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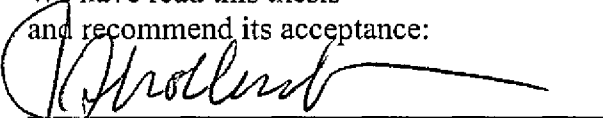
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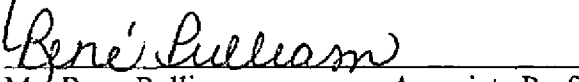


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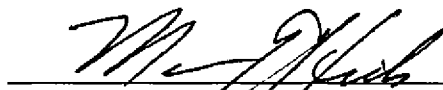


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AN ATTEMPT AT BALANCE:
STAGING GUARE'S *THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES*

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Fine Arts
Degree
The University of Mississippi

Richard J. Albert

May, 2003

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my major advisor and mentor, Dr. Scott McCoy for his tenacious tutelage in the practical craft of directing; his colleague, Dr. Jim Shollenberger for his patience in promoting the seemingly lost art of scholarship; and finally, Professor Pulliam, for her much needed advice and corrective instruction.

Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude toward Doug and Rebecca Rutledge for their suggestions on writing a supportive academic work; personally, to my mother and father, who have always supported my ambitions in performance art; and to Michele Cuomo, former faculty member of the University, whose productive feedback opened many doors to a greater understanding of theatre.

ABSTRACT

This paper is an account of the fully realized production of John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves*, presented at the University of Mississippi, November 19, 20, 21, and 22, in the Studio Theater of Bryant Hall.

The first chapter offers a brief history on the play, including some reviews of both the original production and the revival. The second and third chapters offer an analysis of the play and a journal of the production, respectively. The fourth and final chapter gives an evaluation of the work done.

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INTRODUCTION

The House of Blue Leaves was not the first choice for my thesis show. We, the faculty and myself, had decided on Ruth and Augustus Goetz's tight drama, *The Heiress*. Although the choice was met with favor by most, the costume professor, Ms. Rainey raised concerns about constructing nineteen period costumes from scratch. In conference with her I told her I could find another play, and she welcomed the suggestion. Later on that month, she asked me what show I had chosen. I had been tardy in deciding. I suggested Guare's play, and she enthusiastically agreed, saying it would allow the designers a great opportunity.

I recount this story to suggest that the choice was, in part, unconscious. This would seem to be an awkward way to begin a process, but, as it turned out, my spur of moment decision revealed a bit about my relationship with the play. I had seen the play in three different productions, and I felt all three had failed. Yet, I did not know how I would be able to better those productions myself. I see now that on the spur of the moment, I challenged myself. At that time I had no idea how I would meet the directorial demands set forth in the script.

The first production of *The House of Blue Leaves* that I saw was one of my earliest theater experiences. My father and I had traveled to the State University of New York at New Paltz, where a production of *Blue Leaves* was to be presented. My sister stage-managed. I remember a few things quite clearly. I remember Artie, the protagonist, smoking. It suggests in the play that he smokes, but I did not recall that Artie smoked so clearly as in this production. Even more so, he smoked lethargically and

thoughtfully. How does this fit in the show, once referred to as a “Marx Brothers Tragedy”? I feel it does not. Artie is written as a manic showman, not as someone from an O’Neill drama.

The second production was staged at The Ohio State University. This production came closest to the playwright’s intention of swiftness (Mr. Guare refers to it being a farce rather a comedy) but failed to have any menace or terror or sadness that the show requires. I knew the cast members personally, and that always distorts the true appreciation of the theatrical experience. I recall Bananas climbing the gate that covers the back window, and the window was huge! The set, for that matter, was cavernous – too big to be any apartment that you would typically find in Sunnyside, Queens.

Oddly enough, the Broadway revival, which received copious raves, was the most obvious failure. It was performed as if it were a Neil Simon comedy. Elements of terror and sadness were not in the production at all. It was a self-termed “laugh riot”. Yet, in the end, when Artie kills his wife, it seemed to come from another place. The ending, as written, does not belong. It does not belong, that is, when the production side steps the prescriptive mix of both tragedy and comedy. After the production was finished, two audience members, in the seats ahead and to the right, got up and announced to each other that they really liked the show. “Except,” they agreed, “the ending.”

In several passages in the play, especially in the author’s stage directions, he clearly asks for some sort of balance between perceived opposites. The most obvious one in his description of Ronnie at the beginning of Act Two: “a cross between a gargoyle

and a cherub.” Did any of the productions attempt doing this? Does the play, as written, not meet with the author’s own recipe? Can the play be done that way at all?

This paper examines the process of directing *The House of Blue Leaves* with the intent of achieving a balance. The balance that is sought in the performance of this so-called black comedy, where four murders take place, dreams are destroyed, friends are betrayed, depression mocked, divinity violated. Those bleak aspects must be countered with the zany, the run-around farcical, the laugh-out-loud comedic situation, the parody, the author’s ridicule and the one-liner.

It is not that opposites cannot be juxtaposed easily. They can. How the juxtaposition works in a theatrical progression is key. Recently, the international theatre has offered us this perceived blend most recently in the works of the Irish playwright Martin McDonagh. In several of his most famous works, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Lonesome West*, critics have garnered the author with the achievement of this balance. Yet a closer curiosity points to another element of theatre. When reading the play in our recent Contemporary Theatre class, a good number of those who read the script disliked it. This may point to an emphasis in the playing of black comedy, rather than to the writing of it. The craft of the actors and director may be the primary supporter of the presentation of this genre. This point will be discussed within this paper. I hope to support my ideas with actual circumstances from the production of *The House of Blue Leaves*, as well as with research and with commentary from critics and faculty members.

CHAPTER ONE

History of the Play

The House of Blue Leaves had its debut Off-Broadway on February 10, 1971 at The Truck and Warehouse Theater. It had a subsequent revival which began at the Mitzi E Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Center in New York City, after which it moved to the larger Vivian Beaumont Theatre in the same complex, only to move again the following October to the Plymouth Theatre, a Broadway house.

Throughout its journey, critics were divided over the play's artistic merits. Some reviewers did not know what to make of the play's mix of black comedy, farce, realistic drama, and social commentary. They maintained that its comedic elements undermined the serious issues of the play.¹ The revival was met with a great number of favorable notices, but some critics, clearly in the minority, still held the play's darkness was not brought forth enough.

Guare was inspired to write *The House of Blue Leaves* in 1965, while traveling in Europe. He arrived in Rome; a destination that had been promoted by the nuns of his childhood, at the very time the Pope was making his first visit to the United States. He imagined the excitement his parents would have felt as the Pope traveled through their neighborhood. Autobiographical elements Guare has identified in the play include Ronnie's speech about auditioning to play Huck Finn, based on Guare's own childhood interaction with the uncle Billy Grady, the casting director. Artie was a zookeeper because Guare's father referred to Wall Street, his place of employment, as the zoo.

¹ David Galens and Lynn Spampinato, "The House of Blue Leaves." *Drama for Students, Vol. 8*, (Detroit: Gales, 1998) p. 71

The first act of *The House of Blue Leaves* was presented at the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights' Conference in 1966. It took several years for Guare to complete the play and get it produced. Guare rewrote the second act many times and attributes part of his difficulty to his lack of technical skill in writing for a large number of characters in a full-length play. His earlier works were mostly shorter pieces with only two or three characters in a scene. Following the failure of *Cop-Out* on Broadway, producer Warren Lyons decided to present *The House of Blue Leaves* Off-Broadway. Money raised for a Broadway production had to be returned and new funds found for the revised plan. An Actors Equity strike in November 1970 interrupted rehearsals and threatened to spoil the production.

Finally opening on February 10, 1971, *The House of Blue Leaves* had a successful run that ended the following December when a fire damaged the theatre. *The House of Blue Leaves* was honored as the best American play of the season with a *Village Voice* "Obie" (Off-Broadway) award, New York Drama Critics Circle award, and Outer Critics Award. The touring production won the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award. Reviews of the play were not as consistently positive as the awards and long run might suggest. Some critics complained that Guare did not know how to control his imagination and shape his material, a theme that would recur in reviews of Guare's later plays. John Simon, for example, said the play was "an exasperatingly undisciplined exercise" at certain times and disliked Guare's refusal to stick to a single genre.² Many reviewers were confused or uneasy with Guare's mix of genres, concerned that in combining farce with tragedy Guare invited a mean-spirited laughter. In one of the

² John Simon, "The Sorcerer and His Apprentices." New York, 1 March 1971, p. 58

strongest attacks on the play and playwright, *New York Times* theater critic Julius Novick exclaimed that the play was “a long, sick joke.”³ However, most reviewers, even those troubled by the mixed tone, admired the humor and originality of the piece.⁴

The play also received significant international recognition with a French translation called *Un Pape a New-York*, and a subsequent production in Paris, at the Theatre de al Gaité-Montparnasse, directed by Michel Fagadau, on November 4, 1972. Guare later wrote a screenplay for a film version of the play, but the project did not materialize because Carlo Ponti abandoned it when Sophia Loren was not available to be cast in the movie.⁵

The House of Blue Leaves was an even bigger hit when revived in March, 1986. For the new management of the Lincoln Center Theatre, it proved to be a surprise early success. The second production presented under the team of Gregory Mosher and Bernard Gersten, *The House of Blue Leaves* opened in the small Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre. Through Mosher and Gersten had planned to leave the larger Vivian Beaumont Theatre dark during their first season, the popularity of the production caused them to change their minds and transfer *Blue Leaves* into the larger space. The following October, the production was moved again to the Plymouth Theatre, a Broadway house. During the latter part of the twentieth century, the play has been staged worldwide and

³ Julius Novick, “Very Funny – Or a Long Sick Joke?” *New York Times*, 21 February 1971, sec 2, p. 9

⁴ Jane Katherine Curry, *John Guare: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002) p. 50

⁵ Gene A. Plunka, *The Black Comedy of John Guare*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002) p. 73

has become quite popular with college and repertory theater groups.⁶ The play's creation and the journey it took to Broadway are as odd and particular as the play itself.

The seeds of the play had been sown early in Guare's life.⁷ John Guare was born in New York City, on February 5, 1938, the only child of Edward and Helen Claire Guare. Guare was a voracious reader. His parents brought him to the theater quite often and he was captivated by Broadway musicals.⁸

Raised in a strict Catholic household, Guare attended daily mass with his mother.⁹ He attended Saint Joan of Arc Grammar School in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York, from 1944 to 1952. The nuns who taught him always talked of their ultimate dream to visit the Vatican to be blessed by His Holiness, the Pope. In the "forward" to *The House of Blue Leaves*, Guare wrote,

The nuns would say, [sic] If only we could get to Rome, to have His Holiness touch us, just to see him, capital H, the vicar of Christ on Earth . . . Oh, dear God, help me get to Rome . . . and touch the Pope. No sisters ever yearned for Moscow the way those sisters and their pupils yearned for Rome.¹⁰

Ironically, in October of 1965, it was the Pope who came to them. In a rare event in history, the Pope came to New York to plead for peace in Vietnam at the United Nations. More ironic still, Guare was in Rome at the time. He found a newspaper, and on the front page was a picture of the Pope – on Queens Boulevard! (The Pope en route to Manhattan had to travel through Queens.) He thought about his parents and he imagined how special, how "once-in-lifetime," the event must have been to them. His

⁶ Ibid, p. 74

⁷ Plunka, p. 69

⁸ Galens, p. 72

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ John Guare, "Forward." *The House of Blue Leaves*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. x

parents wrote to him while abroad and confirmed how thrilled they were to be a part of that special day. Guare wrote about the experience: “And I started thinking about my parents and me. . . and what I was doing with my life and what were they doing with theirs, and that’s how plays get started.”¹¹

The very day he received the letter, Guare began writing the play. Guare later noted,

If I had been in New York, I would have discounted that Papal day and sniffed at my parent’s response. Being [abroad] allowed me for the first time to look into my life, into the world of my parents and realize that no is life ordinary.¹²

The author claims the play is autobiographical, if only because “everything happened in the play in one way or another.”¹³ For instance, Guare’s father worked as a clerk on the New York Stock Exchange, yet he always referred to it as “a zoo.” Artie Shaughnessy, the father figure in the play, is a zookeeper.

