A study of the life and work of Christopher Durang: laughing wild amidst severest woe

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A STUDY OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF CHRISTOPHER DURANG;
LAUGHING WILD AMIDST SEVEREST WOE

By
Jeannine M. James

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
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Approved by ________________________
Professor

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ABSTRACT

Jeannine M. James
A STUDY OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF CHRISTOPHER DURANG;
LAUGHING WILD AMIDST SEVEREST WOE
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Dr. Elisabeth Hostetter
Master of Arts in Theatre

This thesis maps Durang’s struggle with faith and demonstrates how his personal journey to discover and document his pain acts as a catalyst for his creative work. It will explore his style of masking and unmasking himself in his characters revealing his innermost pain and suffering. I also surmise that his work serves as a kind of therapy by allowing him to constantly unravel and unveil his investigation of self.

This thesis examines Christopher Durang’s personal history and family struggles in an effort to understand the experiences that shaped the work of one of America’s premier authors of absurdist comedy. It explores the work of Durang as it relates to his own grief and grieving process and chronologically places his work into the standard matrix of grief defined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, which is now commonly accepted by psychologists.
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Chapter One: Introduction, Style and Philosophical Framework

Statement of Purpose

People who read their first play by modern American playwright Christopher Durang often ask, “where does he come up with these totally absurd and over the top characters?” and “how dare he make light of such incredibly serious topics?” Alcoholism, stillbirth, spousal abuse, child abuse, human sexuality and even a harsh critique of mainstream religion serve as challenging topics for his unique style of comedy. The autobiographical character Matt in his play Laughing Wild hints at an answer when he quotes Samuel Beckett explaining, “I’m laughing wild amidst severest woe.” (Complete Full Length Plays, 417) This thesis traces how Durang uses his personal history to serve his art and ultimately create comedy from tragic subject matter. The study shows that Durang’s family conflicts and his personal struggle with faith in the existence of God acted as catalysts for his work, and that his art ultimately served as the vehicle for personal healing.
Style

Many distinguished and respected literary and dramatic scholars revere the work of Christopher Durang. Their often cryptic and mixed reviews reveal both admiration and sympathy. In his book, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*, David Savran labeled Durang, “America’s most savage farceur.” (In Their Own Words, 18) Durang’s style is venomous yet simultaneously touching and hilarious. Robert Brustein, Former Dean of the Yale University Theatre School, described the playwright as, “an angelic altar boy with poison leeching through his writing fingers, which was to say behind his shy and courteous demeanor lurked a literary Jack the Ripper.” (Complete Full Length Plays, vii) Howard Stein, retired chairman of the Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theatre Study at Columbia University, wrote:

Durang shouts for reason in an unreasonable universe in an unreasoning society. He has to be offensive to be effective. That offensiveness is in the service of an objective to aid an audience to see not only its follies and vices but also its misplaced values, its lies and deceits, its infirmities, even its cruelty and callousness. Only by having such conditions razed in front of us can we begin the process of building, of correcting. With his uncommon talent, Christopher Durang lights a candle rather than curses darkness. (27 Short Plays, viii)
Christopher Durang does just that through his writing. He processes the pain and suffering of his youth and his struggle with faith by publicly exposing his issues in an artistic and witty format through the mouths of thinly disguised, autobiographical characters. Mr. Durang fills his work with the anger and pain that originated in childhood. He said, “My plays come from a fairly dark world view; and that world view was created, unsurprisingly, by the family dynamics I grew up in.”

(Christopherdurang.com/QnadA.htm) It appears that Durang writes as a form of self-therapy. Howard Stein comments, “Laughter for Durang not only affords a relief but a temporary refuge which might very well be the only source of salvation” (27 Short Plays, viii).

On his personal website Durang describes himself as “Iconoclastic...a person who attacks or ridicules traditional or venerated institutions or ideas he regards as erroneous or based on superstition.” (Christopherdurang.com/QandA.htm). The “superstition” he focuses the most attention on is organized religion. He consistently criticizes the Catholic Church and its dogmas. The two major concerns he has with the Church is 1) why the Church values suffering and 2) why it disallows birth control. He often attacks issues many consider taboo and uses humor as his ammunition. He notes, “some people do seem to be made uncomfortable when a serious topic is presented in ways that make people laugh. And this is a recurring problem for some audiences with my writing.”

(Slate.msn.com/id/3690/entry/24540) He explains, “there are always angry, unresolved
issues surrounding my work.” (27 Short Plays, 415) Durang’s work straddles the line between hilarious and horrific. Thoughtful stage performance and direction determine in the end which side prevails. In an introduction to his published short plays, he describes the key to successful performance of his work explaining, “Finding the truthful psychological underpinnings to the characters in my plays is very important.” (27 Short Plays, ix) Despite the anger and pain in his work, he suggests humor should always triumph. Robert Brustein likewise states, “There is a great deal of anger in his work, all right, often proceeding from genuine pain and wounded innocence. But…. -when a demon leaps out of his skin and starts pitch forking some fatuous damned soul – Chris is much too kindhearted to go for the jugular.” (Complete Full Length Plays, vii) Howard Stein clearly noted the power of the humor by pointing out, “one must guard oneself against the possibility of dying from laughter while watching a Durang play or reading a Durang script. (27 Short Plays, vii)

While social conditions, political realities and family conflicts often influence a playwright’s work; Durang goes a step further exaggerating his personal experiences to the extreme. This comic treatment of painful autobiographical material is the hallmark of his style of humor. Though theatre often addresses controversial and previously “unspeakable” themes such as deviant sexuality, questionable parenting, alcoholism, still birth and religion, these “serious” topics are rarely so glaringly subjected to ridicule. Brustein states: “Durang managed to make comedy out of the unthinkable and the
unspeakable.” (Complete Full Length Plays, ix) Rarely has a comic playwright so candidly and critically attacked what he sees as illogical and unreasonable dogma of established religion.

This thesis examines Christopher Durang’s personal history and family struggles in an effort to understand the experiences that shaped the work of one of America’s premier authors of absurdist comedy. It explores the relationship of Durang’s own grief and grieving process and places his work chronologically into the commonly accepted standard grief matrix defined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. I examine how Mr. Durang takes painful experiences and turns them into humor momentarily replacing his audience’s pain with laughter.

Christopher Durang’s works include absurdist comedy, social satire, parody and dark comedy. He consistently creates a humorous, yet vigorously effective, attack on commonly held beliefs on family, faith and sexuality. Durang’s work stands alone in American theatre for its candor, comedy, wit and parody. While most of his plays have absurd themes and plots, many contain material directly taken from his own life. Christopher Durang’s autobiographical work consistently touches upon four recurring themes. I will analyze the ways that Christopher Durang’s personal struggle with faith constantly appears throughout his work. In addition, I will address and interpret the recurring issues of suffering, human sexuality and grief as they directly relate to experiences in both his personal life and his written work. I will show how these themes
personally affected Mr. Durang and how they exhibit themselves almost therapeutically in his work. Durang himself has noted:

...when I'm asked how and why I write the way I do, I find the psychology and dynamics in my family of origin to be the inescapable topic I need to discuss. (After all, we're all greatly formed and affected by our families -- good things, bad things, quirky things.) (Christopher Durang.com).

Methodology and Source

This paper uses textual analysis as the basis to uncover the psychological and sociological impulses behind the work of Christopher Durang. I draw attention to thematic similarities across the body of his work and connect his personal experiences to his written work. In doing so, I demonstrate how Christopher Durang uses his art as a form of public and creative therapy to revisit, and ultimately heal, from 1) the struggles of his childhood, 2) his loss of faith and 3) his mother’s death. As I trace the chronology of his life and his work, I expect to demonstrate that his literary journey ultimately brought him to a place of personal peace and contentment. This thesis maps Durang’s struggle with faith and demonstrates how his personal journey to discover and document his pain acts as a catalyst for his creative work. It examines his style of masking and unmasking himself in his characters. It also explores the ways he reveals his innermost pain and
suffering through his characters. I conclude that his work serves as a kind of therapy by which he constantly unravels and unveils his own self.

No full-length biography of Mr. Durang exists, nevertheless, he often gives readers insight into his work and life in the introductions and author’s notes to his published plays. He also regularly contributes to the Huffington Post, an on-line community for news and opinion. However, these limited venues afford only a small window into the mind of the man behind the work. My study pulls together the scattered tidbits of personal and critical narratives by and about Durang to create a comprehensive study of the person and his work. This study uses original research and Durang’s own words. This material exists in three forms: 1) published work, 2) Mr. Durang’s personal blogs and 3) responses by Mr. Durang to questions posed specifically for this thesis including personal e-mail communications and online chats. These original, current and unpublished resources provide a crucial window into the psyche of the man and his role as a playwright.

Despite the fact that there is little published about the influences on his work, I reach conclusions by comparing material from published interviews, introductions to plays, actor’s notes, diary entries and personal contact. Nevertheless, I intend to focus in on Mr. Durang’s own words in an effort to confirm my theories and to provide a much-needed look at connections between this contemporary playwright’s personal struggle with grief and his dark but therapeutic creative work. Understanding that people are often
guarded when revealing personal information, I also examine comments by Durang’s colleagues and contemporaries in an effort to provide objective reflections from those around him.

Structure

This study draws a parallel between Mr. Durang’s loss of faith in Gad as it relates to the grief recovery process proposed by psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ well-known stages of grief: denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance. Each subsequent chapter isolates one stage of grief as it relates to Durang’s life and work.

Chapter One introduces the project and provides the rationale for the survey and its methodology. Chapter Two offers a detailed biography of Christopher Durang from his early childhood through college to the present day and establishes a foundation for the examination of recurring themes in his work Chapter Three exposes Durang’s denial of his God and examines the themes of faith and suffering. This chapter demonstrates how his personal loss of faith is particularly evident in his first major work, “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe.”

Chapter Four examines the ways that Catholic dogma infuses Durang’s work. It examines the issue of anger in a critique of “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You.” Chapter Five exposes his painful childhood, his struggle with faith, and bouts of depression. It reviews his two most autobiographical works The Marriage of Bette and Boo and Laughing Wild.
Chapter Six deals with the concept of bargaining as it delves into the topic of human sexuality. It examines this issue in his personal life and his plays Beyond Therapy and Laughing Wild. Chapter Seven reviews his more recent work including Sex and Longing, Betty’s Summer Vacation, Miss Witherspoon, Mrs. Bob Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Ride and Adrift in Macao. It demonstrates Durang’s final acceptance of his past and his grief and marks his recovery as he moves toward a lighter comedy less riddled with the demons of his past. It summarizes the evidence presented and draws the conclusion that Durang’s rigid Catholic upbringing, compounded by his father’s alcoholism, his mother’s illness and society’s views on sexuality severely influenced Mr. Durang as a writer and contributed to his unique and disturbing, yet deeply moving, body of creative work. It also demonstrates that he writes plays as an act of personal therapy, and through it, ultimately finds healing.

Survey of Literature

To pull together a comprehensive study, I have researched and reviewed all available published material including plays, author’s notes, and his extensive comments on The Huffington Post. In light of Durang’s personal comments about his growing skepticism in Roman Catholicism, I chose to explore the ways his religious faith and his belief in the existence of a loving God may have impacted his work. Therefore, I examine four particular plays in depth: “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe”, “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You”, The Marriage of Bette and Boo and Laughing Wild.
The latter two plays contain very autobiographical issues and all four present clear examples of the themes under consideration.

“The Nature and Purpose of the Universe” marks a crucial moment in Durang’s career and personal life because in this work he directly addresses his own opinion that God allows suffering and possibly instigates it. It is a pivotal play in terms of his personal loss of faith and in his therapeutic recovery process.

Similarly, “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You” reads as laundry list of Durang’s personal frustrations with the rigid dogma of the Catholic Church. It includes a monologue about the death of a parent who died in a manner similar to that of his mother. Clearly this fictitious character shares Durang’s innermost pain. According to the playwright,

Diane’s speech about her mother dying of cancer, about why she’s angry at Sister Mary, was probably the first time I ever wrote what I thought to be truth dead on, as opposed to something fiddled up with dark comedy. For someone who isn’t threatened by what’s said about the dogmatism of religion, it’s clear that the author feels that suffering from cancer isn’t a good thing. (In Their Own Words, 30)

The Marriage of Bette and Boo tells the struggle of Durang’s family as his mother endured three stillborn children and his father battled with alcoholism. In his own words it is his “most clearly autobiographical play.” Durang himself even admitted:
“The Marriage of Bette and Boo is based on my parents’ marriage and the sadness of it, and the drinking and the dead babies. ...It’s psychologically so close to me. I’m proud of having done something constructive with the unhappy parts of my childhood.”

(ChristopherDurang.com)

Durang felt that The Marriage of Bette and Boo so closely mirrored the relationship of his parents that he was uncomfortable with the idea of a production during their lifetime. He states:

So much of this was so close to my parents’ life that I thought, “I can’t have this done.”... So when I got offers to have it done in New York I turned them down. Shortly after my mother’s death, I had a reading at the Actor’s Studio...but I didn’t want it done while my father was still alive, I got very self-conscious about how he would feel. (Savran, 27)

Durang wrote the character of The Man in Laughing Wild with the intention of playing the role himself. The Man’s views and ideals are almost identical to those expressed in Mr. Durang’s website, blogs, e-mails, interviews and published author’s notes. Because these four plays not only contain the most autobiographical data, but also directly address the issue of his loss of faith and mistrust of the Catholic Church’s definition of God, they are the primary texts under consideration in this study. Nevertheless, autobiographical examples appear in almost every one of Mr. Durang’s
full-length plays and in many of his short plays as well. While I will focus on four plays in depth, I will also present examples from across the body of his work to elucidate themes, influences and connections to Mr. Durang’s personal life.

Qualification of Author

I have undertaken this study because Durang’s work speaks to me on various levels. In addition to the fact that I am a Christopher Durang enthusiast, we share many things in common. Also raised a Catholic, I grew up questioning the teachings of the Catholic Church and fret or ponder over the contradictions inherent in many of the teachings of Jesus. I have also experienced the pain of watching a mother stricken with an incurable illness wither away before my eyes and have experienced the loss of an unborn child. I have asked God the same questions that the characters in Durang’s work ask.

I also have a tendency to live my life “over the top” like many of Durang’s characters. I am quite often so amazed with the “soap opera” quality of my life that I sometimes think I have been thrown into a Durang play. As I too often desire to yell and scream at the world, I am amazed and thrilled at the humor, emotional depth and candor in his work. As Howard Stein, playwriting professor at Yale described: “he has the ability to scream for help in a world he knows provides none, so he keeps screaming at it. Durang shouts for reason in an unreasonable universe and in an unreasoning society.” (27 Short Plays, xiii)
Philosophical Framework

Stages of Grief in Relation to Durang’s Work

My study of the emotional and biographical evolution of Durang’s work revealed a pattern similar to the widely accepted five psychological stages of grief. In her 1969 groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying*, psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified five stages of grief a dying patient experiences when informed of their terminal prognosis: denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance. In her 2005 book *On Grief and Grieving*, Kübler-Ross describes the stages as follows:

The five stages—denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance—are part of a framework that makes up our learning to live with what we have lost. They are tools to help us identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief.... Our hope is that with these stages comes the knowledge of grief’s terrain, making us better equipped to cope with life and loss. (Kübler-Ross, 7) This is the model of grief now accepted by the majority in the psychological and medical community. In 1984, Dr. Terese Rando, a noted grief specialist, researcher and author, expanded the concept of grief to involve any significant loss. She defines grief as the "...process of psychological, social and somatic reactions to the perception of loss.”

(www.counselingforloss.com/article8.htm) Durang lost not only his beloved mother, but he also lost an ideal. When Durang stopped believing in God, he experienced a life-
altering loss, that he struggled to accept for many years. Psychologists describe grief and its effects as follows:

1. A change of circumstance of any kind (a change from one state to another) that produces a loss of some kind (the stage changed from) will produce a grief reaction.

2. The intensity of the grief reaction is a function of how the change-produced loss is perceived. If the loss is not perceived as significant, the grief reaction will be minimal or barely felt.

3. Significant grief responses which go unresolved can lead to mental, physical, and sociological problems and contribute to family dysfunction across generations. (www.counselingforloss.com/article8.htm)

Clearly Durang’s loss of his belief in his childhood God was a highly significant loss for him and dramatically altered his life. The intensity of his grief was extreme and began with his two-year bout of depression in college. The stages followed over the course of many years and each of his plays can be said to represent a different stage of grief.

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Each stage represents a crucial period in Durang’s recovery process and represents evolving stages in his literary style.

- **Denial** – “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe” 1971
  
  This play demonstrates Durang’s initial denial of his faith in the benevolent Catholic God of his youth. In the play he represents a malevolent, almost sadistic God who enjoys watching humans suffer. The play presents a self-righteous nun who claims that the Pope is not the real Pope. She enlists help to kidnap him and replace him with the only true Pope, herself. In this play Durang challenges the existence of a benevolent God by comically creating a malicious one. He wrote this play at the tail end of a year long bout of depression, and his biding awareness of his loss of faith is clearly evident. The process of writing opened his creative floodgates and allowed him to express a growing awareness of his denial of faith.

- **Anger** – “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You” 1979
Of all Mr. Durang’s plays, this fits most easily the matrix for this thesis. Durang uses “Sister Mary” to vent his anger and frustration at the Catholic Church’s rigid and unyielding rules. In this play, each of the former students in the script has strayed from these rules and returns to embarrass and ridicule Sister for blindly leading them in the wrong direction. They are angry and seek either retribution or justification.

- Depression – The Marriage of Bette and Boo 1985

Bette and Boo deals with the autobiographical reality of Durang’s own dysfunctional family and the sadness of his troubled youth. It is a touching, but unromanticized, tribute to his parents’ struggles with alcoholism, stillborn children and depression. This play offers a rare moment in his writing when Durang does not cover his true feelings with multiple layers of satire, irony and comedy. Instead it reveals his innermost feelings.


The characters of Bruce and Prudence in Beyond Therapy clearly use therapy as an attempt to validate their choices in life. Even their therapists, as twisted as they are, try to rationalize their own unprofessional and immoral lifestyles. Bruce also endeavors to balance his desire to be gay with society’s standards by attempting to have a heterosexual relationship. Daisy, the hopelessly neglected child in Baby With the Bath Water, attempts to make peace with his childhood and find a way to break the pattern of abuse in his own
life. Remarkably, this is the only one of Durang’s plays that ends with hope for the future. The character of The Man in *Laughing Wild* is the truest to Durang’s own increasingly ambivalent and betrayed feelings regarding God and Faith. The character admits to being an “adhoc existentialist,” yet wishes and hopes to find meaning. He tries using affirmations to center himself, yet realizes the lack of a benevolent and powerful God who will positively intervene in human lives. This autobiographical depiction of his struggle to come to terms with a potentially God-less universe opens the door to Durang’s Acceptance.


When Durang finally reconciles his inner battle with faith, he becomes free of the demons and begins writing lighter material less entangled in dark and autobiographical comedy. Two of these plays, *Betty’s Summer Vacation* and *Miss Witherspoon*, not only received enormous critical acclaim, but were honored with an Obie Awards for playwriting. *Miss Witherspoon* was also nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Durang has wrestled free of the demons which plagued him and is moving forward.

Durang’s works follow the stages of grief chronologically as he uses his written work to cope with the loss of his faith and the death of his mother. He uses a public forum to expose and conquer his private demons and ultimately find peace. Perhaps by
using his work as a map of his struggle with grief over his troubled childhood and skepticism about the existence of God, he was able to use humor and creative artistry to move toward a sense of inner peace. The most recent work indicates that he has moved away from an autobiographical framework to a more popular type of theatrical satire and universalized parody.
Chapter Two: Biography of Durang’s Grief

To truly understand the influences on Durang’s writing and their place in his healing process, we should first explore his history, family, relationships and religious beliefs. Born January 2, 1949 in Montclair, New Jersey, Christopher Durang was the only child of an alcoholic father and a devout Catholic mother. He once explained, “I was very much a wanted child. And in the myriad of photos of me from my early childhood, I look happy and close to both my parents, though especially my mother.”

( christopherdurang.com/QandA3.htm )

Despite a rare blood incompatibility, his parents attempted to have more children, which resulted in three stillbirths. He explained,

When I was 3, my mother lost her second child – that is, it was still born. I later learned that my parents knew it was not likely to survive, they had been told they had a blood incompatibility. I was told years later that they did not know before my birth. (And my mother initially said that it
was okay with her, one child was enough.)

( christopherdurang.com/QandA3.htm )

Evidently one child was not enough because his mother continued to try for another successful pregnancy. Durang’s mother was so influenced by her Catholic roots and her desire to have more children that she did not use birth control, but instead repeatedly tried to have more children. Unfortunately, each subsequent pregnancy resulted in a stillbirth. This catapulted his mother into a long struggle with depression. Durang’s father sought refuge in liquor. Durang commented in an interview:

My father had an alcoholism problem...it was frequent ... intensified after the death of the child.... So counting the first stillbirth, my mother tried for miracles three times...my mother went into a depression after the first stillbirth (and told me later on when I was 14, that there was a year of my life back then that she didn’t know I was alive.)

So! Alcoholism, dead babies.

It’s very sad, and I think I have buried inside me memories of really sad and scary things from the ages of 3 and 4. (ChristopherDurang.com)

His mother’s three stillborn children and the Church’s insistence that she NOT use birth control to prevent further pregnancies deeply affected Durang. Throughout his career and to this day, he seems dismayed and even angered by the church’s continued
efforts to forbid birth control or any form of protection against unwanted pregnancy and sexual disease. This topic appears again and again throughout his writing.

I can still get riled up and angry about the Church’s stand on birth control, for instance, which seems so deeply illogical to me. And the church takes this highly debatable position, and then fights telling people about condom use in terms of protecting oneself against AIDS (sometimes spreading the lie that condoms don’t work against AIDS; they don’t work 100%, but mostly they’re very effective.) And the church doesn’t support family planning around the world, when we have famine and overpopulation to deal with. I think the church’s behavior on birth control is actually illogical, stupid and immoral. And, importantly, it’s hard to come to from studying the gospels. Christ barely talks about sex, let alone family planning. (christopherdurang.com/QandA1.htm)

This subject has appeared again and again in my research. He explained in more detail in a personal email to me.

