



The Deadly Seriousness of
America's Funniest Playwright:
Christopher Durang

by Dr. Susan C. W. Abbotson

Presented at the William Inge Theatre Festival.

26 April 2008

The Deadly Seriousness of America's Funniest Playwright: Christopher Durang

By Dr. Susan C.W. Abbotson, Rhode Island College, 26 April 2008

While describing Christopher Durang as a “social satirist, a malicious caricaturist, who carries everyday scenes—a family around a breakfast table—to the most cataclysmic, even perverse, conclusion,” Mel Gussow also acknowledges Durang’s “heightened social consciousness” and “sense of moral dismay” (“Daring Visions” D9), a combination that evokes a playwright not afraid to offend, but only out of a need to communicate something important. It is this aspect of his work that makes Durang deadly serious, despite the comic veneer that has had audiences splitting their sides across America.

There is a dark side to Durang that many critics have found upsetting, but that is partly the point. Durang acknowledges that his sense of humor “asks for a complicated response. I ask people to laugh at things, “ he explains,” that I know are also serious and tragic. And some people hate that” (“Suspending” 38). Ben Brantley’s response to 1994s *Durang Durang* suggests something of this: “*Durang Durang* is both endearing and exasperating,” he declared, with wise-cracks that suddenly blossom “into moments of coruscating comic insight” (“Plays that Cast” C11). Brantley recognizes that Durang is no “conventional storyteller,” and with even greater insight, also realizes that it is maybe better that way (“Plays that Cast” C11).

Durang may have written his first play at the tender age of eight, but the wit and erudition behind much of his drama evidences his solid educational background. English at Harvard, and an MFA in playwriting from Yale School of Drama, where he performed at the Yale Rep. Before beginning graduate work, drawn to the absurdist style, Durang had written several short pieces, such as *The Nature and Purpose of the Universe*, which explores the meaning of human

suffering through the life of a Job-like housewife in the form of a radio play-within-a-play, and *'identity Crisis*, about a dysfunctional family threatened by tenuous sanity, and a series of sex-changes. While attending Yale, he continued to write one acts and zany cabaret shows, collaborating with fellow students Wendy Wasserstein on *When Dinah Shore Ruled The Earth* and Albert Innaurato on *I Don't Generally Like Poetry But Have You Read "Trees"?* and *The Life Story Of Mitzi Gaynor*.

While the one-act, *The Nature and Purpose of the Universe* was presented in 1974 at the Direct Theatre, Durang's first full-length professional production came in 1975, and was titled, *The Idiots Karamazov*. Co-authored, in 1973, with Innaurato, and featuring another Yale student, Meryl Streep, this musical play parodies classic literature, as an 80 year-old "translatrix" relates a garbled version of Dostoevsky's novel via Chekhov, O'Neill and Dickens, which includes the seduction of Alyosha by Anais Pnin, and Mrs. Karamazov portrayed as Mary Tyrone. Critic Richard Day described it as "a wildly comic perversion of virtually every literary genre" (Day), and Mel Gussow was impressed by Durang's "comic inspiration" and "all-nonsense attitude" ("Review of *Idiots*" 42), but uncertain both how to define the play and how to judge it. His continued ambivalence, and subsequent reviews of Durang's work that offer both praise and complaint, underscore a key difficulty people have with Durang—they love and hate his work, almost simultaneously. This, however, is not a bad thing, but seems intrinsic to the way Durang operates. We love him because he makes us laugh, but hate him because that laughter comes at a price, and a price we at times resent: the recognition that we live in a terrible world and, in large part, it's our own fault. As Christopher Isherwood suggests, Durang "inspires the kind of laughs that you're a little bit ashamed of after you leave the theater" (E5).

