

INTRODUCTION

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A Manhattan photographer places an ad for a new roommate on September 10, 2001. A teenage runaway is mistakenly reported to have been kidnapped by Muslim terrorists. A former drag queen and his male lover adopt three gay/transgender teenagers. A team of researchers at MIT builds a robot that appears to exhibit human emotions. A TV network creates a reality show simulating the war in Vietnam.

Welcome to *Plays and Playwrights 2004*, where, among other things, we encapsulate a year of New York theatre, preserving its variety and vitality within the two covers of a book. What was on the minds of our emerging playwrights during the past twelve months? Current events, to be sure: Frank Cwiklik's *Sugarbaby* and Brian Sloan's *WTC View* take compelling but very different looks at post-9/11 America. We look toward the future in *United States: Work and Progress* by Christy Meyer, Jon Schumacher, and Ellen Shanman, which documents cutting-edge artificial intelligence research; and we look backward to our collective past in *The Shady Maids of Haiti*, in which John Jahnke examines racial, sexual, and gender politics against the backdrop of the 1803 Haitian slave rebellion. We examine cultural institutions: Tom X. Chao deconstructs the outer edges of experimental theatre in *Cats Can See The Devil*, while Rob Reese brings reality television to its logical next step in his parody, *Survivor: Vietnam!* Contemporary family values at the beginning of the twenty-first century are considered in *Feed the Hole*, in which Michael Stock explores the troubled relationships of a group of disconnected twenty-somethings, and in *Auntie Mayhem*, in which David Pumo gives us a nontraditional family extraordinaire. Finally, our playwrights grapple with Big Issues—imagination and redemption in Mary Jett Parsley's

The Monster Tales, and time, space, and eternity in Steven Gridley's *Sun, Stand Thou Still*.

I said "among other things" a moment ago because, in addition to providing a kind of permanent record of the theatre, *Plays and Playwrights 2004* has two other very important goals. First and foremost, it's a showcase for outstanding new plays. As editor and reviewer for nytheatre.com, I see several hundred new plays each year, and these ten are among the very finest of the past twelve months: inventive and intelligent, thought-provoking and thoughtful, stretching and engaging their audiences and challenging the status quo theatrically and thematically. These plays have all had successful runs in New York City and they're ripe for production in your corner of the world (see page iii for contact and permissions information for each one).

Second, *Plays and Playwrights 2004* is meant to be a launching pad for new theatre artists. This year's cohort of playwrights is a distinguished, remarkable lot: a pair of authentic auteurs who meticulously write, direct, and design highly personal yet resonant productions whose dazzling theatricality belies their humble off-off-Broadway origins (Frank Cwiklik and John Jahnke); two energetic young men still in their twenties, both coincidentally educated in Chicago and both founders of their own flourishing theatre companies in New York (Michael Stock and Jon Schumacher); two young women who are building careers as actors and playwrights, exploring the still-nascent field of documentary theatre (Ellen Shanman and Christy Meyer); an entrepreneurial solo performer who has migrated from stand-up monology to full-fledged theatre production and playwriting (Tom X. Chao), and an equally enterprising performer with roots in the world of improv who has become an accomplished theatre director and writer (Rob Reese); a writer and brand-new mother from North Carolina who works as a high school English teacher (Mary Jett Parsley), and a lawyer from Long Island who works with disadvantaged teens at the Vera Institute of Justice in New York City (David Pumo); an independent filmmaker and veteran of Sundance and other festivals (Brian Sloan), and a director-playwright who is one of off-off-Broadway's rising stars and who was, in fact, involved with two of the pieces in *Plays and Playwrights 2002* (Steven Gridley). Mark their names, read their plays: these are the people who will be helping to shape and define American drama in the next decade or two.



