

In *Plays and Playwrights 2006*, the New York Theatre Experience, Inc. presents, for the seventh year in a row, a selection of some of the season's best new plays: works by emerging and/or unheralded voices that challenge the status quos of American dramaturgy and American life, that push the boundaries and definitions of traditional theatrical form and conventional societal assumptions, that explore and examine and contemplate and reflect the world in which we live and the performative community in which artists create.

I am proud and even a little awed by this collection. Here's what we have anthologized for our readers this year:

- Two comedies that consider the very serious (and oft neglected) subject of the place of art in society, one a dazzling intellectual flight of fancy that puts four of history's greatest minds in an anteroom in the eternal for an afternoon of conversation, flirtation, and music (Alec Duffy's *The Top Ten People of the Millennium Sing Their Favorite Schubert Lieder*), the other a shrewd farcical paean to Charles Ludlam wrapped inside a parody of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* and presented in unabashedly vulgar ridiculous style (*The Whore of Sheridan Square* by Michael Baron).
- Two timely (and, I think, timeless) dramas that look at the human toll of war— Josh Fox's *The Expense of Spirit*, which brings the Iraqi War literally inside a Christmas celebration in the heart of Brooklyn, and Glyn O'Malley's *Paradise*, which puts very human faces on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, showing each side to be both aggressor and victim, friend and enemy.
- Two surprising and inventive pieces that give voice to members of the Great American Melting Pot who are almost never heard from in our popular culture: a family of Chinese immigrants in Michael Lew's *Yit, Ngay (One, Two)*, and nearly two dozen members of what we sometimes euphemistically call "underserved" minorities, most of them people of color and immigrants from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia, in Rising Circle Theater Collective's *Pulling the Lever*.
- A pair of works that offer widely contrasting views of family values and personal relationships circa 2005, Kelly McAllister's warm, wise comedy *Burning the Old Man* and Michael Puzzo's hilariously twisted buddy story *The Dirty Talk*.
- Two compact one-acts that demonstrate conclusively the power of the ten-minute play to carry as much, if not more, emotional heft as their longer brethren—P. Seth Bauer's melancholy, touching slice of life *The First Time Out of Bounds* and Saviana Stanescu's breathtaking portrait of a pair of Romanian street kids, *Aurolac Blues*.
- And finally, a duo of pieces that confront the alienation and dehumanization that's afflicting our increasing high-tech society, Kevin Doyle's absurdist play about job interviews, *The Position*, and Jack Hanley's sci-fi triptych about the future of self-knowledge called *Self at Hand*.

I hope you'll be as stimulated and delighted by these twelve plays as I have been in bringing them to you.



Every year, the task of selecting a dozen (or so) new scripts for the *Plays and Playwrights* anthology becomes more challenging, mostly because the pool of candidates keeps increasing in terms of both quantity and (I believe) quality. We are, I am convinced, in a new golden age of American drama. The twelve plays in this volume attest to it, but they're only the tip of the iceberg. At the end of this book, as an appendix, a directory of new American plays produced in New York City provides a detailed view of the vitality and diversity of American dramatic literature (please see page xxx).

The significance of the indie theatre sector as laboratory and starting point for new American drama was acknowledged this year by the creation of the New York Innovative Theatre Awards, which recognized outstanding achievement off-off-Broadway (defined for their purposes as shows having a budget under \$40,000 and charging \$30 or less for tickets). Two of the works in *Plays and Playwrights 2006* are here as NYITA honorees—Kelly McAllister's *Burning the Old Man*, produced by Boomerang Theatre Company, received the Outstanding Full-Length Script Award, while P. Seth Bauer's *The First Time Out of Bounds*, which was presented by TheDrillingCompaNY as part of their themed evening of new work called *Honor 2*, was designated Outstanding Short Script. Incidentally, both McAllister and TheDrillingCompaNY have previously been represented in the *Plays and Playwrights* series—the former with *Last Call* in 2003, the latter in 2005 with *Honor*. In any event, both of these works bring credit to NYITA and are utterly deserving of their place in this collection.

