

# Introduction

## *Martin Denton*

*Plays and Playwrights 2007*, the eighth volume in our annual series of new works from the ever-burgeoning and expanding indie theatre scene, contains eleven plays that couldn't be more different from one another. Yet they have a great deal in common. Most obviously, they all premiered in New York City between September 2005 and September 2006 (though a couple of them actually had world premieres before that, one of them in Canada back in 2000). They're all dazzlingly contemporary, addressing significant issues such as the war in Iraq and the scary booming world trade in child sex slaves, and tracking social attitudes about topics as up-to-the-minute as the alienating effects of the Internet and other high-tech "connectivity" and our accelerating cultural obsession with celebrity and fame. And of course they're really good; these plays all work brilliantly in performance and deserve to be seen again and again on stages around the world.

These eleven plays also reflect the evolving landscape of indie theatre in the way they were developed. Three of the pieces in *Plays and Playwrights 2007* came out of the New York International Fringe Festival: *Kiss and Cry* by Tom Rowan originated in the 2004 Fringe-NYC and then went on to a full-blown engagement at Theater Ten Ten a year and a half later; Brendon Bates's *Corps Values* and Ashlin Halfnight's *Diving Normal* both debuted at the 2006 festival. Bates and Halfnight are both winners (for earlier works) of FringeNYC's playwriting award; they've smartly utilized the Fringe as a nurturing environment to hone their craft, with the results apparent later in this volume. The HOT! Festival, the long-running summertime celebration of queer performance at Dixon Place, is the source of the fourth of this year's plays, Stan Richardson's *Another Brief Encounter*.

Six of the remaining seven plays of *Plays and Playwrights 2007* come from theatre companies—tight, close-knit collectives of artists who collaborate using various structures and formats to create new work that is uniquely their own. This is exemplified by the Canadian-American hybrid bluemouth inc., who made a sensational New York debut with *LENZ*; the Long Island City-based troupe Aisling Arts, whose co-founder Bryn Manion is the author of *Convergence*; CollaborationTown, the energetic group of Boston University grads who gave us Boo Killebrew's *They're Just Like Us*; and Partial Comfort Productions, a young company now based in Midtown's Theatre Row and represented here by Chad Beckim's *'nami*. James Comtois is the artistic director of Nosedive Productions and worked with his longtime collaborators in that company to create *The Adventures of Nervous-Boy*. And Andy Chmelko, who is an associate producer at Bubi Escudero's ETdC Projects' Performance Art and New Media Theatre Experimental Creative Lab, joined forces with rising young Impetuous Theater Group for *Office Sonata*, a most fortuitous collaboration.

Rounding out this year's collection is the singular Taylor Mac, whose *Red Tide Blooming* premiered at P.S. 122, where it was commissioned under the auspices of the first-ever Ethyl Eichelberger Award. Mac's work bridges musical theatre and performance art in a dizzyingly direct fashion: call it, maybe, NeoRidiculous—at once a nod backward to the origins of off-off-Broadway and a leap forward acknowledging new styles of individual and collaborative indie theatre-making.

This book celebrates the ways, both traditional and innovative, that playwrights and other artists are working together to make theatre that's resonant and relevant, timely, and in and of the here and now. Read on and meet 2007's plays and playwrights.

In September 2005, I got an email inviting me to see the New York debut of a company from Toronto called bluemouth. What really piqued my interest was the fact that this show, *LENZ*, was to be staged in three rooms of a small hotel called Ye Olde Carlton Arms, located on East 25th Street in Manhattan.

When audience members arrived, they were told to select a random key from a big bowl. Attached to each key was a tag listing three rooms in sequence, like this: "Room 9D – Room 14B – Room 1D." This list designated the order you would see the three components of *LENZ*. There are three possible sequences, each of which yields a different experience: *LENZ* is a mystery, and the fact that each of the members of your party may be gathering the clues in a different order makes the overall happening all the more intriguing.