I say that I am critical, even highly critical, of much of the teachings of the Catholic Church, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s before the Vatican Council. But that much of the liberalism of the Vatican Council has disappeared over the years, and that same questionable dogma is taught (especially birth control which seems to me entirely illogical and
nowhere in the Bible does Christ remotely discuss it, so why are married
 couples in America and people in Africa at danger for Aids terrorized by
this illogical doctrine? (Personal e-mail November 13, 2006)

He continually voices these concerns in his personal writing and his political blogs. He
also explores this personal frustration in his creative work. Even characters in his plays
comment on the subject, as Soot does in The Marriage of Bette and Boo.

SOOT: Catholics can't use birth control, can they? That's a joke on
someone. (Complete Full Length Plays, 349)

Sister Mary also describes clearly and distinctly how God feels about birth control, as
though He told her himself.

SISTER: Birth control is wrong because God, whatever you may think
about the wisdom involved, created sex for the purpose of procreation, not
recreation. Everything in this world has a purpose. We eat food to feed our
bodies. We don't eat and then make ourselves throw up immediately
afterward, do we? So it should be with sex. Either it is done for its proper
purpose, or it is just so much throwing up, morally speaking. (27 Short
Plays, 385)

Unfortunately for Sister Mary, her students continue to question the rules of her faith. In
this monologue Durang further relates the issue of birth control to his mother's particular
dilemma of striving in vain for a child. This citation clearly illustrates how Durang uses
theatre to dramatize his own deeply held personal anger and anxiety. Sister Mary finally breaks down and answers.

SISTER: You make me want to “bleeeegghhh.” Didn’t any of you listen to me when I was teaching you? What were you all doing????… He meant that Peter was the first Pope and that he and subsequent Popes would be infallible on matters of doctrine and morals. So your way is very clear: You have this infallible Church that tells you what is right and wrong, you follow its teaching, and you get to heaven.

Why this obsession with sex? The Church has been very clear setting up the guidelines for you. For you two girls, why can’t you marry one Catholic man and have as many babies as chance and the good Lord allows you to? Simple, easy-to-follow directions. And for you, you can force yourself to marry and procreate with some nice Catholic girl – try it, it’s not so hard. Or you can be celibate for the rest of your life. Again, simple directions. THOSE ARE YOUR OPTIONS!!! No others. They are your direct paths to heaven and salvation, to everlasting happiness. Why aren’t you following these paths? Are you insane???? (27 Short Plays, 403)

The Senator’s Wife in Sex and Longing has similar feelings.

SENATOR: Everything about the body disgusts you.
MRS. McCREA: It’s meant to disgust you. The body is the temptation of the devil. God wants you to use your body for the holy sacrament of marriage and the creation of children and then that’s it for the body.

Even Father Donally in *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* explains the only reason for man and woman to be together is to procreate.

FATHER DONALLY: The point is that man and wife are joined in holy matrimony to complete each other, to populate the earth, and to glorify God. That’s what it’s for. That’s what life is for. (*Complete Full Length Plays*, 353)

Poor Bette has complete faith in God and adamantly follows the advice that her priest gives her on the subject

BETTE: And then father Donnally said that I should just keep trying and that even if this baby died, there might be at least one more baby that would live, and then I would be a mother as God mean me to be.

(*Complete Full Length Plays*, 331)

Unfortunately for Bette, like Durang’s own mother, the unyielding faith does nothing but bring her more pain and suffering.

BETTE: I know that sometimes one can misunderstand the will of God. But sex is for having babies, right? I mean, it’s not just for marriage. Well, even if it is somewhat, I feel that I should be a mother; and I think it would
be a sin for me not to try again. But I don’t think Boo wants me to get pregnant again?

FATHER DONALLY: Have you tried the rhythm method?

BETTE: But I want to get pregnant…. The problem is that all the babies die. I don’t see why I have to go through all this suffering. (Complete Full Length Plays, 350)

The Durang home also featured constant fighting and uncontrolled bouts of anger. His mother incessantly complained about his father’s drinking which ultimately led to his father drinking more and more to drown out his mother. He explained,

My mother was in such a state of constant fury about my father’s drinking (which he denied was a problem) that every day revolved around: would they fight? And I was an only child in a small-ish house, and it’s very hard to be present when two people are screaming at one another.

(christopherdurang.com/QandA2.htm)

His parents finally separated when he was a young teen and eventually divorced. He describes the climate in the home. “From age 7-13 (when my parents separated), I lived in a house of constant tensions.” (christopherdurang.com/QandA2.htm) In another source he confides,

I became hypervigilant, and could sense immediate tension between any adults (not just my parents)…and in that way, I became very attuned to
people’s psychologies... I sometimes think of these early years as

“Alcoholics Ahoy!” (christopherdurang.com/QandA3.htm)

This was an extremely uncomfortable and difficult situation for Durang. He was an impressionable youth in a volatile situation with no siblings to turn to for comfort or camaraderie. He found himself hopelessly caught in the middle of a futile battle between his parents. Because he was an only child, his mother frequently shared more with him than may have been appropriate, often expressing her frustrations about his father and enlisting her young son in her battles. He explains, “I was an only child; and had a very close relationship with my mother. I was less close to my father, since he and my mother fought so much about his drinking.” (christopherdurang.com/QandA1.htm)

Education

Durang studied at the all boys Dell Barton School in Morristown, NJ where Catholic nuns taught him until he entered the seventh grade. Benedictine monks taught him throughout middle and high school. When he was in eighth grade, the seniors at his school presented his first one act play, “Banned in Boston.” The show was an innocent yet comic story about a young girl living with her two maiden aunts. The aunts and the local Protestant minister join forces to close down a local show they find offensive. Interestingly, this play forecasts Durang’s own future of church imposed censorship, The officials of the Church often responded to his later, more acerbic work with calls for organized protest and public boycott. He explains: “My eighth grade play was called
“Banned in Boston.” I had forgotten it but was amused later when “Sister Mary Ignatius” had censorship problems in Boston, among other places.” (Savran, 20).

High School and the Monastery

Durang spent his high school years believing strongly in the Christian faith and the Catholicism he learned by rote. The Church taught him many concepts he believed as pure fact for most of his life. The Catholic faith offered a comfortable and inviting solace from the turbulence of his home. He confirms this by stating,

The school was on the grounds of a monastery, and my junior and senior years I spent a few weekends joining in the daily routine of the monastery. Prayers, then breakfast, then prayers, then lunch, then prayers, then dinner, then prayers, then sleep. I found the predictability quite attractive (Christopher Durang Explains It All For You, ix).

Later, he was unable to embrace the dogma of the church and he became frustrated over the conflict between the rigid rules of the Church and Jesus’ teachings of love and acceptance. His eventual disillusionment progressed slowly, but was directly linked to the changing Church of his day. He explained,

In my high school years, 1963-67, I was very connected to my Catholic faith. This was the period of Pope John XXIII, who initiated the Second Vatican Council: this was a liberalizing movement in the church that wanted to “open the windows” to bring religion closer to the people.
Along those lines, the Mass in Latin was changed to the Mass in the vernacular. Vatican II also wanted to stress the core of Christ’s message over what had become rigid rules (just as Christ himself disapproved of the Pharisees for valuing the letter of the law over the spirit.) (27 Short Plays, 413).

The Second Vatican Council intrigued Durang with its more flexible views on the Church’s age-old rules. Influenced by the Council and some liberal teachers, he found himself even more bewildered by strict and seemingly arbitrary rules love and sex.

Like many people in the church, I began to question the Church’s rules on sexuality. Any kind of sex outside of marriage was taught to be a mortal sin. But I started to believe that a couple who lived together in a loving relationship and who were engaged in their Christian calling to help people were more moral, in the spirit of the law, than a couple who lived together, married but in mutual dislike, and who had no real interest or commitment to following Christ’s commandment of love. (27 Short Plays, 413)

After high school his faith so strongly consumed him that Durang tried to join the monastery but the priests actively discouraged him. “I was going to joining the monastery right after high school, but they said I should wait. And then I just stopped believing in all
those things, and I never did join the monastery.” (Christopher Durang Explains It All For You, ix)

Not becoming a monk signaled a pivotal moment in his life. It is possible that he later saw this moment as the beginning of the end of his faith. It is understandable that Durang experienced moments of doubt, particularly because he later made a profound life altering decision to completely abandon the absolute and unquestioning faith of his youth. Throughout Durang’s work, there are glimpses of doubt, insecurity and regret. Nevertheless, It is important to remember that Durang was completely engrossed in his religion and faith in his youthful years. His decision not to join the monastery is a topic he revisits many times in his creative work. A substantial number of his characters made the same choice and each seems regret their decision not to join the Church. Bette comments to her sister Emily in Bette and Boo:

   BETTE: Maybe if you’d finally join the convent, you’d learn the apostles’ names. (Complete Full Length Plays, 326)

Margaret chastises the same sister for her failure to answer a religious call.

   MARGARET: That’s a fault of yours. If you had stayed in the convent, maybe you could have corrected that fault. (Complete Full Length Plays, 329)

Emily’s is plagued with guilt about leaving the convent and the family continually blames her. She confides in the family’s priest.
EMILY: Do you think it’s my fault that all of Bette’s babies die? Because
I left the convent.

FATHER DONALLY: Yes, I do. (Complete Full Length Plays, 354)

Other characters suffer from the same guilt. When faced with impending death, George,
the unassuming man in “The Actor’s Nightmare” who finds himself alone on stage in a
show for which he has not been given a script, starts to reveal his own guilt about not
devoting his life to the Church:

GEORGE: I wish I weren’t here. I wish I had joined the monastery like I
almost did right out of high school. I almost joined, but then I didn’t...

All this talk about God. All right, I’m sorry I didn’t go to the monastery,
maybe I should have, and I’m sorry I giggled during Mass in third grade,
but I see no reason to be killed for it. (27 Short Plays, 368)

Even in his comical new musical, Adrift in Macao, which Durang describes as merely an
“entertainment” not rooted in his characteristic dark comedy, touches on his guilt. The
villain, Tempura, explains the root cause of his evil behavior and thereby reveals
Durang’s own sentiments, “My father was a drunk and my mother wanted me to become
a priest.” (Adrift in Macao)

Harvard and Depression

Instead of the seminary, his strong academic potential led Durang to one of the most
exclusive and rigorous schools in the United States, Harvard. Here, his crisis of faith
accelerated as he grew older. Durang wrote two plays while studying at Harvard, *The Greatest Musical Ever Sung*, a comic musical about the Gospels, and “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe,” a dark play about suffering. He also experienced what he repeatedly refers to as his “sophomore slump.”

Unfortunately, college was no escape from family issues. He explains, “I had developed a very dark world view. And going home sometimes was like getting injections of toxins from this family system. So in college I had trouble getting out of bed in the morning – for real for two years” (christopherdurang.com/QandA2.htm) He was overcome with feelings of frustration as he watched the world around him deteriorate. “I was just this quiet bystander, watching other people be harsh with one another; or watch them address a problem by banging their heads against the wall, over and over.” (christopherdurang.com/QandA1.htm) He describes the growing pains of his college years.

Harvard was a wonderful, valuable experience – but it was also a time when I grew up a lot, went through a pretty bad depression, found out I didn’t like academic work anymore, didn’t do well in my classes my middle two years, but pulled myself out of the slump my final year.

(christopherdurang.com/QandA1.htm)

This “slump,” which he attributes to his family dynamics, was likely a very real encounter with major depression that encompassed most of his sophomore year. He later understood and acknowledged this: “My depression was caused by the negative side of my
family upbringing – I come from an alcoholic home, and there was lots of struggle and arguing and no problems ever seemed to get solved. I had problems feeling hopeless about life.” (christopherdurang.com/QandA1.htm) The depression peaked during his sophomore year and he became withdrawn, truant and disinterested. Durang spent his days sleeping and his nights watching old movies and foreign films. He recounts his daily routine during this time period:

My sophomore year was the worst... I started skipping all my classes, without actually acknowledging that was what I was doing; I withdrew from the friends I had (whom I found too chipper and happy anyway); I slept all morning, sometimes through lunch, getting up just in time to do my term time work-study job of cleaning fellow students bathrooms two hours a day. Then at night I’d go to the movies. So a typical day I might sleep all morning, talk to no one, scrub bathtubs and sinks for two hours, eat alone, then go out and see Death stride around Sweden in The Seventh Seal. (27 Short Plays, 230)

This crucial period of withdrawal from university and family life likely contributed to his ultimate decision to question and reject belief in God. Durang hit a major turning point in both his personal life and his career when he began to turn away from the devout and unexamined faith of his youth.
I became a “radical” Catholic. I was a pacifist; I was against the war in Vietnam. Eventually I heard there was a Jesuit house up by Harvard Divinity School where every Sunday they had a more experimental mass, and were politically concerned. Anyway, this particular Sunday – my depression had come upon me during this period – there was a nun, who wasn’t wearing a habit, who said that even though there were more civilians dying every day in Vietnam and even though we kept trying and trying and didn’t seem to affect any change in the government, nonetheless she still had hope. And just quietly to myself, I thought, “I don’t.” So I never went back. Then I went into a two-year depression. I stopped believing in the God of both the conservative and the liberal Church – this God who, though mysterious, has some sort of plan and is watching over us. I just didn’t see the point anymore. (In Their Own Words, 24)

This particular anecdote reappears in several other sources, which perhaps signifies the importance of this particular encounter. It evidently started his serious and long-term contemplation about the flaws of his religious ideology. He recounts it again:

In college I lost my faith. This was for varying reasons, having to do with personal sadness and depression, despair about people’s ability to
get along with one another, and a sudden lack of belief that God watched over us as I had been taught and wanted to believe.

Indeed, I remember the day I realized this had happened... on this particular day, with Vietnam much on everyone’s mind, this one young nun said that even though everyday the news showed more killing and suffering, and even though our leaders did not seem to be responding to the protests to stop the war, she still felt hope. And I thought to myself, I don’t. (27 Short Plays, 414).

An avid fan of old and foreign films, Durang spent a great deal of his college time watching old movies. When I mentioned the subject of grief to him in August of 2008, he responded a day later with a lengthy e-mail mentioning two specific film quotes that haunted him during his years at Harvard and continue to do so. He explained that he spent a great deal of time considering the words of a fictitious character from a Belmondo movie, “between grief and nothing, I choose grief.” This quote had such a long-term impact on him, that he incorporated it into in his play Miss Witherspoon written almost forty years later. The second influential quote was, "I am worn out with grief and fatigue," and comes from the film Band of Outsiders. Durang explained, “The line is almost funny in its formality; and yet the actress played it for real. And for most of my college years, when I was down (which was a lot), I felt I too was worn out with grief and fatigue.” (Personal e-mail, August 7, 2007)
Durang also writes of a poster he often contemplated during his college years that was a major inspiration behind the one act play, “Sister Mary.”

My sophomore year roommate at Harvard had a poster by Sister Corita on the wall. Sister Corita was a “with-it” nun of the sixties who painted cheery, upbeat, inspirational religious art. In any case, this particular poster of hers was just her crayon scrawl, and it said, “To believe in God means knowing that all the rules will be fair, and that wonderful surprises are in store…” This poster irritated me greatly in college. (Christopher Durang Explains It All for You, xx)

Luckily, Harvard offered free counseling. Having faith in the wisdom of this scholarly institution, Durang was able to overcome his hesitation of what many considered the pseudoscience of psychiatry. He took advantage of this service.

Indeed Harvard’s offering mental health counseling for free was a significant thing for me. My parents came from that World War II generation that believed that you solved your problems “yourself”, you didn’t talk to anyone about anything, and it was a sign of weakness and self-indulgence if you couldn’t pull yourself together…

So for my parents’ generation (and their parents), psychological problems of a complex sort were really ignored, denied, and pushed under - though it was typical for some of the women from time to time to have
mental “breakdowns” and to have to go away for a while, perhaps for shock treatments. Then they would come back, and little would be said about it…

But Harvard’s offering psychological counseling was like an imprimatur to me; this important university was acknowledging that its students might need help, and that help was a valuable thing to seek.

So I’m very glad to have been a part of that next generation for whom psychological help was a good thing, needed by many intelligent people, not some sign of failure or disgrace. (27 Short Plays, 230-231)

He was in the midst of his struggle to re-examine his faith. It seems somewhat ironic that his counselor was a former priest. Formal “talk therapy” proved valuable for Mr. Durang and he later sought this kind of help again when he joined the support group Adult Children of Alcoholics.

Not surprisingly, his emotional state directly influenced the plays written during this period, The Greatest Musical Ever Sung and “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe.” His early years with his family influence much of his dark and reflective work.

It wasn’t just fighting. The people I grew up around were also complex and interesting, and I found the extended family – of many aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents – to be very intricate and interesting in
how they interacted. And I find, in retrospect, that I took all this behavior in, lived with it, suffered through some of it when it would turn hurricane-like, forgot about it, and then suddenly it would come charging out of me in the form of a nutty comedy. And these comedies were not like my family in any clear ways, but were usually like them in psychologically disguised ways. And disguised by me unconsciously, I didn’t know I was doing it. (christopherdurang.com/QandA1.htm)

Not quite ready to take the plunge of moving to New York City, Durang stayed on in New Haven after graduation to do some work with Robert Brustein at the Yale Repertory Theatre. During that time he dabbled in some interesting jobs, which surely affected his psyche and appealed to his unconventional sense of humor. He reflected on his experiences by stating,

I had three part-time jobs. One was working with a doctor at the medical school indexing a book on schizophrenia. One was teaching acting...which was quite intimidating because I didn’t feel qualified. The third was sending out form letters to people who had donated their bodies to science, saying that the medical school had a surplus of bodies and they had better make alternate plans. That was an odd period. (In Their Own Words, 22)
New York City

Eventually Durang mustered the courage to leave behind the comfortable shelter of the University. He arrived in New York when Judy Gordon and Richard Bright decided to produce his play, *History of American Film*, at the ANTA Theatre. The play had three extremely well received independent regional productions and, with several producers vying for the rights, the show was destined for Broadway. Even the humble and often insecure Durang thought it promised to be a Broadway success. Durang recalls his response when the Broadway production of *History of American Film* quickly failed to win over the New York critics and public. He commented: “it felt like a stillbirth.” (Savran, p 23)

While in New York, Durang also saw a production of his one-act play “Titanic.” In this sexually charged piece, the characters actually pray for the ship to sink, but the ship does not cooperate. The production subsequently moved off-Broadway to the VanDam Theatre where John Rothman produced it under the direction of Peter Mark Schifter. The play was presented with a curtain raiser entitled “Das Lusitania Songspiel,” that was co-authored by and featured Christopher Durang and Sigourney Weaver. Unfortunately, the critics were not impressed. Headlines such as *The Village Voice*’s claimed, “Durang Goes Down with the Ship” and the *Daily News*’ simply read “Horrors!” These were less than encouraging. Martin Gottfried’s review in *The New
York Post even questioned how Mr. Durang was ever awarded an M.F.A. in playwriting.

Durang explains:

“The Village Voice complained that the play (“Titanic”) was against family and society and unkindly psychoanalyzed me as hating and fearing women; this last was inaccurate as well as unkind – I hate and fear people, regardless of gender.” (Christopher Durang Explains It All for You, xv)

It was a rude welcome to the professional world. On top of this universally poor reception of his work, his mother became gravely ill with cancer.

Durang’s early years were influenced by his precocious intellectuality, his daunting family troubles and his growing awareness of the inadequacies of his childhood religion. These troubling influences compounded his efforts to cope with his sense of loss and depression.
Chapter Three: Denial

“The Nature and Purpose of the Universe” (1971)

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross defines denial as a psychological mechanism to unconsciously manage one's feelings. In her terms, “Letting in all the feelings associated with loss at once would be emotionally overwhelming.” (Kübler-Ross, 8) In her final book, *On Grief and Grieving*, she explains the phenomenon as it relates to grief,

When we are in denial, we may respond at first by being paralyzed with shock or blanketed with numbness… This first stage of grief helps us survive the loss. In this stage, the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming. Life makes no sense. We are in a state of shock and denial. We go numb. We wonder how we can go on. We try to find a way to simply get through each day. Denial and shock help us cope and make survival possible. Denial helps us pace our feelings of grief. There’s grace in denial. It’s nature’s way of letting in only as much as we can handle.

(Kübler-Ross, 10)
She explains that over the years denial has been interpreted in many ways.

“Denial may look like disbelief. In a person who is grieving a loss however, the denial is more symbolic than literal.” (Kübler-Ross, 8) Most importantly, each individual experiences denial and all of the stages of grief uniquely. However, the primary rule of psychology is that everyone is an individual and cannot be forced into any matrix. Rather, the matrix merely serves as a guide, not an absolute.

Durang spent two years struggling with depression immediately following his realization that God was not the benevolent and powerful deity he had revered his entire life. He seems to have found it difficult to live without his faith as a crutch. The loss of his faith caused him to fall into the classic state of paralyzing numbness described by Kübler-Ross. The world became meaningless and overwhelming. He needed to accept that not only was God not the omnipotent, benevolent God of his youth, but also that his own faith in God was gone.

Kübler-Ross explains that the numbness does not last forever.

As you escape the reality of the loss and start to ask yourself questions, you are unknowingly beginning the healing process. You are becoming stronger, and the denial is beginning to fade. But as you proceed, all the feelings you were denying begin to surface. (Kübler-Ross, 11)

In this period of the denial stage Durang escaped his depression though writing and was able to face his loss head on. Humor was the key to recovery. Durang soothed his pain
and suffering by exaggerating it to such an extreme that it became laughable. He
describes the process of writing “The Nature and Purpose of The Universe” as a floodgate opening. Words came pouring out of him in an almost euphoric experience.

His recovery from depression began one day when a flyer was placed under his door entitled “The Nature and Purpose of the University.” He misread the title as “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe” and his mind began to process what he considered a fascinating concept. Inevitably, he found a more successful form of therapy expressing pain on paper rather than on a therapist’s couch.

I took out a notebook and started to write “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe.” It sort of came flying out of me, with this enormous energy and glee...it was like the flip side of my depression, it included a lot of my feelings about life and love and relationships and people’s inability to find happiness or to get on with one another—but where those feelings had previously overwhelmed me, as I wrote this I found the excess of the suffering funny. (27 Short Plays, 231)

Durang could no longer accept all the suffering around him. Instead he decided to write about suffering in which God’s involvement was deliberate and conscious. According to Durang, “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe” is, “the story of someone whose life was really, really, really terrible; and how God sat up in heaven and consciously participated in making that life worse.” (27 Short Plays, 232) So he sat down
to write the play that marked his style for many plays to come. He described the idea for
the play.