In a relatively short time, Frank Cwiklik has journeyed from staging adaptations of fluky films (Orson Welles's *The Stranger*, Ed Wood's

The Fugitive Girls) to mounting sensational productions of Shakespeare (the apocalyptic *Titus Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* set in Las Vegas) to, with *Sugarbaby*, devising, directing, and designing—from the ground up—a completely original, mind-blowingly pertinent American play. Cwiklik's work is special because it's uncannily visceral and thrillingly evocative. Armed with almost no props, but with a prodigiously imaginative use of lighting and sound cues—and a big dollop of theatrical know-how—he creates exciting, cinematic set pieces like *Sugarbaby*'s Vegas Strip car chase sequence that leave spectators breathless. Cwiklik's theatre is noisy, rude, brash, and full of energy; without resorting to the rougher tactics of theatre of cruelty, it nevertheless shakes up an audience that is growing too accustomed to sitting passively in the dark.

Cwiklik's playwriting owes much to the movies, as you'll discover when you read *Sugarbaby* later in this book; also to the lurid paperback pulp tradition, which is perhaps the most precise literary antecedent of this singular look at the Way We Live Now. *Sugarbaby*'s heroine and title character is a teenage girl from the heartland who gets fed up with her parents' petty feuding and her dead-end job and decides to run away from home. She hooks up with the only real friend she has, a car mechanic named Jesus who is obsessed with Elvis Presley; together they head off, as Lewis and Clark and Simon and Garfunkel did before them, to look for America. But when two of *Sugarbaby*'s neighbors tell bigtime cable TV reporter Rod Butane that she was kidnapped by what they call "Moo-Slam" terrorists ("I think it might have been Yoosama Bin Layden," says one of them), a media frenzy of gargantuan proportions ignites.

Sugarbaby takes in the whole of American culture, circa 2003: Vegas, fast food, cable news networks, Michael Moore, TV talk shows, conspiracy theories—you name it. Cwiklik gets the shades and rhythms exactly right; here's anchorman Rod Butane near the end of a typical broadcast:

ROD: America's a word. You think they'll try to ban that, too? Is that next? You can't say "America" in our schools. Because they don't believe in it anymore. Irving Berlin would be appalled. (*Damn. That was nice. ROD lets that hover in the air a moment, then leans back.*) I'm Rod Butane. I know what's important.

The collision of paranoia and patriotism at the center of much recent national debate is all over *Sugarbaby*; what's refreshingly missing is cynicism: everybody in this play is passionate about what they believe, however misguided or ridiculous it may seem. *Sugarbaby*'s melting pot of loud, eccentric characters makes it genuinely epic; in

the best democratic tradition, it pokes fun at all of them, but it does so with love. Somewhere inside all of this deranged and excessive satire resides the truth.



If *Sugarbaby* offers a panoramic view of the Zeitgeist, *WTC View* zooms in on a specific, critical moment in recent history to bring it into sharp, vivid focus. Probably *the* critical moment: Brian Sloan's play is set in New York City in September 2001, just after two airplanes crashed into and destroyed the World Trade Center. In the hours and days after the twin towers collapsed, Lower Manhattan looked and felt like a war zone: streets were coated with inches of rubble; police and soldiers guarded checkpoints at virtually every intersection; the stench of seemingly endless smoke was pervasive. Most of the plays written about 9/11 so far have focused on the personal tragedies and/or political implications of the catastrophe; *WTC View* bravely and incisively maps out the day-to-day human costs, telling a part of the story that has heretofore been mostly ignored.

The incident that inspired Sloan to write *WTC View* actually happened. As he writes in his notes to the play, the last thing he did on the night of September tenth was place a classified ad for a new roommate. The protagonist of *WTC View*, a photographer named Eric, does the same thing; and, in nine scenes spanning the two weeks after 9/11, he interviews an assortment of candidates under just about the most strained circumstances imaginable. Eric is freaked out by what's going on in his city; his attitudes and responses to events are unflinchingly and honestly recounted by the playwright, and contrasted with those of the various would-be roommates, who range from a British hotel worker who started his new job in America on September ninth to a successful bond trader who was on the ninety-first floor of Tower One when the first plane hit.

The resulting drama is riveting and also gratifyingly well-crafted—Sloan cannily ensures that the audience is engaged and absorbed in genuine human conflicts and values even as he manages to say some things about 9/11 that absolutely need to be said. One of the prospective roommates is a New York University student named Max, whose apparently boundless naiveté really gets under Eric's skin:

MAX: Hey—did you take a lot of pictures on the eleventh?

