

Introduction

Plays and Playwrights 2003 is a book of journeys. On the pages that follow you will meet some remarkable, memorable characters and accompany them as they discover and experience life's potentialities. There's Sadie, a delightful "old woman who happens to still be young," whose collection of handbags ensures that she's always prepared for any emergency. There's Keith, a 30-something man who one day forgets all his PIN numbers and takes that as a sign to throw his laptop computer into San Francisco Bay and hitchhike back home to Michigan; and there's David, about the same age, who realizes, in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks, that he's turning into an "asshole" and hits the road in search of his truer, better self. There's Sam and Mattie, a black man and a white woman who embark on a romance that their friends can't quite fathom; and there's Lucy and Laura, two teenage girls who are coping with, among many other things, the prospect of a field trip to New York City post 9/11. There's Tom, whose life, on the fateful election night of 1980, careens into a scary descent toward degradation and hell; and there's B, an anonymous woman whose older sister is stricken with breast cancer and consequently finds herself heading toward the scary places where that disease takes her. There's a pair of clueless clowns camping out at a restaurant's Sunday brunch who seem unable to fathom the apocalyptic events going on around them; and there's a pair of contrasting clerks at a humongous video store who are adopting very different strategies for handling the less-than-challenging work they're confronted with. Finally, there's Daniel, grandson of Shylock (from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*) on a mission to uncover the truth about himself and his heritage; and there's Ben, an updated version of Ebenezer Scrooge, now a sour and repressed middle-aged gay interior decorator, who takes the familiar trips backward and forward in time with a trio of ghosts to learn how to become a better man.

They've all got something cogent to teach us, these people who inhabit the eleven extraordinary plays in this collection. As for the plays and their authors, well, they're a wonderfully diverse lot, as has become the habit of the *Plays and Playwrights* series. (You are, I hope, aware that the present volume follows three others—*Plays and Playwrights for the New Millennium*, *Plays and Playwrights 2001*, and *Plays and Playwrights 2002*—in the New York Theatre Experience's annual publication of anthologies of new works for the theatre by emerging writers.) This year's collection comes from theatres of every size and description, from vibrant new works festivals such as the New York International Fringe Festival, Vital Theatre Company's semi-annual *Vital Signs*, and Screaming Venus Productions' one-woman show showcase *Eve's Apple*; to established off-off-Broadway spaces like the 45th Street Theatre in Midtown and the Greenwich Street Theatre in Soho; to up-and-coming venues such as manhattantheatresource near Washington Square and Horse Trade Theater Group's Red Room in the East Village; to a venerable cabaret space—The Duplex on Christopher Street, right down the street from Stonewall Inn.

The playwrights themselves are perhaps unfamiliar to you now, but it is the editor's fond hope—and indeed, one of the principal objectives of the publication of this book—that

that will change, rapidly. They are: Joe Godfrey (*A Queer Carol*), Catherine Gillet (*Pumpkins for Smallpox*), Andrea Lepcio (*Looking for the Pony*), Ato Essandoh (*Black Thang*), Edward Musto (*The Ninth Circle*), Nat Colley (*The Doctor of Rome*), Marc Morales (*Galaxy Video*), Leon Chase (*The Last Carburetor*), Joseph Langham (*Out to Lunch*), Maggie Cino (*Ascending Bodily*), and Kelly McAllister (*Last Call*).

These eleven authors place themselves, with these works, among the front-rank of America's newest playwrights; the plays they have written and will write are going to help shape the way we think about ourselves as a nation and a culture. They're part of an exciting renaissance in serious drama that's been happening in what's loosely referred to as "downtown theatre" in New York—brave and smart and imaginative artists who, with hundreds of producers, directors, actors, and designers, are collaborating to create a theatre that is relevant and challenging. Their work, as you will see, bursts with energy and invention; it's the kind of work that—quietly or explosively—can change people's lives.

The idea behind this book is to give these plays and playwrights the permanence and long life that they deserve. On page iii you will find contact information for each of the authors represented herein. Put their plays on—these or others that they have written or will write; spread the word about the important and necessary work they are doing by keeping the flame of American drama alive and glowing.