The impetus for the play ["The Nature and Purpose of the
Universe"] was the suffering of a friend of my mother’s – a lovely woman,
age twenty-five, who had five children and an alcoholic brute of a
husband. She had asked the local parish priest, a nice and admirable man
in most respects, if she could perhaps use birth control to protect herself in
case her husband raped her in a drunken rage; the priest thought about it
over dinner, then said no. The husband did force himself on her, and she
had a sixth child. The play is not about the chains of childbearing, it is
about a life filled with nothing but pain and disappointment, and how the
Catholic Church sometimes fosters a masochistic acceptance of this (offer
it up, Christ suffered, this is your cross to bear, you’ll be rewarded in the
next life.) (Christopher Durang Explains It All for You, xii)

The purpose of the play was to dramatize extreme suffering and have God not
only witness the suffering, but participate in it as well. He explains:

“The Nature and Purpose of The Universe” is a brutally comic
attack on the rationalization of suffering by those who believe it will be
rewarded and on the dramatic forms...that exploit and furtively glorify
female anguish. The play dramatizes the abuse of its eternally patient and
submissive heroine by her vicious husband and sons. (In Their Own Words, 19)

In “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe” Eleanor, a battered wife and unappreciated mother of three, struggles to ease her eternal suffering. She offers her physical and emotional pain up to God in the hopes that he will take pity on her and offer mercy.

ELEANOR: Oh, please God! Please! Let my car start again and I promise I’ll pick up hitchhikers even if they beat me with chains because I know that some of them are your angels sent in disguise to test me, I know this, my husband tells me it’s so, and he’s much more religious than I am. I’m just an unworthy woman. Oh, God, help me. (27 Short Plays, 237)

She continues her pleas and begs just for the end of a day.

ELEANOR: Oh, God, please let this day come to an end. (27 Short Plays, 243)

Eleanor is so desperate for help that she even takes comfort in a visit from the Fuller Brush Man and hopes that he will ultimately be her salvation.

RONALD: You’re a fine noble woman Eleanor. God doesn’t mean for you to suffer.

ELEANOR: He doesn’t?

RONALD: No. He wants you to accept His will and be happy.
ELEANOR: I do accept His will. Oh. Please. Please take me away from here. Far, far away. (27 Short Plays, 243)

God does not offer her pity, but instead mocks her through the character of Elaine, an agent of God.

ELAINE: Admit that you have a lousy life. Do you know that on a national scale of one to 800, you rank 92; and on a local scale you are 33, and on an international scale 106, and on an all-white scale 23, and on an all-black scale 640, and on a pink scale 16, and that your capability ranking places you in the lowest percentile in the entire universe? It’s a sad life I see before me, Mrs. Mann. You haven’t any friends. None. Do you realize that you never call anybody up and that nobody ever calls you up? And that you’re universally snubbed and pitied at PTA cocktail parties? And that your husband married you only because he had to, and your housekeeping is among the most slovenly on the eastern seaboard, and your physical appeal is in the lower quadrangle of the pentanglical scale - - and that your children rank as among the foremost failed children in the nation and are well below the national level in areas of achievement, maturity, and ethical thinking? WHY DO YOU CONTINUE LIVING, MRS. MANN? WHY DON’T YOU DO YOURSELF A FAVOR? (27 Short Plays, 252)
After a lifetime of suffering, Eleanor finds herself bound and laid upon an altar where she is to be sacrificed to God. Only then does she stop begging for mercy and begin begging instead for death. However, God shows neither mercy nor death but prolongs her pain by returning her to her miserable life of suffering.

RONALD: And Elaine came to the place God had told her of; and she built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Eleanor her charge, and laid her upon the altar. And Elaine stretched forth her hand, and took the knife to slay Eleanor.

BUT WAIT! And God said to Elaine, spare this woman’s life, for I am merciful. And sing forth my glories and my praise, for I am God of Gods, the Father of His children.

ELAINE & RONALD: (sing, Handel) Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

ELEANOR: Kill me! Please kill me! Kill me!

ELAINE & RONALD: (sing, Handel) Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

ELEANOR: I don’t want to live. Please kill me. Kill me! (Blackout. End.)

(Durang uses “Nature and Purpose” as a vehicle to demonstrate the futility of seeking relief through prayer. He makes light of the Catholic Church’s concept of “offering your pain up to God” by having the characters of Elaine and Ronald, agents of God, participate in and enjoy Elaine’s pain and suffering. Elaine seeks help from God and...
even the Fuller Brush man, but forgets to seek it from the one person who can offer it, herself.

Yale

Submission of his play “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe” gained Durang acceptance to Yale University’s M.F.A. program to study playwriting. At Yale he received concentrated and rigorous training in playwriting as well as acting. In his first role he shared the stage with fellow student Sigourney Weaver, playing her brother in an established play. He later played minor roles in some of his own work. He seemed to fine-tune his theatrical style at Yale and claimed, “I found being in plays very instructive. I was usually more interested in what the actors and directors had to say about my plays than what the other writers had to say.” (Savran, 22) He also forged a strong friendship with actress Sigourney Weaver, with whom he would later collaborate with on many projects, including a short-lived but well received cabaret act. While at Yale, he wrote History of American Film and The Idiots Karamazov and earned his first real critical success. Robert Brustein, playwriting professor at Yale at the time, described Durang and his plays as:

...constantly arousing their audiences with hilarity and mirth. He succeeds because of the extraordinary fertility of his imagination, inventiveness, courage, and audacity. Blessed with twin gifts – originality
and an anarchic spirit – he provides an audience with unruly laughter and outlandish amusement. (27 Short Plays. vii-viii).

As an intelligent young man, Durang noticed inconsistencies and discrepancies in the Church’s teachings. It seemed illogical to him that an all-powerful and all-loving God would banish someone to hell for eating meat on Fridays or for experimenting with physical love. As a consequence, he found his own version of faith.

So in my own development, I went from the religion of rote when I was a child (following rules rather literally) to what seemed like a richer, more compassionate religion focusing on the more radical, love-affirming things that seem to be the main part of Christ’s message. (27 Short Plays, 412)

His examination of religion intensified when he contemplated the contemporary political climate in the United States during a time of increasing violence at the onset of a controversial war. In the midst of the Vietnam era, he began to question whether warfare could ever be moral and he became a proponent of non-violent protest, which he believed the teachings of Christ encouraged. Soon he began to question any faith that could explain, excuse or allow the violence of war.

In high school influenced by some of the younger priest at my school, I became very much a committed “liberal” Catholic. I questioned whether warfare could ever be moral; Christ after all said, ‘Turn the other
cheek, do not resist the evildoer.’ I started to wonder whether Ghandi and Martin Luther King, both proponents on nonviolence, were the true followers of Christ. (27 Short Plays, 413)

This struggle with war marks a crucial phase in his loss of faith. He has the character Father McGillicuty from The Vietnamization of New Jersey; first performed at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1977, explain:

FATHER McGILLICUTY: Don’t you know why God allows wars? God looks down from heaven and he sees a poor country with too many people and he says to himself, ‘Oh dear, think how much poverty and degradation these people are going to face because there are so many of them,’ and then he whispers into the President’s ear at night, and then in the morning there is a war; and when the war is over, there are fewer people, and those fewer people are happier. The same is true of earthquakes, floods, plagues, and epidemics. It all has to do with population control. And likewise homosexuality, although not widely accepted yet, is also God’s way of dealing with the overpopulation problem. (Complete Full Length Plays, 109)

The concept of war, and God’s implied sanction of wars, haunted Durang and continues to do so today. He was a staunch anti-Vietnam protestor and avidly criticizes the present day war in Iraq. He seems even more deeply disturbed by the amount of blood shed
throughout history in the name of God and draws a very poignant connection between the rigid tenets of organized religions and the current state of unrest in our world. Religion’s rigid belief in fundamental dogma seems like a ticking bomb to Mr. Durang and he comments on the effects it has throughout the world even in the current day.

I do think the Islamic fundamentalism that is threatening the world makes “Sister Mary” and all religious dogma quite relevant again.

Happily, Christianity has not been bloodthirsty for a pretty long time (though it was in previous centuries); but the dangers of believing you know the truth no matter what, is what lets Sister Mary shoot Gary dead, because she so completely believed she was sending him to heaven. (As the jihadists believe Allah wants them to kill for him, apparently…)

(personal e-mail November 13, 2006)

Ultimately he came to a moment where he could no longer justify the religion of his youth and he ceased believing in God completely. He describes the day of his revelation. “I just didn’t feel hope anymore. So I stopped going to Church, and I have never recaptured that feeling of hope I used to have when I believed in a Divine Being overseeing all.” (27 Short Plays, 414)

During this period, Durang lost something that had previously been of great importance to him, his faith in a Christian God. In 1984, Dr. Terese Rando, a noted grief specialist, researcher and author, defined the concept of grief as involving any loss
Clearly the loss of his childhood faith catapulted Durang into a state of grief. For Durang his loss involved the new loss of a benevolent God in his life. The first step toward recovery is the stage of denial. His denial is reflected in the fact that he spent nearly two years in an almost catatonic state, feeling lost in a meaningless world. As Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes, denial culminates in accepting the reality of the loss and questioning yourself. "The Nature and Purpose of the Universe," with its cruel, spiteful and almost vicious God, is a vivid example clearly marking the beginning of Durang’s healing as he works through the stages of grief in his written work.
Chapter Four: Anger

Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You (1979)

According to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross anger presents itself in many ways and does not have to be logical or valid. The focus of a grieving person’s anger can jump from individuals, to institutions, to God with little or no warning. While difficult to manage, anger, as many analysts view, is a sign of the healing process.

It is important to remember that anger surfaces once you are feeling safe enough to know you will probably survive whatever comes. At first, the feeling that you lived through the loss is surprising to you. Then more feelings hit, and anger is usually at the front of the line as feelings of sadness panic, hurt and loneliness. (Kübler-Ross, 12)

We use anger to manage all the underlying feelings that we are not quite ready to face. It is common for someone grieving a loss to continually proclaim that they are not angry because they often believe they are simply attempting to manage all of the underlying feelings until they are ready to deal with them. “Anger is a useful emotion.
Then you are ready to go deeper. In the process of grief and grieving you will have many subsequent visits with anger in many forms.” (Kübler-Ross, 12)

Anger has no limits and can be directed at friends, family, yourself and even God. Kübler-Ross describes how God often receives the brunt of the anger. “You may ask, ‘Where is God in all this? Where is his love? His compassion? His powerfulness?’ You may not want people to talk to you about God’s plan or his mysteries.” (Kübler-Ross, 13)

It is common to question spirituality and religion with this loss and anger. Durang’s feelings of anger seem to have resulted from his mother’s death.

Durang’s mother, whom he dearly loved, was diagnosed with breast cancer that spread quickly to her bones. Her bones became so brittle that they would break with the slightest movement. It was an extremely difficult time and his extended family pressured Christopher to move home and help care for her.

I was very close to my mother, at the same time I was trying to become an adult and separate from her. There were many unspoken feelings from her and her family that due to her illness, I should move back to New Jersey and live with her full-time. Three of her siblings all lived with their mother; there was a lot of anger coming toward me (I believe) of how dare I not follow the family rule. Plus, my mother now moved next door to her siblings, for comfort; but part of the “comfort” seemed to be to bicker and fight incessantly, as that was what was
familiar; and this constant embroilment among the siblings was one of the
main reasons I needed to live away from home. (Complete Full length
Plays, 206)

During this time, Durang struggled to find his personal voice as a writer. He
wrestled with the harsh critical reviews of “Titanic” and the quick Broadway closing of
History of American Film. On top of the professional frustration, he was forced to watch
the one important woman in his life whither away. He found himself completely lost in it
all. He explained, “It was an awful time. I don’t mean to make my upset more important
than my mother’s illness; she was going through the most painful events. But I need to
acknowledge that I was both numb and paralyzed.” (Complete Full length Plays, 206)

While, initially this may sound like denial, Durang is in fact moving from denial to anger.

His mother’s pain was excruciating and prolonged and her suffering was quite
intense. He noted, “My mother, who started with breast cancer, which then progressed to
bone cancer, became less and less able to walk.” (In Their Own Words, 25) Durang
describes his sadness coupled with relief when she finally passed, “Her bone cancer had
become extremely painful, she would break bones merely moving in bed; and so,
truthfully, I was extremely relieved. I am grateful I had her as a mother for as long as I
did; but I am sad some of her life wasn’t more consistently happy.” (Complete Full
length Plays, 206)
Ultimately his mother suffered in extreme agony for three years until she finally passed on March 10, 1979.

Failed treatments and pain and more tumors and operations went on for three years; her prognosis was basically hopeless, but the disease moved at an ambiguous pace—depending on the speed with which the bone cancer spread, she could live anywhere from six months to five years to possibly more. Her last weeks were as Diane describes in “Sister Mary Ignatius,”¹ and she died on March 10, 1979. (Christopher Durang Explains It All for You, xv)

During her illness, his mother held fast to her religious beliefs, the same beliefs Durang no longer embraced.

I had not consciously thought about the teachings of the Catholic Church for some years, and watching my mother try to grasp on to religion triggered me into recollections of the doctrines I had been taught. For starters, I was nostalgic for belief, since it offered comfort; and yet I was also made angry by the illogic of the Church’s muddy teachings on how suffering fits into God’s Grand Plan. From thoughts of suffering, I moved on to remember the dizzying intricacies of some of the dogma—limbo, the Immaculate Conception, mortal and venial sin, papal infallibility, etc.

¹ See Diane’s monologue quote on page 59
Because ten years had passed since I'd thought about all this, I felt like a tourist in my own past, and what I'd accepted as a child and forgotten about as a young adult now seemed to a new viewing as the sincere ravings of a semi-lunatic. (Christopher Durang Explains It All for You, xvi)

“Sister Mary”

During his mother’s long and excruciating struggle with cancer, Durang focused on the concept of human suffering and why God allowed it and seemed to participate in it. Such pain and suffering was extremely difficult for Durang to witness. Without the consolation and solace offered by his faith, he found himself alone in his grief. Initially he blamed God for allowing his mother’s prolonged suffering, but ultimately found himself without a God, which led to anger at the Church for misleading him. Ultimately he channeled this anger onto paper in the form of his play. He took all the negative blows life had thrown at him, put them down on paper. Almost magically, the writing produced a euphoric sense of relief and comfort. He transformed his anger into humor, laughter, comedy and most importantly, peace of mind. Based on his copious production notes and published commentaries, it seems as though his creative work is the product of a tortured artist who finds solace through work.

Christopher Durang completed his one-act play “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You” exactly one year after his mother’s death. According to him, the play
questions "the specific rules and dogma that the Catholic Church has been teaching for much of the 20th century." (27 Short Plays, 377). His mother's battle with cancer and his own struggle with faith clearly influenced the work. He describes the process:

That year was an extremely difficult one. I felt discouraged about writing, not sure of where to go next. I was feeling depressed about how the play ("Titanic") was received, also about how hard it is to control things....

He was tormented by his mother's agony and desperately sought relief for her and himself. Religion seemed the obvious place to look for solace, but unfortunately, he was unable to find it. It was this search for answers that spawned "Sister Mary".

Religion is one of the few things that one can offer to someone who's dying. My mother was averagely religious, she hadn't stopped going to church. The rest of her family was more religious than she was. I watched them all trying to make sense of it, try to use religion to comfort. And I got to thinking, that when you accept Catholicism, there really is an answer for everything. Watching my mother's death, I felt that I didn't have an answer for anything. That was the initial thought for the play.

["Sister Mary"] (In Their Own Words, 24)

His family looked to religion for answers and seemed to find them. Unfortunately, Durang, unable to reconcile the anger he felt, was unable to find comfort there.
My mother tried to use her Catholic religion to help her face death and find some comfort. Alas, it did not work for her, though it did work for one of her sisters, for whom watching my mother’s impending death was a painful but nonetheless religiously understandable event – she was simply on her way to God. (Christopher Durang Explains It All for You, xvi)

The idea of praying to a God who allowed such suffering seemed inconceivable, illogical and futile. He found this idea of praying almost comedic.

My mother’s sisters would often say they were praying for my mother, and that I should pray. And I would think…and then what? God will say, “Yes, I will lessen her suffering today.” Or He’ll say, “No, I think I’ll just let it intensify today. How about I make her bones so brittle she breaks a leg just moving in bed? I think I’ll do that today.” (27 Short Plays, 375)

“Sister Mary” is one of the rare examples of Durang’s work, in which he is truly honest about his anger at the Church and speaks directly from the heart. In this play he does not mask his feelings with dark comedy. One of the most obvious examples is the monologue he wrote for Diane in “Sister Mary.” The character endured the pain of watching her mother devoured by cancer just as Durang watched his own mother perish. She questioned God’s involvement in her pain and questioned why her mother suffered.
She also questioned God’s irony that he allowed her to be raped the very same day as her mother’s death. Similarly Durang wrestled with God’s involvement in universal pain and suffering. In this speech Durang clearly presents his personal pain to the world.

SISTER: And you, the nasty one, why did you want to embarrass me?
DIANE: Because I believed you. I believed how you said the world worked, and that God loved us….

When I was sixteen, my mother got breast cancer, which spread. I prayed to God to let her suffering be small, but her suffering seemed to be quite extreme. She was in pain for half a year; and then terrible pain for much of a full year. The ulcerations on her body were horrifying to her, and to me. Her last few weeks she slipped into a semi-conscious state, which allowed her, unfortunately, to wake up for a few minutes at a time and to have a full awareness of her pain and her fear of death. She was able to recognize me, and she would try to cry, but she was unable to; and to speak; but she was unable to…

A nurse who I knew to be Catholic assured me that everything would be done to keep her alive – a dubious comfort. Happily, the doctor was not Catholic, or if he was, not doctrinaire, and they didn’t use extraordinary measures to keep her alive; and she finally died after several more weeks in her coma. Now there are, I’m sure, far worse deaths-
terrible burnings, tortures, plagues, pestilence, famine; Christ on the cross even, as Sister likes to say.

But I thought my mother’s death was bad enough, and I got confused as to why I had been praying, and to whom. I mean, if prayer was really this button you pressed – admit you need the Lord, then He stops your suffering-then why didn’t it always work? Or ever work? And when it worked, so-called, and our prayers were supposedly answered, wasn’t it as likely to be chance as God? God always answers our prayers, you said, He just sometimes says no. By why would he say no to stopping my mother’s suffering...

I became angry at myself, and by extension at you, for ever having expected anything beyond randomness from the world. And while I was thinking these things, the day my mother died, I was raped.

Anyway, I don’t really want to go into the experience, but I got very depressed for about five years. Somehow the utter randomness of things – my mother’s suffering, my attack by a lunatic who was either born a lunatic or made one by cruel parents or perhaps by an imbalance of hormones or whatever, etc. etc. – this randomness seemed intolerable. I found I grew to hate you, Sister, for making me once expect everything to be ordered and to make sense. ...I suppose its childish to look for
blame, part of the randomness of things is that there is no one to blame.

But basically I think everything is your fault, Sister. (27 Short Plays, 405-7)

This speech is one of the most honest, angry and revealing moments in his entire body of work. Durang describes the honesty of the monologue.

Her (Diane’s) out-of-proportion anger; when she says ‘Basically I think everything’s your fault, Sister,’ the audience usually laughs, Sister is culpable of a lot, but everything that happened to Diane, it is inappropriate to blame her. People offended by the play often assume I agree with every single thing Diane says; I only agree with a lot of it. (27 Short Plays, 412)

This is such a powerful and critical speech in his career that he addresses it again and again. In a second source he explains,

Diane’s speech about her mother dying of cancer, about why she’s angry at Sister Mary, was probably the first time I ever wrote what I thought to be truth dead on, as opposed to something fiddled up with dark comedy. For someone who isn’t threatened by what’s said about the dogmatism of religion, it’s clear that the author feels that suffering from cancer isn’t a good thing. People sometimes thought of my early plays that I must be this absolute moral idiot, as well as a moral monster. Those
people who can’t laugh at “Nature and Purpose of the Universe” think that I’m just laughing at suffering. They don’t see that I’m laughing at how awful it is. (In Their Own Words, 30)

Despite his mother’s extreme pain and his pain as a witness, Durang admits that his mother’s struggle opened the door for him to write “Sister Mary”.

I didn’t write the play (“Sister Mary”) “because” my mother died.

But there’s no question that thoughts about religion and dogma were triggered in me because of my mother’s painful struggle with cancer. (27 Short Plays, 376)

This statement directly corresponds to Kübler-Ross’ claim that the sufferer doesn’t always acknowledge the anger because they feel justified in their response to their internal pain.

Durang found the Church’s dogma ridiculous and senseless. The rules were unbelievable. Through this realization, he found his inspiration to write “Sister Mary.”

Looking back, it’s my amazement that these rules were taught to me ages seven to thirteen as FACT that so startles me – that’s where a lot of my upset and surprise comes out of. (27 Short Plays, 377)

I realized that the Catholicism of my childhood had an answer for absolutely everything - it was extremely thorough. I had this impulse to write a play in which a nun came out and explained everything – the
nature and purpose of the universe, if you will, but through the prism of Catholic dogma. (27 Short Plays, 375)

He placed himself back in the theological mindset of his youth to create the character of Sister Mary. Thus, he was able to uncover and artistically demonstrate the lack of logic in the firmly entrenched rules of the Catholic Church.

I wrote it from the same theological place I was in back when I was still a believing Catholic. I felt that the Church I had grown up with had gotten stuck in rules, and that some of the rules were illogical, and some had misled people and caused them psychological pain. (27 Short Plays, 414)

Writing from the theological mindset of a believing Catholic made him revisit the logic of the rules and dogma of the Church and its justification of suffering. He used these rigid rules and the idea of complete and total belief in them to create the character of Sister Mary.

I started with the image of a sole religious figure who teaches children simply coming out and explaining it all. But it had been such a long time since I had thought about the rules. Because you’re taught them when you’re six or seven, you take it as fact rather than interpretation. You learn that if you put your hand on the stove you burn it, and that if you masturbate your soul turns black and you go to Hell unless you go to
confession. There were so many rules that I became somewhat incredulous. I wasn’t actually angry writing the play. The play comes off as angry, I see, but I was incredulous and amused. I just found all that so strange. (In Their Own Words, 24)

Certain rules of the Catholic Church seemed arbitrary and illogical to Durang. He uses the age-old tradition of not eating meat on Fridays as an example as Sister explains the policy.