1977, saw Durang's brutal comedy, *The Vietnamization of New Jersey*, which satirizes anti-war plays of its period for their over-earnestness, particularly David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*, in its depiction of a dysfunctional family waiting for their son to return home from Vietnam. In it, Durang quite literally destroys the family environ with the walls of the home being repossessed, and the play ends in warfare and suicide. The earlier written *Titanic*, an outrageous tale of sex and seduction, and mis-matched parents and offspring, aboard the titular ship, starring another Yale classmate, Sigourney Weaver. It was produced at the Direct Theatre in 1976, then transferred to off-Broadway, along with the satiric mock-Brecht-Weill style cabaret, *Das Lusitania Songspiel*, co-authored by Durang and Weaver, and featuring them both. This would be revived in 1979, in a rewritten form, to become something of a cult success.

Meanwhile, another musical, inspired by a 1933 Spencer Tracy/Loretta Young romance/crime movie, *A Man's Castle*, which Durang grandly titled: *A History of the American Film*, had been accepted by the Eugene O'Neill National Playwriting Conference in 1976, and, soon after, simultaneously premiered at Hartford Stage, Mark Taper Forum, and Arena Stage, the latter production transferring to New York in 1978, to gain a Tony nomination for Best Book of a Musical. In the madcap fashion of movies from the 1930s through the 1970s, the play follows the romantic exploits of a group of American movie archetypes. Clive Barnes called it "mythic" in scope, and "a tour de force of writing" (41), Dick Lochte "an intelligent, noncampy, cleverly constructed spoof of the way our movies have mirrored – and perhaps molded – our modes and moods these past six decades" (Lochte), and Gussow, "a significant act of film criticism as well as wise social commentary" (*History*" 22). But Alan Rich's review gets to the heart of what Durang's art achieves: "This isn't just another funny movie play; it is a disturbing, wonderfully

observant essay on how Movieland's distorted truths have become national ideals a stupendous piece of social satire behind a front of wild hilarity" (Rich).

The loss of his mother to cancer in 1979 caused Durang to move away from dramatic parody in his longer pieces, to explore, instead, his own life and family. That same year he completed *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You*, which won an Obie for playwrighting, and caused a veritable firestorm of complaints, with Archbishop John May calling it a "vile diatribe against all things Catholic" (Mitgang C17), and the anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'rith "offensive, unfair and demeaning" ("*Ignatius Stirs Fight*" C24). In *Sister Mary*, Durang exposes what he sees as the dogma and limitation of the Catholic church of the 1950s, as Mary's ex-students confront her, and she sanctimoniously turns on them. As Durang himself has pointed out, Mary's "not the entire Catholic church any more than Medea was every mother who ever lived" ("How Do You Feel" H14). Elliott Sirkin, while lecturing Durang over what he felt was the "facetious mockery" of *Baby with the Bathwater*, suggests, "What Durang doesn't seem to realize is that, in reality, his bossy, erratic women are pitiful and confused neurotics often as victimized as their charges" (203-04). What Sirkin apparently failed to realize, is that Durang is fully aware of this. Frank Rich, at least, recognized that, pointing out that "After her real-and insane-personality is revealed . . . [Mary] remains all too frighteningly human" ("Theater" C21).

At the 1981 revival of *Sister Mary*, on a double bill with *The Actor's Nightmare*, Frank Rich declared it to be Durang's "most consistently clever and deeply felt work yet" ("Theater" C21). "Anyone can write an angry play," he insisted, "But only a writer of real talent can write an angry play that remains funny and controlled even in its most savage moments. *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You* confirms that Christopher Durang is just such a writer" because he "never lets his bitter emotions run away with his keen theatrical sense" ("Theater" C21). The

play ran for over two-and-a-half years Off-Broadway and was also adapted as a film for Showtime Television in 2001.

The Actor's Nightmare, a satire of theater itself and exposure of the intrinsic theatricality of human nature, in which an accountant is forced to appear in a production he has never rehearsed (a strange amalgamation of *Hamlet*, *Private Lives*, Beckett and Bolt), may have been overshadowed by *Sister Mary* at the time, but it has garnered scholarly attention since, with articles in *Notes on Contemporary Drama* and *American Drama*, that explore its questions about identity and theatricality.