Every December in New York, a dozen or more different productions of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* turn up on our stages. So why care about, let alone publish, another one? Two reasons. First, Joe Godfrey's *A Queer Carol* is refreshingly original: in transplanting the familiar story to a contemporary gay milieu, Godfrey has added a new layer to Ebenezer (here Ben) Scrooge's character, fueling his retreat from the world not just with a broken heart but also with a lifetime of repression and pain at the receiving end of mindless homophobic bigotry. This *Carol* mines a whole spectrum of pop gay iconography to translate Dickens, with Marilyn Monroe as its Ghost of Christmas Past and an exuberant drag queen as its Ghost of Christmas Present. Marley's Ghost appears not just in chains, but also in leather; Fezziwig, now a lovable old queen, gives a roomful of young gay decorators a different sort of Christmas goose at his party; there's even an inevitable naughty joke about "Tiny" Tim (who is now Bob Cratchit's HIV+ lover).

But underneath all the fun and campiness is a spirit that's quite genuine; the second reason that *A Queer Carol* is in this book is that, more than any recent adaptation that I know of (and I've seen quite a few), it captures the true meaning of Dickens' novel with the warm, simple felicity it deserves. Godfrey comes right to the point in the play's first scene, when Scrooge is visited in his elegant Chelsea townhouse by a fellow named Nick, who is fundraising for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS:

NICK: You know, Bob, that's what I love about Christmas. It's a unique time. A time when people—even New Yorkers—forget about themselves for a while and want to help other people. It's the only time I know of when everyone—

(SCROOGE reenters.)

NICK: —well, almost everyone—takes pleasure in being helpful and charitable, realizing—if only briefly—that we are all fellow passengers on the same big roller coaster.

Nick's words felt particularly resonant right after the World Trade Center attacks; now, just a little year later, they're sadly wistful. Which is why, I guess, we need to be reminded—not just in December, but all the time—of *A Christmas Carol's* message of fellowship and responsibility.

A Queer Carol isn't afraid to be sentimental, by the way; its heart is on its sleeve much of the time, in fact. But when Tim makes a Christmas Eve toast at a humble gathering of his makeshift "family"—his lover Bob Cratchit, along with a lesbian couple who are their closest friends—he says (what else?) "God bless us, everyone." And for once, we entirely believe.

It was always clear that at least one "9/11 play" needed to be part of this anthology; an event so cataclysmic and defining can't help but be reflected in the art that gets created in its wake. In a way, of course, every one of the eleven plays in *Plays and Playwrights 2003* deals with 9/11 (see my remarks about *A Queer Carol*, for example, above). But only one confronts the subject head-on, and indeed Catherine Gillet's *Pumpkins for Smallpox* is still, more than a year after it was written, practically the only play I know of that concerns itself directly with what the events of that day mean for the future of our country.

Gillet zooms in, here, on our children. In *Pumpkins for Smallpox*, two teenagers who live in a town not far from New York City are raising money for a good cause outside their neighborhood church on a Sunday morning. Nothing unusual about that—except that the money is to go to providing smallpox vaccine to protect the residents of this community; and all of the talk shared by these two girls has to do with what they call the Thing, the never-named catastrophe that has, quite obviously and irrevocably, changed these youngsters' lives.

Gillet gets under her two protagonists' skins so precisely that it hurts.

LAURA: Ever heard of Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome?

LUCY: Duh. Like every day. My mom keeps askin' if I have it like she used to ask if I had my period. Really pisses me off.

LAURA: Ditto.

LUCY: It's like we're not allowed to be like regular, you know?, normal. Before the Thing I got mad at stuff. I freaked out like when she wouldn't drive me somewhere. Now I've got Post—

LUCY: I don't sleep at night.

Pumpkins for Smallpox is very short, just ten minutes long, but it is by no means slight. It is, I fear, already a little bit dated: what seemed to be far-fetched when Gillet thought it up—mass inoculations against smallpox—is, alas, already very real. Nevertheless, the raw potency of Gillet’s work makes it valuable; *Pumpkins for Smallpox* is a testament to a moment in our history that must be remembered.