The rest of this year's crop of plays come from every corner of the indie theatre world. Two of the oldest and most respected downtown theatre companies are represented: La MaMa e.t.c., which had a very good season, was home to Michael Baron's paean to Ridiculous Theatre, *The Whore of Sheridan Square* (which fittingly played in The Club, the very same venue where Charles Ludlam's *Bluebeard* premiered 34 years before). And just a few blocks away at Dixon Place, Jack Hanley's remarkable sci-fi trilogy of one-acts *Self at Hand* made its debut (in the same month, coincidentally).

Alec Duffy's *The Top Ten People of the Millennium Sing Their Favorite Schubert Lieder* and Rising Circle Theater Collective's *Pulling the Lever*, both independent productions, were mounted at theatres in Greenwich Village, both just a couple of blocks from the Hudson—the former at Bank Street Theatre, the latter at Wings. Glyn O'Malley's *Paradise*, produced by Gary Allen, was presented at one of off-off-Broadway's new theatre complexes, at Theatre Row on 42nd Street.

Theatre festivals continue to be perhaps the most important source of exciting new work, and no festival rivals the New York International Fringe in terms of size, variety, or vigor. *The Dirty Talk*, by Michael Puzzo, originated at this year's FringeNYC, where it played a week of performances at the Flea Theater. The granddaddy of summer theatre festivals, HERE's American Living Room, contributed two selections this year, Saviana Stanescu's ten-minute play *Aurolac Blues* and Michael Lew's *Yit, Ngay (One, Two)*. And Soho Think Tank's annual Ice Factory series yielded the remaining pieces in this anthology—*The Expense of Spirit* by Josh Fox, which was mounted by International

WOW Company at Ice Factory 2004 and then played a full run in December of that year; and *The Position* by Kevin Doyle, which was part of Ice Factory 2005.



So now it's time for me to say a few words about each of the Plays and Playwrights for 2006.

Alec Duffy's *The Top Ten People of the Millennium Sing Their Favorite Schubert Lieder* has, as its premise, what sounds like the opening line of a bad joke: So Einstein, Copernicus, Galileo, and Karl Marx are in a room together, and...

Duffy plays deliciously and inventively with the possibilities of this grand idea, setting what we thought we knew about these enormously famous men on its ear, quite possibly because we realize right away that we know very little about them indeed. In Duffy's slightly cockeyed world, Karl Marx is a klutz and a buffoon, Einstein is a sweet old thing who knits (portrayed, intriguingly, by a woman), Galileo is a crusty curmudgeon, and Copernicus, a kind of visionary hippie. Who's to say that his interpretation of these famous molders of modern civilization is any righter than the one we've been carrying around with us? Especially when they're able to articulate such an essential understanding of the universe:

GALILEO: Well, I guess I'm interested in exploring—well, finding beauty in the everyday, the mundane. Too often, we pass over something lovely and simple that is right in front of us without noticing it.

The stated reason for their getting together—they are waiting for an announcement of the top ten people of the millennium, and they have reason to believe that they are each on the list—propels the play and sets in motion its astonishing joyride through physics, politics, religion, economics, and history. Frequently interrupting the talk are the eponymous Schubert songs, rendered with enthusiasm (if not accuracy) by the quartet. Eventually we realize that beautiful music is one of the few things these Very Important Thinkers can actually agree on: why, then, does the Western World that makes “top ten lists” like the one indicated in the play fail to adequately value the art of Schubert?

Without feeling one iota imitative, *Top Ten* calls to mind the spirit of the great works of Tom Stoppard, mixing sharp and whimsical humor with rich, varied, and often unexpected ideas to create an intellectual stew that engages as it entertains. Probing—among other things—the place of authentic art in a world driven by science and technology, business, and politics, it functions as a provocative and stimulating piece of art on its own.