1982 also saw *Beyond Therapy* transferring to Broadway from Off-Broadway. About a lonely pair of singles who meet through personal ads, this is Durang's closest play to mainstream comedy, and his most produced. The play questions psychiatry by presenting therapists who are crazier than their patients, explores complex issues of sexuality, and the limitations of rationality, all in the guise of Screwball comedy. Although Walter Kerr declared the play to be "beyond redemption" and paternalistically advised Durang on the necessity of conviction and logic (H3), others found it infinitely more inviting. Gerald Clarke enthused: "Durang's plot, which has more bounces than a pinball game, goes from the unexpected to the unpredicted . . . providing two hours of hilarious surprises" (70), and Dan Sullivan called it, "zany in a particularly intelligent way . . . wickedly funny, terribly slanted, and essentially true" (Sullivan). The keynotes here are the performance's unpredictability and apparent wicknessness, and it is in these that conviction and logic may be found. The "randomness" that Kerr found so "dangerous" (H26) is a large part of the play's understanding that life is rarely logical and good can come from bad (and vice versa). For all of her idiotic demean, as Douglas McGill suggests, the psychiatrist Charlotte Wallace may offer the best advice her client could have, "To Risk! To Risk" (64).

1983's *Baby With the Bathwater* is a throwback to an earlier absurdist style, from which Durang had been moving away. We follow the troubled growth of Daisy, a male character with abusive parents, who learns to transcend the abuse cycle to become a caring adult. It made critic Frank Rich describe Durang as a “playwright who shares Swift’s bleak view of humanity” but who also “conquers bitterness and finds a way to turn rage into comedy that is redemptive as well as funny” (“Stage” C21). Then, in 1985, Durang rewrote and extended another play about a dysfunctional family, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, which he had begun back in 1973. Based on his own experience as a child, and his parents' sad marriage and eventual breakup, he even played Matt, the narrative lead, in its Public Theatre production. Linda Winer called it “both demented and compassionate” (“Rev. of *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*” Winer), and Robert Brustein “A remorselessly sad, achingly funny assault on the vanities, inanities and insanities of family life” (28). It won Durang another Obie for playwrighting.

He followed this by the highly experimental *Laughing Wild* (1987), comprised of two stream-of-consciousness monologues in which a woman and man individually search for meaning in a bewildering “New Age,” with a following playlet that creates dreamlike interactions between them, and the possibility of hope. Winer responded: “Durang touches hauntingly and hilariously on the agonies of modern existence, dementia, supermarkets, the ozone layer, and God’s alleged interest in the Tony Awards” (“Rev. of *Laughing Wild*” Winer). Note her coupling of the words, “hauntingly” and “hilariously”.

Between 1988 and 1993, Durang produced no new plays in New York, and wrote very little, aside from the short piece, *Naomi In The Living Room*. As he explained to Richard Christiansen, in a 1990 interview: “I was fed up with being a playwright and had decided to form my own lounge act with two back-up singers and go on a tour of Ramada Inns across the

country" (8). Thus, "Chris Durang and Dawne" hit the road, a parody of a distressed playwright turned lounge singer, which turned out to be pretty successful, performing at the Rainbow Room and Caroline's Comedy Club. But he could not stay away from the theater, and in 1992, another play, *Media Amok*, opened at American Repertory Theatre in Boston. Satirizing the flagrant and inflammatory characters who appear on television talk shows along with the obsession of those who watch, Durang shocked audiences with his emphasis on issues of abortion, gay rights, and racial tension.