At the heart of *LENZ* is the story of Jacob Lenz (a character in a story by George Buchner that is the inspiration for this piece). His sister Iris, whom we meet in Room 9D, tells us this about him:

I am my brother's keeper. (*Lies on the floor, gestures toward the fan.*) A man walks into a police station and confesses to a murder committed prior to his birth. (*Walks over to the dresser and takes a photo out of the top drawer. She turns on a small bedside lamp and looks at the photo under the light.*) How would I know this person I was looking for, my brother? I now had the vague description of a bearded homeless man hanging around Times Square panhandling for change.

*LENZ* hooks you in each of its three remarkable scenes, which are a monologue delivered by Iris, a film whose dialogue is mostly in French, and an environmentally staged one-man show featuring Lenz himself. The four versatile artists who comprise bluemouth—Stephen O'Connell, Sabrina Reeves, Lucy Simic, and Richard Windeyer—combine consummate acting with multimedia wizardry to make their play a completely immersive event. The experience of *LENZ* is dramatic in the traditional

sense, but what's genuinely thrilling about it is actually *doing* it: *LENZ* exists in the intersection between the active observer and the actively observed.

bluemouth followed *LENZ* with *What the Thunder Said* (July 2006), staged in a big empty room on the ground floor of a downtown Manhattan office building. Itself part of an epic trilogy called *Something About a River*, this work continued bluemouth's exploration of theatre as a fully participatory (though not necessarily interactive) event, requiring its audiences to be entirely present in ways that most plays and musicals only aspire to.

A few years ago, I saw a short play called *The Zaks Complex*, by a young man named Andy Chmelko. It depicted a battle between two high-powered corporate executives whose egos won't allow them to give way and walk past one another in a corridor. Chmelko took this delicious idea and combined it with a number of other sharply observed details of modern corporate life to create *Office Sonata*, a very funny play that will resonate with anyone who's ever worked in one of the ubiquitous, cubicle-laden offices of a large American company. Set in a mega-corporation called M T D O Empie Advertising Agency, *Office Sonata* tells the story of an ordinary fellow named Kyle who just wants to do his job right and get ahead. Surrounding him are a bunch of outsized characters who nevertheless ring precisely true: Meghan, an actress who works at Empie to subsidize her career; Martin, a prototypical slacker; Marisa and Lester, the aforementioned two executives with Zaks Complex; and many others. What makes *Office Sonata* special is the keen satiric eye Chmelko turns to the everyday: all of us have surfed the Internet on company time, but we hope and pray to never cause the outlandish ruckus that Martin does here when he pays what he thinks is a harmless visit to a porn site. The institutionalization of corporate soullessness seems particularly irksome to the playwright, as demonstrated here:

MEGHAN: You're right Kyle, I don't! But that doesn't mean these people can treat me like a second-class citizen and then expect me to believe that it's helping me in some twisted way! God, between the finger-flippers and the human centrifuges ... and there's even a rumor going around that they're bringing the Blame Lottery back.

KYLE: The Blame Lottery?

MEGHAN: Something they discontinued not long after I started here. If one of the really big execs made any kind of huge mistake that could ruin their lives ... they put the names of everyone beneath them into one of those lottery machines ... the ones that spit the balls out? And whoever's name came up took the blame for the executive, no matter what they did.

Chmelko's director Jason Zimbler thought outside the box (to use a bit of trendy corporate-speak) to stage *Office Sonata* as a high-energy circus of a play, with Internet sites literally brought to life on stage (and Chmelko has a few tricks up his sleeve to make office technology much more vivid than usual). This is as contemporary as comedy got this season; I expect theatres all over the country will want to mount this delicious paean to corporate culture.