The characters in Kelly McAllister's gorgeous *Burning the Old Man* grapple with big essential questions, too; but they do so like most ordinary mortals, blundering and blustering, generally clueless and searching blindly for the right path at any given

moment. At the center of the story are two brothers, Bobby and Marty, who are driving to the Burning Man Festival where, per their father's dying instructions, they are supposed to deposit his ashes. Bobby and Marty haven't seen each other in years and don't get along; neither seems to be a completely content or actualized man, with the older one (Marty) a self-professed screw-up and loner and the younger one (Bobby), genial but irresponsible and ungrounded.

A freak accident strands them in a remote hotel, where they confront themselves and each other, along with the cheerful but apparently discontented Jo, who runs the hotel; her bombastic, perpetually angry husband Eddy; and a pair of hippies—Earth and Candy—who are also on their way to the festival. Candy is suffering from an unnamed disease that is probably cancer and possibly terminal. When the squabbling brothers collide with these others, the potential for change is created. Whether any lasting transformations occur for any is left unstated, which is one of the reasons why this play is finally so emotionally honest and compelling.

Everyone in *Burning the Old Man* feels—with good reason!—shortchanged by the cosmos; a recurring device in the play is the use of mottos and catchphrases that these folks grab onto in an effort to make sense of a chaotic and unyielding universe. My favorite line in the play is Earth's pronouncement "Nothing in this world takes long. Everything takes short." But the center of the work lives in this excerpt from a "Vespers" ritual that Earth and Candy perform with Jo, Bobby, and Marty:

EARTH: We seek more time.

CANDY: We seek more hope

EARTH: We seek more light.

CANDY: We seek peace.

EARTH: We seek.

CANDY: We seek.

BOBBY: That's sort of ironic, because me and Marty hide. Get it? We hide, and you seek.

CANDY: And what are you hiding?

BOBBY: Oh, not much. Our feelings. Our sorrow. Shit like that.

CANDY: You hide your love for one another, and for him.

EARTH: Love is evil, spelled backwards and wrong.

That last line, from the first time I heard it, has always struck me as the kind of thing that will be quoted for generations. McAllister solidified his standing as one of our finest new playwrights with *Burning the Old Man*, and what lies ahead in his career is thrilling to contemplate.



Jack Hanley, author of *Self at Hand*, is a first-time playwright; each of the three acts comprising this trilogy is based on one of Hanley's poems. This explains, perhaps, the ingenious and imaginative flights of fancy that Hanley makes in this work, which envisions a chilling, not-too-far-off future in which ever-expanding technological advances start to chip away at our fundamental humanity in terrible ways.

The Myth of Not to Be sets the stage for the evening, introducing us to a world where a woman can attend her husband's funeral remotely and the funeral director's main job is to present a virtual "recreation" of the deceased. *Tastes Like Robot* is about a man who can't tell if he's human or android and embarks on a macabre experiment to try to find out. And the title playlet, *Self at Hand*, concerns a woman who has a glass plate installed over her skull so that she can observe her brain functioning in realtime.

The leaps that Hanley takes here are breathtaking; like all great horror stories, *Self at Hand* is authentically frightening precisely because it so self-evidently could be true. But far from being just a set of gruesome cautionary tales, *Self at Hand* is an exploration of the ways we so easily and carelessly yield up the most fundamental of our human characteristics—our need for connectedness, our compassion, our individuality—to the illusory convenience of invasive technology.

Hanley's language is stunning:

THE WOMAN: . . . Yup, no more metaphorical digging in my brain to fix things. I found a doctor who's got a real shovel, a real pick, and he's going to rip out that bundle of neurons, that little beast at the center of my brain, he's going to rip it out. And I'm going to hold it between my fingers and crush it, make every neuron pop and ooze its doubts, its dark veils, its void, its fear of death, and life—its fear of my own flesh.

The original production of *Self at Hand* at Dixon Place featured a knockout staging by Christopher Eaves, one of whose brilliant directorial ideas was to use video projections as the only light source on stage. This had the effect of distancing the audience emotionally from what was happening on stage, while at the same time putting it almost under a microscope, letting us zoom in on important themes. Eaves has provided a fascinating note on his approach to staging Hanley's play which is included as an appendix to the script here. But it will be interesting to see what other adventurous directors and actors make of this remarkable and unusual work.