His triumphant return to New York in 1994 was a program of one-act plays at the Manhattan Theatre Club (including hilarious parodies of Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard) called *Durang Durang*, which followed on the success of the Williams parody, *For whom the Belle Tolls*, produced earlier that year for the Ensemble Studio Theatre one act marathon. But the dark, 1996 mock-epic depicting American sexual excess, *Sex and Longing*, shows a change in direction, and one that bemused the critics, who seemed offput by its explicitness. Admittedly, Durang has not published this play, unhappy himself with the third act, but its target seems to have been the difficulties of sexual freedom in a nation virtually paralysed by an entrenched and bigoted prudery, and one that still needs addressing. Scott Elliott suggests that the problem may just be that the play is too far ahead of its time, and that in 50 years it will be revived to great accolades (H33).

Durang won another Obie for *Betty's Summer Vacation*, in 1999, which was a surreal satire on America's horrific tabloid culture, mocking the audience's own complicity in its appetite for such lurid information. As critic Erik Jackson asserted: "With a style that incorporates Brechtian alienation and Alfred Jarry grotesquerie, the deliriously assaultive, brashly funny *Vacation* defines to perfection the lurid, scandal-starved past decade" (Jackson). And in 2002 he

was inspired to skewer that annual feel-good American indulgence of satisfying one's moral complacency with seasonal viewings of such classics as *A Christmas Carol* and *It's a Wonderful Life* with a crazy Christmas play called *Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge*.

Two recent works of the twenty-first century continue to display the two prongs of Durang's attack: outrageous parody and dramatic satire: 2005's *Adrift in Macao* and *Miss Witherspoon*. In the program notes to *Macao*, Durang wrote, "Parody, to me, is a fun way to celebrate something you love, while satire is a way to point out stupidities or destructiveness in some subject that upsets you." While *Macao* is a musical parody of film noir and America's celluloid racism, *Witherspoon* exposes the inequities of a world so terrible that a person would rather stay dead than be reincarnated. Actress Kristine Nielsen, who played the lead in *Witherspoon*, suggests, "*Miss Witherspoon* is a journey to figure out how to reconnect to the world, and not just be angry and disassociated" (Apple 53). Winer felt that *Witherspoon* displays Durang, "at the top of his metaphysical, apocalyptic, high- and pop-culture game" ("Life after Suicide" Winer), but it is a deadly game at that. Ben Brantley's description of Durang's 2009 play, *Why Torture Is Wrong, And the People Who Love Them*, as an "hilarious and disturbing new comedy about all-American violence" ("Panties"), serves to precisely highlight Durang's approach; serious concern masked by outrageous comedy.

Concerned about people's fears of engagement in a world full of dangers, the strangulating nature of family ties, the pain of sexual disorientation, and social intolerance, with an inventive imagination, Durang embraces his subjects with great audacity and originality. He uses laughter as a response to the grave and inherently tragic, in order to contain and control such forces, and it is a humor that is, as actress Elizabeth Franz, the original Sister Mary, described, "dangerous and delicious." Durang's own love of semantics might lead one to equate Durang

with “deranged” (indeed, in one mock interview he compares himself to a patient just released from Creedmoor [“How Do You Feel” H1]), but it is a necessary madness that feeds the iconoclastic imperative of his work.

Descriptions of Durang’s plays by the critics are often amusingly fraught with images of demonization: John Simon has called him “satanic” (165), Gussow, “diabolically comic” (“Durang at Yale” 30) and “malevolent” (“Shorter *Titanic*” 26), Carol Lawson a “demonic satirist” (C7), and Richard Eder refers to his work as “possessed” (C3). These offer an interesting juxtaposition to equally common descriptions of his appearance as cherubic. Such opposites underscore his whole oeuvre, in which he smilingly turns our attention to the horrors of life. Ben Brantley’s description of Durang as, “an anarchic moralist with a mission to entertain us while pointing out how pathetically addicted we are to being entertained” (“Unraveling” E5), cogently illustrates Durang’s intent, even while it implicitly explains the critical ambivalence he has garnered. His theater catches us red-handed, complicit in the very crimes we pretend to abhor—it’s all a set up. What we laugh at is not the figures upon the stage, but ourselves, but in that laughter comes something potentially positive.

