playwrights are often ignored. Donald Margulies remembers clearly his first Broadway experience with What's Wrong with the Picture?:

If it had been a good production, things might have been different. But it wasn't a good production. It happened on its own scheme, its own terms, and I was rendered essentially ineffectual. I had very little voice or clout; mostly I felt like I was hanging out during rehearsal and previews. (2001)

The extent of the abandonment is frightening and the exceptions are few. But when those exceptions come, they are deeply welcomed, even by the most lauded of playwrights. When the Signature Theatre in New York selected Horton Foote's work to be the focus of their 1993/1994 season, Edward Albee sent him this letter (Foote 1995, xii):

Dear Horton,

Welcome to the club! You will most probably have a frightening experience with the Signature Theatre Company this coming season.

You will discover that you are working with eager, dedicated, talented, resourceful, gentle and thoughtful people whose main concern will be making you happy. This will be frightening.

Even more, they will succeed in making you happy. This will be even more fightening.

Don't fret about it; just go with it. Have a wonderful season.

Regards, Edward Albee

Once the production has opened, the seas become even more treacherous in the intensely commercial environment described by Robert Schenkkan:

There's very little meaningful support for new work. It's extremely difficult to get a play produced. If it does not go brilliantly in its first incarnation, the chances of a second are diminished further. To a playwright, the importance of journalistic criticism to the success of a play is crucial. In fact, the playwright is very vulnerable to dramatic criticism. It definitely can impact the success of a play whereas the same is not true of a film which has a wide opening and as often as not doesn't really depend on the critical success in order to have commercial success. It's also very difficult, even if you are very successful, to make enough of an income on a regular basis to support yourself and a family which means that most writers are forced into a second career of some sort like teaching. Its a fairly discouraging business that requires a fairly strong stomach. (2001)

Vogel recognizes an even more acute problem for women writers and writers of color:

I see us taking a step back, primarily with George W. Bush's election. I see it as a constant struggle which I don't see it getting any better, which distresses me, dismays me. I'm aware that I was possibly the only woman produced in the last couple of years in theatre companies and that's not a good thing. I have to say that I also feel like I'm back to square one with the next play that I do. I think that by and large women playwrights are not given the same leeway in terms of developing different muscles that, say, the critics may give a David Mamet.

Women and writers of color are still seen as threats because in essence, when a woman or a writer of color is defining a play world, there's another definition of what our society is, and that's very threatening. I think it's always going to be very hard won. I'm hoping it changes, but I think what has to happen is that the supply of women writers and writers of color has to increase so that there's a greater demand. I think the supply always comes first. (2001)

Wasserstein notes, "there are playwrights and they are male. And then there are women playwrights, black playwrights. . . . "(2001).

For many of these reasons almost all of these Pulitzer playwrights have played in the world of film and television through adaptations of their work or independently conceived projects. The appeal is clear and hasn't changed in seventy years, as Schenkkan notes:

To read the journals of writers in the 30s and 40s who toiled as play-wrights to make a living, it's very similar to what I hear today: Their most fervent wish seems to be that they can sell the rights of their plays to the movies for a large enough sum to support their playwriting habit for a couple of years. (2001)

Vogel reiterates: "The economic reality is that either one teaches or one writes for other media in order to stay in theatre (2001)."

Still, these writers stick with the stage because, as Margulies says, "it's where my voice can still be the purest it can be as a dramatic writer (2001)." Perhaps it's just the relativity. Neil Simon notes:

I've found the process of working on a play much more in keeping with the way I wanted to work. I wanted to have more control over my material than I would have had if I had only done film. When you make a film, you are always listening to the people who run the studio. And there are countless numbers of them on each picture. When you're doing a play, it's basically you and the director. (2000)

Margulies agrees: "Film and television are corporate endeavors that don't allow the purity of the artist's voice to come through. The theatre is a writer's medium completely albeit maybe a dying one" (2001).