The Expense of Spirit takes place in a Brooklyn video store on Christmas Eve, 2004. The proprietor of the store, a rough-hewn but good-hearted woman named Marty, is preparing for her annual holiday celebration—a humongous party that she gives for her customers, featuring acres of food, drink, and good cheer. But there are a couple of reasons why this year's festivities might not be as merry as usual. Marty's daughter is overseas, serving in the Army in the war in Iraq. And Marty's right-hand, a woman named Jo who has worked in the store for years, is about to quit and move across the country to Oregon. Nevertheless, things are proceeding according to plan . . . until two soldiers march up to the video store's entrance, on what appears to be very official business.

Josh Fox's gripping drama, developed with members of International WOW Company, the theatre group he founded, is at once a panoramic look at contemporary American

values and a raw, intimate study of a family as it's ripped irretrievably to shreds. Fox uses the video store as both backdrop and metaphor in this piece, with its near-extinct homespun-family-business feel contrasting rather achingly with the ugly institutionalized world outside its doors. Movies—war films like *Platoon* and *Battle of Algiers* and offbeat domestic flicks like *Love Streams* and *When Harry Met Sally*—regularly pop up in the narrative like beacons. Our love affair with the unreal is the play's bittersweet undercurrent, as exemplified by this speech, in which Marty explains to her guests how she cooks her famous chicken:

MARTY: OK, you put the movie in and you wait for the lion to roar. Then you put the chicken in the flour get em all pasty. Heat the oil in big pan, cook the chicken for as long as it takes Cary Grant to escape from the crop dusters. I am not sure how long that is in actual time. But when Cary Grant is in the clear you take that chicken off.

The tragedy inside *The Expense of Spirit*—for this play is a tragedy, in the classical sense—comes when reality crashes into the idyllic, fake Hollywood world that we carry around in our heads; it's literalized with great skill by Fox. The original production, which Fox directed, emphasized this collision still more, using cinematic techniques such as cross fades and dissolves to tell the story. Fox provides a variety of useful notes about the way he and his company put up the show as an appendix to the script.



The human face of war is explicitly the subject of *Paradise*, the second in a trilogy of plays on that topic by Glyn O'Malley. (The other two are *Concertina's Rainbow* and *A Heartbeat to Baghdad*.) Set during the Intifada in the fall and winter of 2001-02, *Paradise* concerns two teenage girls, both about the same age—an American, Sarah, who has just arrived in Israel to live with her mother Shoshana in a Jewish settlement in the West Bank; and a Palestinian, Fatima, whose cousin is visiting from the United States. Sarah is struggling to come to terms with her mother's militant attitude toward her homeland, while Fatima finds herself more and more drawn to the Palestinian cause, personified by her brother's friend Bassam.

With great care and respect, O'Malley paints portraits of families who first and foremost love one another; families who are caught in a crossfire not of their choosing or making; families who are, nevertheless, responsible—one by one—for the endless battle raging around them. *Paradise* is written with enormous humanity, because that's finally its only subject: the diminishment of all the things that people cherish and share that is the dependable byproduct of warfare.

One of the reasons *Paradise* works as well as it does is because it airs, about as even-handedly as possible for an American writer, all of the sides of a complicated and very long-lived struggle. In one scene, Shoshana and Sarah take refuge in an ancient synagogue:

SHOSHANA [reading an inscription]: The date is below: almost nine hundred years old. Nine hundred! Those are *your* years up there, as much as mine or any Jew's—your bones and sinew and blood.

Shortly after, Bassam, as if in reply, says:

BASSAM: ...more prayers have risen in a stream from this one spot on the globe than all the waters of the seas into the clouds above. Every stone in our land has heard centuries of prayers; centuries of petitions; centuries of questions. I am convinced ... we each make our own answer.

