

We live in an era of Instant Messaging, iPods, satellite radio, cell phones that take pictures, and digital video technology that can make anyone a movie director. Yet live theatre remains compelling and irreplaceable: it morphs, transforms itself, adapts; steals and borrows from new media and teaches itself new tricks. A “play” in 2005 is not necessarily a familiar-looking structure with acts and scenes and dialogue and stage directions; not even, always, a text in any traditional sense. Today’s playwrights are breaking new ground and breaking down barriers, pushing American drama into the technological age and redefining it as a collaborative composition that is created jointly by artists of all kinds and the audience. *Plays and Playwrights 2005* is at once a demonstration of this new Alive Theatre and a celebration of it.

In this book, you will discover a play in which modern martial arts fight choreography is an integral element (*Vampire Cowboy Trilogy*) and a docudrama that is “interrupted” by a dozen original 30-second videotaped “commercials” (*Walking to America*). One play (*Odysseus Died From AIDS*) takes place entirely inside the dying brain of a sick young man; another (*second.*) tells three simultaneous stories on a single set at the same time. The seven one-acts comprising *HONOR* force audiences to witness a man burning an American flag and the death of an American GI; the four-part play cycle *The 29 Questions Project* is intended to be staged environmentally in a non-traditional space and includes pre- and post-show components that make the piece as much “happening” as drama. *Elephant* defies traditional time and space linearities, challenging its auditors to piece together the story at its core; while *Platonov! Platonov! Platonov!* uses hip-hop sampling techniques and Internet Google searches to deconstruct and reconstruct the work of Anton Chekhov. One of the plays in this book (*Animal*) is written to be performed by humans and puppet creatures, while another (*Bull Spears*) contains almost no dialogue at all. Even the two most “conventional” works in this volume involve their audiences in other-than-conventional ways: in *Kalighat*, we are swept into the chaotic atmosphere of Mother Teresa’s first home for the dying and destitute in a crowded Calcutta neighborhood, while *Maggie May’s* original director Jocelyn Szabo placed the audience in a balcony looking down on the action as they watched this romantic comedy.

The twelve new theatre works included in *Plays and Playwrights 2005*, thus, represent a dazzling array of styles, forms, subjects, and attitudes. Likewise, the twenty writers responsible for them are a diverse lot: men, women, immigrants from Honduras and Canada (plus a child of immigrants from Vietnam). About half of the authors in this book are in their 20s but several are much older than that; one never wrote a play before the one we’re publishing here while others have produced dozens of works. The playwrights in this volume are also actors, directors, composers, producers, filmmakers, screenwriters for movies and TV, teachers, students, and bloggers; there’s a jazz singer, a fight choreographer, and a painter among their number as well. This is the world of theatre in the 21st century, where artists sample disciplines and improvise and experiment to find meaningful ways to communicate compelling content to an audience that’s ever more savvy and ever more tempted to resist the active and seemingly exotic challenge of attending and participating in live performance.

These playwrights are heroes; their voices are part of the burgeoning movement of new theatre that’s changing the nature of American drama. *Plays and Playwrights 2005* is

intended to provide a tantalizing introduction to them and the very exciting, very individual work that they're producing. I hope you will seek out further examples; I expect that some if not all will become "stars" of the next generation of theatre artists.

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This volume begins with *Vampire Cowboy Trilogy*, which was created by Qui Nguyen and Robert Ross Parker when they were both in the Master's degree program at Ohio University's theatre department. Its New York debut was in March 2004 at a small black-box space in the Theatre District, and it went on to become one of the most popular shows at the New York International Fringe Festival the following summer.

VC3, as its authors like to abbreviate it, is a live-action stage cartoon replete with chop-socky fight sequences; it's a paean to classic comic book/pulp forms as well as to more contemporary copies like the recent TV series *Zena*. It is, above all else, a great deal of fun—it asks its actors to be proficient in a variety of esoteric skills, but it asks its audiences only to have a great time and immerse themselves in the pop culture iconography of their youths. One of the best things about *VC3* is that whatever your age, you're almost certain to find references that resonate: whether you grew up reading Action Comics in the Cold War era or learning inane canned dialogues in French class or wondering whether this or that superhero might be gay, there's something here for you.