SISTER: People who ate meat on Fridays back when it was a sin are indeed in hell if they did not confess the sin before they died. If they confessed it, they are not in hell, unless they did not confess some other mortal sin they committed. People who ate meat on Fridays back in the 50s tended to be the sort who would commit other mortal sins, so on a guess, I bet many of them are hell for other sins, even if they did confess the eating of meat. (27 Short Plays, 388)

His repressed anger was based on the fact that the Church taught everything as fact, an absolute. The self-imposed infallibility of the Church angered Durang and he playfully mocks it in “Sister Mary.” He felt the Church did not allow for interpretation or for the concept of guidelines, but instead taught its own morals as absolute truths. Durang introduces some of these absolutes in “Sister Mary”.

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SISTER: Mortal sin... is the most serious kind of sin you can do: murder, sex outside of marriage, hijacking a plane, masturbation. And if you die with any of these sins on your soul, even just one, you will go straight to hell and burn for all of eternity. (27 Short Plays, 386)

The mere idea of being sent straight to hell for not making it to confession on time or for masturbating seemed ludicrous to him. Durang realized that not only did he deny the Catholic dogma, but that he simply didn’t believe in a Catholic conception of God anymore at all. It angered and infuriated him that he had nothing to offer his dying mother for comfort. The following quote displays the agitation and unrestrained emotion he felt regarding this issue.

I didn’t believe He sat up in heaven listening to antiwar protesters praying to stop the killing in Vietnam, to stop the dropping of napalm on people. Remember napalm? The burning gas from Dow Chemical designed to stick to the skin? I didn’t believe God had anything to do with allowing or not allowing napalm; or the atom bomb; or the Holocaust; or an earthquake. But if He had nothing to do with any of human suffering, then I didn’t know the point of praying; or the point of any of it. But this isn’t something you want to say to someone who is dying. ‘Yes, I think it’s a great big empty void you’re going to. So long!’ (27 Short Plays, 375)
Durang could not accept the Catholic view on suffering. That an omnipotent God would allow his followers to suffer in order to prove their love seemed a completely illogical notion.

SISTER: God explains in that story why He let us suffer, and a very lovely explanation it is too. He likes to test us so that when we choose to love Him, no matter what He does to us, that proves how great and deep our love for him is. (27 Short Plays, 407)

Durang mocks this concept of “offering up your suffering.”

SISTER: But can their suffering compare with Christ’s on the cross? Let us think of Christ on the cross for a moment. Try to feel the nails ripping through His hands and feet. Some experts say that the nails actually went through his wrists, which was better for keeping Him up on the cross, though of course most of the statues have the nails going through His palms. Imagine those palms being driven through pound, pound, pound, rip, rip, and rip. Think of the crown of thorns eating into His skull, and the sense of infection He must have felt in His brain and near His eyes. Imagine blood from His brain spurting forth through His eyes, imagine His vision squinting through a veil of red liquid. Imagine these things, and then just dare to feel sorry for the children lining up outside school.
We dare not: His suffering was greater than ours. He died for our sins!
Yours and mine. We put him up there, you did. (27 Short Plays, 384)

Durang's frustrations with the acceptance of suffering culminate as Sister finally loses her temper as she justifies her decisions not to allow bathroom breaks in class and berates her former student.

SISTER: What a baby. You flunked. I was giving you a lesson in life, and you flunked. It was up to you to solve the problem: Don't drink your little carton of milk at lunch; bring a little container with you and urinate behind your desk; or simply hold it in and offer the discomfort up to Christ. He suffered thee hours of agony on the cross, surely a full bladder pales in comparison. I talk about the universe and original sin and heaven and hell, and you complain to me about bathroom privileges. You're a ridiculous crybaby. (27 Short Plays, 404)

"Sister Mary" received critical acclaim from the mainstream press and won a 1980 Obie Award for playwriting. Elizabeth Franz, who played Sister Mary, also won an Obie for her performance. Meanwhile, Catholic organizations condemned the work as a brutal attack on Catholicism. All of the press coverage sparked a new interest in his writing and encouraged his impulse to continue writing. This prolific period of writing, immediately following his own loss of faith and the death of his mother, is one of the most productive streaks in his career. It generated four of his most commercially
successful and critically acclaimed plays, "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You", Beyond Therapy and Baby With the Bathwater and the one-act written specifically to double-bill with "Sister Mary," "The Actor’s Nightmare." The extreme distress of his personal life actually led to tremendous creative productivity in his professional life and it appears he used the writing as therapy to overcome his losses.

Like many people who are dealing with and compensating for their anger, Durang denied that he was angry when he wrote "Sister Mary." According to psychologists, it is very common to deny ones anger. However, even Durang realizes and admits that the play comes off angry and there truly is raw anger on stage. The characters are clearly agitated and often speak about their anxiety, anger, fear and deep seated frustration. They are in an extremely hostile environment and the only relief comes from the unconscious humor the play evokes in the audience. In reality, Durang found an extremely constructive method of dealing with his frustration and anger over the rigidity of Catholic dogma and his mother’s death by channeling it into his writing. Through "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You" Durang was able to work though, experience, process and analyze his anger and move toward depression.
Chapter Five: Depression

The Marriage of Bette and Boo (1985)

Depression is a physical and mental state where the grief becomes overwhelming and one must confront the feelings of sadness and loss. As explained by Kübler-Ross,

Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined. This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. It’s important to understand that this depression is not as sign of mental illness. It is the appropriate response to a great loss. We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness. (Kübler-Ross, 20)

She further explains, “In grief, depression is a way for nature to keep us protected by shutting down the nervous system so that we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle.” (Kübler-Ross, 21) Past the devastating phase of initial emptiness, Durang was able to channel into his writing his feelings of sadness over his loss of faith, his damaged childhood and his mother’s death.
The Marriage of Bette and Boo offers a crucial key to understanding the psychological puzzle that is Christopher Durang. The play tells the story of a couple traumatized by four stillbirths. The characters mirror Durang’s own family and include an alcoholic father, a dysfunctional extended family and a son who tries to keep his head above water in the midst of the craziness. The play, though seemingly absurd, is quite realistic on many emotional levels. Durang admitted, “I feel particularly close to this play (Marriage of Bette and Boo) because it is the only one of mine that is directly autobiographical, telling the rather sad story of my parents’ marriage and a bit about my place in it.” (Complete Full length Plays, 369)

He originally wrote it when studying at Yale as an exercise, but did not intend for the play to be produced or performed. He turned down many production offers because he felt the play should not be publicly staged while his mother was alive because it was far too personal. However, when he was offered a student production at Princeton that he could oversee, he could not pass up this opportunity to directly work through the play and his own emotional baggage. He began without telling his mother about the project, but ultimately she attended a performance. She commended him for capturing the spirit of their family and gave him her blessing to move forward with professional productions. Mr. Durang described the experience to me in a personal email.

...my mother actually saw it [Bette and Boo] in a Princeton student production, where to my relief she liked it (and agreed with how I
portrayed my father and the extended families, for whom she had a lot mixed emotions.) I was surprised she liked the play – but on my own I thought that she liked the fact that her character was the lead. Plus she always had a good sense of humor, and I think she was able to see the humor in some of the portrayals. (personal e-mail March 27, 2007)

The piece was expanded and Joseph Papp wanted to produce it, but again Mr. Durang, concerned about his father’s feelings, felt uncomfortable having it performed while his father was still alive. Durang consented to a formal production after series of unfortunate strokes rendered his father senile.

Durang said and wrote many times that this particular play is based directly on his parent’s marriage, his father’s alcoholism, the stillbirths his mother endured and the constant fighting between them. Matt, the son of Bette and Boo, acts as a witness to the pain and difficulties of the marriage and many of the experiences in the show come directly from Durang’s own experiences. For example, the odd scene where the characters vacuums up gravy really did happen. Durang dramatizes the experience.

BETTE: What are you doing? Boo!

BOO: I can do it.

BETTE: You don’t vacuum gravy!

BOO: I can do it!
BETTE: Stop it! You’re ruining the vacuum! YOU DON’T VACUUM GRAVY!
You don’t vacuum gravy! You don’t vacuum gravy! You don’t vacuum gravy!

BOO: WHAT DO YOU DO WITH IT THEN? TELL ME! WHAT DO YOU DO WITH IT? (Full Length Plays, 337)

Durang’s mother continually berated his father about his drinking, just as Bette did to Boo.

BETTE: Why can’t you stop drinking? You don’t care enough about me and Skippy to stop drinking do you? … You don’t give me anything to be grateful for. You’re just like your father. You’re a terrible example to Skippy. He’s going to grow up neurotic because of you. … You’re weak, Boo. It’s probably just as well the other babies have died. I want you to see a priest, Boo. (Complete Full Length Plays, 335)

Ultimately, his mother actually forced his father to take a vow in front of their family priest to give up drinking just as is dramatized in the play. Boo states: “I pledge, in front of Father Donnally, to give up drinking in order to save my marriage and to make my wife and son happy.” (Complete Full Length Plays, 338) Durang describes, through the character Matt, his own experience as he was forced to testify against his father in his parents actual divorce trial.

MATT: Twenty years later, or perhaps only fifteen, Bette files for a divorce from Boo. They have been separated for several years, since shortly after the death of
the final child; and at the suggestion of a therapist Bette has been seeing, Bette decides to make the separation legal in order to formalize the breakup psychologically, and also to get better, and more regular, support payments. Boo, for some reason, decides to contest the divorce, and so there has to be testimony. Margaret and Joanie decide that Catholics can’t testify in divorce cases, even though Bette had eventually testified in Joanie’s divorce, and so they refuse to testify, frightening Emily into agreeing with them also. Blah, blah, blah, etcetera. So in lieu of other witnesses, I find myself having to testify against Boo during my sophomore year of college. ((Full Length Plays, 356)

Interestingly enough, this trial occurred at the height of Durang’s depression and quite possibly added to its severity. Bette’s medical condition causing the stillbirths is even the same Rh incompatibility factor his own mother experienced. As the Doctor explains, “And so the mother’s Rh negative blood fights the baby’s Rh positive blood and so: The mother kills the baby.” (Complete Full Length Plays, 328)

Durang makes no effort to pretend Bette and Boo is not autobiographical. In fact, he admits that writing and performing it was quite therapeutic. He later even played the autobiographical role of Matt in the professional production.

The character of Matt in The Marriage of Bette and Boo DOES have real autobiographical details…I never intended to play the part, though I was 100% clear that Matt was a stand-in for me… Being in that play was one of the high
points of my life; and I was baffled from time to time how I ever got into such a public sharing of my family background – in many ways I’m shy and when you meet me I don’t offer things about myself easily…Anyway, as you can see, that play was GENUINELY autobiographical, and not only that but I played the part of myself. (personal e-mail March 27, 2007)

Durang includes several references and similarities to his own life choices in the play exposing his inner self on the public stage. A perfect example is where he again questions his decision not to join the monastery and expresses his anger at the dogma of the Catholic Church.

MATT: Now the fact of the matter is that Boo isn’t really an alcoholic at all, but drinks simply because Bette is such a terrible unending nag. Or, perhaps Boo is an alcoholic, and Bette is a terrible, unending nag in reaction to his drinking so much, and because he just isn’t “there” for her… Or perhaps it’s the fault of the past history of stillbirths and the pressures that history puts on their physical relationship. Perhaps blame can be assigned to the Catholic Church. Certainly Emily’s guilt about leaving the convent and everything else in the world can be blamed largely on the Catholic Church. (Complete Full Length Plays, 333)

Just as he did so beautifully in “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe,” Durang mocks the futility of prayer, this time with a very personal and painful twist. These
selections leak anger and also speak to the causes of his deep depression during his late teenage years.

EMILY: …maybe someday God will make a miracle so you can have more children.

BETTE: I can have more children?

EMILY: Well, maybe God will make a miracle so you can.

BETTE: I can have a miracle?

EMILY: Well you pray and ask for one.

BETTE: I CAN HAVE MORE CHILDREN. I CAN HAVE MORE CHILDREN. I CAN HAVE MORE CHILDREN. (Complete Full Length Plays, 330)

Even Bette’s priest admits that prayer may be useless. “By all means, pray for it. Just don’t get your hopes up too high though, maybe God doesn’t want you to have any more babies. It certainly sounds like it to me.” (Complete Full Length Plays, 354)

Bette desperately seeks compassion and solace as she reaches out to an old friend she has lost touch with searching consolation in her sadness.

BETTE: …before you hang up, I’ve lost two babies. No, I don’t mean misplaced, stupid, they died. I go through the whole nine-month period of carrying them, and then when it’s over they just take them away. I don’t even see the bodies…Boo’s not home. Well, sometimes he goes to a bar
and then he doesn’t come home until the bar closes, and some of them
don’t close at all and so he gets confused what time it is. (Complete Full
Length Plays, 334)

Durang not only exposed the humor of his family, but also its very real pain and
suffering, along with the pressure it put on only surviving child.

BETTE: Your father’s gone away. All the babies are dead. You’re the
only thing of value left in my life, Skippy…. I don’t want to put any
pressure on you, Skippy dear, but you’re the only reason I have left for
living now. (Complete Full Length Plays, 363)

Two moments in particular carried such intense emotion in performance, visible
on archival tapes of the original Broadway production, that it is clear Durang laid his
emotions bare for all to see. Perhaps by exposing his pain in such an honest and public
manner, he can ultimately move past it and find peace. The first moment is an exchange
between Bette and Boo where they admit their love is gone.

BOO: Bette, let’s not have anymore. I’ve had enough babies. They get you
up in the middle of the night, dead. They dirty their cribs, dead. They need
constant attention, dead. No more babies.

BETTE: I don’t love you anymore, Boo. (Complete Full Length Plays,
362)
The second is Matt’s very honest confession of fear that he may be following in the same painful footsteps of his parents and may be powerless to change his fate.

MATT: I see all of you do the same thing over and over, for years and years, and you never change. And my fear is that I can see all of you but not see myself, and maybe I’m doing something similar, but I just can’t see it. What I mean to say is; did you intend to live your lives the way you did? (Complete Full Length Plays, 361)

Robert Brustein, Durang’s playwriting professor at Yale quite accurately describes The Marriage of Bette and Boo as, “an extremely touching tribute to a recently dead mother, to an alcoholic father, and to a son who has finally learned to forgive his family and himself.” (Complete Full length Plays, x) Joseph Papp convinced Durang to lend authenticity to the show by performing the role of Matt. He describes the experience.

Performing the role [MATT in Bette and Boo] … struck me as a preposterously public manner in which to reveal some rather personal thoughts and feelings. At the very first preview, I was disoriented and surprised to find that I choked up on the last speech. Since I don’t feel I’m easily open about emotions to begin with, it seemed terribly odd that I had gotten myself in this position. …Acting that last scene [in Bette and Boo] did feel extremely positive and not at all despairing (though occasionally sadness was there.) (Complete Full length Plays, 372)
The final scene in the play is performed honestly and with such emotion that the audience experiences the very real pain of the characters and Durang himself.

BETTE: I sometimes wonder if God is punishing me for making a second marriage outside the Church.

MATT: I don’t think God punishes people for specific things.

BETTE: That’s good.

MATT: I think he punishes people in general, for no reason.

BETTE: Would you pray with me.

MATT: I’m afraid I don’t believe in any of that. (Complete Full length Plays, 364)

The final line of the show delivered by Matt is full of pain with just a glimmer of hope. I found myself in tears viewing the videotaped performance.

MATT: Bette passed into death, and is with God. She is in heaven where she has been reunited with the four dead babies, and where she waits for Boo, and for Bonnie Wilson, and Emily, and Pooh Bear, and Eeyore, and Kanga and Roo; and for me. (Complete Full length Plays, 368)

To expose himself and the skeletons of his family in such a public manner was bold and courageous. The writing process may have been an expression of his depression, but the playing of the role moved him further along in his emotional healing. Playing the autobiographical role of Matt was a genuine step in his recovery process. The expression
of private issues in a public forum and the transposition of specific issues into universal themes through sardonic humor becomes a pattern in Durang’s work. Ultimately, this style of dark comedy with a human soul is the key that sets him free from the prison of his pain.

During the period from 1985-1988 he completed the full-length version of *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* and wrote *Laughing Wild*. Both are extremely autobiographical and both featured Mr. Durang performing the roles most similar to his own life. This very therapeutic period for Mr. Durang is when his characters begin to more obviously reveal his true feelings.

**Laughing Wild**

A second character, the Man in *Laughing Wild*, appears in Durang’s work that represents him so closely it becomes difficult to tell fiction from autobiography. Asked to differentiate between his notions of fictional character and autobiography Durang responded as follows:

Short answer: Although the character of the Man in *Laughing Wild* is not strictly autobiographical, still it is accurate to say that my concerns and issues are very much the same as the Man’s concerns and issues.

(personal e-mail March 27, 2007)

He explains that after his positive experience performing Matt in *Bette and Boo*, he set out to write the Man with the specific intent of performing the role himself. He was
interested in yet another form of therapy at the time, affirmation therapy. This presents itself vividly in the character.

Affirmation #1

MAN: I am the predominant source of energy in my life. I let go of the pain from the past. I let go of the pain from the present. In the places in my body where pain lived previously, now there is light and joy.

(Complete Full-Length Plays, 392)

Affirmation #2

MAN: We can change our own thoughts, from negative to positive. Say I feel bad; I can choose to feel good. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 393)

Affirmation #3

MAN: Everything unfolds in my life exactly as it should, including my career. Abundance is my natural state of being, and I accept it now. I let go of anger and resentment. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 395)

Affirmation #4

MAN: I let go of my need for longing. I let go of sexual interest. I become like Buddha, and want nothing. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 395)

Mr. Durang took a moment to describe for me the way he felt at the time he wrote his character in Laughing Wild and how he attempted to use affirmations in his personal life to become a more positive individual.
I grew interested in affirmation, which is also close to cognitive therapy. Rather than trying to effect change with years and years of talk therapy (which I also did, and which I also found valuable), cognitive therapy said to LITERALLY change your thoughts. Using computer imagery, it was to hear a bad sentence and to write over it in your brain, consciously.

So when I heard “nothing works out,” I would say to my brain: “I no longer choose to believe that.” Or I’d amend it to, “sometimes things work out.” Or – and here the New Age emphasis comes in – “I am willing for things to work out.” Since you often get what you look for, and if I come from a place of expecting things to be bad, well, then maybe they will be.

Soooooooooo…. 

All this positive thinking and fighting off negative thinking and the use of affirmations was fresh in my brain, and when I started to write a part for myself, that’s what I started out writing. (personal e-mail March 27, 2007)

Durang reveals that he has sought answers for his depression and crisis of faith through various therapeutic vehicles: talk therapy, cognitive therapy, group therapy and finally affirmation therapy. Unfortunately, the affirmations did not always work for the
character, just as they did not always work for Durang himself. Instead the effort of attempting to remain positive sometimes had the reverse effect and becomes an emotional drain.

MAN: Well, now I’ve depressed myself. But I really am much more positive than I ever used to be; and I think these affirmations are a good thing. It just that…sometimes the bottom drops out for me. And then I go to sleep for a while, and somehow it feels better. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 403)

The character struggles with the same issues and experiences Durang endured in his own life. The character has clearly lost his faith and experienced depression. At this point the humorous play becomes an autobiography.

MAN: You know, I don’t want to take away faith in God from anyone who has it; it’s just that I don’t follow it. And it’s not as if living without a belief in God is so pleasant. In moments of deep despair you have absolutely nothing to fall back on. You just stay in the deep despair for a while, and then if you’re lucky, you go to sleep. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 400)

I wrote to Mr. Durang about his personal connection to the Man and the concept that this character actually reveals his own fears and concerns. He shared with me that by performing and writing the role, he made several conscious choices to differentiate the
Writing the Man’s monologue was scary, it felt very personal and naked. The Woman’s voice was that of a character who thought and spoke very differently from myself (however much I might occasionally mirror her crazy upset.) The Man’s voice and concerns were much closer to my personal ones...So, I felt insecure about the play (Laughing Wild), including sometimes when I’d perform it, which would be very difficult. (Complete Full length Plays, 377)

Durang consciously differentiated himself from the Man by having a different job, a slightly different sexual orientation and, interestingly enough, a slightly different wardrobe. He explained that each time he performed the role and a professional costume designer was involved, he asked the designer to make a conscious decision to costume him in a manner different from his natural style of dress. While it seemed an admirable idea, it didn’t always work as he intended. He shared with me the outcome of this effort.

When I did the play recently (2004 or 2005, I forget) at the Huntington, we did have a designer again. He dressed me a bit more formally than I would dress myself -- he got a medium-dark grey suit made for me, and gave me a black turtleneck. But in truth, I then bought the suit afterwards for my own wardrobe.
And finally one more costume thing -- in 1985 when William Ivey Long costumed *Marriage of Bette and Boo*, he and I did indeed go shopping for Matt's costume together. But he dressed me very much as I dressed in college and in life - a dark sport coat, jeans, work shirt with loosened tie. The jean and sport coat in particular matched what I often wore (and wear).

So in any case, the costumes in the original *Laughing Wild* production were trying to differentiate me from role. And later on, I gave that up. I had decided by now not to worry about distinguishing the part from myself. (personal e-mail April 2, 2007)

This comment seems to indicate that his creative work was the most effective form of emotional therapy.