Paradise has been rather consistently misunderstood by people on both sides of the Palestinian/Israeli issue, who take O'Malley to task for not agreeing with their view of things all the times in the play when he gives voice to the opposing perspective. I'd like to suggest that readers think about *Paradise* not so much as a play about a specific war but about what happens in any war; its timeliness, alas, is unlikely to diminish any time soon.



At just 24 years old, Michael Lew is the youngest writer we've published in the *Plays and Playwrights* series to date. It's exciting to get to know such a talented artist at the beginning of his career. Certainly his play *Yit, Ngay (One, Two)* suggests terrific work to come, in terms of both its sensitive treatment of a very particular Chinese American family, and its ingenious structure.

Let me address that second point first. *Yit, Ngay* is written explicitly as a play for one actor, but as you'll see it looks very much like a four-character play. In a series of monologues and dialogues, the single performer is called upon to play four different women—sometimes two at the same time. (Lew even includes stage directions where, for example, one of the characters punches the other in the arm.) The result is a neat challenge for both actor and director, one that was beautifully met by Lew and Alexandra Price in the American Living Room production. It will be fascinating to see how others tackle Lew's unorthodox approach to the solo show.

Now, as to the characters—well, they're four sisters, all approaching or well into middle age, reuniting at the California home of their parents, who are retiring and moving away. The sisters have a singular history. The elder two, Jook and Mei, were born in China, before World War II. Their father emigrated to the U.S. and served in the American Army; after the war, he was allowed to bring a bride back to the States from China and, playing the system as best he could, he pretended to marry the woman who was already his wife. This subterfuge meant that the two girls had to stay behind in China, where they were raised by their grandmother. In America, two more daughters were born, Betty and Karen. Years later, Mei and Jook were able to exit China and journey to America.

It makes for a tale of immigrants quite unlike any other I've come across. Here, Mei, the second oldest, remembers some of her first experiences in America:

MEI: So many foods were like this, foods that were almost like home but never quite right. And it took forever before I could eat American food. Cheese. I remember the first time they gave me cheese and... *(makes a face)* More than the new people or the new places, the food is what made me know that I was not at home, made me miss Yeen Yeen and Jook and the village. Even if you had Chinese people making Chinese food, somehow it did not turn out right.

Lew has written four splendidly articulate, opinionated, and, above all, distinct women in *Yit, Ngay*. I predict a long life for this piece.



While *Yit, Ngay* looks at how emigrating to America transformed the lives of a particular family, *Pulling the Lever* explores the ways that a diverse group of immigrants have turned (and continue to turn) America into an ever-changing, broadening society. *Pulling the Lever* is the first theatre piece created by Rising Circle Theater Collective, a New York-based group unique in my experience in that it comprises artists of diverse minority backgrounds—its members are African American, South Asian American, Caribbean American, Latino, East Asian American, and so on.

What they've accomplished in this illuminating play is to give voice to people who are almost never heard from in mainstream American popular culture and art. The characters of *Pulling the Lever* are an Indian doctor, a Tunisian music professor, an African American actor; an Ecuadorian husband and father working in a restaurant to put his kids through college; a gay middle-aged Jewish man with an interest in bondage and light S&M. an upwardly mobile woman who runs her own executive search firm. It's edifying to meet them on stages that are still far too dominated by middle- and upper-middle-class white Americans.

In the tradition of docudramas like Anna Deavere Smith's *Fire in the Mirror* and Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, Rising Circle's members interviewed these and other representatives of "underrepresented" America during the months preceding the Election of 2004. What they learned—and assembled into this funny, warm, and fascinating play—is an enlightening portrait of our country, one that a great many Americans will likely be surprised by.

Led by head writers Sanjit De Silva and Deepa Purohit, the Rising Circle team—which includes contributing writers Rod Bowen, Ragini Shah, Catherine Jhung, Debargo Sanyal, and Dan Nahaku—give us penetrating looks at people like Raph, a young Lebanese American whom we meet at the very beginning of the play:

RAPH: You know, they used to have these American cultural centers after WWII all over Europe. They would have jazz musicians like Cole Porter and Ella Fitzgerald go over there and play at the center and they would show American art. And those are pretty much extinct now. In place of that, they have Coke. And McDonald's. They have our brands now and not our culture.