A more personal kind of catastrophe is the setting for Andrea Lepcio’s *Looking for the Pony*, another brief play of shattering intensity. Taking its title from the old saw about a barn full of manure (“there has to be a pony in here somewhere”), this drama concerns a pair of sisters, known only as A and B, who are forced to travel, as Lepcio puts it, to “the places cancer takes you.” The brilliant leap that the playwright makes in this piece is to keep it entirely impressionistic: A, the sister with breast cancer, is kept at slight remove while B, the other sister, tells the story, not exactly as it happened, but rather as she experienced it. We hear what B heard, as opposed to what the legion of doctors, nurses, insurance company personnel, and other health care industry professionals actually said, and as a result *Looking for the Pony* has an immediacy and intimacy that’s rare in the theatre:

B: Her gynecologist sits down.

A: We sit.

B: She says,

C [the gynecologist]: It’s cancer.... Here’s the name of a doctor. Immediately you are beyond what this office can do. This is the name of the first doctor you need a surgeon and then an oncologist or an oncologist and then a surgeon. There needs to be a surgeon but there will be an oncologist and a surgeon both and a radiologist although from the way the tissue looks on film there is no doubt you have cancer.

Lepcio takes our breath away as she deconstructs the state of contemporary health care and the myriad feelings of fear, powerlessness, anxiety, anger, victimhood, frustration, and disbelief that are experienced by anyone in real trouble up against it. *Looking for the Pony* has moments of not-so-gentle satire that raise smiles, juxtaposed with instances of profound humanity as her characters come face to face with issues of mortality and grief.

Lepcio mines the most essential stuff of life with enormous compassion and intelligence in this play. *Looking for the Pony* has already been performed by several New York City theatres since its premiere; I expect many, many others around the world will want to follow suit, to bring its potent wisdom to as large an audience as possible.

Black Thang is written with such wit and assurance that it’s hard to believe it’s the very first full-length play by its author, Ato Essandoh. This charming and insightful one-act is a romantic comedy about Sam, a young black man, and Mattie, the white woman with whom he falls in love. Trouble is, Mattie is obsessively afraid of commitment. Complicating matters are Sam’s best friend Jerome and Mattie’s roommate Keisha, who

are both convinced that the interracial relationship is doomed to implode, and, worse, are only too happy to say so, every chance they get.

Essandoh lets these splendidly authentic characters say whatever's on their minds, and as a result *Black Thang* turns out to be a richly-observed comedy of contemporary manners. The playwright interweaves scenes of Sam and Mattie going through the expected stages of courtship with morning-after "debriefings," allowing us to watch the evolution of this coupling from every possible perspective. The interplay feels as natural as walking; Essandoh has given us a couple to really root for in this attractive pair.

He's also come up with some of the funniest dialogue in recent memory for a play of this type. The love scenes between Sam and Mattie are surprisingly frank and intimate, but they never feel gratuitous or sensational; they work precisely because they have such a sweet ring of truth about them. Similarly, Jerome and Keisha's various diatribes on all sorts of outlandish subjects, from the lack of what Jerome calls "Ass Content" in white women to a hilariously tragic account of Keisha's grandmother-in-law-to-be's lifelong fear of horses, are all the funnier because they sound so much like something you heard yesterday at work or in a bar.

Actors are going to be clamoring to perform these roles. Consider this first meeting between Jerome and Mattie. Jerome's had too much to drink already and has been on Sam's back for some time because Mattie is vegan:

JEROME: Okay, let's say perchance that you were stuck on a deserted island and there was nothing there but a cow. Nothing but sand and a fucking cow. Would you then?

MATTIE: Nope.

JEROME: You would die?

MATTIE: Yup.

JEROME: And if the cow ate you?

MATTIE: The cow wouldn't eat me.

JEROME: How do you know? How do you know this cow?

MATTIE: Cows don't eat meat. They're herbivores.