Again and again, characters speak words that directly echo the personal voice of Mr. Durang rather than simply those of his characters. For example, Bruce is a confused bi-sexual man trying to reconcile his desires to be with his male lover and pursue a heterosexual marriage in *Beyond Therapy*. He experienced the same Catholic school upbringing and the same ultimate loss of faith as Durang. He says:
BRUCE: Nuns. I was raised by nuns. They really ruined me. I don’t believe in God anymore. I believe in bran cereal. It helps prevent rectal cancer. (Christopher Durang Explains It All for You, 223)

George in “The Actor’s Nightmare” describes Durang’s high school experiences almost verbatim. In the author’s notes to a collection of short plays Durang states:

I was taught by nuns until seventh grade, when I switched to an all-boys Catholic prep school taught by very intelligent and nice Benedictine priests. The school was on the grounds of a monastery, and my junior and senior years I spent a few weekends joining in the daily routine of the monastery. Prayers, then breakfast, then prayers, then lunch, then prayers, then dinner, then prayers, then sleep. I found the predictability quite attractive. I was going to join the monastery right after high school, but they said I should wait. And then I just stopped believing in all those things, and I never did join the monastery. (Christopher Durang Explains It All for You, ix)

Whether the characters directly represent Mr. Durang as The Man and Maty, or the characters speak directly from his heart, the connections are impossible to hide. George in “The Actor’s Nightmare” states:

GEORGE: Get thee to a nunnery. Line. Nunnery. As a child, I was taught by nuns, and then in high school I was taught by Benedictine priests. I
really rather liked the nuns, they were sort of warm, though they were fairly crazy too. Line. I like the priests also. The school was on the grounds of a monastery, and my junior and senior years I spent a few weekends joining in the daily routine of the monastery – prayers, then breakfast, then prayers, the lunch, then prayers, then dinner, then prayers, then sleep. I found the predictability quite attractive. And the food was good. I was going to join the monastery after high school, but they said I was too young and should wait. And then I just stopped believing in all those things, and so I never did join the monastery. (27 Short Plays, 364)

Also a non-believer, the main character George, in “The Actor’s Nightmare,” echoes Durang’s sentiments:

GEORGE: I don’t necessarily believe in any of that... I don’t think the Pope is infallible at all. I think he’s a normal man with normal capabilities who wears gold slippers. I thought about joining the monastery when I was younger, but I didn’t do it. (27 Short Plays, 367)

Struggling with his father’s alcoholism and the havoc it wreaked on his family, Durang revisited traditional therapy attending Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings in 1985. These meetings gave him perspective on suffering which he incorporated into his writing.
The healthy part of this program was the getting in touch with buried feelings; and also analyzing how patterns from alcoholic families were still affecting one… The unhealthy part is that some people in the program kind of fell in love with their pain.

(christopherdurang.com/QandA2.htm)

He describes the meetings:

Anyway, inside these meetings, you would often hear a story from a woman (it was usually a woman) who was in some ghastly relationship with an alcoholic man…. And sometimes these stories would be sad and awful…But sometimes the details of these stories would accumulate in the room as we all listened, and all of a sudden the enormity of the foolish and hopeless behavior would hit everybody at the same time – and we would all laugh, including the person whose story it was.

(christopherdurang.com/QandA2.htm)

From these meetings Durang recaptured the joy in writing and found a way to laugh wildly at severest woe. He used his traditional therapy experiences to further understand and fuel his therapeutic writing. Ultimately, he found the key to his writing was turning tragedy into comedy.

When I attended meetings, I’ve sometimes felt something similar (to the glee of writing “Nature and Purpose.”) A person will be sharing
some awful event in their life, and how hopeless it all looks, and the way they describe what's going on suddenly sounds funny – to everyone in the room. And then we all laugh, including the speaker, at this thing that isn’t actually funny, but we’ve all had this sudden surge of “perspective” and distance where we’ve seen the overviews of the person’s patterns. It’s a healthy feeling actually…though for those people who remain stuck in the specifics of the pain it can seem callous. But it isn’t callous, it’s this strange place where perspective meets pain. It’s the beginnings of something healthy. (27 Short Plays, 231)

He identifies the similar characteristics in his play and the release turning tragedy into comedy achieves. “I think that my plays sometimes have that kind of humor in them. Sometimes the extremity of suffering, or the extremity of bad behavior, is so extreme, that you see and feel the overview, and it’s awful and it’s funny.”

(ChristopherDurang.com/QandA2.htm) Ultimately, Durang worked his way through his depression by channeling it into his work, quite honestly, and, by doing so, was able to process his depression and move forward.
Chapter Six: Bargaining

Beyond Therapy (1981) Baby with the Bathwater (1983)
Laughing Wild (1988)

Bargaining is state where we begin to ask, “what if?” In Durang’s case he continually asked, “What if I had joined the monastery? What if I followed a heterosexual lifestyle? What if my parents did not fight all the time?” Durang struggled with his grief over the loss of his faith by imagining a variety of alternatives. Kübler-Ross describes bargaining as it relates to the grief process.

Bargaining is an escape from the pain; a distraction from the sad reality of his life … In other cases, bargaining can help our mind move from one state of loss to another. It can be a way station that gives our psyche the time we may need to adjust. Bargaining may fill the gaps that our strong emotions generally dominate, which often keep suffering at a distance. It
allows us to believe that we can restore order to the chaos that has taken over. (Kübler-Ross, 19)

Most importantly, she emphasizes that bargaining, just as every other stage in the grief process, is different for each individual and my take many forms. She points out, “Bargaining changes over time.” (Kübler-Ross, 20)

Once through the process of denial, anger and depression, Durang was able to let go of his earlier dependence on his belief in God. He started to see the inconsistencies in and ridiculousness of many of the church’s other teachings. At this point, he had not only lost his notion of a Catholic God, but also the notion of any God at all. He suffered a complete loss, the death of his faith. Durang’s issues didn’t stop with the Christian God’s stand on war, suffering and violence but carried over into the general Catholic views on love, family, sex, disease and family planning. His feelings on recreational sex and birth control are so strong that he is still tormented by Catholic teachings and right wing conservatives. He shared his current feelings on this topic with me.

I also started to find, as I no longer had a defined belief in God anymore, how really shocking it was to live in a society where people were instructed by other people to NEVER HAVE SEX EVER FOR THEIR ENTIRE LIVES – and why? Because of the beliefs of the people setting the rules – you were supposed to follow THEIR conscience. If you followed yours, you were told you were wrong; or the Catholic Church
would say you didn’t have a “well formed” conscience (meaning your logic didn’t match theirs).

Add this thing Aids, that could kill… and the obsession about condoms, which I find idiotic and actually evil… I mean, people have died for the lack of information because some pig-headed person came up with a) God created sex for procreation; b) if you can’t have a baby with sex – because of its being gay or because of using a condom, that is a sin. And so in Africa, “we” go up to people and say, have you heard abstinence? You can stay alive if you never ever have sin. Good to meet you! And then if they disobey YOUR CONSCIENCE and get the disease and die (and spread it), well that’s their fault, isn’t it?

I find the Church and rightwing people’s views on condoms actually kill with their beliefs. (personal e-mail March 27, 2007)

The characters comment on the subject of “Taboo” sexuality in Laughing Wild.

WOMAN: What about homosexuality – is it disgusting or is it delightful?
MAN: It is a grievous sin. But I love homosexuals, I just want them to be celibate until they die. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 413)

Those who know him, describe Christopher Durang as quite shy and rather quiet. While so much is published about his personal life up to his mother’s death, very little is available after 1985. With so many characters struggling with sexuality issues and so
many characters angered by the Church’s views on homosexuality, it seems logical to think that Mr. Durang may have been struggling with these issues as well. Surely with such a rigid Catholic upbringing growing up gay would be extremely difficult. He commented, “To grow up in the 50s and 60s and to be told by both the church and society that homosexuality was immoral, abnormal, ‘no homosexual could ever be happy’ etc. – this was a big burden to grow up with for a gay person.”

(christopherdurang.com/essaysupdating.htm) The Man in Laughing Wild also makes a very poignant comment about society’s views on homosexuality.

MAN: Until recently this [homosexual] attraction was considered so horrific that society pretty much expected you to lie to yourself about your sexual and emotional feelings, and if you couldn’t do that, certainly expected you to shut up about it, and go live your life bottled up and terrified; and if you would be so kind as to never have any physical closeness with anyone ever. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 397)


(slate.msn.com/id/3690/entry/24539) and “I am ‘married’ to John.”

(slate.msn.com/id/3690/entry/24541) Again, in 2006, in a blog, he writes “[I am] a self-
hating gay man, still in the closet (please don’t tell anyone.)”

(www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-durang/dear-senator-santorum-b-31556.html) It seems quite clear that this issue haunted him for most of his life and is prevalent in his writing.

The very first paragraph of “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe” introduces the theme of homosexuality. The stage directions explain, “Eleanor was still crying in her bathrobe because her oldest son was a dope pusher, and her middle son was a homosexual and wore purple scarves, and her youngest son had lost his penis in a McReilly’s reaper accident.” (27 Short Plays, 234) In “Death Comes to Us All, Mary Agnes,” the brothers Todd and Tim are forever playing “Pot Luck”, a game they invented where they randomly call a store for a delivery in hopes of jointly seducing the delivery boy. This game relates not only to the issue of homosexuality, but incest as well. Durang has commented on his own fascination with delivery boys, “I always liked the idea, though, of inappropriate behavior with service people who come to the door.”

(slate.msn.com/id/3690/entry/24541/) Homosexuality is prevalent again and again in his work. Gary, a former student in “Sister Mary,” is living in a monogamous committed relationship with his homosexual partner, Bruce in Beyond Therapy is bi-sexual and struggles between the desire to be with his male lover Bob and his desire to be in a traditional relationship with Prudence. During our e-mail discussions about Laughing Wild, Mr. Durang clarified his feelings regarding how he has been perceived over the years as a result of characters in his work.
Bit of a clarification: the Man says he’s bisexual, but then admits he’s more frequently attracted to men than to women.

I found this scary to say on-stage, at least initially.

I’m not actually bisexual, I’m gay. Though what I think in truth is that I am by nature bisexual, but that I have a strong “block” to sexual response to women that has kept me from being sexual with women. Though I definitely like women and often bond with them.

But a lot of people assumed I was bisexual due to the bisexual character of Bruce in Beyond Therapy – when in truth I based Bruce not on myself, but on another friend who was going through a bisexual phase (though later settled on being gay). (personal e-mail March 27, 2007)

As a gay man, Durang takes personal offense with the Church’s and the government’s regulations regarding homosexuality, masturbation and recreational sex. He has frequently commented about the Supreme Court case from 1986, Bowers vs. Hardwick, in which a policeman mistakenly entered the private home of a man in Georgia. When the policeman found the innocent homeowner and another man engaged in consensual sex, he arrested them both under the anti-sodomy laws of Georgia. The Supreme Court ruled it acceptable for states to criminalize private, consensual sex between homosexuals. The court recently overturned this decision in 2003. The Man in Laughing Wild expresses Durang’s personal sentiments when he comments:
MAN:... but I find the Supreme Court ruling on this issue deeply disturbing. I mean, so much of the evil that men do to one another has at its core the inability of people to empathize with another person’s position. Say when you’re seven, you find yourself slightly more drawn to Johnny than you are to Jane. This is not a conscious decision on your part, it just happens, it’s an instinct like...liking the color blue. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 397)

But the Catholic Church has far stricter rules. Where the government stopped at criminalizing homosexual acts, the conservative Catholic Church also demonizes any form of recreational sex, homosexual, pre-marital or in a loving marriage, if it is not intended for the purpose of procreation. Durang is infuriated by this and continually attacks it in his plays.

SISTER: Sodom is where they committed acts of homosexuality and bestiality in the Old Testament, and God, infuriated by this, destroyed them all in one fell swoop. Modern day Sodoms are New York City, San Francisco, Amsterdam, Los Angeles...well, basically anywhere the population is over 500,000. The only reason God has not destroyed these modern days Sodoms is that Catholic nuns and priests live in these cities and God does not wish to destroy them. He does, however, give these people body lice and hepatitis.
If it were up to me, I might be tempted to wipe out cities and civilizations, but, luckily for New York and Amsterdam, I’m not God. (27 Short Plays, 389)

Sister Mary again attacks homosexuality and accepts no excuses.

SISTER: You do that thing that makes Jesus puke, don’t you?

GARY: Pardon?

SISTER: Drop the polite boy manner, buster. When your mother looks at you, she turns into a pillar of salt, right?

GARY: What?

SISTER: Sodom and Gomorrah, stupid. You sleep with men, don’t you?

GARY: Well... yes.

SISTER: Jesus, Mary and Joseph! We have a regular cross section in here.

GARY: I got seduced while I was in the seminary.

SISTER: We don’t want to hear about it.

GARY: And then when I left the seminary, I was very upset, and then I went to New York and I slept with five hundred different people.

SISTER: Jesus is going to throw up.

GARY: But then I decided I was trashing my life, and so I only had sex with guys I had an emotional relationship with.

SISTER: That must have cut it down to three hundred.
GARY: And now I’m living with this one guy who I’d gone to grade school with and only ran into again two years ago, and we’re faithful with one another and stuff. He was in your class too. Jeff Hannigan.

SISTER: He was a bad boy. Some of them should be left on the side of a hill to die, and he was one.

GARY: Anyway, when I met him again, he was still a practicing Catholic, and so now I am again too.

SISTER: I’d practice a little harder if I were you. (27 Short Plays, 402)

In fact, Sister is so confident in her distaste for homosexuality that she justifies murdering her former student on the spot in order to “save” him from his sins of sexual deviancy.

SISTER: (Triumphant) I have sent him to heaven! I’m not really within the letter of the law shooting Gary like this. But really if he did make a good confession, I have sent him straight to heaven and eternal blissful happiness. And I’m afraid otherwise he would have ended up in hell. I think Christ will allow me this little dispensation from the letter of the law, but I’ll go to confession later today, just to be sure. (27 Short Plays, 409)

The play pokes fun at a kind of bargaining process in terms of choosing not to openly express sexuality. Durang’s play not only attacks the Church’s and government’s views on sexuality, but combines it with his comical view of a malevolent God feigning
benevolence as he attacks their views on AIDS. Durang describes a hypothetical conversation about AIDS between God and the Angel Gabriel in *Laughing Wild*.

[God] Boy oh Boy do I find homosexuals disgusting. I am going to give them a really horrifying disease!

And Gabriel says: Oh, yes?

[God] Yes! And drug addicts and ...and...hemophiliacs!

[Gabriel] But, why hemophiliacs?

[God] Oh, no reason. I want the disease to go through the bloodstream and even though I’m all-powerful and can do everything cause I’m God, I’m too tired today to figure out how to connect the disease to the bloodstream and not affect the hemophiliacs. Besides the suffering will be good for them.

[Gabriel] Tell me, what about the children of drug addicts? Will they get the disease in the mother’s womb?

[God] Oh, I hadn’t thought about that. Well, why not? Serve the hophead mothers right. Boy oh boy, do I hate women drug addicts!

[Gabriel] Yes, but why punish their babies?

[God] And I hate homosexuals!

[Gabriel] Yes, but isn’t it unfair to infect innocent babies in the womb with this dreadful disease?
[God] Look, homosexuals and drug addicts are very, very bad people; and if babies get it, well don’t forget I’m God, so you just better presume I have some secret reason why it’s good they get it too. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 398)

Recently, Durang turned to the internet editorial paper, the Huffington Post, where he maintains a blog expressing his personal opinions. Even here, without hiding his beliefs in the creative voice of his characters, he uses extreme irony to drive home his point.

But the Church has a seamless garment approach to sexuality – it isn’t just homosexuality that is forbidden (though that admittedly is the most disgusting of sex’s faces), it also forbids all touching of oneself (otherwise known as masturbation, and called “normal development” by demon psychologists) all heterosexual contact outside of marriage, and, of course any sexual contact that uses birth control since the ONLY ALLOWABLE sex must always leave open the possibility of childbirth. God created sex for procreation, not recreation. He added pleasure to the sexual act as a little trick to keep the population growing. But we are not meant to enjoy the pleasure, or if we do by chance, that cannot be our primal purpose. (www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-durang/homosexuality-disgustin_b_17284.html)
Through out his life, Durang was forced to work through his personal feelings on sexuality within the rigid framework imposed upon him by the Church of his youth. Once freed of these rules, he was able to bargain with his own values and ultimately reconcile his feelings with his own morals. In a recent email with Mr. Durang he commented that a TV crew from *In The Life* (a gay magazine show for PBS) was coming to film his home. Perhaps now that he has reached his late fifties, he is finding peace.
Chapter Seven: Acceptance

Laughing Wild (1988)

Conclusion

Healing and Hope

Sex and Longing, Miss Witherspoon, Betty’s Summer Vacation

and Adrift in Macao

According to Kübler-Ross, “After bargaining, our attention moves squarely to the present.” (Kübler-Ross, 20) The acceptance stage of the grief cycle is about recognizing the new reality and the permanence of it. Kübler-Ross explains,

We will never like this reality or make it okay, but eventually we accept it.

We learn to live with it. It is the new norm with which we learn to live.

This is where our final healings and adjustment can take a firm hold, despite the fact that healing often looks and feels like an unattainable state.
Healing looks like remembering, recollecting, and reorganizing. We may cease to be angry with God. (Kubler-Ross, 25)

Kubler-Ross explains, “Acceptance is not about liking a situation. It is about acknowledging all that has been lost and learning to live with that loss.” (Kubler-Ross, 2)

Glancing at the work of Christopher Durang, might lead one to initially label him “anti-Catholic.” Extremely close-minded characters with strong black and white views often represent the power structure of the church. In addition, incredibly violent actions are widely prevalent. Sister Mary Ignatius, a Catholic nun and elementary school teacher, shoots her homosexual former student, when he declares his homosexuality, at point blank range to cleanse him of his disgusting sins. Sister Annie De Maupassant enlists Steve’s help to kidnap and replace the Pope in “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe.”

Father Donally continues to encourage Bette to get pregnant despite four stillbirths in The Marriage of Bette and Boo. The Senator’s wife wants the Blessed Mother to appear on national television to denounce birth control and homosexuality in Sex and Longing. These characters are caricatures representing extreme, conservative and inflexible Catholic views. However, after closer study of the texts, one ultimately finds that the characters and themes are not “anti-Catholic.” In fact, Durang was plagued throughout his adult life by the dogma of any fundamental church and the unexamined dependence on God in general, not specific Catholic doctrine. His work asks the reader to consider
and question the control that religion plays in determining our personal behavior and moral choices.

Durang’s personal struggles manifested themselves in an internal conflict of intellectuality and common sense versus the rigid rules and dogma of the church. His own internal conflict ultimately resulted in a complete and utter loss of faith. His struggle with rules and dogma and the unrealistic expectations of his religion repeatedly plays out in characters across his body of work. Durang addresses his personal issues in his written work in what has become a signature, and clearly therapeutic, style. In fact, I believe that, through his work, Durang has found a way to work through his issues with faith and ultimately find peace.

Durang’s problem was not that the Church taught a view or opinion, but rather that the Church taught its ancient views as indisputable and unyielding fact.

It (the Church) was very specific, and very dogmatic. It didn’t say, Christ said such and such, and we interpret that to mean x, y, and z. Instead, it said, Christ said this, and we as His representatives on earth are infallible because Christ said we were, and so everything we say is fact, not interpretation.

Well, I believed them when I was seven (and up until I was twenty). They were teaching me the facts of existence, not any interpretation.
And these “facts” were complicated, and built on top of one another. (27 Short Plays, 376)

Throughout his life, Durang experienced and witnessed tremendous psychological and physical suffering: his father’s alcoholism, his mother’s continued pregnancies resulting in stillborn children, her excruciating experience with cancer, the Vietnam War, his visits to Al-Anon and Adult Children of Alcoholics and his own two-year brush with severe depression. His upbringing in what he considered a strict and inflexible religion taught him that offering his suffering up to Christ would make him stronger and more deserving of God’s love. But as Durang continued to watch the helpless suffering, he began to feel helpless himself.

I used to believe that intelligence was of little help in escaping the psychological patterns that had been inbred in one. I based this depressing belief on how overwhelming my own personal depressions were in my early twenties, and on how my mother and some other family members, smart people too, nonetheless seemed to make the same sorts of mistakes over and over causing themselves that same kind of pain; there wasn’t even variety in their pain. And other people I met seemed similarly stuck in repetition. So life seemed hopeless to me, and without progress.

(Complete Full length Plays, 307)
The Church of his youth taught him to embrace suffering, to offer it to God as proof of their love and devotion to Him, but Durang was unable to embrace and offer up his suffering. Instead, he became increasingly disgusted and appalled by the suggestion. He became disillusioned with this vision of a benevolent God when faced with the reality that God either could not or would not relieve the suffering of his followers. His writing became his outlet for this frustration and anger. Through his creative, dramatic writing he was able to reconcile the conflict between the God of his youth and the reality of his adulthood.

Because of his personal and family suffering, Durang lost his faith. He found it unfathomable that an omnipotent and loving God could sit up in heaven and allow war, suffering, and disease and then turn around and demonize acts of love and pleasure. It seemed illogical to him to banish a person to hell for eternity for infractions that any intelligent person would deem to be minor. In his own words:

"Doesn't sound too much like Christ. "Blessed are the peacemakers, but be sure to send to hell anyone who doesn’t show me enough respect on Fridays."

(Short Plays, 376)

The Man in Laughing Wild, Durang’s most obviously autobiographical character, makes a very poignant comment on God’s involvement in the human race.

MAN: And think about God. You know, it was nice to believe in God, and in an afterlife; and I’m sometimes envious of people who seem
comfortable because they still have this belief. But I remember when everybody won Tonys for *Dreamgirls*, and they were all thanking God for letting them win this award, and I was thinking to myself; God is silent on the holocaust, but He involves himself in the Tony awards? It doesn’t seem very likely. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 394)

Not only does this God allow war, disease, pain and suffering, and exclude sexual pleasure, but Durang notes that this God (as described by the Catholic Church and the right-wing conservatives) sits as both judge and jury handing down penalties for any infractions against His laws. Durang was taught as a child to fear “God’s” punishment and wrath as a very real threat.

When the nuns used to teach us 7 year olds to memorize catechism questions, we learned what was forbidden by God and the church and what terrible punishment (torture for eternity with constant third-degree burns, apparently) lay in store if you broke the commandments.

(ChristopherDurang.com)

This fear, instilled in him as a youth, seemed completely illogical to him as an adult. Durang chose not to live in fear, but instead to find humor in the ludicrous idea that God purposefully inflicts disease, pain and suffering and even worse, that He takes pleasure in punishment. Durang satirizes this idea of a punishing God and finds humor in the almost unfathomable and illogical concept that the all-loving, all-powerful God takes

(Complete Full-Length Plays, 399)

This idea rears its ugly head again and again in his work always with the same vengeful God. Vivien, the mother who dotes on her two sons but gave her daughter away to a French orphanage for being a girl in “Death Comes To Us All, Mary Agnes,” also lives in fear of this punishment.

VIVIEN: I fear that God won’t think I’ve been a good mother. I fear that his criteria and judgment will be limited, old-fashioned. I fear I will be punished. (27 Short Plays, 297)

Durang cannot reconcile the constant contradictions and at this point, he can no longer believe in the Christian depiction of God at all. Once he has denied the existence of a wrathful God, Durang finds himself free of the fear of persecution for his behaviors. He blatantly explained in an unpublished email.

A punishing God who sends 13 year olds to hell for masturbation, and who comes up with a hideous disease to punish people is not a God I am able to believe in. (personal email March 27, 2007)

The theme that recurs the most throughout his work and his life is his loss of faith. This loss of faith left him with countless questions about the logic of the church and
Christianity. Once he no longer “believed” in exactly what he was taught as a child, he
found himself confronted with multiple inconsistencies. Loss of faith is a constant theme
he seems to deal with on a personal level through his writing.