Pulling the Lever overflows with food for thought and offers opportunities to explore the American Melting Pot from the inside out that are, I think pretty much unparalleled in contemporary American drama.



I first encountered the work of Kevin Doyle at the 2004 Stampede Festival, where his very funny absurdist play *Styrofoam* premiered. A year later, he gave us a first look at *The Position*, which subsequently was presented at Soho Think Tank's Ice Factory and then at the Berkshire Fringe Festival. He's clearly poised to become a leading writer for our theatre. He's also a director: he staged all three mountings of *The Position*, and the script that appears on these pages contains meticulous information about how those productions looked.

The Position takes place in an ordinary office at a typical large American corporation, where six men wait to be interviewed for a job. Five of the men are, literally, office clones, clad in identical suits and shoes, carrying identical briefcases, and holding, so it seems, identical values and beliefs. They even have, as far as we can tell, the same last name.

But the sixth man is different: he's clearly unprepared for the interview, superficially and beneath the surface; he's terrified of what might happen to him once he crosses the threshold of the interview room into the corporate sanctum.

Both the general subject and the *modus operandi* of *The Position* are familiar, but in Doyle's hands, new territory is quickly charted. Debts to Ionesco, Beckett, Albee, and others of the postwar absurdist are clear, especially in the play's eventual arc toward tragedy. But the play's sensibility is much more contemporary, and so is the style, which brings in elements of New Vaudeville, postmodernism, and a substantial amount of really astute social satire:

FOURTH MAN: Excuse me?
THIRD MAN: Yes.
FOURTH MAN: Is that the new one or the old one?
THIRD MAN: The new one.
FOURTH MAN: Really. That's the new one?
THIRD MAN: Yeah. The new one is nice.
FOURTH MAN: Did you have the old one?
THIRD MAN: Yup.
FOURTH MAN: Is there a difference?
THIRD MAN: Not much. But I like the new one.
FOURTH MAN: The new one. Thank you.

They're talking about an iPod, but they could be discussing any of the so-called essential accoutrements of modern alienated urban life; Doyle nails the portrait of the disaffected office worker beautifully here. Brimming with sight gags, physical comedy, and running

jokes, *The Position* takes a long hard look at the craziness of comfy conformity and ponders what that comfort might finally be costing us in terms of our humanity.



Michael Puzzo's two-hander *The Dirty Talk* is perhaps the one outright comedy in this collection. Even the play's stated setting—"a hunting cabin somewhere in the mountains of New Jersey"—is funny. And its silent opening is hilarious: we first meet Lino, acclimating himself to his somewhat kitschy surroundings; and then we encounter Mitch, entering in the midst of an all-out battle-to-the-death with his umbrella, which has failed him in a torrential thunderstorm. Sidney Williams, who played Mitch in the FringeNYC production, turned this bit of business into a comic tour de force. Indeed, Williams and Kevin Cristaldi (as Lino) performed like a classic comic duo in the premiere. I'm sure lots and lots of actors are going to be clamoring to play this new odd couple in the future.

So who are these two guys, stuck in the wilds of New Jersey in the blinding rain? Most of the fun of *The Dirty Talk* comes from discovering the precise reason why Mitch and Lino are in this cabin together, so I'm going to leave it to you to find out. The cabin belongs to Mitch's dad, and is the kind of place where one engages in illicit rendezvous. Mitch has just broken up (badly) with his wife. Lino is a lonely gent who likes to hang out in Internet chat rooms.

The great strength of this play is that Puzzo, while putting his characters in a bizarre situation rife with comic possibilities, never forgets their humanity—he never lets them behave so broadly that they turn into caricatures. The rhythm of their dialogue comes from classical farce and comedy, but it's always grounded in a recognizable reality:

LINO: Wow. It's actually flooded? What did you leave the windows rolled down?