JEROME: Yeah, when it suits them. When it's convenient for them. When they're living the plush pansy cow life chewing cud and getting milked all day. Maybe. But I'm telling you. Put a cow in an extreme situation where it's got to choose between its beliefs and living another day and I'll show you one fucking scary cow—

Essandoh nails us in all our imperfect glory. *Black Thang* is a propitious debut of a writer to watch.

The anxious state of the world has made many of us try to pinpoint the moment when things started to go wrong for America. Playwright Edward Musto has fixed the date as November 4, 1980, which was the night when Ronald Reagan won his landslide victory over President Jimmy Carter, ushering in a political regime that remains largely intact at this writing. That same night is the setting for Musto's dark play *The Ninth Circle*, which depicts the most harrowing of this book's journeys, that of a 35-year-old middle manager trapped in a corporate America he no longer likes or understands.

In ten riveting scenes, Musto charts Tom's journey through an increasingly dark and murky night. The play begins in a seedy hotel room, where Tom has just had quick, meaningless sex with a teacher he picked up at the school where he was supposed to vote. It progresses through encounters at a bar, an art gallery, a late business dinner at an exclusive restaurant, a porno movie house, a hospital emergency room, Tom's office, the steam room in a health club, Tom's apartment, and, finally (inevitably) in a club called the Inferno: the dead end. Each stop pits Tom against something of value in his life—his secretary, his job, his wife; eventually the very core of his moral fiber—and each confrontation drives him further away from life and closer to a cathartic but bitterly nihilistic revelation.

The Ninth Circle is bleak and despairing and, in its final resolution, hopeless. But Musto's writing is sharp and incisive and potent: the people Tom meets, especially the strangers, at once compel and repel, both drawing us toward and pulling us away from the damaging drift of humanity that they represent. These characters—Alley, the promiscuous elementary school teacher; Score, the stoned drug dealer; JoJo, the scarily accommodating porno house manager; Julio, the arrogant mail room clerk; and Ian, the exhausted gay businessman with whom Tom connects in a sauna—are unexpectedly unforgettable. We don't want them to, we resist—but these folks get under our skin:

IAN: Took out a membership here strictly for working out. Already know where to go for sex.

TOM: Anywhere.

IAN: Right.

(Pause.)

TOM: Anytime you want to start.

IAN: You start.

TOM: I can't.

IAN: Neither can I.

The Ninth Circle is raw and it is epic. Musto isn't afraid to push the envelope here, depicting the corrosion of Tom's soul in brutally uncompromising terms. At the same time, the play is sharp and literate (liberally sprinkled with symbols and allusions to the classics); much of its power to disturb and unsettle us comes from the contrast between the elegance and order of its surface and the anguished moral turpitude beneath.

The Doctor of Rome by Nat Colley is a sequel to *The Merchant of Venice*, and like that work it is not easily pegged as about simply this thing or that thing. What first attracted me to it is its clear-eyed examination of what really matters to people in power, *i.e.*, maintenance of the economic order and status quo. The Duke of Venice, the official who ordered Shylock to convert to Christianity at the end of Shakespeare's play, explains why he did what he did early on in *The Doctor of Rome*:

DUKE: Shylock's conversion was part of a case settled before this court long ago. The laws of Venice must always be constant. Much trade depends upon the reliability and consistency of those laws. Shylock understood that.

Later, after Shylock's grandson Daniel causes another suit to be brought before the Duke, come these frighteningly pragmatic words:

DUKE: I am not the Duke of mercy, young man, but of Venice. And it is Venice I must protect, and its markets I must defend. All the world must know that in Venice they may trade freely and safely. The economy of the entire city depends upon it... All those who would corrupt the course of capitalism, or fail to turn them in once known, must be penalized, quickly, publicly, and severely...

How much or how little have things changed since Shakespeare's day? Colley considers that question and many others in this impressive sequel, which brashly borrows form as well as characters from the original and manages, quite gratifyingly, to live up to its famous predecessor.