A clearer autobiographical relationship to the play is seen at the beginning of Act Two when Artie’s seventeen-year-old son, Ronnie, tells of an event from his youth. Guare tells us that it is “an exact word-for-word reportage of what happened between [my uncle] Billy and me at our first meeting.” His uncle was Bill Grady, his mother’s brother and casting director at MGM, who had come to New York for an “ideal American boy” to star in a musical adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn* that would also star Gene Kelly and Danny Kaye. Plunka describes

¹¹ Guare, p. xi

¹² Jackson R. Bryer, ed, *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995) p. 76

¹³ Op cit

Only eight years old, John Guare believed that fate would choose him to be Huck and thus to accompany Billy back to Hollywood. Just before John was called out of his room to meet his uncle, suitcase in hand ready to go to Hollywood, it dawned on him that you had to audition for a part in a movie. John went into a wild routine that included singing, dancing, laughing, and standing on his head, finishing the performance with a deep bow.¹⁴

When Billy visited that day, he drove up to their house in Jackson Heights in a limousine. He walked into the Guare's humble apartment dressed to the hilt in a cashmere suit, with a bombshell of woman in tow. The vision was left with the impressionable youth, and he wondered how these two men, who grew up in the same neighborhood, could end up so differently. This evolved into the contrast between Artie and Billy Einhorn, the theatrical name he gave his uncle.¹⁵

Guare conjured the three nuns that appear in the second act from another childhood experience. Three nuns appeared at his doorstep one afternoon to discuss his lackluster class work with his mother.¹⁶ Guare reminisced to Patricia Bosworth of the *New York Times*, "My mother was so upset she served them martinis in the living room. Naturally they stayed all afternoon. Finally, mother got rid of them by offering them a thermos of martinis to take back to the convent."¹⁷ In the re-creation of the event on stage, the nuns ask for, and are handed, beer.

As far as the autobiographical nature of the rest of the play the author admits later in the aforementioned preface, "some of it could have happened, and some of it, luckily,

¹⁴ Plunka, p. 70

¹⁵ Plunka, p. 70

¹⁶ Plunka, p. 70

¹⁷ Patricia Bosworth, "Yes for a Young Man's Fantasies." *New York Times*, 7 March 1971, sec 2, p.12

never happened.¹⁸ This is good to know, since the son, drawn from his own persona, goes AWOL and attempts to kill the Pope; Bananas, the mother in the play, is chronically depressed and believes she's a dog; and Artie, who is having an affair with his downstairs neighbor, kills his wife at the end of the play. It seems the autobiographical elements set a wonderful groundwork for the play, but, as far as the major events in the play are concerned, the work is mostly a clear departure from his actual past.

Guare began writing plays at the age of eleven. After graduating from St. John's Preparatory School in Brooklyn, Guare earned his B.A. from Georgetown University in 1960.¹⁹ The songs in *The House of Blue Leaves* were taken from *The Thirties Girl*, a play he had written in 1960 as an undergraduate at Georgetown.²⁰ He obtained his M.F.A. in drama from Yale in 1963.

Guare wrote the first act of *The House of Blue Leaves* relatively quickly, in the early spring of 1966.²¹ After he returned to New York in 1966, the first act of the play was staged that summer at the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theatre Playwright's Conference in Waterford, Connecticut, with Guare performing the role of Artie. Then tragedy struck, and difficulties ensued. As Plunka relates,

. . . when Guare's father passed away, the impetus to work on the remainder of the play was lost. Guare wrote eight or nine drafts of the second act but then turned to other projects that were more tenable. He was especially having difficulty writing his first full-length play that included several well-rounded character portraits.²²

¹⁸ Guare, xi

¹⁹ Galens, p. 72

²⁰ Plunka, p. 69

²¹ Plunka, p. 70

²² Plunka, p.70

Meanwhile, Guare's producer, Warren Lyons, trying to find a director and a cast for the play, had passed the script to Maureen Stapleton, Gwen Verdon, Anne Bancroft, Gerldine Page, Anne Jackson, Jason Robards, Eli Wallach, Mickey Rooney, Gene Hackman, and director Jose Quintero. Nearly all of them praised the distinctive script, but were unavailable due to previous commitments.²³

The second act finally jelled in 1969 when Guare, in London at the time, saw Laurence Olivier perform in Strindberg's *Dance of Death* and in Feydeau's *A Flea in Her Ear* on successive nights and had an epiphany. Guare wrote of the experience of seeing the performances back to back:

The savage intensity of the first blended into the maniacal intensity of the second, and somewhere in my head *Dance of Death* became the same play as *A Flea in Her Ear*. Why shouldn't Strindberg and Feydeau get married, at least live together, and *The House of Blue Leaves* be their child?²⁴

Guare tossed aside the other versions of the second act, and began anew. He went on to write, "I think the only playwrighting rule is that you have to learn your craft so that you can put on stage plays you would like to see." After the purging of the failed second acts, he said, "for the first time, I understood what I wanted"²⁵ He also realized that farce was the ideal medium to make the play work.

Problems with the second act still plagued him. The most nagging for Guare was relating the first act, written before his "epiphany," to the second. One of the most glaring chores was having the characters that peopled the first half tell everything to those

²³Warren Lyons, "No More Crying the Blue Leaves Blues." *New York Times*, 25 July 1971, sec. 2 p. 1,

²⁴ Guare, vi

²⁵ Guare, vi

in the second. Guare discussed how the problem of shaping the second act was finally resolved:

I didn't know how to take hold of the material, because the people in the first act had to tell this vision from California the problems of their life. I said one night to the producer, "I don't know why I have to waste all this time telling them, because nobody listens to anybody else anyway; she [Corinna] might as well be deaf." I said, "Oh!" The minute that I knew she was deaf I realized that nobody in the play was paying attention to anybody else anyway. That was the key to it: by making her deaf and not having to say anything, the door opened up and air went through.²⁶

"If ever there was a born playwright and satirist, it is John Guare,²⁷" wrote Edith Oliver in her *New Yorker* review of *The House of Blue Leaves*, which opened in New York at the off-Broadway Truck and Warehouse Theater on February 10, 1971, to mixed reviews. Ms. Oliver was the play's foremost champion, going on to say that its playwright, Guare, is an expert at writing comic lines that are grounded in character, and that the director, Mel Shapiro, directed a "stunning breakneck production."²⁸

Marilyn Stasio, writing for *Cue* magazine, also went out of her way to proclaim that the show was "A beauty of a play – eccentric, extravagant, and quite outlandish, but explosively original,²⁹" and that it "successfully mixes the glamour of show business with the pomp of religion in a compassionate and comic upheaval of reality."³⁰

"Guare uses the techniques of farce, plus his own supreme gift for dialogue that pushes sincerity into ridicule, to achieve a new kind of penetrating humor,³¹" Henry

²⁶ Bryer, p. 76

²⁷ Edith Oliver, "Off Broadway." *New Yorker*, 20 February 1971, p. 90

²⁸ Oliver, p. 90

²⁹ Marilyn Stasio, "The Theatre" *Cue*, 7 August 1971, p. 48

³⁰ Stasio, p. 48

³¹ Henry Hewes, "Under the Rainbow." *Saturday Review*, 20 March 1971, p 10

Hewes summed up in *The Saturday Review*, to which he added that it was the season's best play.

But the negative reviews were also plentiful. Harold Clurman of *The Nation* wrote,

“John Guare’s most striking talent is for savage farce.” “There are scenes in which his fancy boils over into a tempest of hilarity. They are the best things in the play; they provoke wild laughter and merit enthusiastic applause.”³²

But Clurman maintained that the play was deeply flawed, that the leading roles were played too much in the vein of psychological realism, and the “grimy realism” of the set was inappropriate for the style of the piece.³³

Frank Segers of *Variety* wanted to praise *Blue Leaves* as “excellent black comedy with the stops pulled far out” and as “emanating from a mind riotously littered with the detritus of a civilization, its comic books, its radio serials, its movies, indeed all of its advertisements,” but he too, ultimately found it flawed. He wrote the play “has incorporated fuzzy characterizations and fruitless plot turns.”³⁴

Although the play opened to mixed reviews, it ran for nearly a year – a feat for a small, quirky play. On December 3, 1971, The Truck and Warehouse Theater burned down. Firemen found the sets and costumes had been vandalized. In a tenement next to the theater, a man had been murdered. Investigators later concluded that the fire, vandalism, and murder were separate incidents. The play was forced to close after 337 performances.³⁵

³² Harold Clurman, “Theatre.” *The Nation*, 1 March 1971, p. 286

³³ Clurman, p. 286

³⁴ Frank Segers, “The House of Blue Leaves.” *Variety*, 24 February 1971, p. 58

³⁵ Plunka, p. 73

What finally resulted was the play we have today. No changes were made to the script after it came into published form. What did change, however, was people's perception of this mix of styles. The change was seen with the mounting of the revival.

