on writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

IN THIS ISSUE: Christopher Hampton, John Patrick Shanley, Patricia Marx and Theresa Rebeck

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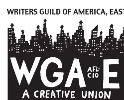

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Donald Westlake often said, "When I write a novel, I'm God, and when I write a screenplay, I'm cup-bearer to the gods." The same could be said of the relationship between screenwriting and playwriting.

The conversations in this issue cover both of these genres. John Patrick Shanley and Christopher Hampton talk about playwriting, screenwriting and directing. Theresa Rebeck and Patricia Marx talk about writing plays and films, but also about the process of writing prose.

On *The Back Page* we're publishing Gina Gionfriddo's one-act play *America's Got Tragedy*.

— Arlene Hellerman

Christopher Hampton
AND
John Patrick Shanley

NEW YORK CITY – APRIL 27, 2009

SHANLEY: I have questions for you.

HAMPTON: Oh, do you?

SHANLEY: Questions that are sort of simple but interesting to me. One is, when you started writing, was there either a play that you wanted to do something like, or something lacking out there that you thought you could supply?

HAMPTON: When I wrote my first play, which was 1966, the theater was really hot in England. John Osborne had arrived 10 years before, and I think that, whereas earlier many young people who wanted to be writers would naturally turn to the novel, at the time it seemed like the theater was the place to be. So ignorantly, really, without even having seen very many plays—I'd certainly never been to the Royal Court Theatre, although I'd read all about it.

ON WRITING: The Royal Court Theatre?

HAMPTON: Yeah, the Royal Court Theatre in Chelsea—which is where John Osborne opened his play *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, and which also put on the plays of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Bond—was very much *the* theater of that time. So I wrote this play when I was about 18, and it's really a complete rip-off of *Look Back in Anger.* What about you?

SHANLEY: I've actually wondered about you and *Look Back in Anger* simply because you were affected directly by the Suez crisis.

HAMPTON: Yes, I was. My father was a radio engineer in Egypt and we were thrown out—along with all the other English—at the time of the Suez crisis in 1956. My father was a conservative, typical English, sports-loving, not particularly reflective man, and this completely changed his political outlook for the rest of his life. He could not believe the stupidity of what was going on.

ON WRITING: How old were you when you were in Egypt?

HAMPTON: Between 5 and 10.

ON WRITING: Do you think that gave you a different perspective when you got back to England? Did you see it as an outsider?

HAMPTON: Yes, very much so. I think you almost need to be an outsider to do this job. Don't you, John?

SHANLEY: Yeah. You have to be a freak to some degree. You might not want to be, you may desperately want to join in with everyone, but somehow it doesn't work. Because it's about point of view: You have to have a point of view, and it ends up having to be different than other people's.

HAMPTON: You were in New York all through your childhood?

SHANLEY: I lived in the Bronx and I never met another writer or artist of any kind. And there just wasn't any place for me to be me there.

HAMPTON: Did that cause a lot of conflict at home?

SHANLEY: Not exactly. I mean, there was conflict, it was a violent neighborhood so I was in a lot of fistfights—that kind of violence, not guns. But I saw a production of *Cyrano de Bergerac* at a high school when I was 12; it was a very good production and it violently affected me, it's affected me ever since.

HAMPTON: For me it was Paul Scofield in Peter Brook's production of *King Lear* which I reluctantly was dragged up from school to see. I thought, if only I could slip away at the interval and go 'round Soho, which was very exciting to me, I wouldn't have to watch all this stuff. And this thing started: Scofield walked onto the stage and he said his first line in this very peculiar way, and I was completely riveted from one end of the play to the other. When I got on the bus with all the other boys afterwards I thought, that's what I want to do, I want to work in the theater.

SHANLEY: I don't believe in past lives in any other way except I do know that I was a playwright from the beginning, even though I didn't actually start writing

plays until I was over 21. But from when I was a child, I recognized dialogue in a movie. The movies that were made of plays were different and more interesting to me than all the other movies.

ON WRITING: Like what? Can you think of any?

SHANLEY: *Devil's Disciple*. But also the musicals like *Pajama Game*, anything that had been on stage that was then a film, I recognized.

HAMPTON: All those Tennessee Williams movies were great.

SHANLEY: Yeah, absolutely. I just wrote a new forward for New Directions for *The Rose Tattoo* and I read the play again. At the beginning I thought, boy, this is really awful, this is a really bad play. And then about halfway through I thought, no, the guy's a towering genius.

HAMPTON: Absolutely. I have a real soft spot for Tennessee Williams. I think he was the great 20th-century American poet-writer. I met him about four weeks before he died, had dinner with him in London with a mutual friend. I was so anxious about this meeting, but he couldn't have been more charming. We actually talked about the various films that had been made from his plays, and he said he hated them all. And I said, "You mean even *Streetcar Named Desire*?" And he slightly, grudgingly, allowed that maybe there were one or two interesting things in that, but he kept saying, "I didn't care for that one at all." *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* he loathed.

SHANLEY: He also said in his autobiography that he didn't remember the '60s—

HAMPTON: —I believe that.

SHANLEY: —At all.

ON WRITING: He was drinking?

SHANLEY: Drinking, drugs, whatever.

HAMPTON: In the generation immediately before ours, it was sort of mandatory to be an alcoholic, wasn't it?

SHANLEY: I guess so. It was definitely much more acceptable.

HAMPTON: I just got the very far end of that because my first two colleagues in the theater—Robert Kidd, who directed my first five plays, and Victor Henry, an extraordinary young actor who was in the first two plays—both died of alcoholism in their 30s. I think Arthur Miller was the exception, really, wasn't he?

SHANLEY: Well, he had an almost terrifying sobriety about him.

HAMPTON: I think if you say that Tennessee Williams was the poet, Arthur Miller was the great prose writer. Looking back on it, you were very lucky to have these two really great writers.

SHANLEY: Now, your horror of writing comedy, does it continue?

HAMPTON: It's just so hard. Do you find it—

SHANLEY: —Yes, it's hard. It's all hard. You just flop a little quieter when it's a drama.

HAMPTON: I know. Chekhov said any fool can write a tragedy.

SHANLEY: I have to say, I was an enormous admirer of your adaptation of *The Seagull*.

HAMPTON: Thank you.

SHANLEY: It was truly beautiful.

HAMPTON: It was a wonderful production.

ON WRITING: Christopher, you have a horror of writing comedy?

HAMPTON: No, I just think it's terribly difficult. I haven't done it since *The Philanthropist* because, first of all, I had nine months of absolute torment writing

it, and then we had a horrible rehearsal period, at the end of which everyone was in despair. And then at the first preview it all went like a dream and we couldn't believe it, we were all shell-shocked by it. Everybody from the Royal Court would come in, watch the run-through and they would say, "Oh my God, what are you going to do, and how are you going to fix it?" We'd try to fix it. And it would seem worse. An absolute nightmare. And suddenly the audience adored it.

SHANLEY: Well, worried people don't laugh, so if you bring people in who have money in it or it's their theater, their reputations, they just sit there and say, "Is this funny?"

HAMPTON: Also, it was a very untypical Royal Court play because they tended to be socially responsible and engaged in one way or another. I remember Lindsay Anderson, who was one of the three directors who ran the theater, saying to me, "I enjoyed your play, although it is rather facetious."

SHANLEY: Now, you were friends with David Hare back then.

HAMPTON: I was at high school with David Hare.

SHANLEY: He would be an example of the Royal Court preoccupation with socially relevant issues.

HAMPTON: He had his own issues with the Royal Court. He was coming at it from the other direction, in a way. I think he thought they were woolly humanists, not sharp-edged enough. But it's been a very good relationship in my life, David Hare, because he knows and I know that we are completely different sorts of writers, and that makes it quite relaxing in a way. Because we're not in competition, as writers tend to be.

SHANLEY: Right, right.

HAMPTON: I wanted to speak to you about directing your own plays and movies, which I think is an incredibly brave thing to do, and I thought you did it brilliantly, actually, with *Doubt*.

SHANLEY: Thank you very much. I directed a movie 17 years ago, *Joe Versus the Volcano,* and I received some very bad reviews—and some good ones, but you remember the bad ones. For a whole host of reasons I felt like I didn't know what I wanted to write about anymore. I had been in quite a run.

ON WRITING: You wrote *Joe Versus the Volcano*—

SHANLEY: —After *Moonstruck*. And then I had this great success with *Doubt* and Scott Rudin came to me and said, "I think you should direct the film." And I said, with real tragedy, "I do, too." Because I felt, of all the films that I would have to direct next, why does it have to be a play with four characters where they talk a lot? This is going to be so hard to make palatable to a film audience.

HAMPTON: But it's wonderful to see films written for actors where they're given their heads and they can develop characters and you don't have to be distracted from the performances—all of which were really, really good.

SHANLEY: They're wonderful actors. But the question you have as a director and as a screenwriter is, how long can this scene hold? What kind of tricks am I going to pull just to keep them awake, just to keep breaking that hypnosis and keep it seamless.

HAMPTON: And to make a film that doesn't smell like the theater.