Long before Douglas Carter Beane's *The Little Dog Laughed* took its satiric swipe at the so-called "taboo" of gay movie stars, Tom Rowan's *Kiss and Cry* weighed in on the same topic with much more serious sense of purpose. *Kiss and Cry* tells the story of Stacy and Fiona—respectively, a young world champion figure skater on his way to the Olympics and a rising movie actress—and how they become America's sweethearts. They meet, in the play's first scene, at a party where they instantly hit it off. A photographer *iN O iO* snaps a picture of them as they get into Fiona's waiting limousine, and immediately the rumor mill gets to work. Soon—with the active participation of both parties, especially the ambitious Fiona—the country has fallen in love with this glamorous young couple. What we know, but the rest of the country doesn't, is that both Fiona and Stacy are gay, and their so-called romance is a huge publicity stunt.

Rowan doesn't treat this story satirically, but finds the truth in it instead. He also doesn't sensationalize it, taking his play in an unexpected direction in its second act so that instead of merely being a thought piece about cultural homophobia, it becomes ultimately a meditation on what it costs artists to make art they can be proud of—and what it costs an individual to be the person he or she can be proud of.

*Kiss and Cry* was beautifully staged by Kevin Newbury and featured an excellent ensemble, led by Julie Leedes and David Lavine as Fiona and Stacy and, in a breakout performance, Nell Gwynn as Lauren, Fiona's partner and the play's conscience:

LAUREN: Why should I go see a movie designed expressly to get teenaged suburban heterosexuals to spend more money in shopping malls?

FIONA: Oh I don't know. Because you love me?

LAUREN: And therefore I don't need to see you merchandised.

FIONA: (*Munching on her breakfast.*) And yet you're going to go spend an evening nibbling cheese and avoiding wine and looking at "installations" Dina put together out of old broken toys?

LAUREN: The difference being that that's her lifeblood. Your movie you did for the money. Which yes, we all have to do. But I don't ask you to come down to the bookstore and watch me run a cash register.

The social pressures that drove, say, Representative Mark Foley to live deeply in the closet are the same ones Rowan explores so incisively in *Kiss and Cry*. These are timely issues that merit serious, as opposed to merely flippant or parodic, treatment in the drama.

*They're Just Like Us* is one of two plays in this book to confront head-on the increasingly alienated high-tech culture of young urban adults. The Internet, cell phones, iPods, PDAs, and so on—devices all designed to make communication easier—seem instead to make M T D O connection more and more impossible. At the same time, blogs and reality TV allow any of us to become stars, if only momentarily, as the world moves closer and closer to Andy Warhol's famous prediction. The four twentysomethings at the heart of this very funny, very moving play—Jen, Frank, Gene, and Ann—exemplify the paradox. Their craving for company manifests itself in an obsessive desire for attention; significantly, they never stop long enough to actually find what they need:

ANN: Hey, Frank!

FRANK: Ann, where you off to?

ANN: I have this thing—but I saw you from across the street and thought I'd say "hey" real quick!

FRANK: I gotta go, too, but I just saw Gene.

ANN: Where has he been?

FRANK: I don't know, he didn't say.

ANN: What?

...

ANN: He's always been a bit of a mystery.

FRANK: You think?

ANN: Oh, yeah.

FRANK: Yeah, I guess he is.

ANN: Shit, I gotta go!

FRANK: (*Looks at his watch.*) Me too—I'll call you!

ANN: Definitely call me!

The rhythms of these characters' existences are perfectly captured by playwright Boo Killebrew, who shrewdly never shows us these people anywhere other than in public places, and always in passing. Their ambitious but empty lives are contrasted in *They're Just Like Us* with a pair of people who actually are famous—a hip-hop star named Biz and a TV/film actress named Beth—and another pair, who aren't—Beth's boyfriend Richard and a teenager named Marty. Together, the inhabitants of this play's high-stakes, high-energy urban environment paint a telling portrait of the transformations taking place in America right under our noses.

*They're Just Like Us* was presented by CollaborationTown, one of the New York indie theatre scene's smartest young companies. In just three years, beginning with *This Is a Newspaper* at the 2003 New York International Fringe Festival and continuing with such works as *The Trading Floor* (2004) and *The Astronomer's Triangle* (2005), they've demonstrated that their highly collaborative approach—group members variously write, direct, produce, act, design, and work behind the scenes, depending on the project—can be astonishingly fruitful. Killebrew and her comrades in CTown are just at the beginning of very promising careers. It will be exciting to see what they do next.