In 1985, director Gregory Mosher and producer Bernard Gersten of Lincoln Center wanted to stage Guare's *Gardenia*. Mosher had directed *Gardenia* at the Goodman Theater in Chicago and sought to move the show to New York. However, when the task of gathering the cast became impossible, Mosher and Gersten decided to stage *The House of Blue Leaves*.³⁶

Guare approached Jerry Zaks to direct the revival. Coincidentally, Zaks had directed the play at Dartmouth ten years earlier and was interested in doing it again. The revival opened on March 19, 1986, at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater in Lincoln Center. The cast featured John Mahoney (Artie), Ben Stiller (Ronnie), Stockard Channing (Bunny), Swoosie Kurtz (Bananas), and Christopher Walken (Billy). Originally scheduled for an eight-week run, the play proved so popular that it transferred to the larger Vivian Beaumont Theater on April 29, 1986, and finally to the Plymouth Theater on October 14, 1986.³⁷

For the most part, the critical response to the revival was better than it had been in 1971. Jane Katherine Curry, in her summation of Guare's work in *John Guare: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, asserts that

Many critics expressed surprise that the work did not seem dated. Of course, the major theme of a culture's obsession with fame and fortune was no less relevant fifteen years after the first production. In 1986 the

³⁶ Plunka, p.74

³⁷ Plunka, p.74

critics were much more willing to accept the play's blend of farce and tragedy.³⁸

The revival of *The House of Blue Leaves* received favorable notices from critics such as Mel Gussow and Frank Rich of the *New York Times*, William A. Henry of *Time*, Janet Hobbhouse of *Vogue*, Jack Kroll of *Newsweek*, Michael Malone of *The Nation*, Edith Oliver of *The New Yorker*, John Simon of *New York* magazine and Edwin Wilson of *The Wall Street Journal*. The general estimation from the press was the revival was better than the original production. Plunka writes that

All of a sudden, Guare's play which had not changed since 1971 and which was initially thought to be cruel and unfeeling, was now perceived as poignant and compassionate.³⁹

Curry states that "by 1986 most critics were comfortable with such a hybrid, though a minority still argued that Guare had not figured out how to strike the right balance." Robert Brustein, for example, argued that it is difficult for an audience to embrace the tragic ending after the story had been played for laughs, that the ending did not fit the "black comedy seen through rose-colored glasses."⁴⁰ More often, critics shared the view of Michael Malone, who expressed admiration for Guare's ability to dance on a tightrope between comedy and tragedy.⁴¹ The audience for the play may have changed over the years too. Guare recalls that the idea of an attempted assassination of a Pope had seemed farfetched – until 1981, when shots were fired at Pope John Paul. Since

³⁸ Curry, p. 51

³⁹ Plunka, p.74

⁴⁰ Robert Brustein, "A Shaggy Dog Story." *New Republic*, 5 May 1985, p. 30

⁴¹ Michael Malone, "Theater: The House of Blue Leaves." *The Nation*, 7 June 1986, p. 799

that event, Guare has noted, “we’re all on the other side of the mirror. It’s like we’ve tumbled through a pane of glass and we’ve lost our ability to be shocked by events.”⁴²

Plunka agrees that the event changed the audience’s view of the work. He states:

After witnessing the shooting of Pope John Paul II in 1981, audiences in 1986 were more apt to accept the play as reality rather than as absurdity, and with the ubiquitous blend or satire in popular culture, Guare’s sense of humor became less threatening.⁴³

Curry adds to this, that:

The audience would now be less removed from the world of the characters and if some of the stage world was abused, so was the world of the audience. Some of the comic distance between audiences and the characters had disappeared.

Frank Rich observed that the play was not as funny as the original, but, with the revival, more moving, that audiences were much more aware of the characters’ pain.⁴⁴

The revival of *The House of Blue Leaves* closed after 420 performances, the original eight-week run extending for nearly a year. The revival was nominated for eight Tony Awards, eventually winning four: Best Actress for Swoosie Kurtz, Best Actor for John Mahoney, Best Director, and Best Scenic Design. During the latter part of the twentieth century, the play has been stage worldwide and has become quite popular with college and repertory theater groups.⁴⁵

⁴² John Guare, as quoted by Curry, p. 51

⁴³ Plunka, p.74

⁴⁴ Frank Rich, “Theater: John Guare’s *The House of Blue Leaves*.” *New York Times*, 20 March 1986 p. C21

⁴⁵ Plunka, p.74

The House of Blue Leaves garnered numerous awards over the years, yet it produced much critical controversy over the use of black comedy, farce, and social realism, and particularly the mix of those different forms.⁴⁶ The question of whether the audience caught up with Guare, or that playgoers were now more willing to accept this different mix is an irrelevant debate, merely because the play had not changed. This “mix” existed in 1971 as it does today, and seems to be the center point of its history. As we will see in the next chapter, it is also the focus of its aesthetic makeup.

⁴⁶ Galens, p. 72

CHAPTER TWO

Script Analysis

John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves*, at first glance, may seem a simple broad comedy; it is not. The play has many layers of meaning; its mix of styles is anything but conventional. Its razor sharp critique of American culture has been called callous and sick. Guare's 1971 play about the aspirations of a zookeeper and his family and others is an unusual play, to say the least.

Unlike most contemporary dramas, the date within the play is particularly specific: October 4, 1965, the day Pope Paul VI came to America. Pope Paul went to the United Nations in New York in October, 1965, to plead for peace, and celebrated a pontifical mass in Yankee stadium.⁴⁷ The unique time of the play serves to anchor it not only within history, but also to the frame of mind of the people of that day, an outlook on life at the time.

Setting his play in New York seems at first obvious, because the author was from there. Yet, he finds a challenge with his choice. He attempts to understand the place from the awkward perspective of being a New Yorker himself: ". . . how do you get there when you're there?"⁴⁸ Specifically, the play is set in Sunnyside, Queens, a borough, or part, of New York. Guare explains that Queens never had a true identity like the rest of New York. Unlike Brooklyn, he wrote, ". . . that people clapped for on quiz shows if you said you came from there."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Chronicle of the Popes*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997) p. 73

⁴⁸ Guare, John Guare, "Forward." *The House of Blue Leaves*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. x

⁴⁹ Ibid

He details the history of the borough as “a bedroom community for people on their way up.”⁵⁰ The ads marketed it as an ideal *stepping-stone* to the rest of New York: “Hallelujah. Queens: a comfortable rest stop, a pleasant rung on the ladder of success . . .”⁵¹ Guare adds, “in the twenties and thirties and forties you’d move there and move out as soon as you could.”⁵² Queens was, and still is for the most extent, the gateway to New York, but never New York. If the five boroughs were siblings, Queens would be the redheaded stepchild.

Here Mr. Guare sets his play. What a perfect setting for a bunch of people who are desperate for something better than their lot in life. Queens was a place that was “just a subway ride to the heart of the action.”⁵³ It was a backdrop where “the builders built the apartment houses in mock Tudor or Gothic or Colonial and then named them The Chateau, The El Dorado, Linsley Hall, The Alhambra”⁵⁴ in some obvious pretentious pandering to hopes and dreams of the tenants. Guare wrote that these tenants

wanted to pretend they had the better things in life until the inevitable break came and they could make the official move to the Scardales and the Ryes and the Greenwiches of their dreams, the pay-off that was the birthright of every American.⁵⁵

Gene A. Plunka, in his book *The Black Comedy of John Guare*, goes further, finding significance in Guare’s choice of locale.

Guare set the play in the locale he knew best, Queens, reinforcing the notion that he views New York City as a microcosm of America. To Guare, Queens suggested the magic of the American Dream; it was a

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Guare, p. x

⁵² Ibid, p. ix

⁵³ Op cit

⁵⁴ Guare, p. ix

⁵⁵ Ibid

residential community, unlike commercial Manhattan, where parents could raise children in peace and aspire towards social mobility.⁵⁶

Guare describes how Queens became the ideal setting for his play about vanquished dreams:

Queens was built in the twenties in that flush of optimism as a bedroom community for people on their way up who worked in Manhattan but wanted to pretend they had the better things in life until the inevitable break came and they could make the official move to the Scardales and the Ryes and the Greenwiches of their dreams, the pay-off that was the birthright of every American.⁵⁷

Outside of the actual and literal, the microcosm sets up the action of the play by positioning the characters within a race – the “rat race”, one that if they lose, they lose everything. Plunka supplies more support toward this metaphor by writing that “. . . Queens, then, was perceived as a pit stop on the path to a more glamorous way of life once the breaks and promotions accrued.”⁵⁸ A great number of contemporary American plays deal with the ill affects of the so-called American dream. Yet, how many dramas illuminate these ills without being didactic? How many of them disguise the “rat race” by placing it in a maze that is some ugly cross between traditional suburbia and the lure of the big city?

Plunka goes on to state that the setting reinforces the style. He asserts “. . . It also functions as the ideal setting for black comedy, a place of bitter irony where one’s unrealized dreams and fantasies become a constant source of humiliation.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Plunka, p. 75

⁵⁷ Guare, p. xi

⁵⁸ Plunka, p. 75

⁵⁹ Plunka, p. 75

American culture is the primary target for attack in the play. American worship of the celebrity is Guare's bull's eye. Those Americans who long to be with the famous, to be like them, and those having an ongoing fantasy to become one, are the personalities he criticizes in his play. Our society raises us to believe this accomplishment will place us highest in the strata; Guare questions the validity this collective American ambition, commonly called the American Dream, and goes as far to say that belief in it will yield to ruin and murder.

Yet how does a working class family attain the goals of this American dream, when the protagonist, Artie Shaughnessy, can not even afford a nickel for a boat ride to Staten Island? Almost adding more conflict to his aspirations of fame, is the need for a steady paycheck, his job at the zoo.

The American Dream for Artie Shaughnessy, Mr. Guare's protagonist, is to be a songwriter in Hollywood. Although he has written some songs, they are terribly outdated, songs that belong to the past. As Plunka notes, "Even worse, Artie's Tin Pan Alley-type songs are not original creations, for most of his tunes are plagiarized versions of Irving Berlin's *White Christmas*." In short, Artie hopes are his only reality, for the prospective chances for success with his songs are next to nil.

Artie is married to a clinically depressed woman, who roams around the apartment in a nightgown acting like a dog, barking and sitting up to be fed. Aptly named Bananas, she shares a love/hate relationship with her husband:

You hate me. You hate my looks – my face – my clothes – you hate me.
You wish I was fatter so there'd be more of me to hate. You hate me.

Don't say that! You love me. I know you love me. You love me. Well, I don't love you. How does that grab you?⁶⁰

In the middle of the two is Bunny Flingus, a young woman from the downstairs apartment, who is having an affair with Artie. Guare depicts her brilliantly, reminiscent of one of those Billy Wilder / I. A. Diamond characters whose spunk and cliché Brooklyn accent define a modern-day archetype. Her entrance at the top of the play is the catalyst for the rest of the drama; she literally awakens Artie from his physical and emotional stupor, announcing the arrival of the Pope.

Pope Paul VI, in a rare event, is coming to New York, and will be driving through Queens very shortly. Many plays occur on a special day and a visit from his Holiness is truly exceptional in any Catholic community, especially one in New York. Ms. Flingus has finagled two choice spots by the cemetery (where the Pope *must* slow down) and Artie is compelled to join her. She and Bananas fight over the attention of the would-be songwriter, but all three end up going out the door to see the passing Pope.

Unbeknownst to the three, Ronnie Shaughnessy, the married couple's only son, has broken into the apartment and is hiding in his old bedroom. When he hears the door slam, he enters the living room, and, later, from that vantage point, addresses the audience.

The ingredients of the first act involve these four characters, and are, for the most part, the family. None of them are highly intellectual or political; most of their discussion involves fame, fortune, and the American culture of both. With the exception of Bananas, they all aspire to be famous, regardless of the cost to their integrity. Even

⁶⁰ Guare, p. xii

their spirituality – they are all Catholics – is sullied under the reign of fame. Their only interest in the Pope is what he can do for them, namely, advancing Artie’s career, sending Bananas to an institution so Artie can go and seek fame in Hollywood, and the instantaneous fame granted to Ronnie if he assassinates the Pontiff.

This is the “world of the play:” crazy and desperate, violent and perverted. The inhabitants of this world have a motive to survive. The setting, with this hidden dramatic drive, is one of the features of this play. It alone is something notable in and of itself, apart from psychological motives. Can this desperate milieu fuel the dramatic action alone? Perhaps not, but as setting for a play with a great deal of action, it is something quite necessary.