SHANLEY: Right. I'm sure it smelled a little bit like the theater.

HAMPTON: No, it didn't actually, it didn't.

SHANLEY: I'm glad to hear that. But it was a real challenge. Very interesting to do, gave me a little more faith in dialogue on screen than I had.

HAMPTON: I've worked, very fortunately, over the years with Stephen Frears. We figured out the other day that it's about once a decade we work together—we've just done a film which is opening in the summer, *Cheri*, based on Colette. And any scene

longer than a page makes him really nervous. It's been one of my missions in life to prove that you can have a three-page dialogue scene on-screen, and it's all right, it's okay.

ON WRITING: Do you like directing films, John?

SHANLEY: No, I don't have a good time.

HAMPTON: I absolutely love it.

SHANLEY: I don't like it.

ON WRITING: Why?

SHANLEY: I remember one day on the set, very late into the shoot, I walked by Phil Hoffman, who's an old buddy of mine, and he said, "How are you doing anyway?" And I said, "Over stimulated and under stimulated all the time." It's 90 percent so boring I could die—because we figure out the shot and then they've got to light it so come back in an hour, which to me feels like going to some municipal building. And then suddenly in five minutes you've got to be brilliant now, right now, the whole movie's slipping away right now. It's like, Jesus Christ, can we even this out a little bit? And it's your responsibility, all the time. The actors may be doing a fantastic job, the cameraman may be lighting really well, and you suddenly have a sickening sense, correct sense, that something's not right. I had that at one point in *Doubt* with the big confrontation scene. We rehearsed the scene, the actors were dynamite. Roger Deakins started to light it and I sat there with a growing sense of doom and suddenly said—which I did very rarely—"We have to stop, everybody has to stop." I went over to Phil and said, "You cannot stay behind that desk." Roger said, "Oh, totally different fucking idea," and told the whole crew to just take a break. Phil's saying, "That's what we rehearsed." And all I could say was, "I know, I know, and I should be really articulate about this, but I can't be. I just know if you stay behind that desk, we're dead."

HAMPTON: Do you direct for the theater?

SHANLEY: Yes.

HAMPTON: I've never directed for the theater. I think partly because I find the idea of not saying right away, "No, no, no, this is how you should do it," frustrating—which is the strategy of directing plays, that you let them wander about in a morass for weeks and then finally you say, no, no, no. I always want to say that right away. And then you've got nowhere to go. And in a movie, of course, that doesn't matter because you've only got five minutes to say "No, no, do this differently."

SHANLEY: Right, the moment can slip away.

HAMPTON: And then the moment is done and then you go on to another moment, which for me is a much more understandable process than the long attrition of rehearsals.

SHANLEY: The theater is, by its nature, very often disappointing because, basically, you're looking for a feat to take place that is rare.

HAMPTON: Yes.

SHANLEY: Something that really comes to life in the theater is rare.

HAMPTON: It's a really difficult medium. It's difficult to write plays and then there's a further set of difficulties which is putting them on right.

SHANLEY: And you can get everything right and then the actor gets the flu on top of that. But even when those kinds of things don't happen, I've gone to so many plays where I sit there and I say, "I got out of my chair and came to this room and I've given you two hours of my attention—I don't care if you fail, but don't be so conservative, take some fucking chances, let's go somewhere, let's try something." And when I don't see that I'm sad, and I go home.

ON WRITING: Well, your plays take a lot of chances.

HAMPTON: Risks, yes.

SHANLEY: And they're messy and parts of them work and parts of them don't, and I think that's something

I want to do. And then once in a blue moon I knock one out of the park, just because of my recklessness to keep swinging so hard. But what makes any theater exciting for me is that the guy up there is taking a chance. If you're writing something and you're afraid to put it on, then I'm there, I want to go and see that.

HAMPTON: I remember when *The Philanthropist*—which was my first real success—opened, I had a very wise old agent, Margaret Ramsay, legendary figure, and she said, "Well, dear, you've got a success on your hands." And I said, "Yes, that's great, isn't it." And she said, "Not necessarily." She said, "Now you have a very big decision to make. You can write this play over and over again for the next 30 years, and it will probably get better, and you'll probably do very well. But," she said, "there's another alternative, which is to do something completely different, and keep doing something completely different." And that seemed like a much more attractive option.

SHANLEY: Well, you had somebody, at least at that moment, who functioned as a mentor, a guide.

HAMPTON: Yes.

SHANLEY: That's a wonderful thing. I've always fantasized about having such a person and I've been amazed over and over again that no one has served that function.

ON WRITING: You've never had somebody?

SHANLEY: No, it's been a shortcoming, or it's something that I certainly hungered for. Because that's a very wise thing to tell a young writer. I met Margaret Ramsay, briefly, a long time ago with David Hare in the lobby of some theater in London. David was talking to her in the most solicitous kind of way, it was great to see. I thought, that's an agent? No American agent would be treated like that.

HAMPTON: Stephen Frears did a film called *Prick Up Your Ears* in which she's played by Vanessa Redgrave.

SHANLEY: That's right.

HAMPTON: All she talked about for the six months before was who was going to play her in the film. She was a very, very short woman, and eventually they landed on Vanessa Redgrave and she couldn't have been more delighted. It was all to do with the height I think.

ON WRITING: I want to go back, you may have already answered this, Christopher, but I just want to approach it in a different way. Why are you comfortable directing movies and not plays?

HAMPTON: Well, it has to do with stamina, I suppose, or focus. What I like in films is solving each day's problem—and then the next day is another problem—whereas with a play you have a continuous set of problems all the way through the rehearsal period.

SHANLEY: There's not a lot of support. When you rehearse a play, you go into a room and they shut the door and it's really just you and the actors and a stage manager for the better part of four weeks, and that can get pretty horrifying, it can get pretty exhausting. There's a lot of insulation in film. People are talking to the first assistant director, they're talking to the costume person. Not the same in theater.

HAMPTON: No, no.

ON WRITING: You mean it's more isolating in theater?

SHANLEY: It's more psychically demanding.

HAMPTON: But the process with a film—everybody has a different process—my process is to plan everything very, very carefully and then go in and throw it all out the window. Because I think if you do the planning, you earn yourself the right to spontaneity. And in a way, that's analogous to how I write, in other words, I plan it all very carefully and then hope for a better idea on the day.

SHANLEY: Picasso, I just read a quote he had, which was that the painting's no good unless something goes wrong.

HAMPTON: I think that's a real insight.

SHANLEY: Now, what's the experience working on a big musical?

HAMPTON: It's like a movie.

ON WRITING: The musicals you've worked on—

HAMPTON: —I worked on *Sunset Boulevard* and then I did a version of *Dracula* for Des McAnuff. My baptism of fire was *Sunset Boulevard*.

SHANLEY: Book and lyrics.

HAMPTON: Yeah, but with a writing partner, which I'd never done before, a really skilled lyricist, Don Black.

SHANLEY: Was that fun?

HAMPTON: It was. It was great fun. The first day I went to see Don, he said, "Now, I have to tell you, there's only one thing I know about a song," he said, "If you sit down to write the song at 10 o'clock and you haven't finished it by six o'clock, you're an idiot."

ON WRITING: And did you find that to be true?

HAMPTON: Yeah. We did pretty well every song in a day.

SHANLEY: I have some experience with musicals and it's true that it doesn't take long to write a song—you might write the wrong song.

HAMPTON: Yes, that's a different matter.

SHANLEY: But certainly, to structure a song and to get clever with a song, you can do a lot in one day.

HAMPTON: *Sunset Boulevard* came out of a lunch I had with Andrew Lloyd Webber, because apart from David Hare, I was also at school with Tim Rice.

SHANLEY: That's where I went wrong. I went to school with nobody.

HAMPTON: Just one of those coincidences. Andrew took me out to lunch one day and he said, "I'm thinking of doing a musical based on *The Phantom of the Opera*." I said, "That's a terrible idea." I called him a couple of days later and said, "Have you ever thought about *Sunset Boulevard*? I think that would make a really good musical." "As a matter of fact, I have," he said. So eight years later he called me up again.

SHANLEY: You did that with *Atonement*, too, where you went after something.

HAMPTON: *Atonement* worked like this: I was in Thailand, looking for locations for a film that was never made. I bought Ian McEwan's new book at the airport and I kept being late to all the meetings because I couldn't put this book down. When I got back to London, I said to my agent, "Can we, is anyone...." She said, "Lots of people are after this." So I actually had to do kind of an audition with Ian McEwan, who had retained the right to choose the writer. I pitched what I was going to do, which bore absolutely no resemblance whatsoever to what I in fact did do. And yeah, I got the job.

SHANLEY: When you first started talking about it, did it have a bookend structure?

HAMPTON: Yes. My first idea was really to have the old writer narrating all the way through, and not, therefore, to have this big surprise ending. And Joe Wright, who was the second director on, said, "Can we go back to the structure of the book," and explained why. He said, "I want to have three actresses playing the main character, but I want a gap between when you see her the first time, when she's 12, and when you see her the second time, when she's 18, and if you do it this way, it will work." And it did.