MITCH: What is that, another joke?

LINO: No.

MITCH: It's flooded, it's fucking flooded. The...the...the engine is flooded or the starter or the...I don't fucking know. Look, CAR NO GO!

LINO: I don't drive.

MITCH: Besides...I don't...I don't have any windshield wipers.

LINO: You mean they don't work?

MITCH: No, I don't have any. I had them, but I...I got into an argument with... Look, I ripped them off, ok?

Puzzo—a wonderful actor in his own right (he played Ethan in the original cast of *When Words Fail...*, published in *Plays and Playwrights for the New Millennium*)—wisely resisted the temptation to appear in *The Dirty Talk* himself, which enabled him to focus on both of these men and flesh them out into fully-dimensional, interesting, sympathetic individuals. The rapprochement that they are eventually able to achieve is an encouraging sign that tolerance and understanding is possible among even the most outrageously mismatched sets of people.



Programs of ten-minute plays are a growing part of the indie theatre scene, and few practitioners of the art are as prolific or masterful as P. Seth Bauer. So it's appropriate that he is the first recipient of the New York Innovative Theatre Award for Outstanding Short Script, for his touching and moving slice of life, *The First Time Out of Bounds*.

Bauer, like the many other playwrights who devote themselves to the short play form, is called upon to create his scripts under a variety of circumstances. He is, for example, a frequent participant in *theAtrainplays*, one of the pioneers of the 24-hour play format, in which a group of writers are assigned to write a piece in a few hours, then immediately turn it over to a director and some actors who stage it and then perform it just one day (to the minute) after the whole process began. Working under those conditions can only sharpen one's skills—so when Bauer is called upon to create a new play for a themed evening such as TheDrillingCompaNY's *Honor 2*, he is well-prepared to craft something with economy, wit, and care.

This is just what he's done in *The First Time Out of Bounds*. In it, a pair of teenagers—an unnamed boy and girl—fumble tenderly around the idea of having sex. The twist here is that the girl is both the more experienced and more aggressive of the two; the boy rather charmingly is holding onto a quaint sense of honor that rules out going “all the way” on a first date.

What Bauer is able to accomplish in a very short time—particularly in terms of character development—is quite remarkable:

GIRL: What did you expect?! You know, you take me out to dinner, a dinner like that. Somehow you get us wine in a little pitcher and everything. There's even a fire in the friggin' fireplace! Violins are playing, the whole bit. Then you take me to see a play, not a movie, not bowling, a play. I never seen a play before 'cept when I was a kid and they took our class down to the Palace Theater to see *Rumplestiltskin* and what-not. We walk by the lake. You hold my hand. We look at the goddamn stars for hours. Then you take me to a friggin' ditch by the side of the road and not fuck me.

The seemingly random details—bowling, *Rumplestiltskin*, “what-not”—speak volumes about who these young people are. The result is a gentle and sweet look at life in miniature.



Aurolac Blues is another magnificent specimen of the compact play form. It's about a pair of Romanian gypsy street kids, innocent but old before their time as they eke out a subsistence living. Their one diversion is Aurolac, a kind of paint that the kids sniff like glue out of plastic bags.

In just ten minutes, we meet this boy and girl and then become emotionally connected to them, their lives, their values, their sad and seemingly inescapable destinies. The sheer

potency of this play—its ability to pull us in, make us care about these kids, and make up somehow complicit in what’s happening to them—is breathtaking and extraordinary.

Here, the boy, Elvis, dreams of traveling to America:

ELVIS: I mean just for a night or so. To see the skyscrapers. The birds. The ocean. The city. I’m gonna eat a huge cheeseburger at McDonalds. With French fries. And ketchup. And mayonnaise. And pickles. Like those at the McDonalds in Victoriei Square, but much bigger.... Then I’m gonna play basketball with the black kids. I’ll let them win. Then I will drive a limo. A long white limo. I’ll be very elegant. I’ll go to a roof-party and dance with women with diamonds around their necks.