Most of the character’s objectives are similar in their desire to achieve fame. The first act shows us this in three of the four characters. The only exception is Bananas who wishes, quite contrarily, not to be famous at all. Her desire for anonymity is manifested in her dog portrayal:

I like being animals. You know why? I never heard of a famous animal. Oh, a couple of Lassies – an occasional Trigger – but, by and large, animals weren’t meant to be famous.⁶¹

Her husband is the diametrical example, to the point of dysfunction. As Plunka points out:

Artie is enamored with celebrities and with individuals who have been successful. He has bought into the myth of the American Dream to such a degree that he has become oblivious to people who are not rich and famous, and thus blind to reality.⁶²

⁶¹ John Guare, *The House of Blue Leaves*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1968) p. 19

⁶² Plunka, p. 74

The House of Blue Leaves deflates the American Dream, which contends that hard work will eventually yield abundant rewards. It also supports a rags-to-riches scenario that is extremely popular in celebrity folklore. Artie is fond of reminiscing about the times past when Billy and he used to go to clubs together as best friends. He tells the audience about how Billy made a film with the unused portion of newsreels, and overnight, he was a success. The rags-to-riches story is popular to Artie and to the populace. It gives hope to the masses, that one day, even they will be discovered by Hollywood. But belief in it is dangerous in its false promise. As Plunka puts it, “Instead, the American Dream is deceiving, especially when we learn that upward mobility is not possible for many of us.”⁶³

Clearly the concept of the American Dream lies entrenched within American culture, and is linked by the celebrity. Most of what is conveyed to the public is through some familiar, relatively famous personality. The understanding that the famous one has lived and mastered the American Dream, makes the celebrity the perfect conduit for the perpetuation of the Dream. Yet one lives a desperate existence when one bases their actions on the life of a celebrity, hoping for the same results.

If the first act of *The House of Blue Leaves* is about the longing for celebrity, the second act surely is about seeing celebrity, celebrity in action. Beginning with Ronnie Shaughnessy’s plan of attaining instant celebrity by murdering another celebrity, one is reminded of Shakespearean dramatic action: committing regicide to ascend to the throne. By dethroning the Pope, “Pope Ronnie” – Artie’s own imaginings for his son – ascends to the same celebrity, although by different means.

⁶³ Plunka, p. 74

Then in walks a genuine celebrity: Corrinna Stroller. One-time starlet before a film explosion destroyed her hearing, her former director and present boyfriend, Billy Einhorn, has sent her over to Artie's place. Corrinna is the very archetype of a star. She is blond, dressed in furs and is first seen carrying flowers and a bottle of champagne.

And what is a celebrity without her fans? So into the scene runs Artie with Bunny Flingus, and then, surprisingly, three nuns. The conjuring of the nuns is clearly Guare's critique of star struck fans. The threesome is rabid, raucous, and has a Pavlovian response to name-dropping.

This mix is so tumultuous that a farce arises. Corrinna reveals that she has two tickets to see the Pope at Yankee Stadium that she no longer needs. The nuns want them; Ronnie wants them. They all fight over them until Military Policeman enters to take Ronnie away for going A.W.O.L.. The nuns end up with the tickets, and race out the door. Before Corrinna exits, Ronnie tosses her the bomb disguised as a present -- the boy's murder weapon to be used against the Pope -- and all three, two nuns and Corrinna die in the elevator.

The explosion is the apex of "celebrity in action." The collected intent of all three, Corrinna, the nuns, and Ronnie, come together in a literal bang. Ronnie's desire for fame is seen in the bomb. The nuns' desire to be near fame caused a fight over the tickets and a rush out the door into the elevator. Corrinna's desire to be seen as still famous is seen in her accepting the gift -- the present -- as a token of appreciation. If only one of them had relinquished their dream, the explosion would not have occurred as it did.

Guare is careful in this apparently careless farce to show that all involved have base and selfish motives. Most of them long for the same thing: fame. Most of them get the same thing: disaster.

In the aftermath, we see a grieving Billy Einhorn, who just flew into New York to identify Corrinna's body. Instead of grieving with him, Artie implores his old friend not to let this incident stop him from pursuing his famous career in the movies. Artie's desire for fame destroys social appropriateness. Bunny, Artie's bride-to-be, who refuses to cook for him until their wedding night, suddenly appears with a piping hot plate of veal and oranges for both Artie and his grieving guest. Fame, and the lure of fame, is now seen to cause the breaking of vows.

Billy too, is also ruled by the need of fame. After consuming a small bite of Bunny's intoxicating dish, he is smitten, claiming she is the new muse for his work. Bunny is at first stunned at his advance – then suddenly, in seconds – changes partners, claiming she will only cook for Billy and will be the best housewife he ever had. Bunny and Billy, the epitome of a famous couple, happy and prosperous, walk out the door, forgetting his loss and her commitment to Artie.

As they walk out the door, so does fame. And in its absence, hopelessness and worthlessness fill the room. Without any reason for living any longer, and seeing his wife as the cause of his misfortune, Artie strangles Bananas.

Guare's final domestic stage picture reveals *The House of Blue Leaves* as the ultimate morality play. The belief in the false dream of fame will yield horror and destruction. As we have seen, the physical action of the plot yields this interpretation

clearly. More importantly, the psychological plot – the internal workings of the characters – parallels the external plot. Their greed for fame is what propels the story forward.

The characters' "en masse" objective of this desire for celebrity is what determines the dramatic action, and the collected conflict to their objective is the reality that, with the exception of Billy, none of them has the willpower, talent, or politics to attain the fame they long for. The conflict this produces throughout the play compels the characters to behave disgracefully. The conceptual setup fuels the action of a black comedy well.

Most of the black comedy in Guare's play arises from the compromised values of the characters in their wanton, misguided ambition for notoriety. If we perceive any value, expressed in passing through dialogue or action by a specific character, the end of the play will in one way or another, violate it. For example, at the outset of the play, Artie states that family obligations hold him back. All family allegiance both to his wife and son are thrown to the side before the curtain falls.

Famed film director Louis Malle wrote in the preface to *Three Exposures: Plays* by John Guare about the desperation exhibiting by Guare's characters:

In Guare's plays characters are forever whirling about, always trying to find out about themselves. They go all the way, exposing their fears, their contradiction, and their false identities. They sing us a lyrical song, interrupted by screams and laughter.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Louis Malle, "Forward" to *Three Exposures: Plays* by John Guare. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1982) p. viii

The desperation and ambition yields a wild, meandering path for the play's personalities to walk. The result is uncanny and unusual. Malle writes of the unpredictability of Guare's characterizations.

After the release of *Atlantic City*, [a film that Guare wrote] John Guare and I met a famous Hollywood producer. This producer volunteered the information that he admired the picture, but added, "I don't understand these people. In *my* movies, you know everything about the characters in the first ten minutes." Well, I can promise this: in John Guare's plays, that will never happen to you.⁶⁵

A clear an example of what Malle talks about is Artie's sudden act of murder. No one expects him to murder his wife in the end. Although he demonstrates anger toward his wife, he is never seen violently attacking her in any manner up until the end. In theory, his actions can be justified, as Plunka puts it:

Realizing that his existence had been based on an elusive fantasy and now faced with the grim reality of a life of hopeless dreams that would devastate any idealist such as himself, Artie kisses his wife one last time and then gently strangles her to death. Artie kills Bananas because she is witness to his failure and would serve to reinforce his humiliation for the rest of his life.⁶⁶

The ending comes as a surprise to most viewers, yet is typical in Guare's plays, as Plunka affirms that in the playwright's oeuvre, "protagonists who are increasingly frustrated by their inability to match reality with their dreams ultimately resort to violence."

Not unlike Hickey, the protagonist of Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, Artie resorts to murder when his dreams are stolen from him. Where O'Neill is saying that the belief in any hope, even false hope or a "pipe dream," is necessary for life to continue, Guare is saying that the belief itself is skewed, if

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Plunka, p. 79

not downright wrong. The tenuous desire to become a celebrity is packaged with potential tragedy. The desire is to reach a position that has nebulous parameters. Instead of working in one's field or art, and attaining notoriety through hard work and ingenuity, one is concerned with the result: fame.

But Guare's morality tale is uncommon in its use of many forms. The play is a mix of three: farce, black comedy, and realistic drama. Each form affords Guare license in shifting to different patterns of speech. The farce has clipped, desperate language that is fashioned into the framework of the brisk action. The black comedy uses one-liners, or "zingers" to highlight the horrific tales it offsets. The realistic drama that the play offers has long descriptive passages owing much to Chekhov.

Farce is a form with great theatricality. By its very nature, it is action based. So is the dialogue. Commands and declarative statements are typical in the sort of theater, and within this segment of Guare's play. "Where are you going?" "I got 'em! I got 'em!" "Make him give them back to us!" all appear on the same page of the play, demonstrating that the frequency of these types of lines is also important to achieve farcical action.

The zingers in the black comedy serve to foster shock value, a basic ingredient of black comedy. Black comedy supplies a low level of disgust, whether in situation, or concept or attitude, but the one-liners are a constant reminder to the audience that it is indeed a comedy and not the sick demented ramblings of a madman. The wording in this form, as well as the other forms, must be so carefully concocted that there is some

aesthetic distance between the actual horror and the horror that slightly objectified and presented to the audience with some showmanship.

Plunka puts it bluntly: “*The House of Blue Leaves* is a contemporary version of Chekhovian realism . . .”⁶⁷ Guare himself hints about his influence by the Russian in his preface to *The House of Blue Leaves*: “No sisters ever yearned for Moscow the way those sisters and their pupils yearned for Rome”⁶⁸ and earlier in the same preface: “Chekhov says we must never humiliate one another, and I think avoiding humiliation is the core of tragedy and comedy and probably our lives”⁶⁹ Chekhovian style can be seen in Artie’s poetic vision of his visit to a psychiatric home, from which the title of the play is derived.

In contrast to the Chekhovian style of speeches in *Blue Leaves*, the play offers – to no surprise – a varying style. Bunny’s opening monologues, Bananas recollection of her dream, and Ronnie’s maniacal rant in the second act, have a fevered rhythm to them that dictates a heightened reality. The speeches are placed throughout the piece, in both acts, and in all three forms. Since they are positioned this way, they, along with a general sense of menace throughout the play, give the drama its only unifying element, outside of the narrative itself.

The overall mood of the play is set right at the beginning, when at dawn, Ronnie slips in and stalks around the apartment, hiding when the doorbell rings. The placement of this incident at the beginning helps to mirror the ending’s murder, enclosing the drama in a mood of danger. The mood is sustained throughout by constant threats to Bananas, not only by her husband to have her committed to an institution, but by Bunny, who

⁶⁷ Plunka, p. 74

⁶⁸ John Guare, “Forward.” *The House of Blue Leaves*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. vi

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. v

wishes her dead. The threatening atmosphere continues into the second act with Ronnie's violent rant, the triple murder, and the final murder of Bananas. It can also be noted that Bunny's wish in the beginning is fulfilled in the end, further enhancing the enclosing structure of the menace.

Since both the tempo and the rhythm of the play vary greatly from form to form, the importance of the mood in *The House of Blue Leaves* cannot be overemphasized. Guare supplied this with a good concern, for the balance between the mood of menace and the comedic attitude is important for maintaining the precarious nature of black comedy. The comedic attitude is attained in different ways: by one-liner, though situation, through witty quip, etc., and therefore is not able to act as a unifying element. Only through the emphasis on mood – the general sense of menace -- is the play unified aesthetically.