SHANLEY: It did work. It has a kind of shocking lucidity at the end of the film, as if suddenly something that had a vaguely romantic sheen had been removed to reveal this kind of diamond-like brilliance right at the end, which I found very enlivening.

HAMPTON: Joe Wright was a very, very good director to work with. But he's a totally obsessional person. We went away together to Italy in the dead of winter for two weeks and just worked around the clock.

ON WRITING: Why didn't you want to direct *Atonement*?

HAMPTON: Too big, too elaborate, too—I was about to say too movie-like, if you know what I mean. I like things that are rather quirky and unusual.

ON WRITING: I want to ask John about adapting *Doubt*. How did you approach the transition from the play to the film?

SHANLEY: What you're trying to do is take the audience on the same journey but using different material.

ON WRITING: Did you do a lot of rewriting?

SHANLEY: Well, there's four people in the play. Trust me, if you tried to do a feature film with four people you will lose the audience, tops, 15 minutes, and you will never get them back.

ON WRITING: But there are movies with four people that work.

SHANLEY: Well, [*Who's Afraid of*] *Virginia Woolf*. It's an amazing accomplishment.

HAMPTON: Just a brilliant adaptation.

ON WRITING: Do you agree, Christopher, that it's very hard to do a movie with only a few characters?

HAMPTON: Yes, but I go back again to this phrase, the smell of the theater. The movie of *Virginia Woolf* was so brilliantly acted and so brilliantly conceived by Mike Nichols that it never ever crosses your mind it might be a theater play. It just seemed like a movie. Part of that had to do with Richard Burton who was staggering in the film, and was so good that nobody noticed how good he was.

SHANLEY: He had that ability because he had that duality. He was a truly great stage actor and a truly great film actor, and they caught him at the moment when he had it all going on, right before the great dissipation. And it was a deeply internal performance, so that Elizabeth Taylor could just bust out and be this gigantic braying creature—which is what [Edward] Albee describes her as doing, braying like a donkey.

ON WRITING: What about all the old movies? Something like *Design for Living*.

SHANLEY: But they go places and do things.

HAMPTON: And they talk very, very quickly, which is a lost art. Joe got the actors to do that in *Atonement*, they talk very quickly and it's great.

SHANLEY: That's one thing I remember when I did my first film, I got to the cutting room and I realized the one thing you can't change is how fast they talk. Norman Jewison used to use a stopwatch, he would rehearse the scene theatrically and have it timed and then not vary from that time when they were shooting. If it started to drop behind that time, he'd say, "We've got to pick it up here or there," and it does work. That is a good tactic.

HAMPTON: Stephen just always says, "Can we do one quicker? Fine, fine, now can we do one quicker?" So he gets them to get a move on as well.

ON WRITING: The writing isn't that way anymore either, is it?

HAMPTON: I suppose not. I was just thinking about Howard Hawk's wonderful definition of a great film.

SHANLEY: Which is?

HAMPTON: Three great scenes, no bad scenes.

SHANLEY: Mine is, give me five good minutes. I'll forgive you anything if you give me five minutes. I go to films all the time where I come out and I'm very well satisfied and people are saying, "But the end...." I'm saying, there are five great minutes, I don't give a shit about the rest of that stuff.

ON WRITING: I think if you have a good ending you can get away with a lot.

SHANLEY: That's one of the great truths, what they walk out with is certainly a big part of your legacy.

ON WRITING: I want to ask Christopher about translating versus adaptation—well, first of all, how many languages do you speak?

HAMPTON: French and German. And I did a year of Russian but I can't speak Russian at all and on the Chekhovs I've always worked with a Russian person to help me through.

ON WRITING: So what is your role as a translator as compared with an adapter of a piece?

HAMPTON: Different things altogether. Translating is like going to the gym. It's just a great way of working out with the language. You're very restricted, you have to do a repetitive thing, which is find the best way of expressing this thought in dialogue, and it really is like keeping in shape. And because I studied languages, I was kind of trained for it, I've always done it. I've actually done more translations than I've written plays, just because I always have one on the go.

SHANLEY: Do you feel as though you've met Chekhov? Do you feel like you know him?

HAMPTON: I do, actually. I went on an extraordinary junket last year when the Chekhov Theater in Yalta was reopening and some people were invited for a kind of a launch at the theater. Tom Stoppard and I were the writers among the party, and John Malkovich and Kevin Spacey were the actors. When we got there we discovered, not to our huge surprise, that it was only the actors that people wanted to ask questions of and Tom and I were excused. So Tom said we really should go and see Chekhov's house. And they've

kept it exactly as it was when he lived there because Chekhov's sister, who lived until the late '50s, was obviously a formidable woman, and when the Russian Revolution occurred and the revolutionaries beat on the door, she said, "Don't you understand, this is Chekhov's house, go away," which they did. And then many years later when the Nazis arrived, by that time, I think his ex-wife, Olga Knipper, was also living there, and she said, "Don't you understand, this is Chekhov's house, go away," and they did. And so the house is perfectly preserved. There's his desk with papers and pens and so on. He could only write for an hour at a time by that stage because he had such bad TB, and there was a little daybed behind the desk where he'd go and lie down and have a rest every hour or so, a very carefully angled desk so he could just see the sea and the trees. And when I came out of the house, I felt I really did know him apart from the fact that you work on those plays for months on end—they really are among the very best plays ever written.

SHANLEY: So elegant, really. Now, if you were to have lunch with Chekhov and Molière, who would you be more interested in talking to?

HAMPTON: Oh, Chekhov, I think. Molière would probably be more laughs though, don't you think?

SHANLEY: He's more dinner. Like a great dinner.

HAMPTON: Yes, yes. But both of them would be very, very good to meet. Who would you like to have dinner with?

SHANLEY: Well, I'm just going to be obvious and say William Shakespeare.

HAMPTON: My goodness.

SHANLEY: While we're dreaming.

HAMPTON: Yes, well, I suppose he invented everything really, didn't he?

SHANLEY: Just to see the look in his eye, must have been pretty acute.

ON WRITING: I want to ask about directing. You've both directed films you've written. John, do you want to direct another movie?

SHANLEY: Yeah, I would direct another movie, but I wouldn't go from movie to movie. After directing a film, it's extremely hard for me to begin writing again. Because actually, it's not that hard for me to write. I know many writers who suffer horribly to write and I suffer somewhat, but I can tell what they're going through is different. And then after a film, it's gone. It feels like the talent is gone and I can't find it again, and it's awful. I just went through that after *Doubt*, and I found it again after a lot of suffering, so I'd be slow to let that happen again. Kind of mysterious though, how that works.

ON WRITING: You don't get that when you direct a play?

SHANLEY: No, it's not as long. A play is maybe six weeks and a film is, with the promotion they make you do now, that's an additional three months on top of about a year.

HAMPTON: It is, it is.

ON WRITING: Christopher, do you like to go back and forth between films and plays?

HAMPTON: Yes, I do. Because films are so erratic in the sense that they sit about until someone finances

them, and then they sit about until someone's cast, and then suddenly it's round-the-clock craziness. So you have to fit the rest of your work in between these bouts of frenzied activity.

ON WRITING: Also, the relationship with the director is different in a film versus a play.

HAMPTON: If you write movies, it's the director's medium so you're trying to collaborate with the director to provide the director with what they want, which wouldn't necessarily be exactly what you would write yourself.

ON WRITING: Even if it's an original screenplay?

HAMPTON: Well, my experience of original screenplays is they're heartbreaking. I've just spent a year writing a screenplay about a woman called Tokyo Rose who was brought back to the U.S. in the late '40s from Japan as a war propagandist. She was tried in the most expensive trial in American legal history, condemned to eight years in prison, which she partially served, and she was completely innocent.

ON WRITING: Really?

HAMPTON: Yeah, she was given a presidential pardon by Gerald Ford in the '70s. But they had to give the appearance of punishing someone. And I met her. She died a couple of years ago, but I spent a lot of time with her. I thought this was a really, really, really fascinating subject about casual racism and scapegoating and journalists, the yellow press, all of those elements. I did a script for Frank Darabont and it's stalled. Now, *Imagining Argentina* took 14 years to make and *Carrington* took 18 years to make. But it's very heartbreaking to spend a year on something and then it doesn't get made. So at least the theater is more reliable in that way.

SHANLEY: You can get it done.

HAMPTON: I often curse the fact that I'm so seduced by movies and I love movies, but they're tremendously satisfying when they work well. OW

BIOGRAPHIES

Christopher Hampton's plays include *The Philanthropist, The Talking Cure, White Chameleon, Tales From Hollywood, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, Treats, Savages* and *Total Eclipse*. He co-wrote the book and lyrics for the musicals *Sunset Boulevard* and *Dracula* and the libretto for the Philip Glass operas *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Appomattox*. He has translated the plays of Chekhov, Ibsen, Molière, Ödön von Horvàth and Yasmina Reza, including *Art*, *Life (x)* 3 and *God of Carnage*.

His screenplays include *The Quiet American*, *Mary Reilly, Total Eclipse, Dangerous Liaisons, Atonement, Carrington, The Secret Agent* and *Imagining Argentina*, the last three of which he also directed. His most recent screenplay *Cheri* premiered at the 2009 Berlin Film Festival.