I have been emotionally honest in my writing about my Catholic
upbringing. It’s not all-inclusive, it doesn’t take in all the positive teachers
I had (I really liked and learned from the Benedictine monks who taught
me in high school, for instance)...but “Sister Mary” is not a documentary
on all the varieties of people in the Catholic Church. Rather it is about the
specific rules and dogma that the Church has been teaching for much of
the 20th century; I question this dogma in my play, and I ask you to
question it too. (27 Short Plays, 377)

Throughout his life Durang witnessed pain and suffering which ultimately
brought him to deny the faith of his youth. He grew up in an angry home watching his
parents continually argue over his father’s alcoholism. He watched his mother struggle
with devastating depression over the stillborn deaths of three children. And, finally, he
was forced to stand by helplessly and watch his mother’s long and agonizing battle with
cancer. The benevolent God of his youth never came to his rescue, just as God never
came to Elaine’s rescue in “Nature and Purpose.” Instead, Christopher Durang was left
with the realization that this God must not exist. These losses compounded upon each
other and created a torturous and painful life. Durang sought refuge in his art and finally
found healing by facing his issues directly in his plays. His use of extreme irony, satire and sarcasm to create laughter and humor where only sorrow had previously existed. This journey opened the door to what might be another phase of his literary career that expresses his growing sense of acceptance.

**Sex and Longing**

After an almost ten year hiatus, Mr. Durang wrote *Sex and Longing*, which The Lincoln Center produced. It starred his longtime friend Sigourney Weaver and deals with two topics, sex and longing, intertwined with his ever-prevalent exploration of sex and religion, and pits the two against each other in Congressional hearings. Unfortunately, it is still unpublished as he feels the third act needs additional revision. In 1999 he wrote *Betty’s Summer Vacation*, which received great critical acclaim and an Obie Award. He has recently written and published *Mrs. Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge* and *Miss Witherspoon* (a very dark comedy about the after-life.) He has also just completed an off-Broadway run of his new musical *Adrift in Macao*, written in collaboration with composer Peter Melnick.

Mr. Durang currently lives in Pennsylvania and co-chairs the playwriting department at Julliard. He is a frequent contributor to *The Huffington Post* and consistently expresses his political views against President Bush, the war in Iraq, the evangelical movement, the Church’s stand on birth control and the right to private, consensual homosexual sex.
Through all of his struggles with faith, like the characters in his plays, Durang still doggedly searches for meaning in life. He sums this up in *Laughing Wild*.

...if there isn’t a great big Father up there to guide and judge (and condemn) us, there’s a belief in a God within that we are all a part of. The world and it’s chaos seem so far outside our control, it’s very attractive to believe or at least entertain belief in these sorts of things in order to more easily walk around, putting one foot after another...So some days I’m a sort of semi-believer. And then other days, alas, I switch back to finding life an enormous, meaningless effort. And on those days I try not to talk on the telephone... and I wait for feelings of optimism to return.

(*Complete Full length Plays*, 378)

Durang’s journey through grief has taken him from denial to anger, depression, bargaining and ultimately brought him to acceptance. According to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross,

Finding acceptance may be just having more good days than bad. As we begin to live again and enjoy our life, we often feel that in doing so, we are betraying our loss. We can never replace what is lost, but we can make new connections, new meaningful relationships, new interdependencies. Instead of denying our feelings, we listen to our needs;
we move; we change, we grow, we evolve. We begin to live again, but we cannot do so until we have given grief it’s time. (Kübler-Ross, 28)

Healing and Hope

Interestingly enough, psychologists agree that grief work and healing usually begins with the last stage of grief, acceptance. One common definition of grief work is summarized by the acronym TEAR:

\[
\begin{align*}
T &= \text{To accept the reality of the loss} \\
E &= \text{Experience the pain of the loss} \\
A &= \text{Adjust to the new environment without the lost object} \\
R &= \text{Reinvest in the new reality}
\end{align*}
\]

(www.counselingforloss.com/article8.htm)

Studying the work of Christopher Durang is fascinating because his plays seem to chronologically follow both the stages of grief and recovery. Whether knowingly or not, Durang has genuinely and creatively progressed through his grief over his loss of faith and had used his body of work as a recipe for classic recovery. His plays continue to fit perfectly into the grief recovery matrix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T</th>
<th>To accept the reality of the loss</th>
<th>Laughing Wild 1988</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Experience the pain of the loss</td>
<td>Sex and Longing 1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **T** = To accept the reality of the loss

**Laughing Wild** 1988

As previously stated, *Laughing Wild* represents his final acceptance of the loss of faith in a Catholic God. He dabbles in affirmation therapy and has truly accepted his own denial of the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent God.

• **E** = Experience the pain of the loss

**Sex and Longing** 1996

The main character Lulu, a nymphomaniac, is brutally attacked and had her arm muscles severed by Jack the Ripper. She is “rescued” by the Reverend and the Senator’s Wife who try to “save” her by transforming her into an almost puritanical, young woman. They recondition and brainwash her to accept their view that any type of sex outside of marriage is immoral and disgusting. Despite being raped again by the Reverend at the end of Act 2, Lulu is successfully reconditioned and forced to testify at Senate Confirmation Hearings. Six of the elected officials are represented on stage by inanimate
porn dolls. Lulu’s friend is given aversion therapy complete with electric shock treatment to cure him of his sexual desires. Ultimately, Jack the Ripper posing as Jesus murders Lulu. Lulu experiences Durang’s pain through her own loss of self. But the clearly objective portrayal of these characters differs from the sympathetic and multidimensional characters of his earlier autobiographical work.

- A = Adjust to the new environment without the lost object

Betty’s Summer Vacation 1999

Mrs. Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge 2002

Miss Witherspoon 2004

In Betty’s Summer Vacation, Durang demonstrates his adjustment to his sense of loss and has moved forward. The play is a light comedy, still riddled with moments of blacker comedy that has become his signature style. Nevertheless, the play is devoid of the personal pangs of his faith, family issues and personal tragedy. Miss Witherspoon is the story of a woman so overwhelmed by the world that she commits suicide to escape. She is so adamantly against reincarnation, that every time she does so, she immediately kills herself again. She begs to see Saint Peter (as the Catholic version of life after death does not include reincarnation) and pleads for the Jewish afterlife, which she refers to as a “general anesthesia afterlife.”

Durang pointed out a quote he used in the play that he felt was rather significant because he pondered it for almost forty years after. He first heard it in a Belmondo movie.
in college. Originally from William Faulkner's *Wild Palms*, the character says, “between grief and nothing, I'd choose nothing.” Durang comments:

> Now as to *Miss Witherspoon*, I used the “between grief and nothing, I'd choose nothing” quote in the play. I first heard it in *Breathless* in 1967-68; and here I was using the quote in a play written in 2005. Clearly it stayed with me. (personal e-mail August 6, 2007)

He has accepted that he cannot hide from his grief but must instead face it and he ultimately chooses to live with his adjusted view that God does not exist. He is reconciled to the fact that life may be meaningless. As the character Maryama, an Eastern guide in the afterlife states,

> What you said just made me think of it, that’s all. You’re choosing nothing. It’s a negative choice, nothing. People who go to a restaurant and order nothing, don’t eat. Their bodies don’t get nourishment.

> Nothing is as nothing does. (personal e-mail August 6, 2007)

> While still dealing with suffering and pain, *Miss Witherspoon* is clearly a play that indicates Durang is moving forward toward recovery. Durang describes it as, “not as harsh as some of my satires; it’s also rather a fable; and in terms of tone, I like to say it’s a comedy to make you worry.” (*Miss Witherspoon*, ix)

> *Mrs. Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge* is the pivotal piece moving forward and away from dark comedy. It is still nested in the concept of struggle and *Mrs. Cratchit*
rejects her traditional role of suffering and instead chooses to get drunk. She is strong and feisty and has decided that she will no longer participate and wallow in the endless suffering around her. Durang describes how this work differs from his earlier plays:

I’ve been wanting to adopt the distinction in my own work between satiric, dark comedy plays and my “entertainments,” such as my parodies and what I might call my “friendly, silly” plays. Mrs. Bob Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge is very much intended as an entertainment. (Miss Witherspoon, ix)

- R = Reinvest in the new reality

Adrift in Macao 2006

Durang’s most recent work, Adrift in Macao is a musical written in collaboration with composer Peter Melnick. It is a light parody of the film noir genre with light-hearted, one-dimensional characters and an ironically predictable plot line. Durang intended it to be an “entertainment” and describes it as, “MUCH lighter than my plays.” (personal e-mail, January 15, 2007)

Acceptance

As Mr. Durang started to see the impact of the overwhelming suffering around him, like Mrs. Cratchit, he began to find that the only escape from the pain was to find humor in it. Whether consciously or not, he ultimately determined that humor and
creative dramatization of his pain would be his healing agent. He described an experience at Al-Anon when everyone in the room would become so overwhelmed with the outrageous pain, suffering and devastating experiences that the entire room suddenly started to laugh.

And what was that laughter? It was laughter of recognition and clarity – the litany of awful things happening suddenly “added up” for everyone in the room as too much - This laughter wasn’t AT the woman... it was an across-the-board, shared laughter caused by suddenly seeing the ridiculousness of the stuck behavior all at once, all at the same...

And it really isn’t laughing “at.” It’s laughing “because,” I think. It was a kind of healing laughter, a relieving laughter. You also suddenly had a perspective at how crazy it all was...

(ChristopherDurang.com/QandA2.htm)

Durang found his unique and stirring dramatic voice through this “healing laughter.” Not only was he able to write, but the words poured out of him. He was brimming with an original, creative voice and he found what has become his own, personal style. He laughs at a world that provides no answers and he creatively uses irony to express and work through his sorrow. He explains how writing “The Nature and Purpose of the Universe” helped move him past his own depression.
During my religious days I viewed suffering with great compassion and concern, as something Christ wanted me to alleviate. Then without religion I found suffering (mine, others’, the concept of) totally paralyzing and spent my college days obsessively spouting depressing movie quotes at baffled dinner companions – But then as I started to write “Nature and Purpose,” suddenly the extremity of suffering made me giddy, and I found the energy and distance to relish the awfulness of it all. This “relish” is something that audiences do not always feel comfortable with, and I find that some people, rather than simply disliking my work, are made furious by it. (Christopher Durang Explains It All for You, xii)

Durang justifies his style:

I’m just making merry about psychological abuse, which is something I know about. (Complete Full length Plays, 308)

I grew up around LOTS of people with emotional problems, so you write about what you know...Plus drama is about conflict, and trouble, and things that are hard to get through. (christopherdurang.com/QandA3.htm)

The concept of suffering is clearly present in many of his plays and a closer look at Durang’s work shows that most of his characters are plagued with continued and unrelenting suffering. For example, Mary Agnes, who was abandoned to an orphanage as
child and yet continually tries in vain to gain her mother's love, in "Death Comes to Us All, Mary Agnes" is told:

MARTIN: We have to face these tragedies in life, Mary Agnes, and believe that even though things seem terrible, they aren't really. Why, if I believed that things were they way they seemed I couldn't go on for more than a day. (27 Short Plays, 300)

The characters in his early play Titanic actually pray for the boat the sink rather than be saved.

LIDIA: Oh, why won't we sink, why? (27 Short Plays, 333)
TEDDY: I’m in mourning for my life. (27 Short Plays, 341)

The Man in Laughing Wild becomes so overwhelmed with the suffering around him that he can barely leave his house.

MAN: It is hard for me to be positive because I’m very sensitive to the vibrations of people around me, or maybe I’m just paranoid. But in any case, I used to find it very difficult to go out of the house sometimes because of coming into contact with people. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 391)

In the end each character learns to accept their fate and must find a way to live with the pain. Few find a way to resolve it. Durang's plays (with the single exception of Baby With the Bathwater which ends with a glimmer of hope for the future) do not end in
revelation or tremendous character development where the characters see the error in
their ways and vow to change. Quite the opposite, his plays end with the characters’ basic
personalities remaining the same. The key to his work is that his characters learn to
accept their fate. Durang describes this aspect of his style.

The whole point of these endings tends to be that people don’t
change. I felt there was no intrinsic reason why endings had to have big
character revelations that huff and puff, and try to explain everything. The
challenge, though, is to restate the problem in a way that is dramatically
satisfying and amusing to an audience. (Complete Full length Plays, 307)

Healing
Accepting what has happened is not the only aspect that has allowed for healing.
The desire and willingness to let go of the pain and move forward is a major contributing
factor. Margot, the abandoned daughter in “Death Comes to Us All, Mary Agnes,”
describes the feeling:

MARGOT: I feel such a prisoner to my past. And I have such a longing
for normality. I see people on the street who eat in cafeterias and have
families and go to parks and who aren’t burdened with this terrible
bitterness; and I want to be like them. So much I want to be like them. (27
Short Plays, 299)
The Man from Laughing Wild (speaking directly from Durang's heart) expresses the same need for salvation. "I was tired of not being joyful and happy. I was sick of my personality, and I had to change it." (Complete Full-Length Plays, 391) He reiterates later in the play "I find more and more that I'm starting to long for a sense of value in the world." (Complete Full-Length Plays, 400) Durang explains that constant exposure to excessive suffering was so draining that he had to find a positive outlet for it, so he chose to write.

Watching repetitive suffering is very irritating and upsetting, and transforming one's view of it into some combination of dark and funny seems as sensible a thing to do with it as any. (Complete Full length Plays, 369)

Hope

A major theme of Laughing Wild is hope and the search for reason in the world. This play was written at the beginning of his healing process and it represents his final release of the grief and his new ability to look forward to the future. This process took the better part of ten years. In author's notes to the play he reveals his own needs:

One of the themes of the play, especially in the Man's monologue, is the need and search for "meaning." ... probably one of the sincerest lines in the monologue, for me, is "I'm starved for some meaning...I'm tired of being an existentialist." (Complete Full length Plays, 378)
The complete line reads:

MAN: I’ve been … a pretty good “adhoc existentialist” for about twenty years. I’ve gotten up every morning, and I’ve carried on with my life, acting decent and getting things done, while all the time believing none of it mattered. And I’m really sick of it. I’m starved for some meaning. For some belief in something. I’m tired of being an existentialist. It’s hard to be joyful when you’re an existentialist. (Complete Full-Length Plays, 400)

In a 2005 blog, Durang clarifies his current beliefs.

I’m not actually an atheist, by the way (in case you’re holding your breath), and I’ve sort of returned to one of my beliefs from my Catholic upbringing, that the soul has a continuing life. As Thornton Wilder says in Our Town, “everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal.” To my surprise, in my later years, that kind of feels right to me.

But my concept of a Higher Power is extremely vague; and it cannot be, in my mind, some Being fashioned after quirky human beings and their messy emotions. “Man is created in the image of God,” was one of the things Catholic school children were taught in the 50s and 60s. That’s a highly debatab idea; obviously it’s more likely that man, thinking of what God might be like, came up with “oh he’s probably like a father, I know fathers.” Understandable, but leads to all that confusion about is
God causing grass fires, and is he punishing people for sex, and is he helping actors win the Tony Award. (www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-durang/why-is-god-sending-grass-_b_13066.html)

He explains further by stating, “I have come to believe in a more mystical view of a Divine Intelligence that isn’t as literal-minded as what I initially was stuck on.” (27 Short Plays, 414). Both the Man in Laughing Wild and Christopher Durang, the playwright, seem to put hope and desire into finding something very clear to believe.

...if there isn’t a great big Father up there to guide and judge (and condemn) us, there’s a belief in a God within that we are all a part of. The world and it’s chaos seem so far outside our control, it’s very attractive to believe or at least entertain belief in these sorts of things in order to more easily walk around, putting one foot after another. (Complete Full length Plays, 378)

So where is Christopher Durang today in his journey with faith? He is evidently still traveling. He explains,

So some days I’m a sort of semi-believer. And then other days, alas, I switch back to finding life an enormous, meaningless effort. And on those days I try not to talk on the telephone… and I wait for feelings of optimism to return. (Complete Full length Plays, 378)
Conclusion

Looking back at his life, Mr. Durang faced his pain and found an escape from a life of suffering that had been unavoidable for him. Throughout his literary career he evolved past his pain and used his creative and public work as part of his healing process. Perhaps he has ultimately escaped a life of deeper sorrow and pain. His newer works, Betty’s Summer Vacation, Mrs. Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge and Adrift in Macao, are not as heavily laden with dark comedy and investigation of his personal biography as his earlier works. Perhaps this indicates that he is moving past his loss and his style is evolving beyond therapy.

There are three very serious ways to admit that life is just going to hell. The first one is suicide – very confrontational [laughs]. The second is go to a mental institution. The third is to live at home, with your parents. A great many of my aunts and uncles lived with their parents. There was a great deal of pressure on me, after my mother got divorced, to come home and live with her because she was “alone.” I viewed this as a living death. There was just something wrong about these families who were living together. Because I didn’t do any of these three things, I feel that I succeeded somewhat in changing the route that was mapped out for me.

(In Their Own Words, 31)
This theme of suffering, which occurs again and again, consistently presents itself through characters that do NOT find an escape, nor do they find solace in their pain. Instead, the comedy is found in the acceptance that these characters are hopelessly stuck in their grief. Ultimately, the conversion of pain and suffering to comedy is the key element that defines Durang’s style.

I think that my plays sometimes have that kind of humor in them. Sometimes the extremity of suffering, or the extremity of bad behavior, is so extreme, that you see and feel the overview, and it’s awful and it’s funny. (christopherdurang.com/QandA2.htm)

Taking pain seriously at the same time that I expect the audience to find humor in it has become for me the definition of my style, or at least what I intend it to be; Absurdist comedy married to real feelings.

(Complete Full length Plays, 306)
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Original Research


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Book Resources


**Internet Resources**


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Video Resources


Sex and Longing. dir. Garland Wright. Lincoln Center Theater, 1996

Performance Resources

APPENDIX

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

130
Jeannine James

Dear Jeannine James,

Hey there. Oddly, I have just put up my own website about two weeks ago -- with the unstartling name of christopherdurang.com Here’s a link:

Click here: Christoper Durang - The Official Website of Christopher Durang

(uh oh: Christopher is misspelled above... typo, will have to contact web person)

I think you’ll find lots of information on it, including some questions and answers I have previously given other students (and some of it is very personal). And there’s a long bio (mostly work related)

I’m at a loss to say where to look for writing by other people on me. So far it’s mostly all reviews... I know of no books where I’m discussed in any particular manner. (One reason I started the website, truthfully.) (the website has a section on Full Length plays that quotes a lot of reviews... in truth some might trigger you to want to find the full thing... though reviews are by nature short and not always that wonderful.)

Some of my recently published (last 5 years, say) books have some nice forewards to them that offer brief opinions on my work. (On the website more information on how to get the books is under Published Plays.)

Smith & Kraus’ "Christopher Durang: Full Length Plays 1975-1995" has a very nice introduction by critic Robert Brustein. (Robert Brustein has mentioned me in many of his books of critical essays. He ran Yale School of Drama when I was there, and has been a supporter.) (there are also 7 essays from me, introducing each of the 7 plays)

Smith & Kraus' "Christopher Durang: 27 Short Plays" has an introduction by playwriting professor Howard Stein (first taught at Yale; then at Columbia). And various essays by me, scattered throughout.

Grove/Atlantic's version of my 1999 play "Betty's Summer Vacation" has two introductions: one by Village Voice critic Michael Feingold, one by Playwrights Horizons artistic director Timothy Sanford.

Playwright John Guare brought to my attention a very little known but I thought interesting essay about me and Guare together, in an arts magazine called Three Penny Review. Summer 1999 issue. The author is Steve Vineberg, and he compares revival productions of Guare's "Marco Polo Sings a Solo" and of my "the Marriage of Bette and Boo." His points are interesting and complicated; he likes both of us; and he claims (which I like to hear) that we are both underrated because we write comedies.

You could do a search for "Three Penny Review" published in Berkeley, Cal. and they sell back copies. (I bought my copy.) I also mention this article in the Full Length Plays section, under "The Marriage of Bette and Boo." I was thinking of typing it and putting it on the website, but haven’t done it yet. (or gotten permission to do so)

Then a regular search for me will find some interviews and stuff... and then miscellaneous reviews around the country that I don’t know much about.

Hope this is helpful. There’s no critical book about playwrights that I know that mentions me in any meaningful way (though I haven’t been looking; but haven’t heard of any).

Anyway, hope you find the website helpful too. I’m flattered you’re doing a masters thesis on me... students who have contacted me in the past couple of years were the prime motivator for me to do the website. best, Chris Durang
Jeannine James

From: CDurang8@aol.com
Sent: Sunday, November 12, 2006 8:04 AM
To: jeanninejames@verizon.net
Subject: Re: question for a master's thesis - quick hello back

Dear Jennine James,

Hi there. Thanks for your note. I appreciate that you like my work, and that you're doing a thesis on me and the work.

Can I ask out of curiosity how you got my email address? I don't mind exactly, but most people who don't know me end up using another email address I give on my "Guest Book" page on the website. Of course, in the days of global emails, all of our emails get out there. But just curious.

The radio interview... annoying NPR can't help you more.

The interview took place during the previews of "Adrift in Macao" at the Philadelphia Theatre Company. I just looked at my 2005 date book, and I've written "NPR interview" on October 21st, which was a preview; the show opened in Philly on October 26, 2005.

I THINK the radio program was "All Things Considered," not 100% sure. But I do recall that Terry Gross was not available for the interview, and it was done instead by Marti Moscawanye. (Not sure how to spell that, Mosca-wayne is how it sounds.) I remember it was a nice interview, though I don't recall what biographical details Peter Melnick (the composer) and I gave, but I think we did give some.

Another way to track this down, if NPR just has a rotten filing system (which they shouldn't, now that I gave you the date), is to try the Philadelphia Theatre Company. Go to their website, and find someone in the administration to help. Maybe they were sent a copy of the interview.

I hope you can find it.

As to your other question -- how is the Man in "Laughing Wild" different from me and similar to me -- I'm willing to attempt to answer that, but it would be probably a somewhat long and/or complicated answer, and I don't have time right now to do it.

Do you have a deadline around the corner? Or might I answer it sometime in the future?

And do you want me to hone in on specific questions regarding the Man's issues and personality? (though you don't have to) Or just see what I come up with.