Malle compliments Guare when he writes:

At a time when most plays and films have become glorified sit-com television, Guare's grace and inventiveness with words, his superb contempt for conventional psychology and plot coherence, and his brilliance at tearing apart the logical and the expected make him stand pretty much alone.⁷⁰

Guare, and specifically Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves*, is a profound anomaly. The play's framework runs the gamut, from the large outrageous gag to the simplest tender moment. Many critics find fault in this, yet the value of the mix that he offers cannot be judged contemporaneously. No doubt the long-term effect on other playwrights to come will be the salient consideration. Just as Guare was influenced by that day in London, when he saw two works back to

⁷⁰ Malle, p. vii

back that differed as night and day, the influenced writer will then in turn influence others.

Malle continues to offer defense of Guare's uniqueness:

He has been accused of self-indulgence, of course, precisely because he cares to impose his original voice, beyond artificial clarity, beyond sentimentality. Yet he manages to report convincingly on the chaotic world we live in. His work is a unique, indelicate balance between the tragic, the funny, the weird, our daily bread.⁷¹

Perhaps the most important quality to be assessed with *The House of Blue Leaves* is its uniqueness. The aesthetic make-up is a mix of forms. The hybrid itself is the play. It is the duckbilled platypus of contemporary drama. Yet, unlike an eclectic painting or architecture that can be viewed and absorbed in a glance, a theatrical piece is presented over time. The different styles in Guare's drama are presented back-to-back, one after another, in a linear fashion, and cannot and are not delivered to the audience simultaneously. The experience is akin to watching three different plays in succession.

Additionally, there does not seem to be any attempt on Guare's part to fuse any of the styles together at all. The narrative runs through them, and the mood is prevalent in all, but nothing else links the forms. The playwright wishes the spectator to view them in sequence; this is the order he intended. The journey the play takes is the journey of the characters as well. Guare intends the experience to be the stripping away of layers of the fraudulent exterior of the human experience, executed in stages.

The stages have different departures from reality. The beginning seems like conventional domestic drama when it is not a situational comedy with a great deal of dark humor. The next stage in the stripping away process is farce, a decided break from a

⁷¹ Ibid

realistic approach. The third is a true black comedy, with humor arising from the unlikeliest of emotions: grief, anger, and betrayal.

This is Guare's art: the unconventional attack on the conventional obsession. For the playwright, the use of differing styles was the only way of presenting the subject of the play. Malle again, supports this when he says that

Guare practices a humor that is synonymous with lucidity, exploding genre and clichés, taking us to the core of human suffering: the awareness of corruption in our own bodies, death circling in. We try to fight it all by creating various mythologies, and it is Guare's peculiar aptitude for exposing these grandiose lies of ours that makes his work so magical.⁷²

The House of Blue Leaves is a rare play of "mixed breeds." It uses several theatrical modes to present its critique of American culture. The rebellious nature of Guare's commentary is seen manifested in the use of different forms in the writing. The play's intent to present the outrageous folly of fame as outrageously as possible on stage is part of play's self-conscious approach to its own theme. The fact that the personalities on stage talk directly to the audience fulfills this idea perfectly.

In the next chapter, we will see the practical application of the concepts revealed by this analysis. The chapter will attempt to answer the question of whether the concepts that I have arrived at in this analysis work in practice.

⁷² Malle, p. viii

CHAPTER THREE

Production Journal

In chronicling the stages involved in bringing *The House of Blue Leaves* to the stage, it is important to note that, unlike any other play I have directed, I had no preconceived notions of what the final result should look. The attempt made was to fully realize the play, as it is written, with the hope that the ingredients set forth by the author would come together in production. Since the drama has many different forms and dramatic conventions, the approach to the rehearsal process considered these distinct differences before rehearsals began. The design considerations, though altered slightly throughout, were also decided before rehearsals began. It is also important to note that what follows was distilled from selected rehearsal journal entries, and then fashioned into the narrative below. Because of this, some of the discoveries made later on are hinted at earlier.

After analyzing the script and making decisions as to what was needed to make this unusual drama work on the Studio stage, it was necessary to meet with collaborators, the design team. I had a terrific meeting with the set designer for *Blue Leaves*, Samantha Baine, before the end of the term, last May. I suggested that she think about a non-realistic set to house this play that wishes to depart from realism. She considered a constructing a set that departed from a realistic or naturalistic style, and after some time, thankfully, rejected the idea.

The choice was the right one. But why was it? Guare, on many different occasions, made it clear, in both reports of the original production and the in book, *War Against the Kitchen Sink*, that he did not want "kitchen sink" realism in this play and others of his. He has, to this day, abhorred the realistic mode. Clearly, the play supports some sort of departure from reality. Consideration must be given as to how a set is to be in agreement with a play that contains a wild hybrid of different forms.

Yet, in considering the different set options, what other style of setting would work better than a non-realistic setting? Sam and I ran through some ideas. One idea was making the apartment look more like a cage -- a zoo motif. Another was to make the apartment slightly distorted, placing horizontals on a tilt, and verticals on an angle, etc. Both were finally rejected, because Sam and I felt that it just would not work. We both agreed that a realistic set was what was needed.

When I returned to the University in the fall, the lighting designer, Kellene Depew, called me to set up a meeting with all of the designers at her home. Coincidentally, she lived with two other designers for the show, Tony Linneberger, the sound designer, and Travis Taylor, the costume designer for the show. The meeting was fruitful. All of them exhibited a genuine concern for the project. Although all of them had busy summers, time was found to read and analyze the play. My concern was linking all of their thoughts together in one general concept. I knew that whatever was agreed upon must make them all happy and agree with my analysis of the play.

The designers, with Travis Taylor at the helm, made dinner, after which we discussed the play. I thought it would be a sensible idea to go through the play

chronologically. My main concern was the practicality of the physical world of the play. Although I had complete confidence in the designers, I aired my small pet peeves: that the door would actually slam, that the costumes would actually come off and come on, that the lights would actually illuminate the right areas of the stage. I had more concerns, but felt I should leave them for later. I feel the designer's job should be to design. The basic elements as well as the details should be left to them.

Conflicts between designer and director arise, most likely, at this stage of development. If the director and designer are in agreement at this stage, nothing but the occasionally unforeseen problem need be discussed later. The designer and director must be on the same page at this time in the development of the show. If they are not, something must be done about the disagreement immediately, not later, when sets have been built, costumes constructed, and lights hung. If there is any disagreement, this stage is the time for it.

All of the designers of the show must be in agreement with my analysis of the play. All of the designers, although they did not state it verbatim, seemed to agree. The play is about the belief in a false dream. The title, *The House of Blue Leaves*, refers to a tree of blue birds, not leaves, that fly away when someone approaches, leaving the tree bare. The most obvious actualization of the metaphor is the lighting effect at the end of the show. The effect is called for in the stage directions of the original production. The realistic lighting of the apartment dissolves to an effect produced with a gobo that simulates light streaming through leaves of a tree. The light would be blue, obviously.

Kellene thought the original concept was a good one, and that we should have it in the show. I agreed.

I went through the play, as I said, chronologically. I started with Artie's entrance at the top of the show. Kellene wanted to know how I wanted it lit. I asked her what was most appropriate for the show. I reminded her that the whole routine at the beginning is done to the audience. Several lines of Artie's banter are directed straight to the audience: "Please take your seats." "I wrote this song at work today, I hope you like it." One of Artie's lines is delivered to the lighting designer: "You promised me a blue spotlight!" I reminded Kellene that this request from the character is to be fulfilled in the end. (In the original production, as written in the stage directions, Artie is given the blue spot light at the show's close.) Kellene knew about this and wanted to fulfill the original concept of Artie waiting the entire show for the light to appear. It also helps to close up the show: a request is made in the beginning; it is fulfilled in the end.

Before we went on with the general lighting of the show, Sam was asked to show her groundplan. What a joy it was to see that, basically, it met with nearly everything we needed to present the show. The set was an apartment with the sofa and television being the central focus. If the set were to be divided into two halves, the stage right half would house the kitchen, and the doorway off to the master bedroom, where Bananas sleeps. The kitchen would be raised on a platform of a foot in height. Immediately off of the imaginary dividing line on the stage left half would be the window. Moving off left from that point would find the front door, then the piano, downstage left, then the doorway to Ronnie's room to the stage left side of that.

The set seemed to be conceived with a great deal of thought. However, there were some areas that needed adjustment. The first concern was the practical inability of seeing actors behind the sofa. I asked that, the doorway, as well as the kitchen, be placed on a platform. A great deal of action was to be performed in front of the entrance, and this practical consideration was sure to benefit the show. I was also concerned with the placement of the sofa and television: they were center stage. I immediately asked whether I could move them during the rehearsal process. Ms. Baine agreed. The other discussions involved considerations of the sight lines, the practicality of the window, (through which several characters make their entrances) and the director's need for the door to be slammed, the living room to be used as if it were a racetrack – allowing actors to run around it without encumbrance, and a practical piano.

Sam said that her groundplan was only preliminary, but Kellene thought that she now had a better idea as to lighting the entire apartment now that she had seen the set on paper. Kellene imagined lighting the stage realistically, and Sam agreed. Kellene and I then discussed the explosion. She had an idea of the lights flickering at impact, before going to a dim level. A creative idea such as this is always welcome, but I questioned whether the dimmers, old and few in quantity could handle such a sophisticated task. Kellene said she would look into it, but she did not think that there would be a problem.

Travis Taylor was benefited the most, I feel, from my having organized my discussion in a chronological order. As I went through the play, scene by scene, I mentioned the costumes in each. Surprisingly, although Taylor was very busy over the summer, he had a clear idea as to what he wanted. As we discussed each character in

each scene, Mr. Taylor asked for confirmation on his thoughts. Although preliminary, his thoughts were on target.

This meeting with the designers was so productive. It placed us all in an advantageous perspective of being “ahead of schedule.” All of us understood, at the end of the night, what we needed to do in order to present *Blues Leaves* to a contemporary audience. We understood the need for balance in the physical world of the play -- the balance of the tragic and the broadly comic, the menace with the zany -- because we talked about it collectively. The production was off to a good start.

At the bottom of the cast list in the published script is a note thanking Michael Eisner, then of ABC – TV, for the video-taped segment of the news broadcast that recorded the Pope’s visit in 1965. I decided to write to ABC news to ask for the recording, if only the audio part, to be sent to the university. I offered to pay them and/or place a mention in the program.

After discussing the physical world of the play, it was time for me to turn my attention to the casting. Like the rest of the production, the casting was a little unconventional in process. With the exception of two roles, I had cast *The House of Blue Leaves* long ago, in early summer. I had discussed the lead role of Artie with Zack Whittington and I asked him, on more than one occasion, if he played piano. He assured me that he could. I said that I was looking for someone to play the lead in the show, and asked whether he would be in school for the fall term. Perhaps my behavior would be described as somewhat obvious instead of surreptitious.

I had always seen Brittne Hamlin as a new age Mae West type. The roles that she has been most successful with, namely Susan from *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* and Magolia from *Life Upon the Wicked Stage* have been women with quirky sexuality. A sensibility such as this is necessary for an actress to perform Artie's wacky girlfriend, who uses her body to get what she needs to survive. I had to have Ms. Hamlin play Bunny Flingus.

Kelly Walton is underrated and under utilized in the department. Yet, she is a fabulous actress with a great reservoir of believable emotion. I have always intended to use her if the opportunity presented itself, and with the role of Bananas, one that needed both comedic and dramatic skill, chance favored me.