Hampton's awards include two Tony Awards, an Olivier Award, the New York Theater Critics Award, an Academy Award, two BAFTA Awards and a Special Jury Prize at Cannes.

John Patrick Shanley's plays include *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea, Savage in Limbo, Italian American Reconciliation, Welcome to the Moon, Four Dogs and a Bone, Cellini, Dirty Story* and *Defiance*. For his play *Doubt*, he received both the Tony Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

He directed his most recent screenplay *Doubt,* which was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Adapted Screenplay. Other films include *Five Corners* (Special Jury prize, Barcelona Film Festival), *Alive*, *Joe Versus the Volcano,* which he also directed, and *Live From Baghdad* for HBO, which was nominated for an Emmy. His script of *Moonstruck* received both the Writers Guild of America Award and an Academy Award for best original screenplay.

In 2009, Shanley received the Ian McLellan Hunter Award for Lifetime Achievement In Writing from the WGA, East.

Patricia Marx and Theresa Rebeck

NEW YORK CITY – JUNE 22, 2009

ON WRITING: You've both written films, plays and television, but Patty, you primarily write prose and Theresa, you're getting more into prose writing, having published one novel and now working on your second. Do you enjoy novels?

REBECK: I do like writing novels. I'm very confused by it in a way, I'm still feeling my way through it. With the first one—

ON WRITING: —Which was called *Three Girls and Their Brother*—

REBECK: —Yeah. I wasn't sure if I was doing it right at all. The whole energy of it seemed completely different than writing plays. But then, finally, I found out it's not really. I lean on my dialogue a lot which I think, well, of course you do, you're a playwright. Sometimes I would get self-conscious about that and then I'd go back and read people like Mark Twain and J.D. Salinger who also lean on dialogue a lot, and then I'd feel better, like I was part of a worthy tradition. But the second one that I'm writing is really, really hard.

MARX: We're in the same place in mid-novel life crisis.

REBECK: Really, you're in the middle of your second one?

MARX: I thought it was almost finished, but now I think I might be in the middle. My latest idea is to change the title to one that implies it's a very short book. I always wanted to write a novel, but I thought, I can hardly *read* a novel these days I'm so A.D.D.-ish, how can I write something so sustained? A writer friend I respect a great deal said, "There are no rules to writing a novel." And that helped me a lot.

REBECK: That's really good.

MARX: He said that, and he also said, "Write something that only you can write." That helped me a lot, too. And the third thing he said was, "Keep me surprised." I decided with my second novel that I'd do something as far away from the first as I could muster.

REBECK: Well, that's good.

MARX: What did you do?

REBECK: I didn't know what I was doing in my first novel so much that there was a point where suddenly I realized that I had kicked my narrator out of the book.

MARX: You didn't do that deliberately? I thought that was a cool thing when I was reading it.

REBECK: The first time it didn't happen deliberately. It just kept moving in that direction and then he was kicked out. And I did not know what to do. I finally came up with three options: I had this very daffy idea about going to a third-person narrator. I don't know why I thought that would work, I'm not good at third-person narrators yet, so that was out. And then I thought I could go back 30 pages and not let him get kicked out. And then I thought, I guess I could switch narrators. So with the one I'm in the middle of now, I decided that if I'm still not ready to move off a first-person narrator—which I'm still not, but maybe I'm getting there—I'd have to stay with one person. And that turned out to be really terrifying. I realized that to some extent it's interesting structurally when you switch narrators, but there are certain problems you don't ever have to learn how to solve.

MARX: Writing a second novel feels more intimidating. With the first I thought, the world doesn't know what Patty Marx thinks about such and such. But now the world knows *everything* that I think about everything. And of course, by the world I mean maybe the six people not including my family who read my first book. Anyway, I decided to write in the third person this time and it's easier than you think, Theresa. I like gossiping and it allows you to gossip about your characters.

REBECK: I'm sort of ready to take it on. When I've tried it, I'd think, who's talking? I don't know who's talking. And now I kind of know who's talking—and it's me, the author.

MARX: Well, that's something about novels, speaking of talking, that I like. I'm a bad listener. In fact, I don't

really listen; I just wait for a break in the conversation when I can get in my bon mots. So novels are just like talking without being interrupted. I guess all writing is.

ON WRITING: Theresa, why is the second novel so difficult?

REBECK: I didn't have the narrator's voice right. There was something I was missing about her. I thought if I kept listening to her and just following her about, sooner or later I would figure out what was up and then I could go back and fix it. I kept looping back. I would say, "I'm going to really work on it this week." And then I would work really hard and end up 10 pages shorter than I had before.

MARX: I think that novel writing, or any writing, is figuring out a way to make the reader or the listener not go away. And you can either do it by being funny or being dramatic. I can't come up with a plot, so that's out. Instead, I try to create engaging characters and be funny enough so the reader keeps turning the page. But I was going to say that whenever I work on something, about two-thirds into it I figure out how I really should have written it. I am now at a place in my second novel where I wish I could start again, but I can't.

REBECK: You can go back to the beginning.

MARX: No, I did something so that it's going to be so hard to rewrite. A trick I used.

REBECK: Too bad.

MARX: I know, damn.

ON WRITING: I want to ask about script writing. Theresa, you're a successful playwright and TV writer. And Patty, you've also written TV and films....

MARX: I've done all of that, but the world doesn't know it too well. And I was thinking on the way over here why I'm not good at drama: I don't like tension—which is a big problem. But Theresa, you are really good at escalating tension and turning the screw and crescendoing things. My impulse is, "Oh, let's just make it all better for these characters."

REBECK: Yeah, that's not good.

MARX: That's not good for drama.

REBECK: No, no.

MARX: And you're also very good, I noticed—in your novel, too—at opening one drawer at a time and leaking information. I get so nervous about not wanting to bore the reader so I say, "Here's everything that I have. Here's everything in the drawers. Take a look."

REBECK: No, you can't do that. You have to open them one at a time. But I also think that drama is about figuring out the worst thing you could put your character through and then putting them through it.

MARX: Yeah, putting them into a situation in which you think there is no solution and finding a solution. But that makes me nervous. And my solutions end up feeling formulaic to me. By the way, it's really discouraging how long it can take me to contrive a plot that seems horribly obvious to the reader. When I used to write scripts, the producer would tell me a twist I stuck in was too predictable and I'd think, really, then why did it take me so long to come up with it?

REBECK: I'm somebody for whom the writing takes over. I'm often talking about my characters as if they exist in another dimension and I'm just like spying on them and then writing the report.

ON WRITING: How great.

REBECK: Well, it's definitely fascinating. I find them all interesting and I love following them around. I'm always amazed by how much courage they have. And one thing you learn over time as a dramatist—and you also learn it in rehearsal—is that nobody wants to look at a victim. Sometimes you end up with an actor who wants to play a character like a whiner or a victim and you're saying, "You've got to suck that right out of the performance. We know you're in pain, what

we are watching is how you're acting on top of that pain and what your actions are in spite of that pain or because of the pain. But the pain is your business." You have to be very, very, very precious with tears on stage—not that you can't do it, I put characters through that all the time, but you can't have a lot of feeling up there. You've got to push through it.

MARX: It's funny that you talk about victims, I'm aware of the opposite problem as someone who writes in the first person a lot. Since I have the sword in my hand as the author and as the narrator, I don't want to use it too much. I don't want to take cheap shots and decimate too easily because then they will hate me, hate the narrator, hate the author.

REBECK: What do you mean by decimate?

MARX: I want to give every character a chance.

ON WRITING: You don't want to destroy them.

MARX: You have to be kind of a lawyer for all your characters, stick up for them, defend them. And in my first novel—

ON WRITING: —Which was called *Him Her Him Again The End of Him*.

MARX: Yeah, there was a villain and he was a creep and a jerk, and I really laid it on heavy. But every once in a while I thought, I've got to give him something. I didn't give him too much and that's probably a flaw of the novel. But if you make someone too easy to hate, then I think you're dismissed because you're creating a straw dog. Am I explaining that right?

REBECK: Oh, if you make somebody too easy to hate?

MARX: No, I'm not saying this right. I'm trying to say you have to be gentle and sort of lovable as the author.

REBECK: Right, I think that's true.

MARX: You have to be someone about whom the reader says, "I wish I knew that person." You have to deceive the reader into thinking you are a wise, adorable person.

REBECK: I find that interesting because, yeah, if your narrator hates somebody, you have to get inside their admission of why they hate that person.

MARX: Yes.

REBECK: So that person really could be a very bad person, but you have to understand why your narrator's having this reaction to that person. You can't just dismiss people.

MARX: You can't be a bully.

REBECK: Yeah, that's what it is.

MARX: I guess that's what I'm trying to say, because we don't like victims, but we don't like bullies either.

REBECK: Yes, I think that's true.

ON WRITING: I want to ask about writing comic novels. It occurs to me that there are two different kinds of comedy. There's a comic situation where the comedy is in the story itself, and then there's comedy in the turn of phrase.