Edith Oliver once suggested in *New Yorker* that Durang “has rarely written anything funnier or more serious than his mordant comedy *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*,” and has “perfected the art of turning bitterness into comedy without losing its edge” (74), but the fact is, all of his work contains this dual thrust. For Durang, comedy is all about invention and cleverness, not laughing at the misfortunes of others. He tricks us into laughter with the unexpected, and while we might feel he offers us a dark world view, an outlook he has been very open about having inherited from his own dysfunctional family background and experiences, he still leaves us with that laughter, which can, in itself, be a restorative. What Durang has said he

strives for is the “laughter of recognition and clarity,” which is also a kind of “healing laughter” (“Information”) as it allows the person laughing to recognize their own complicity in what he depicts. We all too often get stuck in the details and lose perspective on our lives. What Durang’s plays do, is to offer up those details in buckets, and by the sheer accumulation, lead us to a place where the extremity of the situation allows to recognize the inherent ridiculousness of such lives, and, here’s the important part, given that crucial new perspective: change.

As Gussow once suggested, Durang “writes dangerous comedy, treading a tightrope between the real and the surreal” (“Parodist” C13). And Paul Berman’s reaction to *Bette and Boo* is typical of many, in that he felt “disconcerted,” and torn between horror and laughter (778). This is how Durang operates, and it is that juxtaposition that gives his work its serious underpinning. To Durang nothing seems sacred, and yet, everything is. The title of *Laughing Wild* comes from Beckett’s *Happy Days* and a line of Winnie’s, “laughing wild amid severest woe,” and this seems a good description of Durang’s technique. But unlike Beckett, his work seems to have developed a greater sense of hope for the future. “I used to believe that people couldn’t change,” Durang told Douglas McGill back in 1982, “I actually do believe now that people can change to some degree” (64). As Vincent Canby has pointed out, there is tremendous value in the parodic form that Durang so often adopts, for while it “dismembers and ridicules the thing being parodied, it acknowledges that there are things . . . worth defending” (H5). Parody forces us to re-examine what we have perceived to be the truth, and while it may appear merciless, it can also be incredibly enriching, as well as highly entertaining.

Works Cited

- Apple, Krista. "Kristine Nielsen: What's So Funny?" *American Theater* 23.3 (Mar. 2006): 50-53. Print.
- Barnes, Clive. "History of American Film Proves a Tour de Force of the Theater." *New York Times* 21 Mar. 1977: 41. Print.
- Berman, Paul. Rev. of *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*. By Christopher Durang. *Nation* 22 June 1985: 778. Print.
- Brantley, Ben. "Panties, Squirrels and Lots of Ammo." *New York Times*. 7 Apr. 2009. 19 Aug. 2009. Web.
- . "Plays That Cast an Irreverent Eye Over Two Revered Playwrights." *New York Times* 14 Nov. 1994: C11-12. Print.
- . "Unraveling, Not Relaxing, At This Beach House." *New York Times* 15 Mar. 1999: E1+. Print.
- Brustein, Robert. Rev. of *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*. By Christopher Durang. *New Republic* 193 (1 July 1985): 28-29. Print.
- Canby, Vincent. "For Limping Parody, Durang to the Rescue." *New York Times* 4 Dec. 1994 : H5+. Print.
- Clarke Gerald. Rev. of *Beyond Therapy*. By Christopher Durang. *Time* 119 (7 June 1982): 70. Print.
- Christiansen, Richard. "Christopher's Mettle: Playwright Durang is Down, But Still Pretty Far Out." *Chicago Tribune*. 21 Jan. 1990: 8. Print.
- Day, Richard. Rev. of *The Idiots Karamazov*. By Christopher Durang. *Bridgeport Post*. 1975. *Christopher Durang*. 13 Mar. 2009. Web.