The same can absolutely be said for Aisling Arts, the company behind *Convergence*. Founded by Bryn Manion and Wendy Remington, this emerging troupe is based in Long Island City, Queens (and thus *Convergence* has the distinction of being the first play in the *Plays and Playwrights* series to have debuted in that borough, which is becoming a nexus for indie theatre). 2006 was a banner year for Aisling Arts; in addition to *Convergence*, they presented a fine revival of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* as well as Manion's new twist on *The Beggar's Opera*, *Imminent, Indeed*, which made a splash at FringeNYC.

*Convergence* is the final play in a trilogy, collectively titled *Force*, that also includes *Wanderlust* and *Threshold*. While the three pieces definitely work together, each is intended to be an independent evening of theatre. *Convergence* contains a number of interwoven stories: a war correspondent named Jack Kavanagh temporarily leaves his wife to search for an old contact he knew when he was covering the conflict in Kosovo; Jack's wife, Ann, visits her family home in Vermont and encounters an old flame; Ann's brother, Rob, forms an attachment to a young woman named Sara who is obsessed by tornadoes; a man named Hal loses his wife, Lotte, who one day simply picks up his wallet and car keys and disappears.

Linkages beyond the obvious ones pop in and out of these disparate stories, demonstrating the inextricable (and inexplicable) ways that human connections ebb and flow. Characters in one part of the play share dreams or realities with characters they've never met from other sections; as the title portends, lives and ideas and themes flow together and cohere as this epic-within-an-epic (*Convergence* spans five acts) progresses. One of the things I particularly love about this play is that, even when it's all over, many questions remain unanswered. That's like life; it marks Manion as a mature playwright, well in command of her craft.

Manion directed a startlingly spare, fluid production of *Convergence* at the New York Irish Center in what looked very much like a converted apartment. The bare bones elements of theatre—words and actors—accomplish everything in this play, taking us on unexpected journeys and introducing us to a remarkable array of characters:

BRIAN: What is she doing? Why is she holding her breath?

JACK: (*To KATARINA'S SISTER.*) Why does she do this?

KATARINA'S SISTER: Oooooooh, American.

(*She moves to KATARINA and whispers into her ear.*)

JACK: My brother would like to know why she does this?  
KATARINA'S SISTER: Why not?

Postmodern musicals have become a pervasive part of the landscape in the past decade or so, from *Urinetown* to this season's Canadian import, *The Drowsy Chaperone*. But nothing has really jolted the musical out of its complacency the way that, say, *Hair* or *Company* did thirty-five years ago—nothing, that is, until Taylor Mac's envelope-pushing *Red Tide Blooming*. Here, at long last, is a musical that's authentically subversive and enormously entertaining and that includes some incisive political and social commentary to boot.

Following the Ridiculous Theater model of Charles Ludlam and others (including Ethyl Eichelberger, in whose honor Mac was commissioned to write the show in the first place), iconic forms are fitted out with as transgressively inappropriate content as possible: a vaguely *Wizard of Oz*-type journey is undertaken by a green-skinned hermaphrodite named Olukon, who encounters a bizarre coterie of self-described freaks and other characters, including Vice President Cheney's wife and an all-powerful construct/being called The Collective Conscious that is portrayed by a green sweater. Musical numbers are burlesques of every valid description. Theatrical tricks, from puppetry to masks to Brechtian fourth-wall-bashing songs, are employed, constantly keeping the audience on its toes. There are moments in *Red Tide Blooming* that are actually shocking and even one or two that are scary. That's how powerful this piece is.