REBECK: For me, a comic situation—

MARX: —Is usually a tragic situation.

REBECK: Yeah, right?

ON WRITING: If you're talking about a comic novel, are you talking about a comic story, or a comic turn of phrase?

MARX: You can't have solely the latter. It shouldn't be a book of random one-liners about some people who have names. It has to be *about* something. Jokes are one tool you have, but it's more interesting if they're used to serve something bigger.

ON WRITING: So is the comedy difficult to sustain when you're writing in a longer form?

MARX: I am comfortable being succinct. I'm sure I could say everything I need to say in a sentence or two. But with my first novel, I wanted the narrator to be introspective so I had a rule that I had to make every chapter 20,000 words. If I had not spent so much time pressing the word count button, I could have finished a lot sooner. What I'm writing now is pithier and I like that better. But do you think that one of the hard parts of writing, or life, is knowing when to quit, when to bail out?

REBECK: I see a lot of younger writers when I go to theater conferences and they mostly don't know when to quit, they just keep going. And if I look back at some of my really young plays, I didn't know when to quit.

MARX: That's true, too. But I meant when to give up and start something new. How do you know if you're on the wrong track or when, if you just keep trying to revise what you have, it would work?

REBECK: Oh, right. I have kind of a rule of thumb that if I make it to the end of act one—this is pretty much in drama—then it might turn into a play. But I don't really know if it's going to actually turn into a play until I hit page 62. And then I know that I'm going to make it all the way to the ending and that then, once you have a draft, you can shape anything and end up with something.

ON WRITING: How many pages is a play?

REBECK: Plays tend to be between 90 and 100 pages. So I have to be pretty much two-thirds of the way through it before I'm convinced that it's actually going to grow into a tree.

MARX: And have you ever thrown out trees?

REBECK: Yes, but usually I don't get that far. I have one right now that I'm saying, okay, we've sat on page 11 for quite long enough. You have to give this one up.

ON WRITING: Can you use it for something else?

MARX: No, I don't think you can do that.

ON WRITING: Why not?

MARX: I think that's what young writers try to do too much. Something that is salvaged and put somewhere else, I think, is more trouble than it's worth. It either never fits, or you've expended so much time converting it, you might as well have started from scratch. It's like putting too much money into a jalopy.

REBECK: Sometimes I recycle lines and that never works.

MARX: I do it, too. It never works.

REBECK: Don't think we haven't tried. It never works.

ON WRITING: Do you outline your novels?

MARX: No. When I wrote my first novel, I decided, on the advice of somebody I liked, that I would not know where I was going because if I knew where I was going, the reader would know where I was going and it wouldn't be interesting. I used to outline my humor pieces, but I don't anymore. I trust that something will happen that will be more interesting than my outline, or it could be that I'm lazier. Do you do an outline?

REBECK: No, I don't outline anymore. I always need to know sort of where I'm going. I've done it too many times where I really didn't know where I was going and it kind of collapsed. But that was earlier on when I didn't have any technique. Now I sort of know where I'm going and then I start going. I think if I wasn't having any success with letting the play teach me what it wants to be, I might start outlining. But my experience is that outlining just sucks the life out of everything.

MARX: I think so. Theresa, you're very good at satire. I don't mean satire—satire sounds a little too clever, but you're good at looking at the world and figuring out what's wrong and turning it into a play.

REBECK: Oh, thanks. That stuff, there's a little more logic to, it's more like a puzzle. The other kind of play that I write is like, let's just put those four

people together in a room and see what they do to each other.

MARX: It's funny you mention logic because I used to be much more logical about devising a premise for a piece. For instance, I like the theme of sibling rivalry because I was the oldest so I won. And I thought, what is the worst sibling rivalry ever? What situation would be unendurable? And I thought, what if you were Jesus Christ's kid sister? That's how I came to write a humor piece about Jane Christ.

REBECK: That is a good idea.

ON WRITING: So where do ideas for pieces come from?

MARX: Sometimes you read the newspaper and something calls out for a humor piece. Not usually, unfortunately, but sometimes.

REBECK: Yeah, sometimes like that. Sometimes I sit on things for a long time and if it doesn't go away, if it's been sitting in my head for a couple years, then I think I probably should do it.

MARX: I have a list of ideas for humor pieces. I can usually come up with an idea, it's the next step that's harder for me—the digging ditches of writing and figuring it out day after day.

ON WRITING: Also, I would think with a humor piece in particular, it would be hard to know if it's a good idea for a piece or if it's just a good idea for a premise. I think with a play you would know that sooner.

MARX: Well, I think that's what I mean by when do you quit? I never know how many days to work on an idea before throwing it in the trash. I wrote a humor piece a couple years ago for *The New Yorker* called *Audio Tour*. It was about a girl getting revenge on a guy by going through his apartment and it was done in the form of an acoustiguide tour. I tried and I tried and I tried, and it wasn't working. But I just wanted it to work so much that I didn't give up. Other times I'm less determined and do give up, and then I wonder if I should have.

REBECK: Or sometimes it's surprising when you say, that was a really good idea. Why couldn't I figure that out?

MARX: Yeah. Sometimes what seems like the best idea is actually too obvious an idea and there's not that much nuance to it.

REBECK: Maybe that's it.

MARX: But then sometimes I think maybe I'm just not trying hard enough.

ON WRITING: Well, I think sometimes something is just a good premise.

MARX: What I think makes or breaks some humor pieces is length. So often humor pieces are just too long, they're belabored.

ON WRITING: Like sketch comedy, I think, too.

MARX: Yes, because sketch comedy and humor pieces are purer comedy. They're not like plays where humor

is used along with other things. So with a humor piece or a sketch, you have to know when you've exhausted that comic kernel because that's pretty much all you have.

ON WRITING: That's a really interesting point.

MARX: When I'm happy with my short pieces, they are mini long pieces. They make quicker turns because I don't want everything to be an elaboration of the first paragraph. I find the long form challenging. It doesn't come naturally to me. If I can see it on a page or a few pages, I know what's happening. When I write something long—and I've written movie scripts and I've even written plays—I have no idea if it's going to work as a whole.

REBECK: Right.

MARX: I know what works in bite-sized parts. But I find the whole mysterious.

ON WRITING: Theresa, do you feel more comfortable writing longer pieces?

MARX: Well, drama is a natural for you.

REBECK: Yeah, it really is. This year when I was struggling with that second novel, I finally said to my husband, "You know, I could fall out of a tree and write a play before I hit the ground. I don't understand why this is so hard." I've never in my life had writer's block until I was in the middle of this second novel, when I truly had the fantasy of picking up the computer and throwing it out the window and looking down and thinking what it would look like, and then it would be gone. Although it wouldn't be because I back it up.

MARX: One thing about plays—and novels too really, but less so—that I find hard and challenging is act two. And I blame my mother. I blame her for so much, but I figured out a way to blame her for this, too. When I was growing up and she asked me something, I'd start to answer and she'd say, "Just tell me. Was it good or bad for you?"

ON WRITING: Cut to the chase.

MARX: Cut to the chase. And because I was always afraid of boring her, I'm afraid of boring the audience. So I don't know what to do in act two. It just seems like that's when the people are going to go get the popcorn.

REBECK: Oh, you're talking about movie act two. Or any act two?

MARX: I mean any act two. I love starting and I love finishing. In the middle, I'm lost.

REBECK: I love act two, isn't that interesting?

MARX: You like act two?

REBECK: I love act two. Act one, I'm interested in it, there's something frothy about it for me always, that you're setting up the world. For me, finding the first laugh is always dicey because people don't know what the context is. In the theater you always talk about, if it's going to be a comedic evening, you have to land a laugh—really the first 30 seconds would be best.

ON WRITING: Wow.

REBECK: You can go a little longer than that, but the audience doesn't really know how to laugh yet because there's no context. It's a blank slate. And so, you have to set up circumstances and characters very quickly so that you can then drop something in that will get a chuckle, or hopefully a bigger laugh than that. And then you have to keep guiding them into the story with comedy.

ON WRITING: And act two is more fun for you?

REBECK: Act two is more fun for me because everything is set in place and then all of a sudden—

MARX: —There's stuff you're working with.

REBECK: Yeah, and now the laser swords come out. Act two is all about who's going to try to get what out of who? Who's going to lose? Who's going to win? Who's going to come back? It's very interesting to me, the action and the way people get into it.

ON WRITING: That is a very convincing argument for the fun of act two.

MARX: I know.

ON WRITING: Why is that not fun for you, Patty?

MARX: Well, because I like just saying, "Hello, come on in." And then I don't want to see them—

REBECK: —You don't like being mean to your characters.

MARX: I don't like escalating the tension. But it's also that, once I welcome the guests I don't like figuring out ways to entertain them. And even though I said earlier I don't like jokes that come out of nowhere, I suppose I do. In act one, you get to use those because there is nothing, it's all about set up.

REBECK: So if you toss in something funny—

MARX: —You can open with a one-liner.

REBECK: Right.

MARX: I like that and I like act three because it's solving the puzzle and I like puzzles. And also, then the guests are leaving.

REBECK: Right, you've got them out.