The doctor of the title is of course Portia, or rather her alter ego, Balthazar, that learned young man of law who spoke so eloquently of mercy at Shylock's trial. It is now fifteen years later and Portia and Bassanio, childless, are merrily vying for control over the future of Daniel, the son of Jessica and Lorenzo and grandson of Shylock. Portia is still not above playing tricks on her beloved to get her way; and neither is Colley above toying with that infernal ring that Portia made Bassanio swear to hold onto at all costs to make a point of his own about the nature of loyalty.

Colley shows us in his play what happens to most of the familiar characters from *The Merchant of Venice*, and introduces several compelling new ones: Daniel, of course, whose Jewish heritage has been hidden from him by his mother until Tubal visits Belmont with the news of Shylock's death; and also Rachel, the half-Moorish daughter of Shylock's servant Launcelot Gobbo and Daniel's love interest; plus Largo, a merchant of Rome who sets in motion the machinery of Colley's canny plot.

The Doctor of Rome finally turns deadly serious on a number of thorny subjects, such as self-identity, religious bigotry, and the tenuous balance between justice and truth. As the Duke says—and as Shakespeare's own work ultimately proved—mercy unfortunately has little place in any of it.

All of the plays discussed so far have been largely traditional in their structure. But it wouldn't be a *Plays and Playwrights* book without at least a few representative experiments in form, and *Galaxy Video* is perhaps the most innovative piece included here. What *Galaxy Video* most resembles is a long music video, but this is no mere appropriation of quick-cuts and short-attention-span snippets for their own sake. Playwright/director Marc Morales has something weightier in mind, though he'd probably be loath to say so himself: *Galaxy Video*, and the plays he has written since (*The Lounge* and, most recently, *The Show*) are all attempts to explain Generation X in

the context of the art form they invented. Like Sondheim & Lapine's *Follies*, *Galaxy Video* uses popular culture to explore our dreams and ideals.

Okay, maybe that's a little too lofty. *Galaxy Video* feels, mostly, like an antic, turbo-charged farce, set in the biggest video store imaginable, through which traipse a motley assortment of customers and employees. What they have in common, apart from their location, is a desire for control: over what video gets rented tonight, in particular; but more broadly over their destinies. Their adventures, as they try to locate a copy of *Midnight Cowboy* among the endless maze of video shelves or try to figure out what they want to be when they grow up, are depicted in short, sharp, swift scenes that sometimes last no longer than a few seconds. There are more than a dozen leading characters in this play and every one of them gets to be the star of his or her own "video," at least for a brief moment.

Galaxy Video makes liberal use of pop culture references and running gags, linking it both to vaudeville and MTV; and it stops over and over again to interpolate a musical number or break dance that has nothing and everything to do with what's happening in the story. It's breathless, shameless, and boundary-less. It's also enormously funny and enormous fun:

JERRY: Welcome to Galaxy Video. (*Strikes the pose.*) How may we assist you?

MAN: Yeah, buddy. You got a bathroom here I can use?

JERRY: Yes, I do have a bathroom, and no, you can't use it. Customers only sir. Sorry.

MAN: You don't understand. I really got to go.

JERRY: I am sorry. Store rule, not mine. Customers only.

MAN: Man. Okay. How do I become a customer?

JERRY: Well, just rent one of our fine films. We have an infinite number of movies here at Galaxy Video.

MAN: I ain't a member.

JERRY: Well then, you can purchase one of our fine snacks from our concession area.

MAN: Okay. Give me these. (*Grabs a packet of M&Ms with peanuts.*)

JERRY: Fine selection, sir. That will be nine dollars and ninety-nine cents.

The American family, or what's left of it anyway, comes under scrutiny in Leon Chase's play, *The Last Carburator*. Following in the footsteps of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and—most emphatically—Sam Shepard, Chase has fashioned here a taut drama of dysfunctionality centered around tension between a father and his sons. The patriarch here is Doug, very much a broken-down shadow of a man, not unlike the rotting 1970 Plymouth Hemi Barracuda that has awaited repair in his suburban Detroit garage for more than two decades. Doug's elder son, Keith, left home for college and never looked back, becoming a success in the computer biz on the West Coast. Younger son Josh, who idolized dad and car, got neither affection nor respect, and went off to fight in Desert Storm (to the consternation of his Vietnam vet father) and then took a job as a bounty hunter.