Consider for example, this song, which introduces one of the play's key "Establishment" figures, compromised golden boy weatherman Collin Clement:

i have everything anyone could ever want  
fame and fortune, beautiful golden locks  
i am the weatherman for the local island news  
i have muscles, i have smooth skin  
i can afford the vegetable tanning spray  
i'm the state hero, i provide the people with the obvious

This number comes in the middle of the show's *pièce de résistance*, a dark, vitriolic sequence set in Clubland, an apocalyptic vision of mainstreamed outré culture so dark that it makes Sam Mendes's version of *Cabaret* feel like Disneyland. Mac, who directed and starred in *Red Tide Blooming*, proves incontrovertibly here that theatre can still shake up an audience: this show was designed to make people feel a little bit uncomfortable. The nudity, profanity, and other forms of vulgarity in this show are presented with such forthright naïveté that they actually begin to mean something again.

Mac also proved himself a theatrical force to be reckoned with. He was seemingly everywhere in 2006, touring his one-man show, *The Be(a)st of Taylor Mac* (including engagements at the Public Theater in New York), bringing his unique gender-bending performance art persona to audiences around the world.

James Comtois's *The Adventures of Nervous-Boy*, like *They're Just Like Us*, explores the contemporary urban landscape, where hyperconnectivity seems to yield noise and alienation rather than meaningful communication. The eponymous hero of this horror show-cum-modern-day-comedy-of-manners is a young man who finds himself not quite able to click with the people and things around him in the Big City. His anomie alarms him, but he's not quite sure what to do to reignite his fuse. He fears that something terrible may happen and that it may just be his own doing when it does.

The characters who parade through this dizzying joyride of a one-act rival *Red Tide Blooming*'s over-the-top denizens in their eccentricity. Yet they're all undeniably recognizable and familiar (which is one of the reasons that *Nervous-Boy* may be said to cross the line from satire to a kind of horror tale: the world really is pretty much the way Comtois presents it to us). Right at the outset, the playwright demonstrates his talent for capturing the pulse of interactions in today's America:

(He [NERVOUS-BOY] is now in line at a food stand manned by a SERVER. A GUY ON A CELL PHONE is in front of him.)

GUY ON CELL PHONE: (To the person on the phone.) Hold on. (To server.) Uh ... hold on. (To the phone.) Hold on a sec. (To server.) Hold ... hold on. (To phone.) Uhhhhhh ... hold on. (To server.) Hold on. (Etc. Keeps going like that.)

As the play progresses, we meet office dweebs, weird people in bars, performance artists, a stripper, a skank, a very scary dude named Asmodeus, and three inarticulate acquaintances of Nervous-Boy's whom Comtois has christened Grog, Phht, and Hrmph. There's also a vague ray of hope in the person of Nervous-Boy's sort-of-girlfriend Emily; will she be able to put down her cell phone long enough to have a real conversation with him?

*The Adventures of Nervous-Boy*, presented by Comtois's company Nosedive Productions with expert direction by his longtime collaborator Pete Boisvert, was something of a sleeper hit in the summer of 2006, extending its run a couple of times and generating a bit of positive buzz for this talented young playwright. It deserved to: the design and staging were superb, as was the

cast, which included Comtois himself in a smallish role and was headed by another playwright, Mac Rogers, who was delightfully ingratiating as the tense title character.

Stan Richardson had plays presented in two of New York's major theatre festivals in the summer of 2006: *The Children*, a musical he cowrote with composer Hal Goldberg, was part of the New York Musical Theatre Festival, while *And/Or*, a program of four short plays, was featured in the HOT! Festival at Dixon Place. *Another Brief Encounter* was part of *And/Or*, and offers firm evidence that a major playwriting talent I've been watching develop for several years now has reached maturity.

This, the shortest of the plays in this volume (it runs perhaps thirty to thirty-five minutes), is among the most complex. Richardson does two things here: he parodies the famous Noel Coward-David Lean film *Brief Encounter*, and, by setting it in contemporary Chelsea on Gay Pride Day, he also scrutinizes and/or satirizes aspects of a gay/youth culture that may sometimes feel too centered around Starbucks and self.

Actually, Richardson accomplishes a third thing in *Another Brief Encounter* as well, something he may be less conscious of: he places himself, or at least a stand-in for his own artistic temperament, in a supporting role in the play, with the result that the piece can be viewed both as a clever and brittle observation from without and as a more heartfelt, emotional observation from within.