MARX: And act three could just refer to act one. It's that act two that is the hard work because you have to keep the guests amused. You know, one thing that will come out of this interview is that nobody will ever come to a party at my house.

REBECK: I think for me, I don't ever make it into act two unless the people are starting to do things that I'm not in control of. I think that's even what I was saying earlier that sometimes things collapse. I can make them do things, but at some point they have to start doing it themselves. And if they don't, then I can't keep doing it and that's why I stop.

MARX: Well, your characters clearly work harder than mine.

REBECK: Yeah, I think they do. I think you should really give them a little talk.

MARX: They just look to me for everything. I have to do all the work.

ON WRITING: Earlier, when Theresa was talking about first-person narration in the novel, it occurred to me to ask, is a first-person narrator more similar to a play than a third-person narrator?

REBECK: Yes. There's a one-word answer to that.

ON WRITING: Why?

MARX: Because it's a gathering of first-persons.

REBECK: It's like a long monologue. I was thinking about writing a novel and I thought, you can't write a novel, you can't do third person—because I've tried to do it before. And then I thought, well, if you wrote in the first person it would be like a long

monologue. You've written long monologues. And then the other part of my brain said, you haven't written a monologue that long. You've never written a one-person play. And then I thought, maybe I could write a one-person play as practice. And that was part of the reason I wrote *Bad Dates*. It was practice to see if I could write a novel. And let me tell you, writing a one-person play is so hard, so hard.

MARX: And then they rarely work, I think.

ON WRITING: One more question. At the beginning of this interview, Theresa said that initially she thought the energy of a book was so different from a play and then she discovered it wasn't that different. Can you elaborate on that?

REBECK: When I was just starting and I was trying to figure it out on my own I felt it was kind of bold to just dive into something as intimidating as a novel. And so, it took me a long time to get on the ride of it. And I felt like it was —

ON WRITING: —The ride?

REBECK: Yeah, moving ahead and making it off page 11 and onto page 12. And at some point I discovered for myself that as complicated as it was making decisions about what happens next and how do you shape the scene and what's the overall arc of these 20 pages, when I would slide into a scene when people were talking, it was a lot easier. And that was when the action caught fire for me and the writing came much more quickly and I realized it was because it was like writing a play. And once I realized there were places where drama and fiction overlapped stylistically so thoroughly, it was easier for me to feel like it was something that wasn't completely outside of my capabilities.

MARX: I don't find changing gears that hard, even changing from writing for adults to writing for kids. You're still telling a story, even if there are a different number of words on a page. You're still doing it pretty much the same way as you always do it. I mean, if you write in dialogue, you write in dialogue. Tony Kushner writes in blocks in a play.

REBECK: Right, that's true.

MARX: And I think you just kind of finesse your style into whatever format you're doing. It is scary to start something in a format you've never done before. But I think once you do it, you figure out you're writing the same thing, don't you in a way—or not?

REBECK: I don't know. My experience is it feels pretty different. I avoid it in a way I don't avoid plays. So, I think it's still scaring me. Maybe I just have to get more used to it. I like doing it.

MARX: Well, as I've said, I'm scared of long form even though I do it. Once you're finished, though, it's more satisfying in a way because it's so thick. OW

BIOGRAPHIES

Patricia Marx was the first woman on *The Harvard Lampoon*. Her writing has since appeared in *The New Yorker, The New York Times, Vogue,* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. Her books include *How to Regain Your Virginity*, *Blockbuster*, the novel *Him, Her, Him* Again*,* *The End of Him* and several children's books illustrated by cartoonist Roz Chast, most recently *Dot in Larryland*, winner of the fictitious Friedrich Medal named after her air conditioner.

Marx currently teaches sketch comedy at New York University and is a staff writer for *The New Yorker* with a regular column called *On and Off the Avenue*. Her unabashedly pithy novel will be published in 2011 by Scribner.

Theresa Rebeck's plays include *The Scene, The Water's Edge, Loose Knit, The Family of Mann, Spike Heels, Bad Dates, The Butterfly Collection, View of the Dome, Omnium Gatherum* (co-written, finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2003) and *Our House*.

In television, she has written for *Dream On*, *Brooklyn Bridge*, *L.A. Law*, *American Dreamer*, *Maximum Bob*, *First Wave*, *Third Watch*, *Canterbury's Law*, *Smith*, *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* and *NYPD Blue*. Her produced films include *Harriet the Spy*, *Gossip* and *Sunday on the Rocks*.

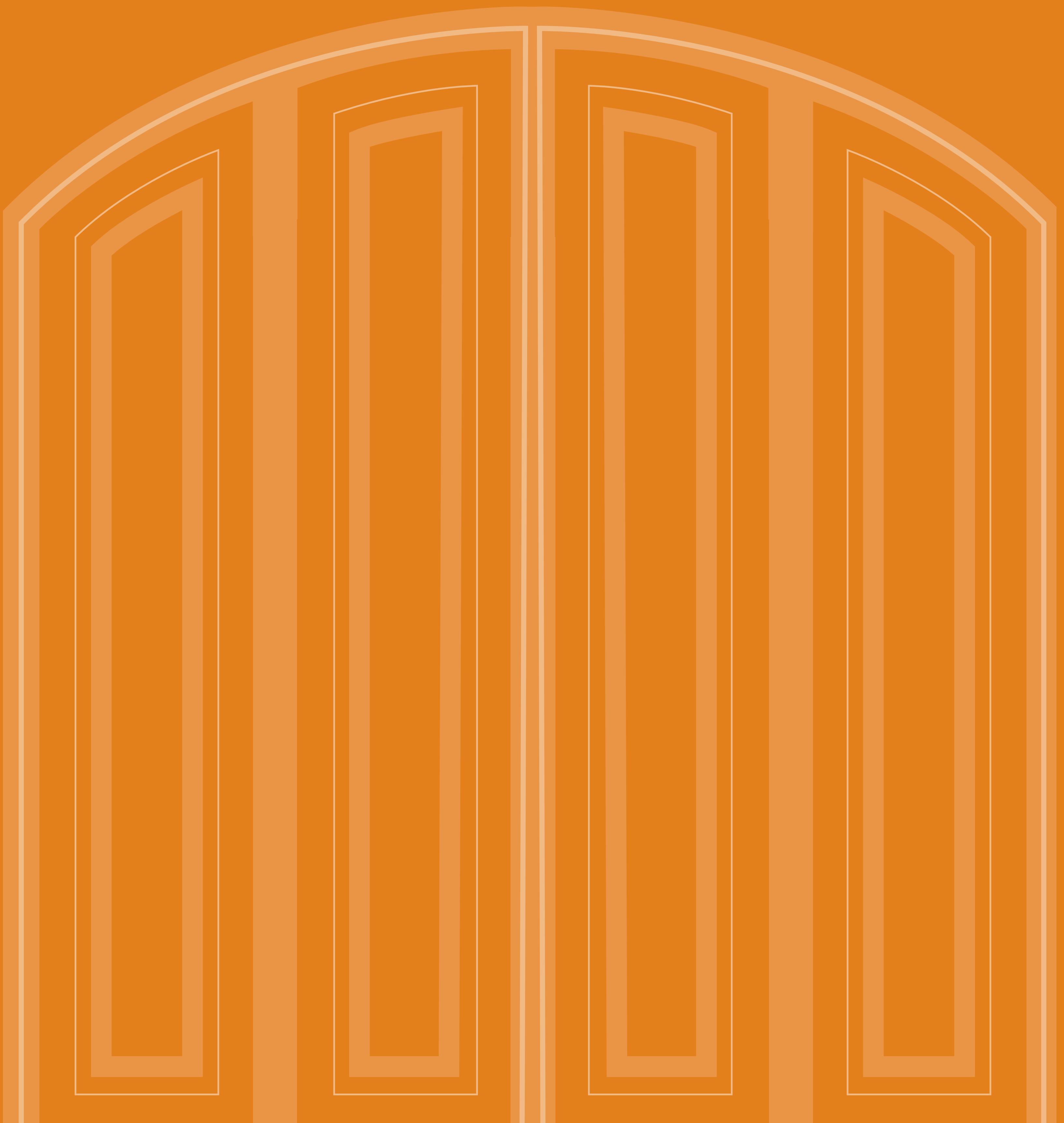
Rebeck's books include a collection of comic essays called *Free Fire Zone* and her novel, *Three Girls and Their Brother*. She has also written for *American Theater Magazine*. Her plays are published by Smith and Kraus as well as by Samuel French, Inc.

For her work on *NYPD Blue*, Rebeck has been awarded the Mystery Writer of America's Edgar Award, the Writers Guild of America award for Episodic Drama, the Hispanic Images Imagen Award and the Peabody. She has won the National Theatre Conference Award for *The Family of Mann*, and was awarded the William Inge New Voices Playwriting Award in 2003 for *The Bells*. Her play *Mauritius* received the 2007 IRNE Award for Best New Play as well as the Elliot Norton Award.

Her newest play, a Roundabout Theatre Company production of *The Understudy*, opened in November 2009, and her new novel *Twelve Rooms with a View* will be published in 2010 by Random House.