ERIC: Uh...no.

MAX: I got some insane shots on my digital camera. I'll have to show them to you.

ERIC: Uh...no thanks.

MAX: Then later that day, me and my roommates went up to Union Square. Got some insane pictures there too. We were lighting candles and meditating. It was pretty intense.

ERIC: (*Sarcastic.*) Ohhh—you were part of that whole sixties love-in thing?

MAX: (*A little offended by this.*) Hey—that's a bit harsh.

ERIC: C'mon...it was a bunch of students whose classes were cancelled and didn't have anything better to do, right?

Cruel and sad and absurd, just like life, *WTC View* offers authentic testimony to the ordinary people who, neither victims nor survivors, just happened to live and work near a site of total devastation. Filled with sorrow, anger, gallows humor, and compassion, it's an important document of our times. And it's a darned fine play.



Documentary theatre has become increasingly popular in the past ten years or so, thanks to Anna Deavere Smith, Moises Kaufman, and others. Christy Meyer, Jon Schumacher, and Ellen Shanman—the three young writer-performers of *United States: Work and Progress*—actually spent some time working with Kaufman in the process of creating their own very original contribution to this emerging genre. As explained later in this book, this piece is part of an ongoing project launched in 1999 by Singularity (the company co-founded by Schumacher and Shanman), with the objective of putting the lives of ordinary people on stage. Schumacher's *A Day in the Life of Clark Chipman*, about a midlevel Chicago government bureaucrat, was in the 1999 New York International Fringe Festival; I saw it there and was immediately impressed by both the ambition and the talent of these dedicated artists. Two more pieces, mounted together as *Railways & Firework*, followed in 2000; then, at the end of 2002, came *Work and Progress*.

It seems to me that one of the fundamental jobs of the documentarian is to properly select whose stories to tell. This is certainly one of the great strengths of *Work and Progress*, which focuses on three young scientists whose work is not only fascinating but enormously relevant. Jessica Banks, Cynthia Breazeal, and Aaron Edsinger work in the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where they're involved with projects such as the creation of robots that simulate human emotional responses and the development of synthetic, mechanical "organisms" that emulate the functionality of, say, a human muscle. The nature of this work is inherently reductive, focused on discovering the component struc-

ture of processes that are extraordinarily complicated, yet so commonplace that most of us take them for granted.

Meyer, Schumacher, and Shanman prove to be adept chroniclers, precisely capturing the voices of their subjects. Here's one of them, explicating some of his current research:

AARON: But I think, I think the cool thing for me is that you can start building robots that have sort of a soft squishy form to them, right? It's not all rods and metal that are bolted together. So I convinced Rod to let me build a tensegrity robot. And, um, so the first thing I'm building is a leech, actually. And then maybe a jellyfish.

The mannered (i.e., natural) speech patterns feel like artifice; we're constantly aware, in *Work and Progress*, that the actors are interpreting (as opposed to pretending to be), the characters they depict in the play. This turns out to be not just intentional, but necessary: actors and characters both, in this piece, seek to create life from, as it were, thin air: can either ever entirely succeed?



The Haitian Slave Rebellion of 1803 is hardly an obvious subject for dramatization; but John Jahnke has carved out a niche for himself in the world of alternative theatre by creating plays on a variety of eclectic topics, commenting profoundly on the human condition in the process. Using a singular stage vocabulary and incorporating startling, vivid imagery that is sometimes shocking but never gratuitous, Jahnke creates theatre that is dense, elegant, and surreal.

The Shady Maids of Haiti requires just four characters to tell its story: M., an exiled French poet; Mme., his Creole wife; Mlle., their Haitian servant; and X, an African man who may or may not be embroiled in the slave revolt. In some two dozen scenes and interludes, the playwright arranges the members of this quartet into every conceivable combination, allowing us to observe a shifting and unsettling balance of power as the white, male (ostensible) head of the household, destroyed by malaise and decadence, yields to the Others. *Shady Maids*, filled with betrayals and intrigue, emerges as a study in politics—racial, sexual, and gender.