All of these playwrights are deeply concerned for the future of their craft. Horton Foote says, "Playwrights increasingly are faced with diminishing audience and places to have their plays done or to make a living at their craft. And it's not heartening (2000)." Even the audiences who do come, often weaned on television, have what Kushner describes as "little patience" for challenging work, making it "hard to be difficult in the theatre." He notes, however, "that we could create a bigger audience for hard work if we had decent free public education. If we taught people how to read (2001)." Albee agrees that we must "create an audience that wants to see plays that are not destroyed by commerce (2001)." In fact, he demands an overhaul of the entire theatrical community:

You have to have critics who urge people to see plays that matter. You have to have brave producers who want to do the play that the playwright wrote. You have to have actors who are more interested in the work rather than themselves. You need a whole bunch of changes that I'm not holding my breath about. (2001)

Introduction

In the meantime, these writers write, and despite the extraordinary level of recognition their work has achieved, the pressure and stress do not abate: As Margules notes:

Whenever I start something new I'm filled with the same terror I experienced when I first set out to write plays. That doesn't go away. You don't become imbued with confidence with recognition and success. In fact, it's more terrifying: more pressure, more expectations, you imagine people standing there with their arms folded, waiting. (2001)

August Wilson agrees:

All those awards, all that stuff, I take them and I hang them on my wall. But then I turn around and my typewriter's sitting there, and it doesn't know from awards. I always tell people I'm a struggling playwright. I'm struggling to get the next play down on paper. You start at the beginning each time you sit down. Nothing you've written before has any bearing on what you're going to write now. It's like a heavyweight fighter. You've gotta go and knock the guy out. It doesn't matter if you're undefeated. There's another guy standing there, and you have to go out again, and you have to duck his punches and do all the rest of whatever it is you do. (Rothstein 1990, A&L 1)

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If you would like your produced play considered for a Pulitzer Prize, you need only ask a friend to sponsor you and to send in the appropriate paperwork. The entry form is very straightforward, asking for name, address, occupation, and place of birth for the writer, and a check in the box for the category in which the work should be considered (distinguished fiction, distinguished play, distinguished book, etc.). The form must be accompanied by a biography and photograph of the playwright and fifty dollars. (Please note that photocopied entry forms are not acceptable.)

You must also send six copies of the play itself. These will be read by a panel of four critics and one academic who will consider your play along with others submitted and others the committee members themselves deem worthy. They read them all and attend performances of the plays both in New York and regionally. The award in drama is given to a playwright, but the quality of the production is also weighed in the final decision.

This panel will narrow the competitive field and present to the Pulitzer Board three nominations for the award. (The list of "runnerups" in the past decade includes, among others, John Guare, Maria Irene Fornes, AR Gurney, Anna Deavere Smith, David Mamet, Richard Greenberg, and Suzi-Lori Parks.) The panel may present its nominations equally or may, in writing, offer the preferences of the panel. The seventeen members of the Pulitzer Board, made up primarily of academics and journalists, must have both read the play and seen a production (live or on videotape) in order to be eligible to vote. For two days, following receipt of the nominations, the Board deliberates and debates. One week after the Board completes its work in the award categories, the winners are announced.

In theory, your chances are as strong as the next writer's. But the competition over the 82 years of Pulitzer Awards has been keen. Fifty-four individual writers have been awarded the prize and several teams of writers (mostly for musicals) have also won. A few writers have won more than once: August Wilson, Thornton Wilder, George S. Kaufman, and Tennessee Williams each won twice. Edward Albee and Robert Sherwood each won three times, and Eugene O'Neill won four Pulitzer Prizes. In twelve individual years, no Pulitzer Prize was awarded in Drama; five of those were between 1963 and 1972; one was in 1997. In 1963, the top contender, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was considered by the Board to be "insufficiently uplifting," a response most likely engendered by its sexual and violent undertones. Thirty years later, with the award to Tony Kushner for Angels in America: Millennium Approaches, a revised Board had become less provincial.

It is, of course, possible that your play will not be selected. Then, you must return to your keyboard and try to find solace in the belief that you were just barely edged out by Wendy Wasserstein or August Wilson, by Neil Simon or Robert Schenkkan, Tony Kushner or Edward Albee, Horton Foote or Jonathan Larson, Paula Vogel or Margaret Edson. Or even Donald Margulies—himself a runner-up twice before.

Note

1. See "Theatre Facts," American Theatre, 1994, insert.

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"NOT HAVING IT ALL": WENDY WASSERSTEIN'S UNCOMMON WOMEN

Angelika Czekay

[F]eminism gave me the right to find my own voice. . . . [F]eminism gave me the perspective to see that there weren't enough women's voices being heard. It gave me the belief that my own voice was worth hearing. And that there could be many different women's voices, all that could and should be heard.