The Back Page

AMERICA'S GOT TRAGEDY
BY GINA GIONFRIDDO



America's Got Tragedy was commissioned and produced Off-Broadway by the stageFARM as part of *Spin*, an evening of short plays.

The set of a TV game show. The host, BRYAN SEABREAST enters with enormous, unnatural energy...

BRYAN Hello, America! Yes! America in the house... America at home... Hello!

I want to hear a round of applause before we start... Can I hear that? I want a round of applause for you guys... Yeah, let's... You guys deserve that, you really do... (as applause dies down) Thank you. Thank you for being here. I'm Bryan Seabreast. For those of you who don't know, the show is *America's Got Tragedy*. You guys are amazing. You proved that *America's Got Talent*. Tonight, we are gonna prove that the American people are not just a one-trick pony. You've got talent, but you've got tragedy, too. Yes. You do.

Here's how the game is gonna work. We're gonna bring out two contestants who believe their lives are tragic. We're gonna put 'em head to head... squeeze all the juice out of their stories. Then our judge is gonna give them their scores and one of these sad bastards gets to go home with a big bag of money.

So let me introduce our judge... She is a professor of English literature at Smith College. She'll tell you her specialty is Shakespeare, but I'm gonna let you in on a little secret... Her real specialty is busting my balls. Give her a warm welcome... Dr. Elizabeth Charney...

During the applause, Dr. Elizabeth Charney enters and takes her seat. Grave, unimpressed, ready to work.

BRYAN We are like the craziest, most mismatched TV hosts ever. We have jokes like she says, "I like Coriolanus" and I'm like, "Whoa, whoa... TMI! You can't say that on TV!" It. Gets. Wild. So, Liz, tell the people at home... Why is tragedy fun and not just a big huge downer buzzkill?

ELIZABETH True tragedy... that which conforms to the rules of art established by Aristotle and shaped by Shakespeare...

BRYAN Blah blah blah... It's a half-hour show. Catharsis.

ELIZABETH A well-crafted tragedy excites pity and fear in the spectator. When these unpleasant emotions reach their proper pitch, the spectator must yield to them. The weeping, the wringing of hands... This is catharsis.

BRYAN It's an orgasm of the emotions. Right?

ELIZABETH Wrong.

BRYAN Yes... It is. It's why I go see horror movies like *Saw*. While I'm there, I'm like... "God, that guy's gonna cut his foot off! I hate this!" But after the movie... I feel so friggin' chill and blissed out. Like after a really intense workout, you know? A nice hot shower, a Bacardi Ice... Catharsis.

ELIZABETH (after a beat) I don't even know how to respond.

BRYAN Stumped the judge! Yeah! OK, let's start the show. Our first contestant is an Army National Guardsman who died this past Thursday in Iraq. If that isn't tragic, I don't know what is... Please welcome, Matt Stafford.

Matt Stafford comes out, waves to audience, and takes his seat. His energy is genial, easy, happy to be there.

BRYAN Now, Matt, you're probably thinking... "I'm dead; I was in Iraq... I don't know who else is back there, but... You. Can't. Touch. This." Matt, don't count your money just yet. Your opponent had a pretty rough year, too, and she got more news coverage than all you dead soldiers combined. Who is it? It's Britney, bitch.

Britney Spears comes out and takes her seat next to Matt. Poised, pleasant, there's a sweetly lobotomized quality to her that doesn't seem odd until we realize she can't shake it.

BRYAN OK. So not to stir things up right off the bat, but... Matt, Britney kinda stole your spotlight this year. You must be pretty pissed off.

MATT Yeah, it's messed up, but... It's not her fault. (to Britney; a bit starstruck) Nice to meet you. I'm Matt.

BRITNEY Hi, I'm Britney. Are you really dead?

MATT Yeah... (off her distress) But it's OK...

BRYAN Can't ignore the elephant in the room, Matt. Death. All death is tragic...

ELIZABETH All death is not tragic! There are rules!

BRYAN (ignoring her) Matt, what can I say? You seem kind of OK with being dead. I guess that's what makes you a hero.

ELIZABETH No! That is not what makes him a hero.

BRYAN Unbunch your panties, Liz. We're not playing the game yet. So. Death... What was that like?

MATT Bryan, when I first realized I was dead, I was pissed. But then I thought about it and... That's just not how I was raised. Whenever me and my brothers felt sorry for ourselves, my mom told us to think about people who had it worse.

BRYAN Worse... than... dead.

MATT One thing people don't understand about this war... The number of dead soldiers is really small compared to the number of injured soldiers. We're medically advanced enough to save thousands of guys who would have died in, say, Vietnam.

BRYAN And that's what you fought this war for: this amazing country where people do not have to die.

MATT Not... exactly. See, I saw guys go home with, like, no legs, no arms... hunks of metal in their brains makin' them retarded, slow or blind. And me personally? I would rather be dead than some sad, gross shell of who I used to be.

Britney is transfixed.

ELIZABETH That's not very heroic.

MATT I'm just being honest...

BRITNEY I understand. You didn't want people calling you lucky while your soul ached for death.

MATT Exactly.

BRYAN Well, this is starting to bum me out, so I'm gonna start the game. Liz, remind us what defines a tragic hero.

ELIZABETH The tragic hero is a good, but deeply flawed individual...

BRYAN (points at Britney, then Matt) You yes, you not sure yet...

ELIZABETH ... who suffers a great fall through their own bad judgment...

BRYAN (pointing, again, first at Britney then at Matt) Definitely you... you not so much...

ELIZABETH ... leading to a devastating reversal of fortune...

BRYAN You both got that.

ELIZABETH Flaw, mistake, fall, reversal... and finally, recognition. The hero learns from their mistake.

BRYAN (to Britney) That's where you're definitely gonna lose points. OK, death before beauty. Matt, you go ahead and start.

MATT OK. Um... My name is Matt. I'm 25. I'm from Florida, youngest of six kids. All boys...

BRITNEY My kids are all boys.

MATT I know. I grew up... I guess you'd call it working poor. Money was tight. Scary tight, to be honest.

BRITNEY Me, too!

BRYAN Britney, you'll have your chance.

MATT My dad worked his whole life for shitty wages because he had no education. All us kids saw how unhappy that made him...

BRITNEY Me, too! Did your dad drink so much there was never enough food in your house?

MATT No...

BRITNEY Did you and your mom move to New York... so you could dance and sing and save your family's house?

MATT No... I think that's your life.

BRITNEY Oh.

MATT We never lost our house.

BRITNEY Neither did we! I joined The Mickey Mouse Club and paid our mortgage.

MATT Wow. How old were you?

BRITNEY Ten.

MATT Wow. Well to make a long story short... My brothers had all joined the Guard to get money for school, and it worked out great for them, so I joined up. My bad luck... I joined the summer before 9/11.

BRYAN Now THAT is tragic.

ELIZABETH Bad luck is unfortunate. It is not tragic.

MATT Uhhh… I'm dead, ma'am. I think it's pretty fucking tragic.

ELIZABETH In tragedy, the hero falls, not by accident, but because of a mistake emanating from a flaw in his character.

MATT But… That's what this war is, isn't it—a mistake emanating from a character flaw?

ELIZABETH Not your character. To die for another man's mistake—

MATT —Is fucking tragic.

ELIZABETH It is terrible. But it is not tragic. We do not write plays about MacDuff's children; we write them about the man who ordered their slaughter.

MATT You want tragic? I did three tours in Iraq—

BRITNEY You did tours? Me, too.

MATT Different kind of tours. Three tours… not a scratch on me. I got out of the service summer of '07, none the worse for fucking wear. So I re-enlisted. I died my first week back in Iraq.

BRYAN Wait. You volunteered to go back? Wow. Liz, question: Can stupidity be a tragic flaw?

BRITNEY Don't call him stupid!

MATT It's OK. Look, my girlfriend got pregnant. They offered me a big re-enlistment bonus. A ton of other benefits… health insurance, living allowance. How could I say no to that?

ELIZABETH At last! A discordant note elevates your most pedestrian story. The good soldier undone by greed…

MATT Greed? I lost my life for fifteen grand and health insurance.

BRITNEY How old is your baby?

MATT (to Britney) My girlfriend had a miscarriage, so…

BRITNEY Oh, no!

BRYAN Wait, you re-enlisted to support a family that doesn't exist?

MATT It existed at one time. God, you people are cold.

BRITNEY How did you die?

MATT I was shot.

BRITNEY Just like my grandmother.

MATT Someone… shot your grandmother?

BRITNEY No. She shot herself with a rifle. Because she lost her baby. She pulled the trigger with her big toe.

MATT (after a beat) That's not true, is it?

BRYAN Matt, I'm afraid it is. Now, Britney may be dumb… but she just played her suicide-grandmother card at a pivotal moment in your story. Matt: Is she trying to steal this game?

MATT I don't know. (back to Britney) God, that's horrible.

BRYAN Matt, we're gonna give you one last chance to convince us that your story is more tragic than Britney's.

MATT Uhhhh… How about she's not dead and I am?