- Durang, Christopher. "‘How Do You Feel About Our Career?’ ‘Go Away,’ He Said." *New York Times* 17 Nov. 1985: H1+. Print.
- . "Information for High School and College Students." 2002. *Christopher Durang*. 13 Mar. 2009. Web.
- . "Introduction to *Adrift in Macao*" Program for *Adrift in Macao*. By Christopher Durang. Philadelphia Theatre Company Oct. 2005: n.p. Print.
- . "Suspending Disbelief: An Interview with the Playwright By Himself." *American Theatre* 16.10 (Dec. 1999): 38. Print.
- Eder, Richard. "Play: *History of American Film*: Screen and Scrim." *New York Times* 31 Mar. 1978: C3. Print.
- Elliott, Scott. "Ever Earnest and Funny, Ever Relevant to Youth." *New York Times* 7 Sep. 1997: H8+. Print.
- Gussow, Mel. "Christopher Durang, A Parodist, Finds Very Little That Is Sacred." *New York Times* 27 June 1994: C13+. Print.
- . "The Daring Visions of Four New Young Playwrights." *New York Times* 13 Feb. 1977: D1+. Print.
- . "Durang at Yale, Overindulges in Satire." *New York Times* 27 Jan. 1977: 30. Print.
- . "*History of American Film*, a Play, Is Glorious Montage of U.S. Myth." *New York Times* 23 May 1977: 22. Print.
- . Rev. of *The Idiots Karamazov*. By Christopher Durang. *New York Times*. 11 Nov. 1974: 42. Print.
- . "Stage: Shorter *Titanic*." *New York Times* 11 May 1976: 26. Print.

- Isherwood, Christopher. "Here's Looking at You, Beloved Movie Clichés." *New York Times* 14 Feb. 2007: E5. Print.
- Jackson, Erik. Rev. of *Betty's Summer Vacation*. *Time Out* (New York). 1999. *Christopher Durang*. 13 Mar. 2009. Web.
- Kerr, Walter. "A Lesson in How Actors Cope with Tedium." *New York Times* 6 June 1982: H3+. Print.
- Lawson, Carol. "Durang Explains It All For You, Satirically." *New York Times* 8 Dec. 1981: C7. Print.
- Lochte, Dick. Rev. of *A History of the American Film*. By Christopher Durang. *Los Angeles Magazine*. 1977. *Christopher Durang*. 13 Mar. 2009. Web.
- McGill, Douglas. "The Warming of Christopher Durang." *New York Times* 23 May 1982: 64.
- Mitgang, Herbert. "Dispute on Durang Play is Eased in Missouri." *New York Times* 9 June 1983: C17. Print.
- Oliver, Edith. Rev. of *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*. By Christopher Durang. *The New Yorker*. 61 (27 May 1985): 74. Print.
- Rich Alan. Rev. of *A History of the American Film*. By Christopher Durang. *New York Magazine*. 1977. *Christopher Durang*. 13 Mar. 2009. Web.
- Rich, Frank. "Theater: One-Acters By Durang." *New York Times* 22 Oct. 1981: C21. Print.
- . "Stage: *Baby*, New Durang Comedy." *New York Times* 9 Nov. 1983: C21. Print.
- Simon, John. "Satiric Gelbert, Satanic Durang." *New York* 22.41 (1989): 165-66. Print.
- Sirkin, Elliott. Rev. of *Baby with the Bathwater*. By Christopher Durang. *The Nation* 238 (18 Feb. 1984): 202-04. Print.
- "Sister Mary Ignatius Stirs Fight in St. Louis." *New York Times* 13 Jan. 1983: C24. Print.

Sullivan, Dan. Rev. of *Beyond Therapy*. By Christopher Durang. *L.A. Times*. 1982. Christopher Durang. 13 Mar.2009. Web.

Winer, Linda. Rev. of *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*. By Christopher Durang. *USA Today*. 1985. *Christopher Durang*. 13 Mar. 2009. Web.

---. Rev. of *Laughing Wild*. By Christopher Durang. *Newsday* 24 Nov. 1987: 6. Print.

---. "Life after Suicide? No Thanks, She Says." *Newsday* 30 Nov. 2005: B5. Print.