Lauren Kuehnle is another actress who is not used as much as she should be. She is petite and perky, the perfect Puck or Pan, and perfect for the role of The Little Nun. She possesses innate comic timing, as does my choice to play the Head Nun, Arlene Watson. Ms. Watson usually performs backstage as an expert make-up artist and costumer. Yet, with her bold stage presence and Irish good looks she was a shoe-in for the authoritative sister.

I knew I wanted Jeff Prewitt to play Ronnie. Prewitt is at his best when he is physical and over the top. These qualities describe the menacing solo rant that Artie's son spews at the audience at the opening of the second act. The monologue is one of the highlights of the play, and it required someone as fearless as Mr. Prewitt.

I needed someone big to play the Military Policeman and Jeremy Skupian is the biggest guy in the department. He is fit and broad and this physicality alone makes him believable in the role.

I wanted a contrast between Artie and his longtime friend, Billy Einhorn. Where Artie is desperate, angry, and sympathetic, I wanted Billy confident, smug, and unctuous. I thought Mark Walkley could pass as smarmy because I had seen him do it everyday. As his girlfriend, Leesel Boulware was appropriate to play a woman who was a premature has-been. Leesel had the comic timing I needed for the role, as well as the important quality of acting flighty.

The two roles I could not cast ahead of time was The Second Nun and the bit part, The White Man, the sanatorium worker who comes in at the end to take Bananas away.

Confident that I had most of the cast I wanted, I was not concerned much in casting those two relatively small roles. This assuredness evaporated when I returned to school to find that there was now a conflict between *Big River* and *The House of Blue Leaves*. The two productions shared a week, and therefore actors cast in the musical based on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* could not be cast in the Guare piece.

Before auditions began, I went to talk with Lloyd Caldwell, the director of the musical. He said that he had no idea who he wanted, and, because of the difficulty of the work, he must have “full access to the entire casting pool.” The conflict between the shows made all of my decisions worthless. Even Brittnie, who was out of town for the auditions, was being considered for the musical.

I was in a predicament that made it necessary to callback the ones I had chosen already plus other actors to consider. Only after the callback list was up, did anyone realize that there was no conflict between the shows at all. The confusion with an older schedule that predated the newer revised one by a month is what caused what many thought was a conflict between the shows. Many professors still had the older schedule and were using it as a reference: Professor Caldwell and Professor Pulliam to name two; Professor Foregger was *still* using the wrong schedule well into the semester.

The large audition, disparagingly called “cattle call,” was first. Dr. McCoy, the new chair of the department, asked me to time the actors auditioning. The job is for a person who prefers to have no friends. I was the one who, when the allotted minute expired, was to scream, “Thank you!” I was glowered at, shot the nastiest dirty looks, and was threatened by Kelly Walton. Some of the actors still avoid eye contact with me. This was yet another sacrifice made in the pursuit of my Masters degree.

The so-called cattle call showed me some options. While carefully monitoring the stopwatch, I would jot down the names of potential substitutes for my pre-cast line up. I did note some aspects of the day, namely, my chosen lead for the show, Zack Whittington, gave the most incomprehensible audition. I had no idea what he was doing. If I had not known what he was capable of, I would have written him off. I have still, as of this writing, not told him of my response. Otherwise, Jeff Prewitt gave a surprisingly vulnerable performance of a man at a party; Mark Walkley brought down the house with his brief rendering of a ‘Nuevo-commie-hater,’ and as a surprise, Sara Bergandi was believable in her audition. I called her back in response.

When the conflict between the shows disappeared, my casting decisions were back in order again. But, in desperation, I had already called back at least thirty people! Brittnie, as I said, was out of town in Durango, Colorado, and had sent me a video taped audition. That too, would look suspicious, if, after I had auditioned other women for the role of Bunny Flingus, the only person who was not present for the audition got the role. I would have liked the process better if I had called back only those for the roles I needed to cast.

For the callbacks, I had designed dialect tapes. During the summer I decided, because I was in New York at the time, to make some homemade dialect tapes. I made two. One was the voice of Elaine Deminia, an elementary school teacher originally from Flushing, Queens. She was born and raised in the neighborhood, which borders on Sunnyside, Queens, where *The House of Blue Leaves* is set. She read Bunny Flingus' opening plea to Artie. I also included some meandering banter of Ms. Deminia as she discussed her career as a sixteen-year veteran of P.S. 114 in Corona, Queens.

The second tape featured the voice of Richie Miller, a forty-something, larger-than-life conductor on the Long Island Railroad. He was asked to read Artie's monologue on the phone. Although he did not grow up in Queens, he lived nearby, on Long Island. Still, he had the same inflection as the Queens dialect, perhaps because his mother grew up there and he had many close friends from there. He, too, was asked to speak extemporaneously for a while, and he did.

At the beginning of the callback audition, I played the Dimenia tape, the one that was the closest to the real thing as it would ever be. Some of the actors laughed, amazed

at the thick dialect, genuine and impressive. Playing into this I said, "This person actually exists!" I asked everyone who was auditioning, with the exception of those who were auditioning for Corinna, to try the New York dialect in their reading.

At the end of the playing of the tape, Leesel walked up to me and told me that she could not commit to the show because of work commitments and having the responsibility of an officer's position in her sorority. She was out; I was looking for a Corinna now. I understood Leesel's concerns, and I understood her need to make priorities in her life. For this reason, I gave her the cold shoulder for twelve weeks.

During the callbacks, I went through role by role, eliminating as I went. When I got to the Corinnas, I had three: Sara Bergandi, Lauren Gregory and Kathleen Berrong. After their first reading of the part, I gave them all one direction. I needed more vulnerability from them and I told them so; only one, Sara, made any change to her reading. Sara was cast as Corrina as a result.

All in all, most of what I had in mind for the cast from the start was realized in the final cut. After she gave a rather inspired reading for Bananas, I cast Kim Howard in the role of The Second Nun. Because of his brawn and knowledge of fight choreography, I cast Trevor Hucklebee in the role of The White Man.

After the cast list was posted, I needed to re-direct my focus to the design process. Sam had finalized the set. Once again, the set was designed to fit the needs of the script, but two concerns still remained. Our primary matter of consideration was the room on the platform in front of the door. I understood the need for the space in playing entrances and exits. Since the platform was new; it was a new consideration Sam and I had. The

other matter was the need for masking flats on both sides of the set. Sam said that adding them was easy.

I had a wonderful phone conversation with Travis one evening. He went through his costume choices with the understanding that nearly everyone in Guare's play strives desperately for some sort of fame. His conception was built upon our collective discussions and led to inventive choices. One, in particular, was the costume for Corrinna. He designed it as a facsimile of Jackie Kennedy's famous pink outfit with the pillbox hat.

Kellene and I lost some clarity in our communication at this point. I believe it was due to her loss of a close friend and my lack of diligence in pursuing regular conversation regarding the show during this difficult time. She seemed to forget our decisions in the lighting design. We clarified those decisions later in the process.

One night, while house managing for *Big River*, a redheaded young woman dressed in black approached me. Marjorie Billings was working backstage for the musical and wanted to know if I was in need a stage manager. Dex Edwards, professor of scenic design at the university, suggested that if she "wanted to get right into the thick of things" as she reportedly told him, that she should take the job. I agreed.

The rehearsals began. The first undertaking was to lay the groundwork for the show, namely, the blocking and the lines. I asked my cast to be off-book by week's end. The blocking was configured in large part by planning it on paper. Although some of what was finally seen was altered from the original movement scheme, the major movement to and from one spot to another, from entrances to exits, was set down at this

time. At the end of the week, a run-through for the creative staff was planned. We had a deadline.

The first night of rehearsal was fantastic. Most of the cast was right on the money. I was very thankful for such a great pool of actors from which to choose. Admittedly, some members of the cast were of a lesser skill level, but the force of the group seemed to pull them up in skill. The only one that seemed marginalized was Trevor Huckabee, who had the smallest role. He sat in his seat disconnected from the rest of the group, and fell asleep once.

What followed was a series of blocking rehearsals. I had prepared blocking, but I also needed some freedom, so during the evenings, I deviated from the plan somewhat when I felt it was needed. I used a technique that I was familiar with: having someone, in this case, the lead, search for something that would motivate his movement around the stage. I suggested, since the script calls for Artie to smoke, that Zack search for matches in a desire to light a cigarette. Throughout the entire span of the play, he never finds the matches, and the cigarette is never lit. Yet, he is able to move around realistically, especially in the beginning, offsetting the tedium of long monologues with action, and having Bunny Flingus chase after him as he moves.

I have always liked blocking rehearsals. I like to figure how a show works mechanically. This show was a challenge because of its farce and many characters. Yet, in a relatively short period of time, we were able to block it. On the fourth day of rehearsals, Ned Yousef came in to do the fight choreography. It was an exciting creative rehearsal full of great ideas, and the final result, organized mayhem, was wonderful to

watch. Although it was incomplete at this time, I knew eventually the result would look like a farce – one of playfulness and cartoon menace – that should fit the script nicely.

On the night that Trevor was to rehearse his small part, he announced to me that he could not do the show after all. He said he had work commitments. The announcement was a surprise to me because he never wrote down or told me of any conflicts, and, when he first accepted the part after being told it was a small role, he said “that’s okay; I’ll take anything at this point.” He asked me if I was mad, and I told him I was not. I was disappointed. I now needed to find someone to replace him.

Mark Reeves is my fellow graduate assistant in the directing track here at the university, and a good friend. I had him in mind to record the voice of Pope Paul VI, if the tape had not arrived from ABC studios in time. Given this new event, I asked him to play the White Man. Always desiring to be upon the stage, he quickly agreed. I had re-cast the White Man.

Oddly enough, most of the creative work was accomplished in this first week of foundation building. At week’s end, to my surprise and the to the amazement of the creative staff, a show was seen in rough outline. The intense week was unmatched by anything that followed. The evening of the run-through was one of my best days in the theater. We achieved so much in so little time; collective pride was the greatest profit.

Toward the end of a rehearsal on October 30, I decided to honor the request of Kelly Walton’s: that we talk about “character”. I only know of one helpful way to discuss the concept of character: it’s creation using action on stage, and how to go about doing that, if it is needed at all. I recommended that she or any actor go through the

script and find all of the responses to stimuli. The actor should note how the character responds to what happens to him or her during in the time of the play. For example: When Bananas considers the different lengths of her fingernails, she goes into a panic attack. Listing these items are listing actions; actions are the building blocks of performance. The actor is not creating a work of literature or lecturing, she is creating art through sound and motion, the tools of these actions. By doing this, the actor may find herself liberated by not “thinking” about character, but actually “doing” the character. Sometimes, by too much “thinking” the actor might become too inactive, or have confusion as what to do on stage. It is sometimes helpful to understand it this way: that character, on the stage, is created using actions. My explanation either satisfied her or stunned her into silence.

Mark Reeves was no longer able to play *The White Man*. The show’s dates conflicted with his duty as stage manager for Mississippi: The Dance Company’s *Kinetic Journeys*. I now had to recast again. I found Daniel Shaw to be an appropriate replacement because of his brawn (to carry Brittnie) and the fact that he is not as tall as my other options (so Brittnie does not hit the top of the doorway on the way out).

The next night’s rehearsal was terrible. Actors coming in late destroyed the first part. The running of the farce was delayed by ten minutes. Jeff Prewitt, the man playing Ronnie, had to leave early, so there was no way I could hold the cast any later. Brittnie, Lauren, Daniel, and the assistant stage manager came in late. Then we tried running it. Lauren had an injury; Jeremy was just getting over one. The farce looked terrible. People were not getting it. I called it quits. I had a stern talk with them, and let them go.