Fight choreography is tightly integrated into the play and is extremely important to it—the Vampire Cowboy ethos is that theatre should first and foremost be a hoot, and they have built a script here that pretty much guarantees one to actors and audiences alike. A light touch, a broad sense of the absurd, and fearlessness in the face of ridiculousness are the other prerequisites for successful mounting on a work that asks its actors to speak wonderfully hokey, tongue-in-cheek dialogue like this:

LIBERTY LADY: Oh no, Cap, he still has the detonator!

CAPTAIN JUSTICE: Menace, don't do anything rash.

HOODED MENACE: The only way the citizens of this crappy capitalistic continent will ever be safe is once I rule it and turn it into... a communist nation.

CAPTAIN JUSTICE: Menace, you know as well as I do, not even I, Captain Justice, have the power to give you that.

HOODED MENACE: Well, how about just Alaska and Hawaii?

CAPTAIN JUSTICE: Not even those.

An exciting aspect of *VC3*'s combat sequences is that they are pitched heavily toward females: women are involved in virtually every fight scene in the play (and in the original production, the three fight interludes that connect the parts of the trilogy were performed by women as well, even though they're written for "cowboys").

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Horse Trade Theatre Group, which operates three fine, intimate houses in the East Village, has been one of the most reliable incubators of new talent in the New York City theatre community. Neal Utterback, author of *second.*, joins Frank Cwiklik, Tom X. Chao, Joseph Langham, and Marc Morales on the list of Horse Trade resident company playwrights whose works have been included in this series.

second. premiered in April 2004 at Under St. Marks in a splendid production directed by Joe LaRue. On a single unchanging set, *second.* tells three stories at the same time; it's only near the end of the play that we start to recognize the inextricable links among the plotlines. All three involve a Mystery Man who—seemingly miraculously—saved the life of a woman who had been run down by a car on a busy Manhattan Street. Witnesses saw this young, anonymous stranger simply reach down and touch the battered body and apparently restore it to life. Now some people believe—or at least want to believe—that the Mystery Man is the second coming of Christ. In the middle of an apocalyptic snowstorm on Christmas Eve, a pair of kindappers, a lesbian doctor and her TV journalist longtime companion, and a prostitute and her john all find their destinies wrapped up with that of the Mystery Man, who has disappeared.

So *second.* is a sort of mystery play, one with two layers: the characters on stage engage in one kind of search for answers, while the members of the audience have to decide for themselves what they will finally believe or disbelieve about Utterback's central enigmatic hero. Watching it is like being on a roller coaster, with the three narratives building up emotional steam until, in the play's stunning climax, they converge in a nearly cathartic collision.

I hasten to add that each of three stories that unfolds within *second.* is told with enormous humanity and humor—Utterback is a writer of genuine compassion, as we see from passages like this one:

VICK (Looking out the window): It's this blizzard. It's like *The Shining*.

LAUREN: I hope for hope.

VICK: This storm is like this malignant, carnivorous animal.

LAUREN: Hope, hope, hope.

VICK: You can feel it trying to creep through the windows driving everyone to spontaneous insanity.

LAUREN: It's one of those words that make you giddier the more you say it. I hope for a greater capacity for hope.

VICK: But what is that? That doesn't do anything. That doesn't *change* anything.

LAUREN: If I can *hope* more, then I will *believe* in more, which will lead to *trusting* more, which is the foundation of love. *I* will become the change.