-Wendy Wasserstein, "Yes I Am a Feminist . . . "

Though women are often said to write "small tragedies," they are our tragedies, and therefore large, and therefore legitimate. They deserve a stage.

-Wendy Wasserstein, Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights

My plays are generally about women talking to each other. The sense of action is perhaps different than if I had come of age as a male playwright.

--- Wendy Wasserstein, The Playwright's Art

Wendy Wasserstein's five most famous plays, Uncommon Women and Others (1977), Isn't It Romantic (1981, revised 1983), The Heidi Chronicles (1988), The Sisters Rosensweig (1992), and An American Daughter (1997), which have all been produced on and off-Broadway, focus on female characters struggling with difficult personal and professional decisions in challenging, often transitional moments of their lives. The women Wasserstein places center stage are strong, intelligent, well

educated, upper middle class, and frequently Jewish. They share her generation's convictions of and frustrations with the social movements and discourses of their times, which is why the author is often called the voice of her generation.

Wasserstein's plays are driven by character rather than plot, but the characters' experiences and conflicts are consistently set against current cultural and political developments. Thus, the characters are exposed as products of cultural and political history rather than results of personal choices. In particular, they can be read with regard to the history of feminism from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. The issue of "having it all"—the female characters' discovery that choosing a career over family invariably jeopardizes personal happiness—is the leitmotif of all of Wasserstein's plays. As the characters are torn between career ambition and personal fulfillment, in other words, *having* to choose either the one or the other, all of Wasserstein's plays also (implicitly or explicitly) engage in a critical dialogue with the women's movement on women's cultural and social positions.

Although Wasserstein has been much maligned by feminist critics for her problematic representations of the women's movement—particularly regarding her Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Heidi Chronicles*—a closer look into her major plays testifies to a feminist sensibility and sensitivity that have enabled and inspired her writing. Wasserstein's plays do not necessarily focus on explicitly feminist topics, but they are woman-conscious in their consistent treatment of women's conflicts. While Wasserstein rejects a clear-cut feminist label for herself, scholars, critics, and interviewers alike nonetheless tokenize her within the constraints of female authorship, an aspect that in itself places her within the discourse of gender politics.

In light of the small number of female playwrights in mainstream theatre or, more precisely, the comparatively small number of visible women playwrights in general, this relatively one-sided critical and scholarly categorization of Wasserstein is not surprising. However, Wasserstein is as famous for her feminism in mainstream circles as she is notorious for betraying it in certain feminist circles. From a materialist feminist perspective, several of Wasserstein's plays sell feminism out. Jill Dolan (1996, 50), for instance, astutely remarked that *The Heidi Chronicles* "narrates the uncomplimentary view of the feminist move-

ment promoted by dominant culture." In this play, Wasserstein seems to locate the source of Heidi's problems in the failure of the women's movement to liberate her rather than in her own ambiguity towards the movement and the gender-biased dominant structures that oppress her.

In contrast, other feminist scholars, such as Gail Ciociola (1998), in her comprehensive book-length study of Wasserstein's work, have tried to expand definitions of feminism in order to recuperate Wasserstein. Ciociola offers the notion of "fem-en-actment," a "textual or performance drama that, guided by a feminist disposition, thematically and stylistically enacts situations of interest to women, the psychological and social effects of which form the core of that drama" (2). "Feminism," Ciociola suggests, has become "feminisms," a "myriad of different and sometimes conflicting ideas about how women define themselves and their needs" (3). According to her, Wasserstein "seems to favor a pluralistic blend of feminism, [revealing] signs of liberal, cultural, and materialist thinking, and as a whole [advancing] contemporary 'power feminism'" (3). While power feminism, according to Ciociola, promotes "ideas of equality and selfempowerment," it does so "without the benefit of a clear theoretical impulse" (7). It thus lacks a systemic analysis and fails to challenge dominant ideology or raise questions of access and privilege.