Now it's 2000. Mom has left, though Doug seems unable to say for sure whether she's on vacation or gone for good. The youngest child, Ayla, is in college at Ann Arbor looking eagerly forward to escape from her family. Josh and Doug maintain an uneasy truce. And then Keith turns up, unannounced, in a ditch near Doug's house.

KEITH: This one morning I was outside the door to go into work. I was late, too.... I was trying to remember the number to get into the door, but I kept getting it mixed up with all the other numbers. The office code. My network password. My e-mail password. The PIN number for my ATM card. The code for my voicemail. My home phone number. My cell phone number. Social Security. My credit card number. My account number at the bank.... They'd never been a problem before. Then, there I was, just standing there, all of it mixed up... so bad it made my head hurt.

JOSH: So how'd you get in?

KEITH: I didn't... I just left.

And thus begins, in earnest, Chase's drama, in which all the stuff Doug thought he knew, and all the stuff Ayla and Josh thought they understood, and all the stuff Keith thinks he's going to rediscover—all these things blow up in everybody's face, in a cathartic, life-changing weekend. Chase's debt to Shepard is clear throughout, and indeed acknowledged with a wonderful homage in the form of a box of melting popsicles on the kitchen counter. But he has his own heartfelt, distinctive voice, and *The Last Carburetor* eventually winds up covering quite different ground than we initially expect, especially in the stories of Keith and Ayla.

I was personally very heartened by the resurgence of politically-minded theatre in the off-off-Broadway community during the past year; explosive national and international events seem to have triggered activist reaction among at least some of our playwrights. Joseph Langham's *Out to Lunch* is certainly the most polemical play in this collection. Drawing from a variety of dramatic and cultural reference points, Langham has crafted a dada allegorical farce about, among other things, the dangers of apathy. *Out to Lunch* is deliberately off-the-wall and deliberately provoking; a frenzied parade of calculated, wanton shock effects, it manages to jolt its audience out of complacency, even though leaving them laughing all the way.

At the center of the *Hellzapoppin'*-ish shenanigans are numba one and numba two, a pair of clueless geeks who spend their entire Sunday camped out at a table at a neighborhood restaurant. Here they conduct an inane and endless conversation about internet chat partners and scanning their "booties," all the while blissfully unaware of (a) the increasing consternation of the restaurant staff and (b) the intermittent interruptions of a crazed gunman looking for an excuse to open fire. These guys are *Godot's* Vladimir and Estragon without anything to wait for; virtually nothing happens to them during *Out to Lunch* and yet we understand that they are vitally central to it.

A lot happens, on the other hand, to the other characters, who include a temperamental Waitress who at one point takes off all her clothes as a token protest against her immovable customers; her boss, the Manager, a (very) frustrated ballet dancer; his boss,

the Owner, who wears a crown and is attended by two sexy “goils”; *his* boss, the Owner’s Wife, who is so vile that she tells her nanny to shoot her children if they won’t behave; and the aptly named JesterDishwasherFrenchChef, a hard-working soul who speaks, in his way, for the oppressed everywhere. Each of these, from his or her rung on the food chain, tries to make at least a ripple, if not a wave, as when the Manager explodes with this tirade:

MAN: yeah, yeah, well i’m sick of it. i’m sick of all these rules, everywhere you go. no smoking, no parking, stop, go, the customer is always right, don’t take candy from strangers, do this, do that, blah blah blah. well, i’m sick of it!! i want to be a ballerino, a ballet guy, what’s the term for that? balleretta? balleroniio? heck i dunno. but i’m for once in my short pathetic life going to follow my dream, and i’m going to break the rules, all of them. look mister mayor, i’m smoking in a restaurant, you nonsmoking republican nazi motherfrigger!

Langham uses stylized language (and punctuation) to make sure that we’re constantly on our guard, paying attention to the apocalyptic events of *Out to Lunch*, lest we fall into the trap of his two clueless “heroes.” Rowdy and risky and entirely pertinent, *Out to Lunch* reminds us that theatre can be on the frontline of social and political protest.