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It's always thrilling to discover something entirely new in the theatre. That's what happened to me when I saw *Bull Spears* last August at Clemente Solo Velez Cultural Center on the Lower East Side: this artful blend of music, movies, combat and dance choreography, live action, songs, and Microsoft PowerPoint slides affected me powerfully and viscerally. No mere gimmicky multimedia playground, the

compositional landscape of this remarkable work uses an array of technologies and media available to its creator, the prodigiously talented Josh Chambers, to take on the iconography of the mythological American West, at once deconstructing and re-imagining the meaning of its symbolism in provocative and thought-provoking ways.

Chambers is, with actor Timothy Fannon, the co-founder and co-artistic director of Fovea Floods, a smart and adventurous young theatre company whose work I have been following for several. Fovea Floods are a group of Skidmore College graduates, all now in their late twenties, whose passion for creating meaningful, relevant theatre has led them to look beyond the boundaries of traditional theatre and to incorporate an impressively varied stock of visual and aural presentation styles in their work. *Bull Spears*, their first full-length original work in New York, reveals the fruits of their audacious (but not arrogant!) vision, and portends even more remarkable work to come.

Chambers describes *Bull Spears* as a “silent film for the stage.” Its three acts, each one crafted in an arrestingly different style from the others, tell the story of a reluctant cowboy named One Pump who rescues the beautiful barmaid Milky Hills from the clutches of villainous bad guy Horse Dick. He rides off into the mountains with her, where they encounter a ghostly woman called The Bonnet and uncover the tragic secret of a long-ago inferno. In the final act, One Pump arrives in corrupt Knife City, which is run by a trio of decadent sadists who have enslaved the population. *Bull Spears*, which is named for the fictitious town in Nevada where it begins, reaches its climax with a duel between the salacious leader called the Roue and our embattled hero.

All of the foregoing plays out with barely a single spoken word of dialogue; Chambers communicates to the audience with dance, movement, titles, film sequences, and a gorgeous continuous synchronized original score (his own composition, which you cannot hear in the book, alas; there’s information at the end of this introduction and in the section on *Bull Spears* about how you *can* hear it). Chambers’s distinctive style as musician, director, and scenarist is matched by his skill as a poet. Here’s the refrain of One Pump’s number, sung just before his first fight with the wicked Horse Dick:

Take me out to Derelict Mount
Kick out all my teeth
My gun gets excited
My horses retreat
And I can’t be a cowboy tonight
I can’t be a cowboy tonight

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Just as *Bull Spears* represents a departure for the *Plays & Playwrights* series in its lack of traditional dialogue, so too is *Animal* something different for this series. For, except for one young man named Jeff, all of the characters in this powerful work by Kevin Augustine are non-human creatures; most of them are meant to be played by puppets. In the original production, Augustine and three associates animated these figures, a dazzling collection of remarkably lifelike creatures created by Augustine himself.

I've been a fan of Kevin Augustine's puppet theatre since I first saw him at the 1998 New York International Fringe Festival in *Big Top Machine*. Augustine's artistry as an actor-puppeteer is without parallel in my experience; as he explains in his note to *Animal*, he doesn't even attempt anything like ventriloquism; he animates his puppets in a more fundamental way, imbuing them with something that feels like a soul. Anyone who's seen his work will come away with a new conception of what puppetry in the theatre can be. I hope that the presentation of *Animal* on this pages will encourage many readers to seek out Augustine's work and experience it for themselves.

Of course, *Animal* wouldn't be in this book if Augustine weren't also a terrific writer. He is—a resoundingly talented and smart one, with no little self-awareness, as demonstrated in this exchange between Eugene, the principal puppet character in the play, and a green felt frog hand puppet that is his only toy:

FROG: I don't feel anything either.

EUGENE: Oh, that's because you don't have any feelings. You don't even have a soul.

FROG: Who took away my soul? Where did it go??

EUGENE: Well, you never had one—you're empty. You are not even really alive.

FROG: I am too alive, see?

(EUGENE animates FROG in a sing-songy way, bouncing him around inside the cage.)

FROG: Because I can do this, and this, and doo-dee-doo-dee-doo!