The story line itself is fairly simple: a young man, called 1, has a chance encounter with a romantic stranger (2) and possibly jeopardizes his long-term relationship with his partner (6). Richardson intends for 2 and 6 to be played by the same actor, suggesting that one "moral" of the story may be that each of us has one and only one soulmate; I leave that for you to decide when you read the play.

Richardson fills the piece with colorful characters and quirky details, the most notable of which is a proper English lady reminiscent (not at all coincidentally) of Celia Johnson in the Coward film, who speaks 1's innermost thoughts. And almost in passing, he packs in, with deft economy, some fairly profound musings on some big themes, such as this, spoken by 5, the writer character in the play:

I know it's not very political, but I think that for people to actually *be* political, they have to determine first how or IF they want to interact in the world ... Politics are about what we fight for, right? But if you feel unlovable, why bother fighting? ... People who feel unlovable don't need newspapers. We need *fairy tales*.

Few American plays in 2006 addressed the issue of the war in Iraq, and almost none did so with the raw honesty of Brendon Bates's powerful drama *Corps Values*. This tight, emotional play is rooted in the conflict between a father and son, one of the mainstays of American drama from O'Neill forward. And in its recognition that all acts are inherently political, it hearkens to the socially conscious work of Arthur Miller.

*Corps Values* takes place in the kitchen of a remote house in western Pennsylvania, where Wade Taylor, a Vietnam vet with a drinking problem, lives by himself. His wife was just killed in an auto accident, and his son, Casey, has returned home on leave from a tour of duty in Iraq; like his father, Casey is a U.S. Marine.

As the play begins, we learn that Casey has disappeared, apparently having gone AWOL. One of Wade's comrades from Vietnam, a career Marine named Kyle Adamson, has arrived at the house to investigate. In flashbacks that are skillfully interwoven with the forward action, Bates reveals what happened to Casey and, in particular, what transpired when father and son had a fateful confrontation. For Casey had told his dad that he intended to go AWOL:

CASEY: ... I'm not going back.

WADE: Pardon?

CASEY: I'm not returning to duty.

(Pause. WADE laughs.)

WADE: You have to go back. You got six months left.

CASEY: I know.

WADE: You got an entire Company counting on you.

CASEY: Half my Company has been wiped out.

WADE: Well, the *other half* is counting on you.

CASEY: I'm writing a letter to each member of my platoon, explaining myself, asking for their forgiveness ...

WADE: What?

CASEY: Encouraging them to do the same.

WADE: Encouraging them to do what?

CASEY: To walk away from the war.

WADE: Have you lost your mind?

CASEY: I'd rather rot in jail than ...

WADE: (Interrupting him.) What are you saying?

CASEY: I'm saying I'm done with this war.

Part tantalizing mystery story, part gripping family drama, part searing indictment of a culture and seemingly ceaseless cycle of war, *Corps Values* explodes in one of the most harrowing and exciting climaxes seen on any stage last season. I leave it to you to discover on these pages; it's a play that demands to be seen and heard, and Bates is a playwright who is going to leave his mark on American drama.

If *Corps Values* is the most overtly political play in this collection, *Diving Normal* is perhaps the most blisteringly intimate. It's about a young man named Fulton Ditmer, a reasonably successful graphic novelist, single and living alone in New York. When we meet him, he's just had a chance encounter with Dana, a girl he had a crush on in high school. Now, about a decade later, she barely remembers him, but he's in seventh heaven, certain that he can ignite the romance that never was.

And he does: Dana, whose life has gotten more and more out of control following a car accident in which her mother was seriously injured, likes the stability, security, and, yes, sentimentality that Fulton provides. She also likes, against the odds and probably her better judgment, Fulton's quirky neighbor Gordon, a librarian whom Fulton describes as "harmless": he's endearing but odd, not very good in social situations. Gordon falls in love with Dana at first sight, and complications ensue.