Rather than directly engaging in this debate and trying to either refute or recuperate Wasserstein as a feminist playwright, this chapter examines her plays as her ongoing dialogue and critical engagement with the women's movement. This dialogue is exposed through the experiences, conflicts, and choices of her female protagonists who grow in age from play to play and thus always remain of the same-Wasserstein's own-generation. Read chronologically, her plays give voice to upper middle-class women from the baby boomer generation. Born in the 1950s, they came of age in the uproar of the late 1960s, were caught between the two conflicting discourses of gender conservatism and women's liberation of the 1970s, moved through the major shifts of the feminist movement and the feminist backlash of the 1980s, and then arrived at what has been termed a postfeminist era in the 1990s. According to their age, the main characters in her earlier plays, Uncommon Women and Isn't It Romantic, concentrate on the hopes and outlooks for their futures. In contrast, the protagonists of her later plays, The Sisters Rosensweig and An American Daughter, tend to

reflect, in retrospect, on past choices and directions their lives have taken (Savran 1999, 291). Set up as a flashback chronology and juxtaposing the forward and backward perspectives of its protagonist, *The Heidi Chronicles* formally occupies a place in between her earlier episodic plays and her later realist ones. Thus, as Wasserstein takes inventory of women's positions in society against the backdrop of the feminist movement throughout the past three decades, her characters reflect the gender politics of their times.

Furthermore, Wasserstein historicizes each play's present by integrating references from contemporary cultural, political, and feminist history. To mark the historicity of women's experiences, she juxtaposes different time periods, either by inserting flashbacks (as in *Uncommon Women*), by mapping out a chronology (as in *The Heidi Chronicles*), or by contrasting characters from different generations (as in *Isn't It Romantic*, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and *An American Daughter*). This dramaturgy allows her to frame the personal within the larger context of the political and, thus, offers gendered experience as a historical category.

In this context, Wasserstein's use of comedy—critics call it her trademark—becomes a crucial stylistic means through which the characters express their social critique along with their personal emotions. Praised for their poignant wit, Wasserstein's plays are frequently described as funny with "serious undertones" (Wasserstein 1996, 383). While comedy makes her plays entertaining and, as Wasserstein suggests, fosters "a community with the audience" (386), it also allows her protagonists to vent their frustrations, anger, and pain in a socially acceptable form for women. Wasserstein imbues her characters with humor that, on the surface, deflects from their outrage but that also creates a visible subtext, which highlights the social and personal pressures they face. Thus, comedy in her plays often functions as a form of politicized speech, a distancing device that prevents the characters from being subsumed by self-pity or categorized as victims. Christopher Bigsby contends that Wasserstein uses comedy as "a way of taking the heat out of things," which, he suggests, "would seem to imply a disengagement" from the issues at hand. In contrast, Bigsby (1999, 342) stated, "her autobiographical element implies an engagement." He convincingly argued that "the tension between the two [aspects] is definitional of her work."

In many ways, Wasserstein's plays are based on her own life. As she

remarked in an interview: "My plays tend to be semi-autobiographical or come out of something that's irking me" (Wasserstein 1996, 262). Many of her characters can be traced to the author's upbringing, her college experiences, and her family and friends. Several of the protagonists, such as Janie Blumberg and Heidi Holland, resemble Wasserstein herself in their perceptions and conflicts. Their thoughts, questions, and hesitations reflect the author's own observations and opinions of the current cultural and political climate. Likewise, Wasserstein has always regarded herself as an outsider, as do many of her characters, which is reflected in their position as somewhat removed from the plays' action (*Bachelor Girls* 1990, 194). As David Savran (1999, 290) put it in his introduction to an interview with the author, her main characters are "slightly detached from the world in which they move" and "as much spectator as actor."

The upper middle-class social milieu in which Wasserstein's plays are consistently set also reflects the author's experiences, since Wasserstein was privileged through her upper middle-class background and her Ivy League education. As Ciociola (1998) accurately pointed out:

Wasserstein does not pretend to speak for all women. . . . Her main characters are not every woman, but college-educated and career-driven "uncommon women" determined to "fulfill their potential" even when they have not reached certainty about the direction of that potential. (3–4)

Born in Brooklyn in 1950, Wendy Wasserstein grew up on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Her parents regularly took the children to plays and musicals. Wasserstein attended the all-girls' Calhoun school and later the elite Mount Holyoke College as a history major. After graduating from Mount Holyoke in 1971, Wasserstein returned to New York and earned her M.A. in creative writing from the City University of New York (CUNY) in 1973, the same year during which her first play, Any Woman Can't, was read off-Broadway. Upon graduating from CUNY, Wasserstein rejected an offer from the Columbia School of Business and instead attended the Yale School of Drama where she wrote two satires that, like Any Woman Can't, signify early attempts to critically engage with dominant gender representations.