EUGENE: (Halts FROG's demonstration, taking him in both hands.) Oh, that's not really alive, just because you can walk and talk and eat and sleep and breathe.

(He brings him close to his face.) No. You're... you're dead.

In a way, *Animal* is entirely about what it means to be alive; or rather, what it means to be not alive, even though you can walk and talk and eat and sleep and breathe. Its story is of a depressed young man (Jeff) who takes a class in shamanism in a futile effort to overcome his depression. In his shamanic vision, he encounters Eugene, a five-eighths-human genetically-altered test subject, who becomes his animal guide. The history of their relationship and their quest for comfort and meaning fills out this deeply touching, deeply moving play about what discovering our capacity for being human.



Elliot Hayes, the 30-year-old protagonist of Stephen Svoboda's *Odysseus Died from AIDS*, has been sick for ten years. The play takes place in a hospital where Elliot, in the final stages of his disease, has come to die. But it really happens inside Elliot's very vivid imagination, where, in the confusion of his disintegrating mind, he has become the great legendary hero Odysseus, making his eventful journey home after the conquest of Troy. Other patients on the AIDS ward become the goddess Athena or the monster Cyclops; the doctor attending him is mighty Poseidon:

ELLIOT: And Poseidon saw Odysseus.

DOROTHY [THE NURSE]: Code Blue! Code Blue!

(*The alarms start to ring, and a blue light flashes in waves across the stage. The screens begin to move in a chaotic pattern around the bed. DOCTOR and DOROTHY begin attaching tubes to the bed.*)

DOCTOR: This patient is crashing.

ELLIOT: Poseidon gathered the clouds, and, gripping his trident, he stirred the sea.

DOROTHY: I have no pulse.

ELLIOT: The winds blew hard from every direction, and lighting-charged Boreas rolled in a big wave. Poseidon gave him potassium through an intravenous line.

Svoboda creates a strange, wonderfully vivid language for Elliot, who is gradually losing the ability to string words together in normal sentences; just as he creates a poetic, surreal world for Elliot to occupy in this majestic play. But *Odysseus* is not just a study of a dying brilliant mind: Elliot is damaged, not only by AIDS, which he got during his one and only, very brief love affair, with a handsome swimmer at college; but perhaps even more tragically by the fear of love that this sad and senseless affair engendered in him. Elliot retreated to his mother's house and his books since his diagnosis when he was 20. Now in the final days of his life he has come to understand that he needs to reach out to other human beings before he can go to his final rest—before the Odysseus inside him can go “home.”

Svoboda fleshes out this mighty idea in his beautifully wrought script, which despite the complexity of its structure and its relatively large number of characters (ten) is simplicity itself to produce, as he demonstrated in his staging of the play at the 2004 New York International Fringe Festival (where the production received, deservedly, an award for outstanding ensemble). Elliot and his “crew”—his fellow patients on the AIDS ward—are heroic and wise, and they deserve renewed life in productions of *Odysseus Died from AIDS* for years to come.



A romantic comedy of the screwball variety, *Maggie May* by Tom O'Brien also looks at a young man going after a second chance at life and love, albeit in much lighter, happier circumstances. Set on an island in the Bahamas, *Maggie May* is the story of Donny, a sweet, shy young man who has always backed away from the things he wants, and consequently is single and alone. He hatches a scheme to bring an old girlfriend (the title character) on vacation in the Caribbean, where he hopes he will somehow manage to woo and win her. Of course, complications interfere with his plans, in the form of another old friend, Mark, who happens to work on the island as a tour boat fisherman for a wealthy ex-businessman. Mark moves in on Maggie May, naturally, leaving poor Donny out in the cold. Will he be able to assert himself and go after the woman of his dreams?