The play shakes us up by continuously positing outcomes that challenge accepted wisdom and status quos.

MLLE: You play two sides, refusing to defend your home merely for the attention it might afford you—as if coquetry would be the drug that finally forces you to surrender the empty well of your soul to whomever offers the highest price.

MME: And who would that be?

MLLE: A stranger—

MME: A slave?

MLLE: A thief? Your husband prowls the estate for a means of claiming what he perceives to be his. He conjures forgotten memories of your sweet and comforting kiss as a stranger bleeds on your sheets.

It also stretches our assumptions about contemporary theatre, as well. A rigorous superficial structure belies the fluid, magical-to-supernatural shape that the play ultimately takes: the action encompasses both the mundane and the extraordinary; characters speak dialog at once frank—profane, even, sometimes—and oddly formalized and stiff, like figures in a dimly remembered dream. Time moves logarithmically: a moment or a month can pass within a single exchange. Symbols—beginning with the treacherous flowers of the play’s title—abound. An ethereal design—beautifully realized in *Shady Maids*’s New York production, I should add—is skillfully sketched out in the stage directions (one of them, with bravado worthy of Tennessee Williams, simply reads “The fireflies flicker and die”).

Almost novelistic in its sweep yet innately theatrical, *Shady Maids* conjures an unknown and alien world as it recounts its unfamiliar story. It’s ripe for interpretation and exploration by directors, designers, and actors looking to exercise their imaginations.



The fringe/alternative theatre scene that provides such a nourishing environment for artists like John Jahnke gets a good-natured (and well-deserved!) ribbing in *Cats Can See The Devil*. Tom X. Chao’s shrewd comedy-satire-meditation-parable on creativity begins at a performance of a self-proclaimed “puppet show for children” (that is actually *not* recommended for children) entitled “The Story of the Abstract Geometrical Shapes With No Allegorical Content,” in which a writer/narrator and three puppeteers enact the exploration of ten thousand years of psychohistory with characters such as Puce Nonagon and Mr. Can of Cream-Style Corn. This masterful opening set piece is at once a hilarious parody of the grotesquely self-indulgent avant-garde/experimental/performance art claptrap that we’ve all had to sit through over the last several decades, and a deliciously self-referential exemplar of same: Chao knows this terrain, in all its uncomfortable, underfunded, desperate glory. It’s not long before the puppet show implodes under the weight of its own self-importance, and the performers stage a mutiny. The second half of *Cats Can See The Devil* is more serious—though still enormously funny—as it tracks

what amounts to an onstage nervous breakdown to reveal the obsessions and preoccupations of a compulsively creative individual.

CCSTD knows no sacred cows. It sends up virtually every genre of fringe theatre, along with the New York International Fringe Festival (where it premiered) itself; everything from interpretative dance to Improv to interactive drama gets a jab or two in Chao's take-no-prisoners tour-de-force. Here, for example, one of the rebellious puppeteers talks about her checkered career in sketch comedy:

TUESDAY: I was in a group called Lousy Poker Hand...but they folded. *(Pause.)* Then I was in a group called The Croissants...but everybody flaked on me. *(Pause.)* Then I was in Vacuum Tube...but that imploded. *(Pause.)* Then I was in The Helen Kellers...but they lacked vision. *(Pause.)* Then I was in The Amputees...but they didn't have a leg to stand on. *(Pause.)* Then I was in Empty Fabric Store...but they didn't have any material. *(Pause.)* Then I was in The Sandals...but we kept stepping on each other's toes. *(Pause.)* Then I was in The Weekly Newsmagazines...but they had too many issues.

This gag is actually sustained for a few more lines; Chao is, perhaps above all else, a supremely funny writer. His is a far-ranging, esoteric wit—how many plays do you know of that boast jokes about *n*-plus-one dimensional entities?

And then there's the Tom X. Chao persona, a sort of sad-sack loner with delusions of aesthetic superiority. Chao puts himself, or this (hopefully) exaggerated version of himself, right in the middle of his plays, *CCSTD* included; in fact, he's built up something of a minicult in downtown NYC around his performances. As you'll discover, this is yet another layer of the recursive put-on: a show about creating a show about creating a show. No intellectual or artistic pretension is safe with Chao in the house.