Langham’s shock tactics wouldn’t be necessary if we were all as resilient and resourceful as Sadie, the heroine of Maggie Cino’s solo work *Ascending Bodily*. More a performance text than a conventional drama, this monologue originated as a character study intended to be developed into a movement-based piece by its author. Cino tells us in her author’s note that Sadie soon took on a life of her own, and she emerges here full-blown as the unlikely subject of her own very unusual little one-act play.

Her tale, which she narrates herself, is one of great adventure, in places like the Siberian Desert and the Serengeti Jungle, and involving extraordinary creatures such as the enormous gentleman with a bald head like the moon, not to mention the teeny tiny llamas of the Himalayan Andes. Armed only with her handbags, Sadie exults in the joys of every new acquaintance. In the end, she teaches us a great deal about life, love, and loss.

Cino has endowed Sadie not only with great spirit and wisdom, but with a fantastical, inimitable voice:

SADIE: The second time I met my enormous gentleman I was walking among the ancient stones when I saw his great knees and his bald head like the moon. And I ran to them and looked up and up and up—and there was nothing above his knees, and his bald head was the moon. Then I heard laughter behind me and there was my gentleman friend! He reached across and broke off bits of the moon. They rained around me and he said,

“For you you you...”

Ascending Bodily is a magical piece, full of wonder and nuance. Cino says she will continue to perform it, and I’m sure she will continue to learn more about her remarkable creation as she does so. But she’s eager for others to bring Sadie to life, and I am hopeful

that once people meet her within these pages, they'll want to put Sadie on stage in places she's never even dreamed of.

I've given the final word, so to speak, to Kelly McAllister, and his immensely moving play *Last Call*. It is, at first glance, a *Big Chill*-ish piece about a reunion of old friends in a small California town, all of them stuck in early-middle-age ruts and some of them eager to get out of them. McAllister populates his play with vividly recognizable figures: Vinnie, a barfly who spouts movie quotes and obscenities and little else; Jerry, his buddy who still lives in his parent's garage and harbors unrequited desires for a high school sweetheart; Molly, Vinnie's smart, sharp-tongued wife; Kristen, the still-glamorous object of Jerry's desire, now married to a successful but nerdy businessman named Karl whom everybody else calls Fievel, the village idiot; Carlos, the avuncular Vietnam vet who runs the local watering hole; and Jack, a sweet-natured frump who has never recovered—emotionally or physically—from a long-ago car crash.

Into this mix arrives David, the local boy made good, the one who got away, moving to New York City after college. It's a few months after the World Trade Center attacks, and David is heeding—and attempting to deliver—the last call of the play's title:

DAVID: It was about three months after 9/11. After everyone started acting like their normal, boring, creepy selves.

VINCE: Including you?

DAVID: Oh yeah. Especially me. Thousands of people dead. A war on terrorism that just gets curiouser and curiouser. Anthrax, some kid putting pipe bombs in mailboxes—things are totally fucked up. And there I am, buying this and selling that, closing deals like nothing ever happened. Keep going on like before, That's what everyone said to do to fight the terrorists. Keep going on like before. Even if you're an asshole, keep going on like before. It's all so fucked and weird.

I will leave it to you discover what happens to David and his friends in *Last Call*. I will tell you that McAllister respects the awful complexity of real life; in my review of the original production at the New York International Fringe Festival, I said that the play is messy and poetic, like life; I still can't think of a better way to describe it.

We need our Kelly McAllisters to encapsulate, so deftly and truthfully, what's in our heads and hearts. He and each of the other contributors to this volume—Joe Godfrey, Catherine Gillet, Andrea Lepcio, Ato Essandoh, Edward Musto, Nat Colley, Marc Morales, Leon Chase, Joseph Langham, and Maggie Cino—have used their extraordinary talents to show us, in wonderfully different ways, what it means to be human at this particular moment in time. The journeys they have brought to the stage this past year and have now set down for us in this volume are signposts on our way to whatever's next. They await you as soon as you turn this page. I wish for you a trip as rewarding as mine.