You'll have to read the play to find out. You'll have a grand time doing so, I think; *Maggie May* is a delightfully crafted comedy, reminiscent of the daffy romances of Preston Sturges or Kaufman & Hart, but with a warmth and contemporary zing that are

uniquely O'Brien's. It's a very funny play; here's Donny in the very first scene, trying to call down to the hotel's front desk:

DONNY: Hi, this is Donald O'Connor in room... Yes, like the dancer. We just checked in... No, I'm not the dancer. He's dead... I'm sorry too. I loved his work. Anyway, we just... Yes, that's right. They were very different. I think he wasn't as well known as Fred Astaire but in terms of... My mom was a big fan of his, yes...

And it's also gently wise, as in these remarks by Mark's boss, self-described "pleasure seeker" Charlie:

CHARLIE: Most of the time, we're too afraid to live. We say, "I couldn't do that. I couldn't be with her. I don't want to be happy." We talk ourselves out of living. But it's still out there. It's waiting for you. It's happening whether you choose it or not. It's just a question of whether you're gonna go for the ride or sit on the sidelines hopin' and dreamin'. All you have to do is step into it. (Beat.) A life unlived is not a life at all.

Maggie May scans as a fairly traditional four-character comedy, but its exotic setting and its modern sensibility render it anything but. Director Jocelyn Szabo recognized this is in her staging of the piece at the Belt Theatre. She placed all of the scenic elements on stage and moved her actors through them, while the audience—seated in the balcony—looked down on the action like proverbial flies on the wall. An inventive and elegant approach to the material!



Margie Stokley (pronounced with a hard "g," by the way), the young actor-turned-playwright whose first play *Elephant* is, told me that she was surprised and glad that I called her work a comedy in the short description on the back cover of this volume. Its subject, after all, is a serious one: a close-knit family working through their grief and sense of loss following the sudden accidental death of the oldest son, Jay. But *Elephant* is nevertheless and very appropriately a comedy, both in the classical sense and in the more familiar sense of being warmly human and humorous.

It is, too, a wise play, mature beyond the playwright's years in many ways (Stokley is in her twenties); but then, the experience of losing a sibling, which actually happened to her seven years ago, makes a person grow up pretty quickly.

Stokley has shaped her play without regard for the "rules"—it takes place in two different automobiles and an art studio, plus a variety of other locales within the memories of the various inhabitants of these spaces. All were seen on stage side by side in Jessica Irons-Davis's spare and very effective staging at the Ontological Theatre in August 2004. This is the sort of play that engages its audience's imagination wholeheartedly throughout; from our seats, we fill in all the blanks deliberately withheld by the author and the canny director and actors who interpret this work.

Stokley bends time as well in *Elephant*, moving backward and forward from scene to scene, gradually building a portrait of this singularly loving family and their journey away from tragedy. None of the survivors—mother, father, sister, girlfriend—knows exactly how to go about managing their recovery; each stakes out territory on his or her own to work through the sadness, yet their support for one another remains palpable—that’s the key to *Elephant*’s potency. All the characters are fully three-dimensional and written with love and authenticity. Look, for example, at this scene between Jay’s mother Kathleen and his pregnant girlfriend Ellen:

KATHLEEN: You said “No”?

ELLEN: I knew he was going to be my life, I didn’t have to admit it. I wanted to wait, get pregnant, and then take him for granted. I’m a child. How can I be having one? I can’t do this on my own.

KATHLEEN: You have us. We are your family with or without a certificate.

ELLEN: I don’t want you, I want Jay.

KATHLEEN: I don’t want you. I want Jay.

Actors will, I think, clamor to bring these vivid individuals to life.



Theoretically, the cutoff date for *Plays and Playwrights 2005* was August 31, 2004: However, when I saw Alberto Bonilla’s *Walking to America* at 78th Street Theatre Lab just two days after later, I felt no compunction in bending the rules and including it in this collection. The message of this play is so important that I didn’t want to wait a year to share it with readers. And so there are twelve plays in this collection, more than we’ve ever published in any previous volume.