As *Cats Can See The Devil* mines the parodic possibilities of off-off-Broadway, *Survivor: Vietnam!* tackles the currently ubiquitous phenomenon of reality television. Its author, Rob Reese, hails from the world of improv, having studied in Chicago at Second City and The Annoyance (home of “*So, I Killed a Few People...*,” which was featured in *Plays and Playwrights for the New Millennium*). In New York, he founded Amnesia Wars, a troupe that started out doing long-form improvisations and which has now branched out into stand-up comedy and more conventional theatre. *Survivor: Vietnam!*—sharp, ingenious, and hilarious—benefits from all its diverse antecedents in Reese's varied career.

The idea is one of those “what-ifs” that seems obvious after somebody else thinks of it—a reality TV series set in the midst of the Vietnam War. Six impossibly eager contestants compete for a \$1 million prize in *Survivor: Vietnam!*, battling landmines, air raids, a *Deer Hunter*-esque game of Russian roulette, and, eventually, a crazed network executive with more than a passing resemblance to the Marlon Brando character in *Apocalypse Now*. Acknowledging the apparently limitless cynicism of TV programmers (as well as the fact that the war in Vietnam ended several decades ago), Reese gives us the Ho Chi Minnies—Asian beauties in tight fatigue shorts and wet T-shirts—in place of the Viet Cong; and he gives the whole post-Enron capitalist economy a nod with a pair of hilarious and brilliant “commercials” for the ultimate consumer product, the Wipe-n-Go Completely Disposable Two-Step Disposable System.

The sights and sounds of (as he calls it) “Empty-Vee” culture are everywhere in this play. Here’s some of the “teaser footage” at the top of *Survivor: Vietnam!* introducing us to one of the contestants:

CHORUS: Cut to Erica in an urban park, concrete and steel.

ERICA: As a woman, I know about struggle. I know what it takes to survive, which is why I want to be on “Survivor,” because I can survive the hardships that need to be...survived.

CHORUS: Cut to Erica in her living room.

ERICA: This is my collection of media products that I find demeaning to women...

CHORUS: Cut back to Erica on the playground.

ERICA: ...and a result of a societal structure that forces black kids to live in neighborhoods like this one. Now, I actually grew up in Northport, Long Island, but, you know, women are an oppressed minority too, so I completely know what these kids had to go through. Without the street crime, and violence, and poverty.

CHORUS: Cut back to Erica in her living room.

ERICA: This is my Disney shelf: *Cinderella*, *Pocahontas*, *Lion King*. I actually kind of like *Lion King*, but I’m sure if I watch it over and over again, I’ll learn to find it demeaning.

Reese’s dead-on take on the New Banality is so funny it’s scary, and vice versa. Reese is an authentic humorist and also a fine theatre craftsman: *Survivor: Vietnam!* works as well as it does because it adheres to a surprisingly robust classical dramatic structure, of which the character of Chorus is the most essential and obvious component. This is a sturdy play loaded with apt commentary about human impulses that will be with us long after reality TV has run its course. At least, let’s hope so.



Feed the Hole takes a quieter, more contemplative look at the mores and attitudes of young adults in America. It tells the story of a group of twenty-somethings who are going through the motions of grown-up life—jobs, apartments, boyfriends and girlfriends—without firm commitment to any of it. There are four major characters: Brett and Shelly, whose relationship is falling apart—in fact, for most of the play, Brett is the only character who doesn't know that Shelly is deeply involved in an affair with another man—and their good friends Rob and Samantha, another couple whose relationship is tested and strained by the residual effects of Shelly's infidelity.

The play depicts parts of their individual journeys toward fulfillment, or at least something approximating fulfillment. Over dinner, drinks, or Ben & Jerry's ice cream, the women (with gay best friend John) dissect and analyze and agonize, while the men parry and banter. What I find most striking about *Feed the Hole* is the way that its sitcom rhythms—echoing *Friends*, *Sex in the City*, and the like—belie the gaping unhappiness that is at its center. So we laugh in recognition at a scene like this one, the empty-headed barroom chatter of Brett, Rob, and one of their friends:

BRETT: Oh, Rob, you're the deal-breaker—

STEVE: We were talking earlier— So *think* about this now—

BRETT: You think Hall and Oates are gay?