We proceeded with the second part of the rehearsal. It was a dispirited fifteen minutes while I recognized that Brittnie had lost ground in her process. She was back exhibiting all of the habits she did at the beginning of rehearsals. I let her perform for a while, and then stopped her. I was tired and angry over what had happened and was at a loss for words. Yet, somehow I communicated to her. We went on, and I coached her through her performance until she got back on track.

Thankfully, the following night was productive. We worked on the farce – the racing around, specifically – with Ned looking in. He straightened out the interaction between Artie and the Little Nun, making it more realistic, and I liked the change a lot. The problem with rehearsing the farce (and we were calling it “the sequence”) is that Arlene Watson, a major component in the farce sequence, was out for two weeks. Sometimes I felt rehearsing it was unproductive, but in theory it could not be. All of the other actors were practicing the routine, and that counted toward the total effect.

At this time, I considered the ground covered so far in production. The show looked good, overall, but there were areas that did not – and it was bugging me! I had questions that emanated from the text. One was the conundrum of when should the actors address the audience, and when should they not. Obviously there are sections of dialogue not delineated as “to us” in the script, that seem to be directed outward. I re-discovered this awkward reality about the script one night when Kelly asked me if I wanted one of her particular phrases to be directed toward the audience. She tried it and it seemed to work, and we kept it.

At times, this dual direction of dialogue is seen within the same section of a character's speech. One line is specifically to another character; and another is presentational. The back and forth technique works to keep the viewer at a distance, reminding the audience that there is an audience. The technique is seen in the first act quite extensively, and we were finding it hard to find the right balance in the playing of it. Snapping to and fro in this way also requires a great deal of concentration from the actor.

At this point, I was still in a quandary about Ms. Hamlin. I felt as if I was directing her poorly. I did not understand what was holding her back. She seemed afraid to commit to her action of seducing Artie. At times I had the impulse to go up on stage and show her what was needed, but I was reluctant to do that. She covered sizable sections with no fault, yet overall, she had difficulty sustaining her creation. Her performance had moments of brilliance, but the totality of the character was not seen. Witnessing this, and being unable to help her sustain this quality throughout, was particularly frustrating.

Ms. Hamlin's problem may have been related to the somewhat two-dimensional quality of the character drawn by the author. Bunny Flingus is a "type" personality, one that merits little pathos from the audience. She is drawn boldly. Brittnie had mentioned often that she felt uncomfortable with the characterization, and this might have been what she was experiencing.

Oddly enough, the nights that Ms. Hamlin was "on her game", her responses were the same. One evening, I told Brittnie her performance was "on" and she felt that that

particular evening's performance was a "cartoon." I remember saying to the auditioners that I wanted something of a "cartoon" for a characterization, that this type of acting was dictated by the author, but this is the first time it was ever brought up after rehearsals began.

Zack, on the other hand, grew with every rehearsal. He became more menacing and angry in moments needed to justify the ending (where he strangles his wife). Mr. Whittington's less-than-perfect piano playing was sounding better as well. (Although, clearly, work was still needed.) He was getting the flow of tempo changes and was able to get to the next one effortlessly.

Kelly, too, seemed to have mastered her role. However, I do not believe it was a direct result of talking about "character" with her. I believe it was merely a question of her working the role enough to get a handle on the way the author built the character out of unconventional elements. It was a hard task to pull off, for both actor and director.

Later that same week, I decided to rehearse Sara Bergandi with the other actors. She was better than she was in previous rehearsals. She seemed to be finding the balance between being truthful and presentational. I had always thought she had trouble doing that, and now she seemed to have overcome it. Since some of the show's best laughs are derived from the fact that she is deaf and that no one knows it except the audience, her belief in her deafness is important. We had to work to get that right – specifically in the scenes where the timing of the questions asked her, and her responses, needed to be precise. A lesson was learned in this rehearsal: comic timing cannot be worked on, it must be innate.

Ms. Bergandi has talent as an actress, but the timing in these specific scenes was right one night, and off the next. Ms. Hamlin, on the other hand, has inbred comic timing. Most of the give-and-take in those rehearsals relied on her technique. Although Brittnie was inconsistent again with her overall performance in rehearsal, her timing was never off in the scenes with Sara.

The end of this week and into the beginning of the next, the rehearsals became more productive. I have always thought that if the actions are played enough, the characters will emerge, and they had. Brittnie was back on her game again, and then some. She seemed to have found depth in Bunny, and given different tonalities to various passages of dialogue. Brittnie's evolution had created variety in her performance, and had created depth in her character through the vocal distinctiveness she seemed to have found in the dialogue. This development helps maintain interest in the long monologues in the beginning of the show.

On the Monday of that week, we rehearsed Act Two, scene two, and it was rough going. Mark Walkley, whom I did not see as often as the others, was not where he should have been at this time in the process. His timing was off and his focus diverted. It was hard trying to communicate with him, most likely because of his Attention Deficit Disorder, but he wrote down his notes, and he did, eventually, throughout the evening, get things in order.

At this time in the rehearsal process, I noticed there were a great deal of ups and downs. With the exception of Zack, no one performance grew at an even rate. From a director's point of view, this "roller coaster" experience was extremely frustrating and led

me to feel, quite rightly, the fault was mine. The discovery was humbling and, ultimately, discouraging. What was I doing wrong? I had planned everything right. I knew the pitfalls before I began, and yet, I was not helping anyone.

Later that week, on a Wednesday, the walls and platforms were placed on stage, and there were a few spatial issues. The space in front of the door was not what was planned, and the window was too high. The space in front of the door was necessary to accommodate the actor making the entrance there. The door would not close with the actor in front of it. The window needed to be at a certain height to allow Ronnie and the nuns to enter without difficulty. I immediately brought this to the attention of Sam and David Navilinsky, the Technical Director. Both of them agreed to look at the issue the first chance they had.

The very next day, in less than twenty-four hours, these two problems with the set were fixed. Sam, David and the other team members were magnificent and worked to solve the issues by re-building the platform before the door, and the wall that housed the window. Their actions gave me a great deal of security. Their work led me to a new confidence.

After those problems were corrected, both Sam and David invited me to walk around the incomplete set to see what I thought needed attention. I, in turn, invited them to join me. Perusing the set, we did discover two sight line problems that needed correcting. Sam said she would correct them.

That following evening was another frustrating evening with Brittnie Hamlin. Ms. Hamlin seemed to take one step forward, and then two steps back. She could not

sustain a performance at this time. I felt inept in directing her. I felt that I needed to think harder as to what I could say and do to correct the problem.

Whenever I thought I had made progress, I saw that nothing had been remembered. I felt a great deal of frustration. On the other hand, Zack Whittington got better and better every night. His performance grew and was one that could be sustained throughout the show. Kelly Walton got better every night as well, but to a much lesser extent. But otherwise, the high point in the rehearsal process so far was that early run-thru. Could this have been a case of over-rehearsing? I have never believed in such a thing as “over-rehearsing” or, as my high school English teacher would advise, “to not have the actors peak too early.” I have always thought that the more practice, the better the yield, or “practice makes perfect.” It also follows logical sense to believe that the more effort that is put into a project, the higher quality of the work. At this time, I was convinced that the fault was with me, and yet I did not know how to correct the problem.

We had a run-thru the Friday evening of that week, and it went well, but I was not satisfied. Perhaps I was asking too much of my cast, but I had seen them so much better than what I had been seeing. The run-thru demonstrated that I did have a structure now from which to work. The up-coming weekend was important to the success of the show. I felt that I must work them with careful consideration, and be prepared to propel them forward by instilling confidence in them.

Saturday’s rehearsal was tough. I rehearsed Brittnie and she still seemed to falter in certain sections of her performance, especially in the first act. She talked to me awhile about her troubles. She seemed to realize that she was not performing well enough, and

yet she did not know why. I firmly believe that, in general, a great deal of what holds her back is lack of confidence. She lacks confidence in her ability to perform and is still shy in many ways. She also had a habit of lowering her volume when she got closer to Zack. A common problem in tyro actors; Brittnie should have known better.

Saturday evening's rehearsal was even worse. The "sequence," not rehearsed for five days, looked terrible. It took five or six runs of the farce section of the play to get it right. I was depressed to say the least. The nuns were slow and poorly timed. Much of this had to do with the absence of Arlene Watson for two weeks in the rehearsal process. Even though I had a replacement, Annie Gaia, when I ran it, Annie was never up to the skill level needed for the job, and could not serve as a replacement.

Monday evening's rehearsal was canceled. A storm was brewing when Marjorie, the stage manager, called to say there was a tornado warning in effect, and wondered if rehearsal would be canceled. I immediately thought it was too early to tell. I went to the radio to hear the warning myself. The warning was to be over by seven the station announced, a half an hour before the rehearsal was to begin. No later than five minutes from the time I hung up the phone, the electric pole outside my house sparked like a firecracker and the power ceased. I was in the dark. A call to Marjorie to see if the power on campus was out as well was not answered. I called several of the cast members, and found the majority of them huddled at Ashley Vellano's home in the dark as well. I cancelled rehearsal.

When we returned to rehearsals, the same scenario was played, both literally and figuratively. It was another rehearsal dealing with the insecurities of Brittnie Hamlin.

She has talent and it was clearly being seen in rehearsals, but she could not focus her performance enough. We ran through the opening several times and she could not keep it at an even keel. We talked about what the problem was. She claimed that she is “still in her head” and that she needed “to get into her body” more. I am not sure whether this was an excuse for laziness or she really had a problem. I know she is talented; I have seen her talent before. The actress’s insecurities and the director’s insecurities were yielding nothing.

However, the following night’s rehearsal, on November 12, was the only other highlight in the course of rehearsing *Blue Leaves*. The rehearsal is what I do theatre for. The night was a wonderful experience. The cast was together and happy to be working with one another, and there was growth even within the course of the evening! Finally Act Two scene two came alive! Jeff figured out how to dress himself in the surplice and say his lines without stopping or losing any steam. And Brittnie was on. She had subtle and clever nuances that only the truly talented possess. The nuns, performing for the first time after I restaged them, came together nicely, and worked as a unit, as one performer. It was something to watch. I wish more people were present to see it.

What followed this was a rather disappointing run-thru the following evening. Brittnie said that her problems were personal and that she would leave “that stuff” at the door next time she performed the role. Ms. Hamlin had said this before. I do not believe that it is part of my job to pry, but it is getting in the way of a better show. Perhaps I should have suggested to her that she talk to someone at the counseling center on campus. Yet, I believed that this was going too far. All of this considered, the run-thru was

productive in some ways. It showed us how some of the props would work, and how some of the costumes would be used in the show. It was good to see that most of the items to be used in performance worked. If a repetitive theme can be seen in this process, it may be this: the creative team's skill in this production never faltered; whereas the director's skill in maintaining fruitful rehearsals was in question.

Perhaps one cause of the up-and-down nature of the rehearsal problems was the discovery that actors were not taking their notes down, and following them. I felt the need to go through the script and write notes and give them to the actors as memos, in their mailboxes, before the next run-thru. From rehearsal to rehearsal, I saw the same problems existing. Bunny was not coming to fruition and subsequent performances did not equal her performance on November 12. And yet, sometimes, I felt I should just leave it alone, to leave well enough alone. I did not want to. I felt the show could be better, much better.