Bonilla based his play on a true story, of a homeless, orphaned Honduran boy who decides the escape the poverty and violence of his life on the streets by walking to the land of his dreams—the USA. “He didn’t hitchhike, he didn’t take a bus, he didn’t hitch rides on rail cars,” Bonilla tells us in his notes to the play, “he walked. From his street corner in Honduras Oscar walked for twenty-four months across four countries and over 2400 miles to the American border.” And once he got here, he was arrested as an illegal immigrant and sent back to Tegucigalpa.

This is a story that hasn’t been told enough, about a boy (and thousands just like him) about whom most people never give a thought. This fact alone merits a place for *Walking to America* in this book; but Bonilla doesn’t stop there. For interspersed in the straightforward docudrama that Bonilla crafted around this story are a series of pre-recorded satirical “commercials,” advertisements for the life that the play’s young protagonist thinks he desires that are also jibes at the values and attitudes of the residents of the world’s most affluent and, increasingly, most isolated and intolerant nation.

Bonilla’s attacks are not at all subtle. After scenes depicting the Honduran boy starving and begging for food, he shows us spots for “Shugga Crax Cereal” (which begins with a

kid whining, “Breakfast just isn’t fun anymore, Mom”) and a TV show of the *Fear Factor* variety:

VOICEOVER: On the next "Last Man Standing."

HOST: Whoever eats the most worms...

VOICEOVER: The contestants face their greatest challenge yet, the Madagascar worm. But one of them will take it too far! A shocking secret is revealed.

HOST: I’m sorry but you’re not the Last Man Standing.

Walking to America is a very necessary wakeup call, reminding us that our fellows all around the planet need our attention every day of the year, not just when catastrophe strikes.

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The events of September 11, 2001 remain indelibly etched in our consciousnesses, and continue to inspire playwrights and other artists to try to understand the causes and effects of the events of that momentous day. *The 29 Questions Project*, written by Katie Bull and Hillary Rollins, approaches this enormous task with probity and conscience. At the center of this four-play cycle is Rollins’ *29 Questions*, in which two longtime friends, one of whom has just moved from New York to Los Angeles, play one of those time-wasting email games in which you answer random, seemingly trivial questions about yourself and then forward the responses to colleagues. The twist here is that the east coast friend has just been killed in the World Trade Center attack. Rollins captures one of the fundamental lessons of that terribly day—that nothing in human relations is ever trivial.

Surrounding this powerful but brief two-person drama are three response pieces penned by Bull, each of which considers, in a different way, some dimension of the complex array of social/political issues that made 9/11 possible. Fearlessly and idealistically, Bull takes on topics such as prejudice, religious intolerance, the War in Iraq, and the pervasive culture of fear that has become endemic during the past several years. There is material in *The 29 Questions Project* that may inflame or even alarm, but I hope strongly that it will function, in its small way, as a beacon for understanding and compassion.

The project’s production history reflects its origins in a unique way: it was staged at Yaffa’s T Room, a restaurant located in downtown Manhattan, just a few blocks from Ground Zero, one of many local businesses that provided support and comfort to the men and women who worked on the search-and-rescue teams in the aftermath of 9/11. In notes to the play, Bull provides guidance to readers about the ways she and her collaborators transformed their four scripts into a positive, healing event in the style of a ‘60s-era “happening,” and encourages future presenters of this work (who will be, I hope, numerous) to do the same.

The beauty of Bull and Rollins’s writing, finally, is that it transcends any particulars of time and place:

ACTRESS 2: The glass is twice as big as it needs to be... isn't that great?! No, it's half full. I know that's the truth. I just can't always get there.

ACTRESS 1: So she wasn't a saint. Just an angel. (To ACTRESS 2.) Is the glass half full or half empty? Half empty, of course. Everyone knows that, don't they?

ACTRESS 2: Unless it's filled with good red wine! No, it's half full. I know that's the truth.

ACTRESS 1: (To audience.) I just can't always get there.