ROB: Well, I dunno— Why?

STEVE: Just talking. C'mon, it's just us guys—talk straight.

BRETT: 'Cause I see this MTV "Behind the Music" thing.

STEVE: Yeah, it's VH-1.

BRETT: And all of a sudden it hits me— these guys are fags.

ROB: Yeah?

BRETT: C'mon that song, "Man-Eater"?

But then we unexpectedly get punched in the gut, as in Scene Fourteen:

BRETT and SHELLY's. The only light is from the TV. The sounds of bad porn. BRETT is alone in the apartment. He is masturbating in the greenish glow of the television.

Feed the Hole is, finally, a sad, wise, and unsettling meditation on a disconnectedness that seems to have become epidemic. Playwright Michael Stock, with his remarkable ear for dialog and his Pinteresque grasp of the meanings between words, proves himself with *Feed the Hole* to be an able spokesman for his generation. Stock, also

an actor and director, won an Excellence in Playwriting Award at the 2001 New York International Fringe Festival for his first full-length play, *Hustle*; one imagines other accolades in his future as his distinctive voice begins to reach a wider audience.



“Family values” is a buzzword that gets bandied about a lot these days, but the self-appointed guardians of this American ideal probably aren’t thinking about Felony Mayhem and her brood when they talk about it. Which is exactly why *Auntie Mayhem*, David Pumo’s warm, loving dramatic comedy, is so important. The title character is a gay man who was once a professional drag artist; the play chronicles the birth and growth of his new family, as he and his husband Bobo adopt first Dennis (sixteen, gay, living on the streets), then Ivan (seventeen, gay, thrown out by his mother’s abusive boyfriend), and finally Epiphany (né Eduardo, sixteen, a male-to-female transgender—i.e., biologically a boy, but living as a girl).

Felony, Bobo, and their “sons” are all Latino or black, which is to say that these characters are as invisible to mainstream America as *Feed the Hole*’s twentysomething urbanites are ubiquitous. *Auntie Mayhem* lifts the curtain on a group that most people know nothing about—kids whose sexuality causes them to be despised or misunderstood by their families, schools, and communities; and whose ethnicity often results in their being ignored by the gay community as well. Pumo, who has made a career outside of the theatre working with kids like Dennis, Ivan, and Epiphany, does us all a great service by at last giving these vibrant, life-affirming individuals a home on stage.

It’s exciting to hear the too-long disenfranchised when they are finally given a chance to speak! Listen to Ivan, rapping about *his* sexual identity at the center of *Auntie Mayhem*:

IVAN: Liza’s back, didn’t even know she was gone
 You know it sounds like the same old shit she’s always done
 Ethel Merman, Judy Garland, Billie Holiday
 What dead diva’s grave are we dancin’ on today
 Not that I don’t give props to the departed
 The ones who planted the seed, who got it started
 Shouts to the trannies in their panties and their underwire
 Took over the Stonewall, set the Village on fire
 Back to the Daughters of Bilitis before
 And the Mattachine Society challenging the old law
 Sylvia, and Marcia P. and Harry Hay
 Laid the tracks that brought us to where we are today
 But we gotta fight a new war, sing a new song that’ll
 Bring the children to the floor, lead them into new battle

You're right, by the way, if you guessed that Pumo is alluding to *Auntie Mame* in his title: one of the pleasures of this charmer of a play is picking out the many references to Patrick Dennis's iconic novel which are liberally sprinkled throughout (e.g., Felony's best pal/"bosom buddy" is named Charlotte—or Charles, as in Vera). But the congruities are actually incidental; for as untraditional as Felony, Bobo, and their family may be, they're finally not madcap or unconventional creatures—not about the stuff that really matters, like discipline, and rules, and creating a warm, loving, and nurturing environment in which young people can grow and flourish. *Auntie Mayhem* is, of all things, a celebration of the nuclear family—albeit one that's been shoved, kicking and screaming, into the brave new world of the twenty-first century.