The author of *Diving Normal*, Ashlin Halfnight, distinguishes himself by constantly surprising us and constantly keeping things real. Gordon, for example, could easily turn into a Kramer sort of character (from *Seinfeld*), but Halfnight never lets us lose sight of the ache that's underneath an admittedly comical surface:

GORDON: I go every Sunday to the YMCA to take my diving lessons. I used to go to church, but now I go to the pool. (*Beat.*) Today is Sunday.

DANA: Yes. It is.

GORDON: Yes. I go every Sunday, except in April when the pool is closed for cleaning.

DANA: You—um—what kind of dives do you do?

GORDON: Head first. (*Beat.*) And other kinds. (*Beat.*) I have green swimming trunks.

Halfnight has remarkable control over his characters, and he gives them each singular, distinctive voices. These beautifully written characters are roles that actors will want to play; designed economically for just three people and a single set, *Diving Normal* should have a long and healthy life in theatres, where the tangled web that evolves among Fulton, Dana, and Gordon can be spun and respun. I should mention that the original players, Josh Heine, Eliza Baldi, and Jayd McCarty, set a very high standard for subsequent performances of this play, under the thoughtful direction of Mary Catherine Burke; they helped make *Diving Normal* one of the breakout hits of FringeNYC 2006.

The genesis of *'nami* is in the devastating tsunami that hit Indonesia and other Indian Ocean nations in late 2004. Subsequently, a trade in human beings began to flourish: orphans were being kidnapped and sold as sex slaves to Westerners in record numbers.

From this awful circumstance, playwright Chad Beckim created a compelling tragedy about two married couples who are neighbors in a low-rent apartment house in Queens. Harry and Lil have been together a long time and have been through a lot, including a recent episode involving her fragile mental health. He's a cabbie struggling to make ends meet. She desperately wants a baby. Next door are Keesha, a young black woman who works at a nearby McDonald's, and Roachie, whom the playwright indicates is black or Latino, a one-time hoodlum Keesha is trying to rehabilitate as best she can.

What none of these people realize, as *'nami* begins, is that their landlord Donovan has gotten hold of an Indonesian girl and he is about to sell her for a great deal of money. No one emerges unscathed from this terrible act.

Beckim's play is superbly plotted, his characters artfully drawn, and the various themes he weaves through the piece well articulated and important. Lil becomes convinced that she's hearing a baby crying in the apartment next door; we know that Harry knows that she's mentally unstable and obsessive about her childlessness. Is she crazy? What is she supposed to be doing when the person closest to her in the world won't—can't—believe her?

LIL: I could hear her, Harry. I could hear her crying. All night. She wouldn't stop. I could hear her through the wall. She was crying so hard, Harry. She wouldn't stop—

HARRY: I don't—Who—What—What happened—

LIL: But then she did stop! Like someone made her. She just stopped. But when I went to pee, I could hear them talking through the hole from where you hung the picture so I made it a little bigger—just a little bit—and it crumbled a little so I pulled at it a little more and it got bigger and bigger and before I knew it the whole wall was broken but I could hear them, perfectly, Harry! I could hear them talking—Oh God!

HARRY: What are you talking about? Look at me! LIL! *Look at me!* (*Rises.*) I have to call the doctor.

Beckim imbues the play's other primary relationship, between Roachie and Keesha, with equal urgency. Thanks to the tight script, a superlative cast, and exquisitely economical direction by John Gould Rubin, the original production of *'nami* proved to be a taut, resonant thriller that gripped the audience until its end.

*'nami* is the kind of script that deserves to be done over and over again; so are the other ten pieces printed on these pages. One of our main objectives in putting this collection together is to encourage producers and theatre artists all over the world to mount

these plays, not only because their playwrights are worthy, but because they're smart, viable, eminently producible works of theatre. As you will discover when you read *Plays and Playwrights 2007*, American drama is as vibrant and vital as it was in the so-called "golden ages" of the 1920s or '40s. Please spread the word about these extraordinary plays. I hope you enjoy reading them!