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TheDrillingCompaNY has been creating evenings of theatre around a single unifying theme for five years now. Under the leadership of producing artistic director Hamilton Clancy, the company commissions a number of playwrights to write short original pieces about a particular subject or idea, and then selects some of these to form a compelling program which is performed at their home base at 78th Street Theatre Lab. In 2004, the very politically-minded Clancy selected "honor" as the topic, and the resultant collection, also called *HONOR*, proved to be as resonant as it is varied.

HONOR contains seven short plays, ten to thirty minutes long, that riff on the various meanings of the word in exciting ways. Joanna Cherenky (in *'Til Death Do Us Part*) and Andrea Moon (in *A Friday Night Trans Am Ride*) explore the personal connotations, the former looking comically at a wedding ceremony that goes awry, while the latter depicts the vagaries of pride among three very different couples who come together on visiting day at the prison where the men are all incarcerated. Scott Baker's *For the Benefit of Alfred Beamer* is a light-hearted piece about a fellow who throws himself a party because, apparently, no one else will. Taking a somewhat broader perspective are Allison Moore, who in the monologue *CUTRS!* presents us with a woman who fancies herself a patriot because she's following the president's bidding and going shopping; Stephen Bittrich, whose *Duty Honor Country* takes us to the frontlines of the war in Iraq; and Brian Dykstra, who in *Mick Just Shrugs* audaciously gives us a high school student trying to burn an American flag as part of an art project. Dykstra's play, which had a surprising and undeniably visceral impact in performance, includes a scathing and memorable monologue—later repeated in somewhat altered form in his solo show *Brian Dykstra: Cornered & Alone*—that constitutes a compendium of catastrophic choices that future American generations may need to grapple with:

MICK: In the name of fighting terrorism, civil rights are being denied citizens of this country every single day. And most of the time, we don't even know it.

We eat shit.

Intelligent people are marginalized by being branded "the Cultural Elite" while the government is reacting to polling that gets taken in Darwin's waiting room.

I haven't even really gotten started on Iraq.

Half the people can't afford a hospital stay.

SUVs get shitty gas mileage. And nobody cares.

Don Carter's gorgeous, abstract, Wilderesque piece, *Coming to the Table*, offers a summing-up of *HONOR*'s themes with touching simplicity. Singularly and as a group, these seven plays, representing the work of some very talented and prolific authors, are deserving of more attention.

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Paul Knox chooses as an epigram for his play *Kalighat* the famous words of John Donne: "No man is an island... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind." This thought is the heart and soul of Knox's remarkable play, which is an epic drama—a good two-and-a-half hours in length—about a group of European and American volunteers working at Kalighat, the first of Mother Teresa's homes for the destitute and dying in Calcutta, India.

In his script and in his staging (Knox directed *Kalighat*'s premiere in January 2004 at the Baruch Performing Arts Center's Nagelberg Theatre), the playwright immediately immerses us in the chaotic, brutal world of the poorest of the poor—a world, we are loathe to admit, that is daily existence for most of the people on this planet. Knox doesn't flinch: he shows us the ugliness, the disease, the prejudice and intolerance and poverty; he depicts the valiant efforts of Mother Teresa's nuns and the hard-working volunteers, and the ultimate futility of all that they do in the face of too few resources and too many people who need their help.

In the midst of it all, he introduces us to Peter, a young gay New Yorker whose journey to Kalighat is at least part intended to appease some lingering guilt, and to a group of other conflicted westerners, including a young Canadian woman trying to decide whether she should devote her life to the church and a young English man who is struggling with his sexuality. Theirs and others' stories are rendered with compassion and humor; they can't help but do some growing up in a setting this remote from their former lives:

PATIENT 23: (*To PETER.*) Brother, *pani*.

BRIGID: That's water. See if he has a cup under his bed.

(*PETER fills his cup just as TWO OTHERS ask for water.*)

PETER: Here you go. Pani, huh? I'll be speaking Bengali in no time.

(*Several OTHER PATIENTS ask for pani.*)

PETER: Okay, okay, brother pani, brother pani!

PATIENT 37: Brother, *jhol*.

BRIGID: That's water too. He's a Hindu.

PETER: Different water?

BRIGID: Same water, different word.

Kalighat, like *Walking to America*, is important as a wakeup call: it makes us confront truths we'd rather not think about, but need to take to heart because, as Donne says, we are involved in mankind.



For sheer gutsy, edgy, envelope-pushing vitality, few NYC theatre companies can match Feed the Herd, a collective of rowdy cross-discipline, barrier-breaking young artists led by Brian Snapp who in just a few years have built a small following among audience members in search of visceral adventure in the theatre. My first encounter with them was in 2001 with *Seven Seconds*, an eerie multimedia work about the last moments inside the brain of a murdered man. In January 2004, they presented the third annual Stampede Festival, a month-long showcase of new theatre and music by emerging artists that proved to be one of the highlights of my year.

One of the hits of Stampede 2004 was Eric Michael Kochmer's *Platonov! Platonov! Platonov!, or the case of a very Angry Duck*, which is the final play of this volume. If you know the work of Anton Chekhov, then you will probably have already guessed that this is based somehow on the great playwright's early comedy *Platonov*. Kochmer says in his note to the play that he intended to create the stupidest possible version of Chekhov. And in a way, *Platonov! Platonov! Platonov!*—with its characters running around videotaping one another while they prattle endlessly about their myopic concerns, its eponymous protagonist protesting that he is in fact a duck, not to mention the very silly surname Yagorovnachorgaforgagorgaforgaborgachobia assigned to one of the characters or the preponderance of allusions to rubber chickens—is exactly that:

ANNA: Enough, you fool! Go hunt some more rubber chickens and bring them to me... I'll take them... I'll take your rubber chickens as any good widow would...only promise me this: Don't touch Platonov! Platonov! Platonov! Do you hear me? Do you want to end up in prison? Or worse, in a monastery? There there don't cry. What are you, a child? Enough, I'm going home. Don't you dare touch him...

OSIP: I will kill him, your ladyship. Once a rubber chicken, always a rubber chicken.

But look beneath the surface and you'll see there's much more going on here than mere sophomoric shenanigans. Kochmer, with his close collaborator/director Ross Peabody, deconstructs Chekhov using the devices of post-modernism and, more tellingly, hip-hop-style sampling; and then reconstructs him to both comment on and explicate the enduring appeal of his work. The play explodes with the antic giddiness and excess of its young creators, but their intelligence and their formidable talents are evident everywhere in it.



What's presented on the pages that follow are only the texts of these twelve plays, along with some notes and background material that, it is hoped, will provide some context for them. These are the blueprints that will enable readers to make vivid, at least in their mind's eye, these remarkable new works; and that will entice actors, directors, designers, and producers to bring these pieces to life in new stagings in the months and years to come.

To help the process along, however, *Plays and Playwrights 2005* is providing readers with a companion website. Visit <http://www.newyorktheatreexperience.org/pp05web> to access supplementary multimedia content that will augment and enhance your experiences with these plays. Here's some of what you'll find here:

- Discussion guides for each of the twelve plays
- Production photos
- Set/costume design sketches, staging diagrams, and other illustrative materials
- Audio clips from the score of *Bull Spears*

The *Plays and Playwrights 2005* website is intended to offer an active play-reading experience analogous to the participatory style of theatre-going that's inherent in all of the works included here. This book and the website are guides to a new movement that's transforming the nature of American drama—a theatre that challenges and engages its audiences using new paradigms of presentation and new forms that meld disciplines and emerging technologies.

This work makes my job, as theatre reviewer and editor of these volumes, as exciting as it is rewarding. I can only hope your experience with these new plays will be as provocative, provoking, and fun as mine. Enjoy!