Mary Jett Parsley's *The Monster Tales* was chronologically the earliest of the ten plays in this volume to be produced in New York; it premiered in the fall of 2002 as part of Boomerang Theatre Company's annual mini-"festival" of new and classic work in repertory. Its special qualities were instantly apparent, and I am sure that many more productions of this whimsical, lighter-than-air fable are going to pop up as soon as people find out about it. It begins when twenty-eight-year-old Mimi checks under her bed, as she does every night, for monsters. Only this time, she spots one. After she recovers from some initial alarm, she begins to chat with her visitor, who explains that he has been hiding under her bed all her life, listening to the stories she tells while she sleeps.

Mimi's life is in something of a rut at the moment, and she can't believe that she has any interesting stories to share, even in her dreams. So the monster starts to tell some back to her. There's a romantic tale about an old man who orders a bride from a catalog and then is unable to get her to fall in love with him. There's a sweet and hopeful tale about an old woman who one day discovers a little boy growing in her garden. And there's a sad, sorrowful tale about a girl who refuses to leave her house after her mother dies.

Parsley surprises us with these stories, which have the warm, familiar air—and the timeless wisdom—of authentic folktales; but they're all new, and their freshness delights us as well. Eventually, it's time in *The Monster Tales* for Mimi to invent something new for her visitor, and she rises to the challenge beautifully—her and our imagination reawakened by this moving and lovely celebration of the power of storytelling:

MIMI: Once upon a time...there was a man who could make music with his hands. He did not need to touch an instrument; he simply rubbed his fingers together and a violin played. It came from the air, from another time, and it sang to any soul who could listen. If he rubbed his hands together, whole orchestras sounded. His name was Alexander.

Who could resist?

Of course, in again finding the stories inside her, Mimi rediscovers herself. Which is, on reflection, the reason we have theatre.



Steven Gridley made two appearances in *Plays and Playwrights 2002*, as the assistant director of J. Scott Reynolds's *The Wild Ass's Skin*, and as the director of Marc Chun's *Match*. He's clearly got the soul of a writer, though, and so it's with pleasure that I include his remarkable, dreamlike play *Sun, Stand Thou Still*, in this collection. Like the other authors anthologized here and in previous volumes, Gridley is one of our theatre's rising stars, bringing intelligence, insight, and imagination to every project he undertakes.

This piece—abstract, bittersweet, and moody—brings together an old blind man, a hitchhiker whom he picks up in his truck, and a pretty young woman selling apples at the side of a lonely road. Gridley doesn't tell us much about any of them: we never learn the Hitchhiker's name, for example, or the exact place where the Apple Woman came from or is heading to. Mary Chase wrote that her fantastical creation Harvey had overcome “not only time and space—but any objections,” and so it seems to be for Gridley's characters: faith and reason are tested; the quest—for redemption? for love?—seems to be all.

Sun, Stand Thou Still brings us full circle, more or less: *Sugarbaby* started us off on a road trip in search of America; the inhabitants of Gridley's play, on journeys of their own, seem to be in search of something even larger. The blind man has been driving west for tens of thousands of miles:

DRIVER: Been traveling west since I can remember. Direct and nonstop. You think there's anything casual about that? Going in one direction? One. There was only one time, one time, that I stopped heading west. At about the forty thousand-mile mark I got mixed up. Suddenly wasn't quite sure if I was traveling west anymore. You go forty thousand miles in one direction, your mind starts to doubt, you know? You expect something to happen, I mean... *something*. An ocean?

Gridley blends the real and the unreal to create an evocative and sometimes enigmatic fantasia that gets under the skin. Is the Hitchhiker Everyman or a supernatural being? Is the Apple Woman real? How is it that the Driver—eyes burned out after a fifteen-hour “staring contest” with the sun—can always read the odometer of his truck? The “truth” of *Sun, Stand Thou Still* is ultimately for each of its observers to riddle out, the same way each of its characters has to make sense, with what limited information he or she has been given, of what their own lives are supposed to be about.

The answer, maybe, *is* in the questing. Which is why we have theatre.