Originally produced in 1975 at Yale as Wasserstein's M.F.A. thesis production, *Uncommon Women and Others* was to become her first professional play. Wasserstein refined some of the gender-specific themes

and issues raised in her student plays by presenting an all-woman perspective to explore the impact of the rising women's movement on individual women's lives. The play is based on Wasserstein's own college years and was inspired by her realization that women were not represented in theatre history:

I remember when I first wrote *Uncommon Women*, which is a play about a reunion of Mount Holyoke graduates, I was a student at Yale and we were studying a lot of Jacobean drama. To me, basically, it was men kissing the skulls of women and then dropping dead from their poison, and I thought to myself, "Gee, this is really not familiar to me. It's not within my realm of experience." I . . . thought, "I want to see an all-female curtain call in the basement of the Yale School of Drama." (1996, 264)

Episodic in structure, the play features a group of five female students who meet for a reunion lunch at a New York restaurant in 1978, six years after they have graduated from the all-women's college, Mount Holyoke. They reminisce about their lives, compare former hopes and illusions to later achievements and disappointments, and share their pasts, presents, and futures. The restaurant encounter frames the play in the beginning and the end, but most of the seventeen scenes take place in collective flashbacks to the characters' senior year at the college in 1972.

Uncommon Women is set against the backdrop of the radical political changes in the mid-1970s. The college scenes include numerous references to the political climate and popular culture of the time, from Cambodia to Judy Collins, the Beatles, James Taylor, and EST. In particular, by featuring discussions about birth control, Ms. magazine, and women's history classes, the play zooms in on this first generation of female college students exposed to the newly burgeoning rhetoric of feminists such as Friedan, Greer, and Millett. "Uncommon Women," Wasserstein (1998) said, "is in a way about feminism. It's . . . filtered through the people who were participating in it at that time" (268). The play captures the characters' perceptions and confusions during this period when the "women's liberation movement" began to critique sexism, misogyny, and power relations in the patriarchy and challenged women's traditional roles along with the conventional institutions of marriage, motherhood, and family.

At the same time, as the play outlines, Mount Holyoke, founded in

1837 and originally conceptualized to give women the same access to education that young men had at Yale and Harvard, still trains women in proper behavior and "Gracious Living" with high tea hours and candle-light dinners. A male voice-over, citing the inaugural address of a former Mount Holyoke president and articles from the 1966/1967 college bulletin, opens most of the scenes to describe the college's traditional values: "The college produces women who are persons in their own right: Uncommon Women who as individuals have the dignity that comes with intelligence, competence, flexibility, maturity, and a sense of responsibility. This can happen without a loss of gaiety, charm, or femininity" (*Uncommon Women*, reprinted in Wasserstein 1991, 7). "They will be part-time mothers, part-time cooks, and part-time intellectuals (Wasserstein 1991, 23).

Simultaneously confronted with two conflicting ideologies, Wasserstein's college students have to negotiate a new stance for themselves without the privilege of having any role models. Through a range of characters, the college scenes depict the students' struggles to find and define their positions vis-à-vis the confusions and contradictions of the times, which, the play suggests, are the flip side of newly assumed attitudes of self-awareness and self-realization along with newly available professional options for women. On one end of the spectrum there is Kate, the overachieving career woman, who gets accepted into Harvard Law School after she graduates (Wasserstein 1991, 64). On the other end there is Samantha, the "prefeminist prototype, whose cheerful disposition and unassuming manner seem so suited for the traditional role of good wife" (Ciociola 1998, 29). As Wasserstein contended:

The Women's Movement has had answers for the Kates of the world (she becomes a lawyer), or the Samanthas (she gets married). But for the creative people, a movement can't provide answers. There isn't a specific space for them to move into. (Wasserstein 1987, 424)

Consequently, Wasserstein places the other three of the five main characters, Holly, Muffet, and Rita, somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. With only vague dreams for the future, they remain undecided about what to do after they graduate. Rita, a radical feminist, summarizes the dilemma of her generation—and the play's main theme—when she says to Muffet on graduation day: