



PHOTO: EST

Life-changing

From 'Blue Leaves' to dancing legumes, remembering the plays that transform us

LAST DECEMBER, *the American Theatre Wing and Applause Books* came out with a little paperback that got a lot of people talking. *The Play That Changed My Life: America's Foremost Playwrights on the Plays That Influenced Them* inspired dozens of theatre professionals, academics, critics, and bloggers, and a surprising number of people outside the field, to solicit and share their own stories of "desire... [of being] caught in the tantalizing web of theatrical allure," as Paula Vogel writes in the book's introduction. The Theatre Wing sponsored a contest on the subject; you can read and watch some of the best entries at www.americantheatrewing.org.

We at Dramatics became fans of the book, of course, and of its thrilling premise: that on any given night, in any theatre or church basement or high school cafetorium in America, something might happen that could make the world a beautifully different place, a place of magic and welcome and possibility, for at least one person. Maybe in your town, tonight, that person will be you.

So, with thanks to the authors and to American Theatre Wing executive director Howard Sherman—the book was his idea—here are a few

John Maboney, Swoozie Kurtz, and Ben Stiller in the 1986 Broadway production of The House of Blue Leaves, a play that had a profound effect on David Auburn.

of our own picks from The Play That Changed My Life: excerpts from interviews by editor Ben Hodges, with Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights Lynn Nottage (Ruined), Suzan-Lori Parks (Topdog/Underdog), and Nilo Cruz (Anna in the Tropics); and a longer essay by David Auburn (Proof), reprinted with permission.

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Seduced by the possibilities

BEN HODGES: The title of the book is *The Play That Changed My Life*. Were there influences that you could point to that had a large impact on you?

LYNN NOTTAGE: Well, I guess the best way for me to answer this question is to go back to my very, very first memory of going to the theatre, which was seeing a production of a children's play at a community college in Brooklyn. The show was called *Succotash on Ice*. I mention it because it really must have made a tremendous psychic impression, because after all these years—and I have seen hundreds of plays—I still remember the extraordinary moment when this oversized refrigerator on stage opened up and inside there were talking lima beans and corn, and I was absolutely entranced. And I think that was the first moment that I was seduced by the possibilities of theatre. I remember turning to my mother, with my mouth

wide open, speechless—I didn't even have language to ask her what was going on or express my wonder. I was just like, "Do you see what I'm seeing? Talking lima beans?" And so, you know, we can speak about plays that stylistically and intellectually influenced us, such as *Mother Courage* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. They are plays that were really very, very important to me when I first encountered them. They challenged me to engage the social and political sides of my brain, but I have to turn to something like *Succotash on Ice* as being the play that really transformed me, because it opened up a whole new creative universe for me. It is where I really feel that I understood how magical and special theatre could be.

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The guru is in you

SUZAN-LORI PARKS: Talking about the play that changed your life or the teacher who you believe made you a writer is a beautiful opportunity to give thanks to those who helped us along the way. And it also might be sending a constricting message to those who have yet to find that teacher, that path, that singular event. So let's say that maybe the special event doesn't exist. Maybe *every* event, maybe *every* person, is special. Maybe you don't have to get into Harvard to be-

come a success. Maybe the guru is in you. There are a lot of up-and-coming writers these days who believe that they have to get into a certain school or study with a certain writer to become a success, or to become a “real writer.”

When writers believe this, they place an expectation on an institution or teacher or external system—and we all know there’s a lot of letdown that happens after graduation! Just yesterday (really) on the street a young man came up to me and thanked me for my work and told me that he wouldn’t have become a writer if it hadn’t been for me. I acknowledged his thanks and then I looked him in the eye and told him what I believe is true: that he would have become a writer with or without me. I wanted him to know that he would have done it. An oak is an oak. A redwood will be a redwood. Who you are *will out*. You will. You will out yourself. I acknowledge the challenges of people in very difficult circumstances, and—right now speaking to those of us in the middle ground—I want to encourage artists to realize that while teachers, classes, and events can help you, you should not expect them to *make* you.

‘It was astounding’

NILO CRUZ: I don’t recall seeing any theatre in Cuba. I do remember being exposed to the world of entertainment. When I was a child—I was eight or nine years old—my family always went to the beach in the summer; it was a ritual, and my father used to rent a family room at a famous hotel called Hotel Internacional in Varadero Beach. I was ten years younger than my sisters. They were already engaged around that time, and in the evenings my whole family loved going to the hotel’s cabaret to dance and enjoy the show, including my grandmother. This meant that nobody wanted to stay home and babysit me. So one evening my father said, “We’ll take him with us tonight.

We’ll take him to the cabaret. I have friends there. We’ll sneak him through the kitchen and it’s going to be all right.” And they did. They sneaked me through the kitchen and basically hid me under the cabaret table, where my family was sitting, which was covered in a white tablecloth. Then, when the lights went off in the cabaret, and the show started, I lifted the tablecloth and started watching the show. The waiter of course saw me, smiled and said, “It’s okay. Let him stay. Let him watch the show.” And that was the first time I saw live entertainment. I was just amazed to see all the lights, to see the showgirls, and it wasn’t just the kind of dancing that you see in Las Vegas—the dancers danced ballet too. I was just dazzled by the vibrant music, by the exuberant energy coming from the stage.

HODGES: It must have seemed rather magical for a kid.

CRUZ: More than magical. It was astounding. Intoxicating. Imagine being a little boy and being exposed to this energizing and powerful music, and all the colorful images coming from the stage, including lots of flesh from the showgirls. So when I went back home, I gathered some friends from the neighborhood and I put on a show on my grandmother’s patio. Basically that was sort of the seed, my first attempt to recreate what I had experienced and witnessed on a stage. Actually, now I am writing a libretto for a musical that is set in a nightclub in the 1950s, *Havana*, and I constantly travel back in time to those early impressions—the lushness of that first cabaret show I ever saw.

‘Sheer, overwhelming exuberance’

DAVID AUBURN: I was seventeen. We were living in Little Rock, Arkansas, and I set our VCR to record a PBS broadcast of a play I had read about in the TV listings. It sounded odd and interesting and I had never heard of it: *The House of Blue Leaves*. A play from the early seventies, evidently,



SUSAN JOHANN

LYNN NOTTAGE

but a new production on Broadway. I couldn’t watch the broadcast live because I was working late at the theatre.

I was already deeply involved in the theatre, albeit with absolutely no interest in pursuing it professionally. I just liked hanging around actors and working backstage. I had even found ways to earn a little money doing it.

We had moved to Little Rock the year before. It was my family’s second move in two years. If you move a lot you look for ways to make friends quickly, to plug yourself into familiar social situations. Sports do this, but I wasn’t much interested in sports. Theatre was better. My brother and I figured this out—try out for the school play, or go down to the community theatre and ask to help out. It was something to do. The adults in charge were often eccentric and entertaining. You stayed up late, got a buzz from the performance energy even if you weren’t performing. You got to climb ladders wearing tool belts. Girls were involved.

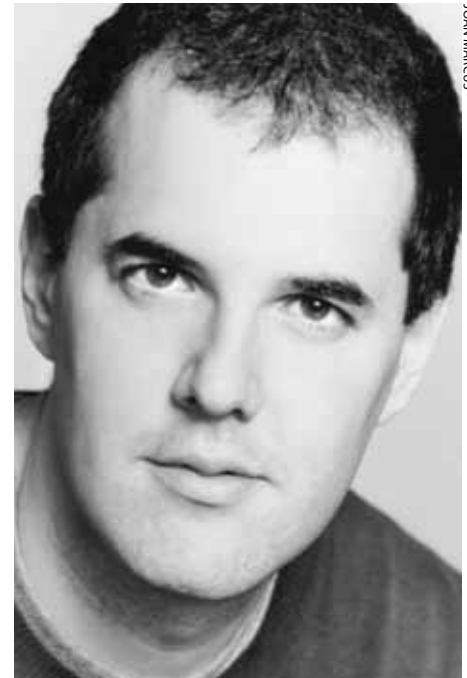
And Little Rock was a good theatre town. It had two professional theatres. One, the Arkansas Rep, didn’t hire teenage stagehands, but I found work there a couple of times a year working their benefit dinners as a busboy.



SUZAN-LORI PARKS



NILO CRUZ



DAVID AUBURN

(One night I walked into the dining room with a bag of ice on my shoulder for the bar and got a nod from the governor, Bill Clinton.) If you worked the dinner you could go to the show. At the Rep I saw productions of modern plays like *Quartermaine's Terms* and *The Night of the Iguana*.

These plays were interesting but, like the much older plays I had been taken to growing up and was more familiar with (my dad was an English professor and his academic specialty was Sheridan, so I'd seen four or five productions of *The School for Scandal*, a bunch of Restoration plays, and lots of Shakespeare), the experience of seeing and enjoying them never shook me from my vague and strangely firm conviction that my future career path lay in international diplomacy.

I'm not sure how I formed this notion of my future career, or even what the notion was, exactly—myself as some sort of high-level envoy or international aid worker, maybe. That I spent no time at all working in or even reading about this area, and spent a great deal of time hanging out at theatres and acting in school plays, didn't remotely impose on my assumption that theatre was a hobby that I'd abandon as soon as I went to college and got seri-

ous about my international relations studies.

The second of Little Rock's professional houses was the Arkansas Arts Center Children's Theatre, and I spent much more time here. It had a permanent repertory company of six or seven actors, and a group of maybe fifteen or twenty teenagers hung around to perform in the shows or work backstage. If you worked on a show at the AAC you got permission to skip school to run the matinees. Being a children's theatre, all the performances were matinees. That meant ten or twenty days of driving downtown to the theatre instead of to high school. You felt like a professional, going to work.

The Children's Theatre didn't pay, but when the Arkansas Opera Theatre took over the Arts Center's auditorium for their three or four annual productions, they needed experienced sound- and light-board operators. They didn't care that I was seventeen. I worked *Rigoletto*, *The Barber of Seville*, *A Little Night Music*. I was hired—miraculously, *paid*—to run the Arts Center's primitive boards. These boards drove the lighting designers brought in from New York or Chicago insane. They were used to writing hundreds of cascading computerized

cues. In Little Rock they were limited by the speed at which a teenage board-op on his knees in front of a manual preset bank could enter the individual dimmer settings—up to twenty per preset, and up to twenty presets. It was nerve-racking to be yelled at by these anxious, aggressive pros demanding that you keep the hell up, but exhilarating to find that you could.

More important even than the practical experience, if you hung around the professionals enough you got invited to their parties. Here were adults who talked to us seriously about life and art; and more to the point gave us wine and cigarettes and let us make out on their couches, and sometimes flirted with us themselves. One fantastic night, an impossibly older actress—was she thirty?—perched on the arm of the chair I was sitting in and quietly took my hand mid-conversation and slipped it up her shirt.

So why, given the fact of all this highly stimulating immersion—of my de facto high-school-age semi professionalism—did I remain oblivious to the possibilities of a career in the theatre? Why did it take a VHS recording of a Broadway revival shown on TV to tip me toward something approaching the beginnings of professional ambition?

I still have the tape I made of the broadcast. Watching it again now, and rereading the play, it is clear *The House of Blue Leaves* is about ambition—about fame, and the hunger for recognition and success. But this is not what struck me at the time. It barely registered.

What registered—and it was with real shock, when I finally watched the tape, late at night after getting home from a show—was the play's sheer, overwhelming exuberance. I had never seen a "serious" play with such an utter lack of solemnity or restraint. It was nothing, *nothing* like the thoughtful, well-tailored contemporary classics that I saw at the Rep. It seemed *crazy*, inexplicable—a farce with songs, direct address to the audience, a kid who wanted to blow up the pope, a deaf movie star, a chorus of angry nuns, a character called Bananas.

Nor could I figure out how to reconcile the play's overflowing high spirits with the despair at its core, or the shocking, violent ending. *The House of Blue Leaves* is a despairing play. All the characters are grievously afflicted by illness and terror, beset by humiliations and frustrated longings of the most agonizing kind. How was it that this darkness coexisted alongside such loony hilarity—and not merely coexisted, because it wasn't just that the terror and the jokes didn't conflict with one another, they actively generated one another—the jokes becoming expressive of the terror and vice versa?

After many viewings, I decided, provisionally, that maybe the simplest way to explain the play was as a demonstration of the utility of jokes. Jokes could do anything, or everything—illuminate character, provide exposition, generate plot, establish a logic that went beyond conventional explanations of motive and allowed the playwright to go places he wouldn't otherwise be able to go.

Here is Bananas' Act I explanation of how her "troubles all began":

I drove into Manhattan... Forty-second Street. Broadway. Four

corners. Four people. One on each corner. All waving for taxis. Cardinal Spellman. Jackie Kennedy. Bob Hope. President Johnson. All carrying suitcases. Taxi! Taxi! I stop in the middle of the street—the middle of Broadway—and I get out of my [car] and yell, "Get in. I'm a gypsy. A gypsy cab. Get in. I'll take you where you want to go. Don't you all know each other? Get in! Get in!"

It goes on from there. There's a laugh on nearly every beat. It's like a succession of punch lines, but cumulatively the surrealism of this near-standup monologue becomes a better explanation of Bananas' frustrated longings than any realistic explication could. (And in Swoosie Kurtz's performance in the production I saw, the jokes were almost unbearably painful.) A string of jokes; but, John Guare seemed to be saying: see what jokes can do?

I liked this explanation because it fit with another intense interest I had. My father, the Sheridan scholar, was also crazy about comedy. Comedy LPs were the other entertainment staple of my childhood, the soundtrack, to my mother's occasional annoyance, of every family car trip—Monty Python, *Beyond the Fringe*, Bill Cosby, Tom Lehrer, Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, and (my favorite) the manic and possibly actually insane Jonathan Winters. My brother and I memorized the bits and made best-of cassettes and entertained or irritated our friends with our own renditions.

Much later, I read Guare's own explanation of the origin of his play: seeing, on successive nights, the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain's productions of *Dance of Death* and *A Flea in Her Ear*, and wondering, "Why shouldn't Strindberg and Fedyeau get married, at least live together, and *The House of Blue Leaves* be their child?"

Maybe an analogous fusion eventually occurred for me, triggered by seeing *The House of Blue Leaves*—of

those endlessly spinning comedy records with their endless jokes, and the experiences in those Little Rock theatres where I spent so much time. Why shouldn't they belong together? Why shouldn't the source of so much fun also be the place where you go to work?

The next year when I got to college in Chicago I was bored to tears by my International Relations course. I looked for a theatre. There was a student sketch-comedy group on campus. I auditioned and got in. I started trying to write my own scenes, my own jokes.

One of my first weeks in town, I noticed *The House of Blue Leaves* was playing in Evanston. It was hard to get to. I took the bus downtown, then the El, then another bus. Getting there took an hour and a half. The production was disappointing. I didn't care. I was out in the city and going to plays. On the long train ride home I could think about the scenes and jokes I would try to write for my troupe. Maybe eventually the scenes would get longer and my jokes better—better meaning not just funnier, but capable of doing more than one thing at a time. Maybe I'd try to write a play someday. ▼