BRITNEY I wish I were dead.

ELIZABETH If you killed someone, tell us now. If you committed atrocities, you can take the lead.

MATT I didn't do any of that.

BRYAN Matt, the judge is very stuck on the whole flaw/mistake thing.

MATT I didn't kill anyone.

BRITNEY My mother killed someone.

MATT OK, no way that is true.

BRYAN Matt, I'm afraid it is. Britney's mother hit a child on a bicycle in 1975 and he died.

MATT Oh, my God… That's horrible.

ELIZABETH (rapture mounting…) Britney Spears threatens to steal this game! Matthew! A tragic woman is rare, sweet fruit. Three tragic women in one cursed house… This is hard to beat.

BRYAN Last chance, Matt. If you had a little drug problem over there, gotta tell us now.

MATT No! This game is fucked up. I don't care if I win.

BRYAN Liz, give him his score.

ELIZABETH Your score is a seven. Out of a possible 10. It's a five of a story. I gave you two extra points for being dead.

BRYAN A seven. Ow. I'm sure you hoped for better. But the game's not over yet. It's Britney's turn. Liz, where does Britney stand?

ELIZABETH Ms. Spears has an immense advantage. In classic tragedy, the hero is a prosperous individual who falls from great heights. Mr. Stafford, to be blunt, was poor as dirt until he toppled into a gravedigger's hole. That's just not very far to fall.

MATT Hey!

BRYAN Matt, You had your turn. Now, Britney. There may be people in this audience who only know you as a crass, bloated, frappuccino-swilling freak show. I want to remind them... You had a major career. You started out a white trash swamp thing like this guy and you built a fucking empire! 83 million records... 370 million dollars in endorsements... You. Fell. Far. In 2002, Forbes ranked you the most powerful celebrity in the world. Four years later you're hooking up with paparazzi in gas station bathrooms. Britney, what happened?

BRITNEY That isn't true. It was a Quiznos and I just talked to him. The one I kissed in the bathroom was at a Walmart.

BRYAN Does she score points for relatability, Liz? Most celebrities party at clubs we can't get into. Britney's doin' her thing in public restrooms. Don't we sorta love that about her?

ELIZABETH No one loves a woman who gives up her children.

BRITNEY I didn't give them up.

BRYAN Liz, she's got the fall from great heights. She's got the tragic flaw in spades, and talk about reversal of fortune... Wow. It seems to me the "recognition" is where she may lose points.

MATT Can we just give her the money and end this? You've called us both trash. The judge said Britney's unlovable...

BRYAN Liz, he makes a good point. Do you hate Britney too much to judge this game?

Elizabeth stands. This is her moment, long-awaited.

ELIZABETH When I was a little girl, I had a Malibu Barbie doll. I was a thick, dark child with hair like Brillo. I would stroke my Barbie's shiny, golden mane and I would cry... because I didn't look like Barbie and I knew life would be much, much easier if I did.

BRITNEY That's what you think.

Bryan holds up his hand to silence Britney.

ELIZABETH Britney, you were my Barbie come to life. And I cursed God when I realized that beauty was not your only gift. You could dance. And sing. Surely, I thought, your first record was a fluke. But no, it wasn't. Ooops, you did it again. And again and again. Britney Spears, I confess: I wanted you to fall. In my dreams, I was Tonya Harding to your Nancy Kerrigan. I smashed your kneecaps to slow you down, but Britney... I. Never. Wanted. This.

Bryan turns back to the contestants and opens his mouth to speak. But Elizabeth isn't done.

ELIZABETH Britney Spears, I have seen the error of my ways. How dark this world had to become for me to have my own recognition: This world needs beauty. This world needs you. Britney, your self-defecation is appalling to nature and an affront to the gods who made you. Britney Spears, the world needs you and I need you. Save yourself.

MATT (after a beat) Does that mean Britney won?

ELIZABETH Recognition, Britney. I did it. So can you.

BRYAN Britney, you are poised to win this game. What have you learned?

BRITNEY (after a beat) I think I learned a lot of things.

ELIZABETH The loss of your children! Take responsibility! GIVE US OUR CATHARSIS NOW.

Matt takes a step towards Britney. Soldier's instinct. There's a shade of rabid dog to Elizabeth's demand.

BRITNEY But I'm not responsible for that. I didn't give them up; they were taken from me.

MATT Just say you were selfish, we can end this...

BRITNEY Selfish? Selfish?! My father was a drunk for the first 20 years of my life. We were this close to homeless, my mother said, "You've gotta turn this around." And I did. I did... and I was happy to do it.

Because that's what good children do. They help their parents.

I love my children and I didn't do anything wrong. The "court appointed monitor" that judge put in my house... That fucking traitor whore told the judge I "refused to explore a child-centric sleep schedule."

MATT I don't even know what that means.

BRITNEY I didn't know either! It means put them to bed at 8 o'clock.

ELIZABETH You put caffeinated soda in your babies' bottles to make them stay up late with you. You woke them in the middle of the night to go to Starbucks.

BRITNEY So? My mother gave me soda all the time. You think I didn't have a Mountain Dew or two in me when I was paying our rent on the kiddie pageant circuit? Child-centric sleep schedule? Bitch, please. Where was the fucking child monitor for me?

MATT Wait. I'm confused. Why were you taking your kids to Starbucks if you had a nanny?

BRITNEY (after a beat) Because I have rights. (starting to break down) Love is a human right!

MATT Oh, no. I didn't mean to make you cry.

BRITNEY (trying to maintain control) I'm a good person. I have been working since I could walk. I'm a good person, and love is a human right, and I am not asking for much. If I have a nightmare, someone needs to wake up and comfort me. And I do not want to stand in the Starbucks line alone behind a couple with their hands in each others' ass pockets. I have rights!

Me and Kevin was just like me and my mom. I didn't care how much of my money they spent. All I asked them to do in return was be there. Be there WHEN I WANTED THEM. And they couldn't do it. So I had some kids.

BRYAN That is the most chilling confession I've ever heard.

ELIZABETH At least Susan Smith put her boys in car seats.

MATT Are you both insane? She just wanted to hang out with her kids. At weird hours... on boats without life jackets... So what? Is it a crime to love too much?

BRITNEY (falling for him) I don't think so.

ELIZABETH Britney Spears, your lack of self-knowledge is appalling. You regard your children as servants to your needs. You've given no thought to how you should serve them.

BRITNEY But they're supposed to serve me. That's what children are for.

MATT You should probably... stop talking now.

BRITNEY Oh, get real. Women have babies to fill their holes!

MATT Whoa... I think that came out wrong...

BRITNEY (indicating) Holes, here. In the heart. If I didn't need them to fill my holes, I wouldn't have had them. Why are you all looking at me like I'm crazy?? No one does something for nothing. Anyone who's gonna stand up here, say they had a baby to make a baby happy... That's nonsense. You want to make a baby happy, there's plenty of babies in Africa who could use your help. No. I had two cesareans; they carved those babies out of me with a knife! I lost my body and I lost my mind... I didn't go through all that for them; I went through it for me. I need love or I AM GOING TO DIE!

Matt grabs Britney and kisses her passionately. When they break out of their kiss...

BRITNEY My father controls my money. I can't even buy gum without his permission. And that may never change.

MATT That wouldn't bother me, but... I'm... dead.

BRITNEY I forgot!

MATT Yeah... I think this may be my deathbed hallucination or you off your meds...

BRITNEY I really am tragic. I finally met a boy who loves me for me and he's dead.

BRYAN Speaking of money... Judge, who wins the game? Who is more tragic?

ELIZABETH (In closing...) Neitzsche said of tragedy... We shudder at the hero's suffering even as we divine from it a higher overmastering joy.

What can I say, Mr. Stafford? You died in an embarrassing and unpopular war. We cherish World War II's great generation. The troops in Iraq... Frankly, you make us uncomfortable.

Britney is a sociopath, but her awful story stirs joy in our breasts. Like King Lear, her arrogance, folly and bad parenting horrify us. We will live better and love more fully for having witnessed her fall. The more tragic contestant... is Britney.

A melancholic Dr. Charney leaves the stage, unable to make eye contact with Britney.

BRYAN OK. Britney. We've got a check for you—I mean, for your dad—backstage. We worked it out. You'll give it to charity... Be some nice PR. God knows you need it. Matt... (extends his hand) Have a good... afterlife or whatever. Don't haunt my house. (with a wave and a wink to the audience...) 'Night everybody.

Bryan leaves the stage.

BRITNEY I wonder if this is in my head or yours. (after a beat) Probably yours. I'm not very smart.

Matt touches her cheek tenderly.

MATT You're very smart. And you're a good mom. I wasn't just saying that.

BRITNEY I don't think your death was stupid.

MATT Thanks.

They look at each other. They could kiss again, but... why? It'll never work out.

BRITNEY My loneliness is killing me...

MATT (taking her hand) I must confess... (turning to audience) I still believe.

It's a statement of hopeful defiance. A spit in the eye of despair. Taking strength from his lead, Britney—still holding Matt's hand—turns to the audience as well.

BRITNEY I still believe.

Blackout. End of play.