The timing at the end of show was still off. Timing, it seems, is an elusive technique. Most of it comes from nature, from the organic core of the performer, and not much can be instructed or dictated.

Sara Bergandi, the actress playing Corinna, has a lesser skill level than the other actors. However, based in this experience, she was the most professional of them all. She wrote down her notes and followed them through. She was a professional in attitude as well. She arrived on time. She wore articles of clothing to get a sense of what she would be dealing with as far as costumes. She brought in her own props to get the feel of what it would be like to handle those items early on in the process. At times I felt I let

Sara down when I did not commit more to improving her performance, but time did not permit the extra attention. As we moved into tech week, I knew that I must find ways to help her and the others achieve a better performance.

On a following night, we had a “tech watch,” a rehearsal where the production team sits and views the entire performance to see what is needed in final run. It began as a “dry tech”, that is, a rehearsal without actors, and then it briefly became a “wet tech,” one with actors. We ended up having a run-thru with the running crews present, which supplied an audience.

Several odd things occurred. First, to my relief, the actors performed better under the added stress of lights, props, some costumes. Second, something I feared, Zack choked a bit under the pressure of an audience, failing in parts of the play where he never did before. Third, when the voice of the Pope played over the sound system, it was met with copious laughter. This last was probably because the voice was that of Mark Reeves, popular among most of audience. Although his Italian dialect was appropriate for this black comedy, his voice was recognized as a parody.

Then, during this week, an accident occurred. Arlene Watson, the woman playing the Head Nun, fell on her knee. She has had several surgeries to correct former knee injuries, and this enflamed a dormant weakness in her body. Brittnie, Sam, and I spent two hours in the emergency room with her at Baptist Hospital. When she left, she needed the assistance of two crutches and a knee brace. The accident put the production in jeopardy, as it would have been difficult to replace her at this time.

The upshot of all of this was that she could walk, but with great difficulty. I asked her if she wanted to go on with the crutches, and she felt extremely uncomfortable doing that. Finally, after a day of waiting it out, she said she could manage getting in and out of the window and limping around the set.

I recognized the need to restage some of her movement to make it easier for her to perform the role. I knew at this time what I could change easily, but it would undo some of Ned's better moments in the farce choreography, namely, the section where Arlene's character, the head nun, corners Ronnie and does a tango-like walk with him. This particular part could not be accomplished with any new blocking because it involved Arlene bending her knee several times. I decided, without Ned present, to change her movement to a simple, menacing walk to him.

The other issues that arose were technically related. Sam was aesthetically attached to a shelf unit that hung down from the border that surrounds the top of the kitchen. However, it cast a shadow upon the actors when they stood upstage of it. I told Ms. Baine that I would take a bribe in lieu of her removing her shelf, but other than that, it had to go. It was clearly interfering with the show.

Ms. Depew maintained that she could correct the problem by using light. She tried using several smaller lights and housing them within the border, unseen to the audience. The final product was not powerful enough, both in intensity and affect, and the shadow remained. She said she would do her best to give us more light on stage in this area.

Another problem was with the straight jacket. It had to be pulled on Brittne, and then fastened quickly, and it was not working. The jacket was hand made by Travis Taylor, the production's tireless costume designer, and he began to redo part of the jacket so that it could be attached more readily.

Entering Tech Week, I noticed some trends in the production. The primary assessment was that the show was, in general, together. The blocking was functional, and the cast was well rehearsed. Yet, the life the show had in that first run-thru was missing. The jokes were mechanical. The actions were stagy. I felt a great reluctance at this time to change anything.

Ms. Hamlin's performance had leveled out. This was not necessarily a good thing however. The moments when she was brilliant were not there anymore. Conversely, the evenings where I felt she was phoning in her performance were gone as well. Ms. Walton's performance was technically accurate, as well as Mr. Whittington's. I felt both lacked the freshness it once had. Once again, I felt I might have over-rehearsed them, if that is something that can be done at all.

On the brighter side, the explosion scene, which we had rehearsed just as long, was magnificent. The movement was staged by Ned Yousef and augmented by me over the course of practice. Later, when the lights were added to it, it looked horrific and otherworldly.

The hanging shelf unit still plagued us. It was still casting a shadow. I wanted it removed. Ms. Baine promised me if I did not like it, it would be removed. I did not like it. Sam knew this, but was still attached to it aesthetically. She felt it balanced the set

out. I felt the set was balanced nicely with or without it, and it was a bane to the look of the show. However, I felt then, as I do now, that I would allow it if she was so pleased with it. It stayed.

Although I was somewhat disappointed in my work, the run of *The House of Blue Leaves* was met with praise. During the rehearsal process there were moments of great excellence in the acting, and yet sustained performances were slow in evolving. We had great run that showed teamwork and a healthy, productive support from the creative team throughout. What went wrong, and what was right in the process will be delineated in the next chapter, the evaluation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Evaluation

As I said before, I chose *The House of Blue Leaves* because I did not know how to direct it. I felt, either consciously or unconsciously, that I should challenge myself, and that a university setting was the place to do that. I knew, having seen several productions of the play that I was not satisfied with what three accomplished directors before me had done with it. In theory, I knew what was needed: to play both the horror and the zaniness of the actions in the script, and have the work play itself, as the author intended. In practice, I felt my work on Mr. Guare's play proved fruitless.

The first sign of trouble was the moment when it was not clear to whom some of the lines were being delivered. Kelly Walton had this question regarding a passage she was trying to justify. I had not caught the distinction in my several readings of the play, but here, in the passage where Bananas introduces herself to the audience, it was obvious that one line was not being delivered to either the audience or to anyone on stage. Worse, it seemed the line was being said to some vague, uncomfortable place between the two. Maybe it was merely an oversight by the author, a mistake. Nevertheless, I had not caught it early on.

Then other awkward parts of the script appeared. Why does Ronnie clearly say to his father he is going to blow up the Pope, and his father just does not hear him at all? Why do the nuns suddenly appear in the second act? Why does the killing at the end seem to come from nowhere?

All of these concerns were answered, I felt, by directing around them. For example, I directed Ronnie's father Artie to talk to Corrina while Ronnie was confessing his murderous ambitions; I punched up the line in the first act, "You have never seen so many nuns!" to justify their "sudden" appearance in the second act; I intentionally overemphasized Artie's moments of anger toward his wife throughout the play to justify the ending.

I understand the conventions of farcical style are different from the conventions of realism, and perhaps this is what was causing some of the problems that I had. One of the unique elements of Guare's script is its use of many forms; one of the problems of this, I discovered, is that each form has its own conventions. Conventions need to be set forth at the outset of a drama, and should hold true for the rest of the performance. Yet, in *The House of Blue Leaves*, this could not be done.

I have been very critical of the direction of this play as seen in past productions. I especially disliked Jerry Zaks' direction in the revival. As I said before, it clearly glossed over the darkness in the script. But in retrospect, there may have been more ingenuity behind it than I originally thought. If the script does not work as a mix of different forms, it may well be that the director, if he is to make a cohesive whole of the thing, must decide on one form to direct the whole show in.

Terry McCabe, in his wonderful book, *Mis-directing the Play*, points out the dilemma of the auteur director. He describes an auteur director as the medium's "controlling intelligence" and its "true author,"⁷³ rather than the playwright. McCabe is right in pointing out that the theatre is not a director's medium (whereas film is). In my

⁷³ Terry McCabe, *Mis-directing the Play*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001) p. 17

view, Mr. Zaks was acting as an auteur director when he directing the revival as a Neil Simon-like “laughfest.” But, in a way, he might have been justified.

Can the script be worked in the way the author intended? And if the script is flawed – structurally flawed – does the director have the right to take over and place upon the production his particular bent, even to the point of complete distortion?

The House of Blue Leaves may make an argument for that, and the answers to those questions could take some time to develop in a different thesis. But the question pertinent here is whether I should have taken it upon myself and, as McCabe puts it, “mis-directed” the play. Looking back on the research, I find that the play has its reputation because of its uniqueness in its structure and its comedy, not necessarily because it works as a play, or a theatrical experience.

In hindsight, to make the play work may involve taking the avenue Mr. Zaks took. The play contains a great deal of humor. The humor seems to be the highlight of the script because it is quirky and, in the farce, knockdown and fast paced. Since these are the highlights of the script, and not the dark, seriousness in it, choosing to emphasize the comic elements and glossing over the rest would seal the play in one style, making it function better.

If I had to do it again, I might try this. I will quickly add however, that acting as an auteur director is against my artistic policy. I think it is wrong for the same reasons McCabe delineates in his book:

Stage directors who attempt to be auteurs of the theater are denying the nature of their art form. And so they give us productions that depend

heavily upon “nonlive” elements . . . they give us productions that are about the directing, not the play.⁷⁴

I agree with Harold Clurman, who maintains the director is more akin to a mid-wife in the birth process: not the wife, who is the playwright or the husband, who is the actor, but merely one who guides the process.

Another option would take more time than I was allotted: to work the script until some happy medium was found between the juxtaposition of the different forms by introducing each of the styles at the outset of the show. This would involve taking liberties with the intent of the playwright without changing the text. This attempt would solve the problem of having one form follow another without explanation, gearing up the play’s audience to expect nearly anything instead of surprising them with a farce in the second act, and then returning to psychological drama, per se, in the end. Admittedly, this sort of reconstruction would need to be developed, as I said, over time, and well thought out to boot.

This sort of approach would, as all good theatre does, involve the actor’s input. Another failure in my directing seems to rest in my lack of confidence in performers. Did my faith in them lessen as the process wore on, or did my obsession in achieving the balance needed in the play override them? Relying on more collaboration from the actors would not have corrected the structural flaws in the production, yet might have brought about a way of hiding them well.

The production had some strong points too. The general menace I thought was warranted by the script was maintained throughout the show. The effect was assisted by

⁷⁴ McCabe, p. 17

Arlene Watson's make-up design that gave the actors a haggard look. Since it was rehearsed well, the performances achieved a certain level of excellence that buoyed the entire show. The explosion scene, which was performed in slow motion, was the highlight of the show. It was also well rehearsed and looked it. Liturgical music was played over the action for a stunning effect.

The true solution would be to find another play. Finding another play was not an option in this case, and would not be an option if I were hired to direct this play without choosing it. So, in a way, the same situation could present itself to me in the future, and I will be faced with making a decision to "auteur" or not. I decide not to. I believe to err on the side of being right in one's duties is perhaps more important than getting your good notices. On the other hand, I was not directing Guare's play on Broadway, a venue whose only determinant of success, it seems, is measured at the box office. This "bottom-line" attitude toward theater forces the director to abandon artistic goals for the pursuit of making "a better product" to be marketed to a mass audience.

Ultimately, the experience of mounting *The House of Blue Leaves* was priceless. One must fail before one succeeds, however disappointing that might be. The failure in directing this show will, I am certain, lead to a success later. I have also gained a deeper understanding of the relationship between actor and director because of this experience: that is, when to let them "go" -- when to let the actors take over and run the show for a while, literally. Directing in many ways is a question of balance: where the striving to obtain the perfect poise of control and "letting go," of bringing the script to its fruition and commanding over its parameters, and having a correct relationship between

performance and text, is the pursuit. As a director, getting close to this balance is my lifelong goal.

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