Aurolac Blues paints an almost dreamlike portrait of something that seems nightmarish and very far away from our existence; at the same time, it casts a sharp accusatory eye on its Western audience as collaborators in a world where such events are in fact commonplace.

The author of this remarkable play is Saviana Stanescu, a playwright from Romania who is just beginning to make her mark here in the United States. Within the past few years, she’s collaborated with Richard Schechner on *YokastaS*, a play about Oedipus’s mother/wife; and she’s had readings and workshop productions of several other original pieces. Smart, articulate, and inventive, Stanescu’s is an exciting new voice, bringing to bear in particular her unique experiences as an Eastern European woman working in New York.

At the American Living Room, where *Aurolac Blues* debuted, Stanescu collaborated with director Nina Hein and dancer Natia Kezevadze to create a surreal environment surrounding the stark naturalistic world where the children actually live—a sort of abstract visualization of the contrasting worlds of their imagination. This was dazzlingly effective. It will be interesting to see how other directors and performers approach this piece and bring its powerful message to life in theatres.



The subject of *The Whore of Sheridan Square* is Charles Ludlam, the great pioneer of Ridiculous Theater who worked from the 1960s until his death from AIDS in 1987. Ludlam’s work appropriated more or less whatever it could get its hands on from culture (popular and otherwise) and art (high, low, and in between), to create theatre that was chaotic, assaultive, flamboyant, hilarious, irreverent, and, above all, subversive. The stanchions of the Ruling Order—gender roles, sexuality, politics—are not merely questioned in Ridiculous Theater, they’re toppled, trampled, and rendered unrecognizable. Revolutionary then, the key ideas of the Ridiculous are iconic and entrenched now, perhaps too much so. *The Whore of Sheridan Square* reminds us of the danger of taking revolutionary art—or any art, for that matter—for granted.

Writer Michael Baron has accomplished this worthy goal masterfully, brilliantly, and hilariously, by usurping Ludlam's own methods and creating a brand new Ridiculous-styled theatre piece, grafting Ludlam's life and art onto one of the great camp landmarks of American noir, the film *Sunset Boulevard*. In the play, a young gay playwright named Joe Glassman accidentally wanders into the Sheridan Square apartment of Norma Charles ("maybe the greatest theatre faggot of them all") and soon finds himself caught up in an insane scheme to co-write a tribute to Norma that will supposedly be presented at the Kennedy Center Honors.

If you know the Billy Wilder film then you know how the story will spin out: Baron is splendidly faithful to his sources here, alluding to all the famous moments of the movie, yet twisting them deliciously off-kilter in accordance with his governing aesthetic. So one of the film's most famous lines turns up like this:

JOE: It looks like she's gained a little weight.

NORMA: I'm not big! It's the dress that got small!

And the climactic reunion of Norma with her one-time benefactress Didi St. Holt (*Whore's* DeMille counterpart) includes this wondrous exchange

NORMA: I knew I could count on my government to still support and recognize humble, yet revolutionary artists. (*getting sentimental*) Oh Didi, it's sometimes so sad getting older.

DIDI: I think it's sadder not getting the chance to grow old.

which manages to encapsulate most of the important themes of the play in two astonishing, deft lines of dialogue.

The Whore of Sheridan Square is enormously funny and entertaining, but at its core it is both sad and serious. Though the sheer volume of theatrical activity is unprecedented nowadays, public support for it—governmental and otherwise—is not exactly unwavering; the theatre is no longer so reliably the unstintingly accommodating home to subversion and activism that it has traditionally been.

Playwrights like Michael Baron (and the other eleven featured in this book) are vital to the survival of a theatre that doesn't just comfort and divert its audience, but prods and pokes and challenges and awakens and enlightens and enlarges it. Indie theatre—theatre that speaks to the impulses of a free and liberated people—isn't dying, but it might start to falter if we don't take good care of it. Please read and cherish these plays and the others that are popping up in theatres all over New York and the rest of the country. Without people to see them and people to put them on, they can't do the important work they're meant for.