Thanks again for writing. Let me know about time frame that I might answer the Man vs. me question. best,

Chris Durang

11/15/2006
Jeannine James

Hi there. Well, if I gave you the email address, that more than explains it, lol.

Thanks for your interesting commentaries, and what you're writing about; it sounds interesting.

You use the phrase "Anti-Catholic issues."

Can I request you consider adding this into the topic of "anti-Catholic."

When I saw Fellini movies (and loved them) and he made satiric fun of the Catholic Church in a lot of them, and due to this, critics often referred to him as anti-clerical. Which I took to be descriptive.

And when "Sister Mary Ignatius" first was done, and was mostly well received, I saw from time to time people referred to it as "anti-Catholic"; and I took that phrase to be descriptive like saying Fellini was anti-clerical. To me it meant that we were both CRITICAL of the religion we were brought up in (and with good cause).

However, after "Sister Mary" had run about a year in NYC, it started to get attacked by religious conservatives around the country, who said the play was "anti-Catholic," and they defined that as being BIGOTED against Catholic people. And they said things like, (I'm paraphrasing), "If anyone made fun of a black person or a rabbi, this way, society wouldn't put up with it." And then I and my play were very much demonized by, basically, right-wing conservatives. Patrick Buchanan wrote it was the most anti-Catholic play ever written, which he published in a syndicated column. There was a lively Phil Donahue show on the play, which came off well in the program, actually. On the news in Boston, before the play opened, people were quoted as saying "this play is the same thing as throwing a rock through the windows of a black family who just moved into a white neighborhood" -- a ludicrous comparison, since being black is a racial thing and Catholics are not a RACE, and also criticizing Catholic dogma is to criticize IDEAS; and because throwing a rock and writing a play are remarkably different activities.

But it's made me very afraid of the word "anti-Catholic." Because it's then used as a club.

I say that I am critical, even highly critical, of much of the teachings of the Catholic Church, especially in the 1950s and early 60s before the Vatican Council. But that much of the liberalism of the Vatican Council has disappeared over the years, and some of the same questionable dogma is taught (especially birth control which seems to me entirely illogical and nowhere in the Bible does Christ remotely discuss it, so why are married couples in America and people in Africa at danger for Aids terrorized by this illogical doctrine?)

Blah blah. But you get my drift. A potent word.

I do think the Islamic fundamentalism that is threatening the world makes "Sister Mary" and all religious dogma quite relevant again. Happily Christianity has not been bloodthirsty for a pretty long time (though it was in previous centuries); but the dangers of believing you know the truth no matter what, is what lets Sister Mary shoot Gary dead, because she so completely believes she is sending him to heaven. (As the jihadists believe Allah wants them to kill for him, apparently...)

That's all for now. If you don't hear back from me about "Laughing Wild." feel free to write and nudge me. I'm involved in two productions right now, and teaching, so I can forget to complete things...

best, Chris D

11/15/2006
Hi, back,

Thanks... glad you're attuned to the "anti-Catholic" word and how it has been used (and over-used, and not just on me).

NPR -- I'm frustrated for you. Do they claim they've never heard of it?

Let me give you a couple of contacts at Philadelphia Theatre Company, in case they can help. The interview was set up by their press people (whose names I don't recall).

Lois Kitz is the general manager there. You can say I suggested you contact her. Her info is: lklitz@phillytheatreco.com company manager, Philadelphia Theatre Co. 215-985-1400 x105

Ask her who the press person was for "Adrift in Macao" and ask if you contact them. (Truthfully I don't know how helpful they'll be... but maybe they have a contact at the Philadelphia recording studio who could be the right person to talk with.) Also... this radio interview was also filmed, and apparently aired on WHYY in Philadelphia (a portion of it did; not all of it). I wasn't home at the time, so I didn't tape it. Plus ask Lois if by any chance anybody at the theatre taped the radio interview, or kept a copy.

Good luck... it shouldn't be that hard. Don't they keep copies? Don't they file them? Wouldn't Durang or Melnick be what it would be filed under? (Unless is under "Adrift in Macao" or "Macao"...)

Let me know if and when you have any success with them... best, Chris D

11/15/2006
Hi, Jeanine,

By the way, I realize the program was TAPEd on Oct 21st, 2006 - but it did not air until some time afterward. And I can’t remember if it was a week later, or if it was two weeks later. It was during the run of the show, though. Also I know people heard in southeastern PA (Philadelphia and suburbs), but I now recall that it was not a national version of the show.

It may be that you need to get the name and number of the building where NPR tapes its Philadelphia tapings, and see if their records are better. Well, let’s see.

The Lincoln Center Theatre and Film collection does indeed have the original productions of THE MARRIAGE OF BETTE AND BOO and LAUGHING WILD. (Does not have “Sister Mary.”) “Bette and Boo” in 1985 was the first show of mine they taped; and I’m proud of myself. There were no plans to tape it, but I called them up, and they said they would except they had run out of money for that season (it was late spring). So I then asked how much, and when they said $2,000, I said can I pay for it myself. And they said yes. Then when Joe Papp heard what I had done, he then paid the $2,000.

My other NY shows after that have been taped too - SEX AND LONGING, BETTY’S SUMMER VACATION, and MISS WITHERSPOON. The Senator’s wife in SEX AND LONGING is a rabid right winger, and also Catholic. And Miss Witherspoon, though she doesn’t talk about Catholicism per say, nonetheless seems steeped in the beliefs of heaven-hell-purgatory, and the purgatory part is very Catholic. Betty’s doesn’t have any Catholic stuff in it.

best, Chris D
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best, Chris D
Dear Jeannine,

Thanks! I did the copies of the two interviews you sent me. Thank you! I meant to write and say hooray you finally cracked the nut of tracking them down, good for you. I'm at Juilliard over night tonight, and won't be home til Friday. Limited email here. But yet got it, and glad you got them... best, Chris D

-----Original Message-----
From: jeanninejames@verizon.net
To: CDurang8@aol.com
Sent: Wed, 15 Nov 2006 2:54 PM
Subject: Did you get the interview?

Mr. Durang:

I was just checking to make sure you received the last email I sent that I had in fact found the interview and I sent you a copy of the audio for your records. Please let me know if that email did not go through and I will resend it. Thanks again for all of your help. I am really jazzed now about this project. I look forward to reading your response to the monologue.

Jeannine

Check out the new AOL. Most comprehensive set of free safety and security tools, free access to millions of high-quality videos from across the web, free AOL Mail and more.
Dear Jeannine James,

Hi there. Good to hear from you. I’m glad you’ll be able to see the tapes of “Bette and Boo” and “Laughing Wild” -- I’m glad they exist, even if though it’s a small number of people who can see them. And I personally made the “Bette and Boo” one happen; I called and found they’d run out of money, and I asked how much it cost, and I offered to pay it myself to be filmed. They agreed. Then Joe Papp heard, and he paid it. (It was small-ish, $2,000.) But without that call from me, it wouldn’t have been filmed.

Don’t feel you have to, but my musical is playing Jan. 31st at Primary Stages... (in preview). That may be too much viewing in one day; and it’s MUCH lighter than my plays...

In terms of other writing, I forget - do you know about my pieces (for a year now) on the Huffington Post. (I can’t remember if I’ve mentioned these.) These are primarily political, but there are probably tidbits of my adult life in them too.

Here’s my most recent, which has some family memory stuff in them:

Click here: The Blog | Chris Durang: Joyful Christmas, Hellish Christmas, Dada Christmas | The Huffington Post (a non-political, personal one)

Here’s a link to all of them:

Click here: The Blog | Chris Durang | The Huffington Post

To get all of them, you also have to scroll down and click on May 2006, April, March, February and December 2005.

My mind is a sieve... did I already tell you about these?

Oh, and would you mind reminding me about the Laughing Wild Man vs. Chris Durang overlap after my musical opens (which happens Feb. 13). Thanks.

best, Chris D.
Hi, Jeannine,

I appreciate your email. And I do want to help with the Man vs. me question you've asked, but even since late Dec. when rehearsals began, my schedule has been insane, and it still is, even though the show is stopping. We're recording it Monday and Tuesday, which is great but we have 100 questions back and forth to settle (details stuff). And I have to prepare for a tv crew to come the following week to film me at home (for "In the Life" on PBS, a gay magazine show).

So give me a date -- can you wait two weeks? It's hard for me to do in the next few days... anyway, give me a bottom line... thanks. best, Chris
Hi, Jeannine,

I started working on my answer early this morning. Need to take a break, but hope/plan to finish today or tomorrow at the latest.

It's way longer than you need, I bet, but it's how my brain starts to work.

best, Chris D
Hi, Jeannine,

I wrote such a long answer... and then when I got to the "Laughing Wild" part I ran out of time; and my schedule is such I don't know when I'll get back to it. So I did a rush job on the "Laughing Wild" part of the answer, and just did a short version right now.

Still I think you'll find the material actually does answer your question.

Let me know if there are specifics I left out you'd like me to address...

best, Chris D
March 24, 2007

From: Chris Durang

Re the question: “How much am I like or not like the Man character in Laughing Wild.”

Short answer: Although the character of the Man in Laughing Wild is not strictly autobiographical (unlike the character of Matt in The Marriage of Bette and Boo that DOES have real autobiographical details), still it is accurate to say that my concerns and issues are very much the same as the Man’s concerns and issues.

And indeed I’ve found a quirky acting corollary about that: when I’ve watched other people play the part, I’ve realized that the MAIN thing they must do as the Man is “believe what they say.”

I’ve seen actors try to do the role by inventing a “character persona” that they lay on top of the role – such as, being a bit of a “scattered professor type”; or one actor who unwisely chose to play the beginning sections in a foul humor because he made a “decision” that he had almost been hit by a bicycle rider minutes before coming on stage. Thus in all of his discussions about his attempts at finding optimism, he wasn’t sincere about that... he was playing talking about optimism while being in a foul mood. So it wasn’t funny actually... it left the audience going "who is this person in a bad mood, and why is he in this bad mood"?

Now the Longer answer.

To get to the longer answer, and to trigger some of my memories of writing the Man’s part, I want to discuss how Laughing Wild came to be written.

I’m going to begin by discussing the play that preceded Laughing Wild – The Marriage of Bette and Boo – because that play ended up being unabashedly autobiographical, and I think it may be useful/interesting to contrast it to Laughing Wild.

In 1985 my play The Marriage of Bette and Boo was produced by Joe Papp. I had written the play based entirely on my parents’ marriage, and used the truthful details of their troubles including my father’s alcoholism and my parents RH blood type incompatibility, which made them lose three babies to stillbirth. (I added a fourth stillborn baby to the play.)
I had written that play for many years. It started in 1972 as a one act, when I wrote it as an exercise never expecting to have it produced; at that time I even used all the real names of my parents and the extended family.

That one act got done a few places (with the names changed), and my mother actually saw it in a Princeton student production, where to my relief she liked it (and agreed with how I portrayed my father and the extended families, for whom she had a lot mixed emotions). I was surprised she liked the play – but on my own I thought that she liked the fact that her character was the lead. Plus she always had a good sense of humor, and I think she was able to see the humor in some of the portrayals.

In this one act, the character of Matt – the son of Bette and Boo, and thus my stand in – was very much a narrator. He rarely was in scenes; he had some of the same speeches about confusing analysis of his parents’ lives with analyzing the characters in the novels of Thomas Hardy... but otherwise his role in the family was a bit of a cipher.

After this Princeton production (which was roughly in 1974 or 1975), I decided to take the one act “off the market” and planned at some point to make the play a full length work.

My mother had her first bout with breast cancer in 1972, had a mastectomy and then seeming remission. But in 1976 she had a recurrence, now as bone cancer; she went through chemo, and then her situation worsened in 1977 and she died after a lot of suffering in March of 1979.

After my mother’s death, I wrote the play *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* (which includes a serious, upset speech where Diane, the ex-student, details her mother’s death from cancer, and how it made her question the meaning of prayer and of the existence of God). And I also had an impulse to go back to *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, which I had put aside waiting for the right time to turn it into a full length play.

The first addition to the one act I wrote was Bette talking on the phone to her school friend Bonnie Wilson, who she calls up in the middle of the night to tell of her of the second stillborn baby. The monologue is unabashedly poignant, it is not a mixture of comedy and seriousness like much of the one act version was.

I had found when the one act was done that people who had not liked some of my crazier, harsher absurdist plays DID like this play, they felt a compassion for the characters. So I decided to strengthen.

As I continued to work on the play, I added the scene of the upsetting Thanksgiving where drunk Boo vacuums up the gravy; I added the scene where
Matt ends up testifying against his father in the divorce trial; and I added the final scene where Bette dies of cancer in the hospital.

And those scenes were based in fact: my father DID vacuum up gravy when drunk (though not at Thanksgiving, though we always had traumatic Thanksgivings and Christmases due to tensions about his drinking). I did indeed end up testifying about my father’s alcoholism in my parents’ divorce hearings. (And the reasons Matt says he had to testify, because of his mothers’ family refusing to help her out by testifying, were also factually correct. I couldn’t think how to fictionalize them, so I just used them.) And my mother, of course, did die of cancer. And also during that last year, my father did show up and become more attentive to her in a sweet way, but he DID start to have these “staring off” silences that were an early sign of his having had some mild strokes (and he had major strokes later on, after her death).

So that’s a lot of real stuff in The Marriage of Bette and Boo.

Also as I wrote it, Matt became a fuller character. He functions more as a narrator in the lighter toned Act 1 (which darkens toward the end of the act). And he becomes more of a genuine character in Act 2 when I found myself adding some actual scenes of Matt dealing with his need to separate from his mother – as a normal part of growing up – and her understandable difficulties letting go of him due to her isolation and sadness.

I never intended to play the part, though I was 100% clear that Matt was a stand-in for me the same way Tom in The Glass Menagerie is a stand-in for Tennessee Williams for the story of him with his mother and sister.

Joe Papp had seen me act in a few productions, and I read Matt in one reading at the Public too; and Papp decided I should play the part.

I was flattered but also scared... I feared the play would be pleading or self-indulgent with me in it. I also felt: wow, I’m being offered to act in my own play by Joseph Papp, an enormously powerful producer in New York theatre. So I felt I had to embrace the opportunity.

I did tell the director Jerry Zaks – who had worked with me several times by then, including once where I was an actor (replacing the title role in The Actor’s Nightmare for a period) – that I was the playwright first, and actor second; and that if I was not working out as Matt, that Jerry must not be afraid to tell me he needed to replace me, I would accept his judgment on that.

Being in that play was one of the high points of my life; and I was baffled from time to time how I ever got into such a public sharing of my family background – in many ways I’m shy and when you meet me I don’t offer things about myself easily.
I also was startled when I got to the final speech, where Matt says his mother’s epitaph to the audience, moments after she has died. Though in rehearsal I had been, of course, appropriately sad and sincere, I had never had real emotion overtake me. And at the end of the first preview I suddenly found my voice shaken with emotion, almost unable to form the sentences (though I pushed through). That didn’t happen all the time in the playing of the play, but it happened often. And it happened again when we did a reading of the play in 2006 (with as many of the original cast as possible including Joan Allen and Graham Beckel) as part of 10 play celebration of plays the Public Theatre had produced. There’s something about the wording of the last speech, I must say, that seems to cut to the quick for me.

Anyway, as you can see, that play was GENUINELY autobiographical, and not only that but I played the part of myself.

Now as to the writing of Laughing Wild.

I write intuitively most of the time. And I wrote the Woman’s monologue – maybe in one sitting, maybe in two – on an impulse one night a bit after midnight.

I had had an argument with a friend, and felt angry. I honestly can no longer remember what the argument was about, but after talking to him about my upset, I realized I was being unreasonable and was even in the wrong in terms of the argument.

But strangely I still felt angry, it “didn’t matter” I was in the wrong.

So I went to my computer at midnight, and had an impulse to write a monologue in which a woman complains about life but is also unreasonable... I decided to let the most unreasonable aspects of my brain enter this character.

At the same time when I was writing this, I was finding living in New York City to be very stressful. (I had moved there in 1975, so it was like 11 years later when I was starting this piece.)

Due to Ronald Reagan, the financing and rules of mental hospitals got changed, and suddenly there was a NOTICEABLE group of mental patients among the homeless in New York City. And it, frankly, was upsetting to be dealing them, or to be around them.

So I decided that the Woman would have been in mental hospitals. Plus I had read an excerpt from a book called Is There No Place On Earth For Me? By
Susan Sheehan, which chronicled a real woman’s heartbreaking dealing with schizophrenia.

Plus I had written, in an absurdist way, with schizophrenia when I wrote my one act play ‘Identity Crisis’, which was triggered by reading a book by R.D. Laing called Madness, Sanity and the Family, in which he found that the families of schizophrenics were often as crazy as the patients.

So anyway, I wrote the Woman in Laughing Wild using all my most unreasonable feelings and opinions... I really entered her personality – or she entered mine.

I then had a reading of some one acts, ending with the Woman’s monologue. And I asked the actress E. Katherine Kerr to read the Woman’s part.

The reading of that play was electric, and Katherine was marvelous in it. (She had won an Obie award and great critical praise for her performance off-Broadway in Caryl Churchill’s Cloud Nine, and she and I had become friends.)

The play went so well I felt that I wanted to think of a way to make it a full length – it seemed somehow connected to the upset lots of people felt about living in the 80s, living in a city, living on the earth.

So I thought how to do it. For a while I thought of choosing two other characters mentioned in the Woman’s monologue and giving them their own monologues. I wondered about writing one of the taxi drivers. Or writing the musician who helps her after she falls into the gutter. Or maybe one of the people she meets at AA.

Katherine, who had seen me in The Marriage of Bette and Boo, said to me “Why don’t you write a part for yourself to go with the Woman’s monologue.”

And I must say this suggestion coming from an actress I admired so much gave me a real sense of freedom to consider that. I do like to perform, and I thought, okay, what can I write.

Now from here my memory is a bit muddy but here’s my best recollection.

I had already written the monologue about God and Gabriel having a discussion about how God “created” Aids to punish people, which was very much a belief of the religious right in the first couple years of the epidemic.

I had performed this monologue publicly a couple times, and I decided I wanted to include it in whatever I wrote... I was deeply angered by the stupidity of people deciding that God punished people this way, and I felt the monologue was a good and powerful way to refute that.
And in terms of writing the monologue... I think I started with writing just some things on my mind.

I had become drawn, partially due to my friendship with Katherine, to some New Age-y ideas, especially about affirmations and positive thinking.

Actually I should back up a bit, because BEFORE that happened and before I grew to be friends with Katherine, I had started going to meetings of Adult Children of Alcoholics and also to Alanon; and these meetings influenced me a lot. And also these groups, like the parent group of AA, spoke of the 12 Steps, and the 12 Steps made reference to a “Higher Power.”

I had been an agnostic, not thinking of God or spirituality for a long time. But these meetings forced me to examine what, if anything, I thought a “Higher Power” might be.

By the way, I initially went to meetings of Adult Children of Alcoholics a few months after the limited run of The Marriage of Bette and Boo. And I went with a fellow cast member, who also came from an alcoholic family background. And that cast member went on to decide that they were an alcoholic themselves, and then joined AA (successfully and has stayed sober to my knowledge).

Adult Children of Alcoholics was, as it sounds, a group for people who grew up in alcoholic families; but found that in their later years they had ongoing issues in their lives that had to do with having grown up in the chaotic and unsettling atmosphere of an alcoholic family.

The short version with me: my parents couldn’t stop arguing, my mother wanted my father to stop drinking; he kept saying he didn’t have a problem; the identical arguments repeated and repeated for years and years. Plus both families had multiple alcoholics on both sides of the family; both of my grandfathers were alcoholics, and my father had 4 siblings who were alcoholics (counting my father, that was 5 out of 7 siblings with alcohol problems); and my mother had 3 siblings out of 5 who were alcoholics.

And once my parents separated (when I was 13; they divorced when I was 19), my mother had ongoing run-ins with her family, where the alcoholic siblings fought meanly and illogically and with no admission or knowledge of what they were doing. And those arguments repeated and repeated.

So from that background I grew up with an automatic sentence that comes up for me: “Nothing works out.” This is partially why I went into a deep depression in college. The way my mother and father couldn’t work out their conflicts, and then my mother and her family couldn’t... I just saw no hope for anything. Plus as a child I felt trapped there.
At Adult Children of Alcoholics I became conscious of the fact that I had this voice that kicked in that said “nothing works out.” That’s a dreadful place to come from. Being aware that voice was there was helpful.

And I grew interested in affirmation, which is also close to cognitive therapy.

Rather than trying to effect change with years and years of talk therapy (which I also did, and which I also found valuable), cognitive therapy said to LITERALLY change your thoughts. Using computer imagery, it was to hear a bad sentence and to write over it in your brain, consciously.

So when I heard “nothing works out”, I would say to my brain: “I no longer choose to believe that.” Or I’d amend it to, “sometimes things work out.” Or – and here the New Age emphasis comes in – “I am willing for things to work out.” Since you often get what you look for, and if I come from a place of expecting things to be bad, well, then maybe they will be.

Soooooo....

All this positive thinking and fighting off negative thinking and the use of affirmations was fresh in my brain, and when I started to write a part for myself, that’s what I started out writing.

And though I was (and am) a believer in affirmations, sometimes when one’s mood was dark enough, affirmations just felt like lying to yourself... and then it was very hard to use them. So I found humor in this. (at least when writing; not when experiencing the “this feels lying” aspect)

Initially the Man’s character was not giving a speech, he was just expressing his opinions the way the Woman expressed hers. The “giving a speech” aspect was added later.

While writing the New Age/positive thinking part of the speech – and finding as I wrote that the Man’s positive feelings kept being taken over by his second-hand negative ones – I suddenly flashed on the idea that the Man could and should be the person the Woman hit in the tuna fish aisle.

I didn’t start with that idea. But when I stumbled upon it, it seemed the perfect way to connect the two monologues and the two characters. And I even like that the audience doesn’t learn that connection for about the first 6 minutes of the Man’s speech... and I find when I’ve played it (and seen it), that the audience takes great pleasure in suddenly discovering the connection between the two characters.

So that’s how I wrote that section; and clearly the feelings about positive thoughts warring with negative thoughts was very much at my core at that point.
Though I was NOT hit by anyone in the supermarket, so there was no incident that was biographical, it's just the character's thoughts were currently pretty close to my thoughts.

At this point in the writing, I added that my character worked at a magazine. I didn’t want the character to be directly me, and I felt we needed to know what he did for a living. And I decided that if I hadn’t been a playwright, I might have been a teacher, or maybe a journalist or maybe a magazine writer.

When I decided to make it be a fluffy magazine, I stumbled into the theme of the attractive nature of celebrities, and how magazine coverage and sometimes success in the world has to do with their sex appeal.

And suddenly the theme of sexual attraction was in my brain. And the next section of the speech is very similar to how I’ve felt with my own sexual longings and attractions.

Bit of a clarification: the Man says he's bisexual, but then admits he's more frequently attracted to men than to women.

I found this scary to say on-stage, at least initially.

I’m not actually bisexual, I’m gay. Though what I think in truth is that I am by nature bisexual, but that I have a strong "block" to sexual response to women that has kept me from being sexual with women. Though I definitely like women and often bond with them.

But a lot of people assumed I was bisexual due to the bisexual character of Bruce in Beyond Therapy – when in truth I based Bruce not on myself, but on another friend who was going through a bisexual phase (though later settled on being gay).

And so just like the fiction of "I work for a magazine" helped make the Man not literally me, I felt that including the idea the Man was bisexual helped for me, at least, to distance myself from the character a bit.

However, once the Man talks about his attractions and says he’s more frequently attracted to other men, from there on his thoughts and perceptions of early relationship flirting is very much what I’ve experienced.

Indeed from college on I experienced intense first responses to people I felt attracted to, which then, once a relationship began, were followed by intense and illogical fears of abandonment.

(I didn’t talk about the abandonment fears in the play, just the intensity of the initial flirtations.)
But around this time in my life, between therapy and Adult Children of Alcoholics, I did connect the abandonment fears to something my mother told me that I had no memory of: she said that when she lost the first child, when I was 3, that she went into a deep depression and she said “I didn’t know you were alive for about a year.” She told me this when I was 14. And strangely, I remember the day my mother came home from the hospital after losing the child – I remember the morning, I remember waiting in the car and seeing her come out of the hospital – and then I have no more memories for the next two years about. Hmmm. So I believe my intense abandonment fears come from that period I don’t remember.

Plus I wrote a fictional scene about this in Marriage of Bette and Boo in scene 12, when, as Matt says, “Margaret and Bette visit Emily, who is in a rest home due to nerves.” And in the scene Bette is silent, staring off, and in a deep depression; and isn’t quite sure who “Skippy” is. (Skippy is the nickname Bette gives to Matt as a child.)

Anyway, but back to this romantic/sexual part of Laughing Wild.

I wrote it intuitively again... and sort of stumbled into the theme as soon as I had the Man discuss people chosen to be featured in the magazine due to their attractiveness.

Actually, looking at the section today as I write this, I see that I actually focus on the idea that sexual attraction goes hand in hand with a feeling of “longing.” This predates my play CALLED Sex and Longing.

And, more to the point, it also ties in with the Woman’s comments about longing, when she says:

“Have you ever noticed how spring is lovely, but it fills one with sad longing because nothing in one’s life will ever live up to the sweet feelings it raises, and that fall is lovely but that it fills one with sad longing because everything is dying; and life is beautiful and awful and there’s no assuagement of this awful longing inside one? Have you all noticed that? I presume it’s a universal feeling, isn’t it? I know I feel it’s universal.”

And the man ALSO uses the words “no assuagement” when talking of longing triggered by sexual attractions.

I think the bigger topic of the Man’s sexual comments is that of “longing.” What is longing? It’s an inchoate feeling, it’s not even quite clear what one is longing for – a desire to “go home,” whatever that means. To feel safe, to feel cared for, to feel able to embrace what’s wonderful and beautiful. But mostly one has the longing without real fulfillment; it’s not possible to fulfill this longing, at least not on earth.
Then the Man also, humorously, talks about the more literal aspects of sexual attractions, and he contrasts it with the concept of “sex is beautiful.”

The Catholic Church -- and this one aunt of mine -- both like to proclaim that “sex is beautiful,” it’s sacred, it’s a sacrament.

But, experientially, that’s a lie. Sex is a strong and gritty drive, it’s not some lovely thing like a vase of white lilies.

“Sex is beautiful,” to me, is a lie made up by people who don’t like sex, and want to stop other people from having sex.

So there’s that theme.

And then there’s the “it’s humiliating to want something” theme about sexual longing. It makes one vulnerable to be wanting something/someone.

And then – for one paragraph at least – my realization – from own experience, but I have a hunch for many other people too – is that part of my getting to know someone, both just in friendship but also in early romantic exchanges, is “the flirtatious exchanges of childhood traumas.”

I find that most people have had some sort of upset in childhood; many of us have had a lot of upset. And when you’re getting to know someone else, you end up exchanging those stories... but oddly it’s part of the flirtation game.

Now from here... also remember I was writing intuitively, so I just stumbled into this topic too ... we come crashing into the topic of bisexuality and homosexuality and society’s feelings about that (especially their disapproval).

Being a baby boomer, I grew up during the period where homosexuality was not mentioned, it wasn’t on the radar; and when it was in plays and movies, it was indeed true that the homosexual character tended to kill him or herself out of shame. (Lillian Hellman’s The Children’s Hour, an interesting play, nonetheless does fit that description, and the woman who kills herself hadn’t even had a physical relationship with her woman friend, but kills herself anyway, she’s so ashamed by the mere fact of her attraction.)

So my family barely mentioned homosexuality. (Which was lucky for me. I did have friends who had families were virulent anti-gay, and would see signs of homosexuality in their child, and humiliate him and focus on him. That did not happen to me, thank goodness.)

But the Church mentioned it a lot, even when you were 7, when you were told that the commandment “thou shalt not commit adultery” forbade “all impurities in thought, word or deed, whether alone or with others.”
Who knew "adultery" had such a wide and vast meaning?

Anyway, I believed the church’s teachings about sex for my boyhood and teenage years.

Dear Jeannine,

I wrote the above lengthy response several days ago, and keep not being able to get back to it.

And I know I won’t get back to it for several more days....

So I’m going to send this now.

But the quick version of the rest of what I’d say is that as a baby boomer, I had to figure out on my own what I thought about homosexuality.

And I had to think through whether I thought God would send people to hell for eternity for sexual acts – including teenagers masturbating, who the church taught would go to hell forever. Boy, God didn’t have much perspective... Hitler in hell, and 13 year old boys in hell. Stupid if one thought about it outside of the by-rote brainwashing we all received.

I also started to find, as I no longer had a defined belief in God anymore, how really shocking it was to live in a society where people were instructed by other people to NEVER HAVE SEX EVER FOR THEIR ENTIRE LIVES – and why? Because of the beliefs of the people setting the rules – you were supposed to follow THEIR conscience. If you followed yours, you were told you were wrong; or the Catholic Church would say you didn’t have a “well formed” conscience (meaning your logic didn’t match theirs).

Add to thing Aids, that could kill... and the obsession about condoms, which I find idiotic and actually evil... I mean, people have died for the lack of information because some pig-headed person came up with a) God created sex for procreation; b) if you can’t have a baby with sex – because of its being gay or because of using a condom, that is a sin. And so in Africa, "we" go up to people and say, have you heard abstinence? You can stay alive if you never ever have sin. Good to meet you! And then if they disobey YOUR CONSCIENCE and get the disease and die (and spread it), well that’s their fault, isn’t it?

I find the Church and rightwing wing people on condoms kill with their beliefs.

The Infant of Prague section, in a giddly way, grew out of that feeling.
And the God/Gabriel – written before “Laughing Wild” was begun – was written pointedly as a response to those religious people who early in the Aids epidemic announced God was punishing homosexuals with the disease.

A punishing God who sends 13 years to hell for masturbation, and who comes up with a hideous disease to punish people is not a God I am able to believe in.

So... as you can see, the concerns in the play ARE my concerns. It's just I don't work in a magazine, and I don't teach positive thinking seminars.

Does that help?  CD
Hi, Jeannine,

I thought I'd share with you a quirk in how the topic of is the Man me or is he a character played out.

In the original production (with pics on the website), producer Andre Bishop and I both focused on wanting to suggest the Man was a character, and not me per say. Along those lines, Andre suggested to the costume designer William Ivey Long to dress me in a more trendy fashion than I would dress myself. And so, though it was somewhat subtle, that's what he did.

When a few years later (1990; original was 1987) I did the part again in LA, and the budget was small anyway, I just wore my own clothes that I might wear if I gave a speech somewhere - grey dress slacks, a blue blazer, regular shirt, a tie (with perhaps some dollop of color). All pretty unremarkable, but I had decided by now not to worry about distinguishing the part from myself.

When I did the play recently (2004 or 2005, I forget) at the Huntington, we did have a designer again. He dressed me a bit more formally than I would dress myself -- he got a medium-dark grey suit made for me, and gave me a black turtleneck. But in truth, I then bought the suit afterwards for my own wardrobe; and unlike the Playwrights Horizons the suit was just a nice suit, it didn't look "trendy" or anything.

The black turtleneck was a touch outside something I'd wear, but the designer was dressing Debra Monk as the woman in all black, and so he wanted me in gray and black (except for the Infant of Prague).

And finally one more costume thing -- in 1985 when William Ivey Long costumed "Marriage of Bette and Boo", he and I did indeed go shopping for Matt's costume together. But he dressed me very much as I dressed in college and in life - a dark sport coat, jeans, work shirt with loosened tie. The jean and sport coat in particular matched what I often wore (and wear).

So in any case, the costumes in the original "Laughing Wild" production were trying to differentiate me from role. And later on, I gave that up. best, Chris D
Jeannina: I just got the e-mail back undeliverable. Are you still cdurang8@aol.com?
CDurang8: Yes, I am.
Jeannina: Things are weird today.
CDurang8: Let me send you an email, see if you can get it.
Jeannina: OK, jeanninejames@verizon.net.
CDurang8: I'm sorry - you sent it from which email - verizon?
Jeannina: I just wrote to you at aol.
CDurang8: jeanninejames@verizon.net. I only use AOL for instant messenger.
Jeannina: question for you - do you think you were being overly-sensitive to the NY reviews of Titanic or were they really that bad? My professor has asked me to find these old reviews to see if they were really as bad as you made them out to be.
CDurang8: Hold on a sec.
Jeannina: I only use AOL for instant messenger.
CDurang8: hi back, you still there?
Jeannina: Still here.
CDurang8: Oh, okay.
Jeannina: thanks so much for telling me about the site.
CDurang8: The culprit is my publisher, Grove Atlantic. They own the website name, but let me have it for free. And they did something to their site which has affected mine. It will be solved, but may take a couple days -- weekend and all -- but at least it's not crazy hacking, which I worried about.
CDurang8: did my email to you go thru by the way?
Jeannina: That's a good thing. I'm glad I let you know.
CDurang8: no the e-mail did not go through.
Jeannina: I'm really appreciating it.
CDurang8: really? Gosh, this is weird about emails.
CDurang8: send yourself an email see if it goes thru.
CDurang8: I'll answer the Titanic question too, by the way.
Jeannina: I was looking for producers, director and theatre info for History of American Film but I got up and grabbed a book.
Jeannina: thanks.
CDurang8: I'll try you again.
Jeannina: sends to me no problem.
CDurang8: lol - about grabbing a book.
Jeannina: well don't know what's up with email then... maybe it's aol (though I got a few other emails).
CDurang8: I know and the question is really because I can't find reviews that old online and the other option is again going to the library.
CDurang8: I'll try you again.
CDurang8: about "Titanic" - no they really were bad. I do have copies, but it would take me a while (maybe) to find them, but I probably could.
CDurang8: the NY Times off-off Bway was mixed but actually good. When we moved to off-Bway, it changed to mixed but kind of bad (but not a killer). But the Daily News was really bad, the NY Post said it was awful and he couldn't imagine how I was ever awarded an MFA from Yale.
CDurang8: And then the Village Voice wrote "Durang goes down with his ship" - and wrote a long review that didn't mention the director or a single actor, but was only about how unfunny I was, and that furthermore the play showed I hated women.
Jeannina: It's OK. I quoted several from your own quotes - I actually have a problem with using reviews as well because I want to use only your own words to prove my thesis - especially so much of it is psychological rather than literal.
CDurang8: I asked my agent if anyone would ever do my plays again after that, and she said "people forget reviews." Which is mostly true (though not 100% true).
Jeannina: Well they definitely have done your plays after that.
CDurang8: There was one other mixed but nice review - "The New Yorker" in the person of Edith Oliver said that "Titanic" was a mess but that it showed talent and was "merrily and innocently obscene" (something phrase like that). And then she gave the curtain raiser with me and Sigourney a rave review, including for both of our performances. So it was the Post, News, and Voice (and a few I'm forgetting) that were awful.
No, the focus of the bad reviews was the writing
CDurang8: Looked at from a distance, the NY Times being mixed but not hateful; and the New Yorker being kind of nice (in a national magazine) meant it wasn’t as bad as I thought, kind of.

Jeannina: that’s exactly what I have down - it’s been amazing but every e-mail you have written me has just confirmed my thesis so I’m doing good

CDurang8: oh good...

Jeannina: and the 2nd test I sent you just failed again - it must be quirky today - if I get lost again I’ll IM you

CDurang8: ok... very very strange

I just emailed myself and it went thru

Jeannina: thanks again for all the support - I hope to finish soon - it actually took me a while to scale down as I have enough to write an entire dissertation and I had to be willing to let go of a lot of fabulous material and focus

CDurang8: when are you meant to hand it in?

Jeannina: they are pretty flexible - I have to finish by December 2009 for my 6 years to finish the degree deadline but other than that it’s an open book

CDurang8: so when are you hoping to finish.... or is it a bit open to you?

Jeannina: I really was trying to finish by May but have had to accept that it takes a long time to get each draft back from the readers - sometimes 3-4 weeks. I am hoping to have it approved by the end of August so I can get a raise (you know teacher’s only get a raise with more degrees).

Jeannina: It’s written (less the final chapter) and is just going through the revision process.

Jeannina: I hope you won’t think it too personal

CDurang8: hold on a sec, website issue

CDurang8: oh well I gave up

CDurang8: my publisher needs my server/ISP address to repoint my site BACK to it... so I called earthlink to see if they could help. but I got someone from India who listened uncomprehendingly, and then disconnected me

Jeannina: the whole technology thing is outside my area of expertise - I much prefer dealing with real people

CDurang8: earthlink hosts my website

CDurang8: yes but not when they’re from India, and English is their second language and they’re not paid much

Jeannina: oh I hate it when the customer service calls are routed to India - not only can you not understand them, but that’s lots of lost jobs here -plus they are being taken advantage of and work for far too little

CDurang8: absolutely - about the lost jobs

companies save money by paying less and not giving health insurance

Jeannina: I went through it with Amazon last night - but then I also what to save money and get the great prices they offer so I guess I’m as much to blame

CDurang8: oh I’ve always had smooth dealings with Amazon... did you need to talk to a real person for some reason?

Jeannina: I accidentally hit 1 step ordering and it pulled an old address and shipped my items to a HS I no longer teach at - they could not stop the shipment but we had to try and locate it at teh school

CDurang8: oh yes that would cause 99 hours worth of communication needs

Jeannina: however, when you ask for a phone call (which I was initially skeptical - the phone instantly rings at your house and you are connected with a real person no waiting) I found that pretty impressive

CDurang8: oh that is impressive

Jeannina: I finally got my item, but they had to ship me another one.

Jeannina: it’s pretty cool actually - you typein your number, hitenter and your phone rings

Jeannina: anyway I have to get back to work - it was very nice talking to you

CDurang8: thanks you too

Jeannina: good luck with the website

CDurang8: thanks

I’m trying calling earthlinke again
Jeannina: hi Mr Durang - it's Jeannine the grad student who is almost finished her thesis on your work - may I ask what happens to Lulu in Act 3?
CDurang8: oh hi, sorry am just about to go to store and was away from my computer
CDurang8: let me try to email you later
CDurang8: let me check if you get an email from me
Jeannina: ok
Jeannina: I just wanted to know if she went back to her sexual ways or remained in "recovery"
Jeannina: I never got to see Act 3 and as you know haven't been able to read it
CDurang8: she remains in weird, conservative sexual shut down (not perhaps convincingly written by me). and then she gets killed by Jack the Ripper who isn't dead after all... and then she comes back after death to talk to Justin at her funeral, and worry about the future of the world
CDurang8: I sent u a quick email, tell me if it went thru
Jeannina: no it didn't - I don't know why I can't get emails from you anymore - it's very frustrating
CDurang8: you should maybe talk to aol... other people are getting them
Jeannina: so does it end hopeful?
CDurang8: do you have another email address?
Jeannina: anyway I don't want to keep you - just trying to see if the ending fit into my thesis
Jeannina: just jeanninejames@verizon.net
CDurang8: didn't we initially talk by email?
Jeannina: yes that's why it makes no sense to me
Jeannina: I have to see if somehow you are blocked, but that would be odd because I get tons of junk mail that gets through
Jeannina: you could send it to my brother kenhutchinson@mail.com and he can forward to me
CDurang8: doesn't really end hopefully, no...
the last act is a failure I think
Jeannina: I just sent u an email to your other email address, check it later
CDurang8 signed off at 2:39:07 PM.
CDurang8 signed on at 3:58:12 PM.
CDurang8: I sent you an attempt at describing Act 3 to you, to your verizon address. Did you check your spam folder on aol? Could be I'm mistakenly thought to be spam...
CDurang8 signed off at 4:27:04 PM.
CDurang8 signed on at 10:21:20 PM.
CDurang8: did you get the long email I sent you at verizon? (telling plot of act 3)?
Jeannina: I just read it
Jeannina: wow I really missed a lot when I was forced to stop watching halfway through Act 2
CDurang8: oh good just wanted to be sure you got it.
also what about my question about your aol spam file?
Jeannina: I didn't see the Reverend and Lulu have sex or anything after
Jeannina: I don't use aol for email at all anymore - I was tired of having 300 e-mails a day, most of them junk
Jeannina: when I send you my thesis to read (and I promise I will) I really hope that you will not think I have overstepped my role as researcher
Jeannina: it has become very psychological
CDurang8: ah... well hope you don't use "Sex and Longing" for too much in that regard, in that you only saw part of it (though I suppose you can have opinions on the first half; I didn't recall you only saw half of act 2)
Jeannina: BUT I have made a point ONLY to use your own words and just a few quotes on your style from Brustein and Stein that were published in your books
Jeannina: I thought I saw more than apparently I did - I saw the hearings and then the library was closing
Jeannina: no- the majority of the thesis deals with Bette and Boo, Sister Mary and Laughing Wild
CDurang8: you saw the hearings? (there are hearings in act 1 and in act 3... u didn't see act 3)
did you see her attacked at the end of act 1 by Jack the Ripper?
Jeannina: it's basically about your work being therapy for your own personal tragedies and losses
Jeannina: I saw her get attacked, I definitely saw her being reconditioned by the Reverend and the Senator's wife, I saw a porn doll (which I thought was hysterical) sitting on a committee
Jeannina: I was a long day and it starts to run together - I watched all of Laughing Wild and Bette and Boo first and then went over to see Adrift in macao
CDurang8: I see - well the Reverend reconditioning her was definitely early part of act2; the porno doll was act 1, mid-way about. Yes, it must have been an intense day to see so much material
Jeannina: I was just trying to place the show in the evolution of your work and did not want to make assumptions having not seen the 3rd act
Jeannina: thank you so much for the description - I hope one day you will revisit the show - I loved what I saw
CDurang8: thanks. some of it is good, I admit; but as I described act 3, I thought "wow, this sounds a mess; the story telling is too complex and confusing"
Jeannina: anything new in the works
CDurang8: not really. I've been working on a very political play (about blue state/red state disagreements) for the Public theatre; i intended to write a draft this summer, but all of July raced by with almost no work done. hmmm
Jeannina: I know the feeling - I don't know how writer's discipline themselves to get things done without crushing their creativity'
CDurang8: when is your thesis due? you probably said earlier, but I forgot
Jeannina: whenever I finish it - I suspect I just have to reread the conclusion and add some more exposition and then it will be off to a second reader at the University
CDurang8: I see
Jeannina: my first reader is so excited that I placed the evolution of your work into the psychological Stages of Grief and Grief Work ( and they do SEEM to fit pretty easily) I believe it may almost be good to go
Jeannina: I have to admit - I started out simply looking for autobiographical tendencies but found that I have to make a point and try to prove it (rather than just do a research paper) that it feels very personal -
CDurang8: oh interesting. to be honest, I had a slight reaction against the word "therapy" in your earlier section... though I am comfortable with the idea I'm writing from own psychology and from my family's psychology... and I've come to believe that the unexpressed grief at the death of the babies, felt by my parents and picked up by me, has had a big effect on me
Jeannina: especially since you have been so wonderful - I don't think that any of what I am saying in my thesis has been concious
Jeannina: it's actually aimed more at the loss - being the loss of your childhood religion and faith
CDurang8: well loss seems a promising way to analyze my writing
Jeannina: would you like to see the matrix?
CDurang8: sorry... what does matrix mean in this context?
Jeannina: how I have tied your plays in the stages of grief and recovery
Jeannina: actually I would be willing to have you read the thesis whenever you would like - I'm just terrified that you will disagree with my analysis and send me back to the beginning
Jeannina: but you may actually confirm some things or redirect me where I may have gone astray
CDurang8: I think I'd feel better see the finished work... though your kind to offer the above. but I think I feel it's wiser to let you (and your advisers) come to your own conclusions. which I'd then find interesting to look at. but again, the use of grief seems a promising "lens" to look at the work through
Jeannina: that makes me feel a bit better - it's basically says that you are/were a tortured artist who worked out his issues in his art
CDurang8: "worked out his issues" sounds fine to me. and probably accurate
Jeannina: I've actually been thinking in the last few days that it seems so simple and such a "normal" thing to expect from most true artists that I don't know why it took so long to find it - I think everything is so deeply disguised in dark comedy perhaps
CDurang8: I do think comedy "disguises" things to some degree; one reason I like when the comedies (most of them) have some serious moments in them... sincerely or emotionally played... Jeannina: personally, I love the moments when the characters seem to briefly step outside the play and speak directly from your own heart and your own experiences
CDurang8: tjanms (or thanks)
Jeannina: well - it's late and I've troubled you far too much for one day - Lulu's fate does indeed fit my matrix I appreciate your help
CDurang8: yes, need to go to bed too
Jeannina: I'll let you know when it's done - I am aiming to get it to the 2nd reader before the semester starts as he just took over as Chair and will be overwhelmed if I wait too long
Jeanmina: good night
CDurang8: good night