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Reflections on Theatre in New York City after September 11, 2001

by

Dana Ivey

Hello. I am happy to be here to take part in this wonderful festival. My thanks to all the festival committees, and especially to Professor Ahmed for inviting me to participate.

I would like to talk about several ideas: my experience of performing in a play in New York during the September 11, 2001 World Trade center attacks; then briefly about a special performance given a year later to commemorate 9/11; then I would like to discuss two plays I have seen in the last year, both of which were written in response to 9/11, followed by a short summary of other authors and plays.

Some of you may know me as an actress, but I'm sure many of you do not. I have lived and worked in New York for over 25 years, and before that I lived and worked in both Atlanta, GA and in Canada. I have a degree in theatre from Rollins College in Winter Park, FL and studied for a year following my degree in London, England at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. I have done all kinds of theatre, from the Greeks and Shakespeare to the latest new plays -- comedies, dramas, farce, tragedy. One of the things on my mind right now is the effect of worldwide tensions on our ability to respond to tragedy. Since tragedy is with us every day in events around the world, it is sometimes hard for audiences to relate to tragedy in the theatre -- as the saying goes, I can get that at home.

However, I had an interesting experience in September 2001 when I was playing in "Major Barbara" by George Bernard Shaw. "Major Barbara" is one of my favorite plays. Shaw juxtaposes a maker of weapons against a religious leader. As many of you know, the play tells the story of Andrew Undershaft, the maker of weapons, who was an orphan and came into the inheritance of the armament business by adoption. He marries the daughter of an Earl, bringing money to impoverished aristocracy. His conservative wife, Lady Britomart, has banished him from the house, deeming his revolutionary thinking unsuitable for the children. The title character is their daughter Barbara, who joins the Salvation Army, a religious organization devoted to helping the poor. The hierarchy of the Salvation Army uses military terminology, and so Barbara becomes a "Major" in the Salvation Army, in charge of a center that provides food and clothing for the poor. It also makes the poor that they help listen to preaching and sing hymns. The Salvation Army's aim is to convert the poor recipients of their charity to a fervent Christianity that brings them solace and joy in their poor and destitute lives. Barbara glows with the inner conviction of the truth of her religion and the happiness it brings her and others. Her father, on the other hand, does not believe in religion. Or rather, he believes in an unorthodox religion. He believes that if you give a man enough money for his work, he will take pride in taking care of himself and his family and will be a happy and contributing member of society. After visiting his daughter Barbara's Salvation Army shelter, Mr. Undershaft invites his family to his armaments factory, which they all believe will be a vision of hell. To their surprise, it is a clean, well-ordered place and the workers village is a model of organization and services. The people who work in the factory take pride in their work. And Mr. Undershaft gives several impassioned speeches about being

above religion and society in the manufacturing and sale of arms. George Bernard Shaw's writing is very provocative, even today. When it was written in 1910 it was blasphemy.

We had been performing "Major Barbara" for several months and had one more week of performances left before the announced closing when the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center happened. I live in upper Manhattan, far away from the World Trade Center, so I was not directly effected by the damage, and I followed the events of that day the television, as did most of the rest of the world.

Around noon, the stage manager for "Major Barbara" called to officially cancel the performance that night. I really wanted to go in and do the show, in the spirit of the theatres that were kept open during the London blitz in World War Two. But all public transportation was off and no audience would have been there. We didn't perform again the following day, canceling a matinée and an evening show. We did perform the next day, though. That Thursday all the Broadway theatres were back in business. We had an audience of about 300 people, less than half of the theatre's capacity, and the play had been selling out.

Our Mr. Undershaft, the great British actor David Warner, went out on stage before the curtain to speak to the audience. He was very nervous about performing the play because in the play his character takes the stand that weapons themselves are neither good nor evil, and some of the ideas Shaw expresses through him seemed frighteningly close to the reasoning of those who attacked the World Trade Center.

He spoke briefly about the terrible tragedy that had happened and

thanked the audience for coming and applauded their bravery in doing so. They seemed grateful for the public acknowledgment of an unusual situation, and it did seem to help them settle into the familiar role of audience member, reassuring them that the fabric of our culture was not torn, and that life was going on as usual.

The audience was more attentive than previous audiences had been. They seemed very conscious of the act of attending the theatre. Their coming to the theatre on that night was a statement of their beliefs; a declaration of their support of our way of life. Both the audience and the cast members were very aware of this heightened sensibility of the occasion. I'm sure that similar feelings were felt all over the city, at other theatres and at concerts. There was an unspoken need for the arts to continue and to represent what our culture meant to us on a broader level. As actors we initially felt useless in response to the terrorist attacks, and theatre seemed frivolous and of no importance. The skills necessary for dealing with the awful destruction of the World Trade Center and lower Manhattan did not lie with us. Very quickly, though, people made it clear that going to the theatre was important and was essentially what was being fought for, in what was now being spoken of as a war of cultures. The freedom to attend theatre, concerts, cultural gatherings of any kind, was recognized as an essential component of our way of life. Going to the theatre, in and of itself, became a statement in support of being an American.

I hasten to add that this heightened consciousness and feeling of connection with the theatre as representative of our freedoms did not last long. And although this patriotic feeling existed, the fact is that many, many audience members stayed away, putting severe strain on

many productions.

Since many shows in New York depend on the tourist trade, the lack of tourists made for very difficult financial times. People from all across the U.S. and from other countries, were afraid to come to New York. The consequence for Broadway theatre was felt by everyone. Cuts in pay were agreed to by all the unions in order to keep shows open. Some productions could not survive and had to close. Even more hard hit were the Off-Broadway theatres. Many of them are located downtown and audiences literally could not get to them because of police lines and barriers.

A year later, a remembrance celebration was organized at Town Hall. It was called "Brave New World" and was a three-day event involving all the theatre arts. Playwrights wrote monologues and short plays for the event, often for actors that they frequently work with. Songwriters wrote songs, and most of the well-known and not-so-well-known actors and singers in New York were invited to be a part of this remembrance. I was honored to have been asked by Alfred Uhry to do a monologue that he had written especially for the event. Audience members paid for their tickets, and all the proceeds went to help families of those who died on September 11.

Alfred Uhry and I are good friends. I created the role of Daisy in the original "Driving Miss Daisy," and the role of Boo in "The Last Night of Ballyhoo," which won a Tony Award on Broadway. Alfred and I are both from Atlanta, GA, so we share a background, and he knows that I "hear" the words he writes the way he intends them to be said. The monologue written by Alfred Uhry for the "Brave New World" event

portrayed a middle-aged woman, a Southern matron in Atlanta, GA, talking on the phone on the morning of September 11. Early in the morning she speaks with her daughter who is on her way to work. Her daughter works in New York, and at the very end of the piece, we realize she works at the World Trade Center. Her daughter is planning to be married in Atlanta at the end of the week, and her mother is busy arranging the wedding. The mother, who is animated and funny, uses call waiting, and speaks to the wedding planner, and to the daughter's fiancé, and to her husband, and again to the daughter and fiancé. Her final call is one she receives from her daughter, who has arrived at work and who calls to tell her mother that she loves her. Her mother laughingly says "I know you love me, honey," and then hears a loud explosion, and slowly realizes what has happened as she keeps calling out her daughter's name. Mr. Uhry told me that he wanted to write a piece about someone who would seem to be the least likely person to be affected by the terrorist attacks, someone who was far away from them and lived a life that was far removed from the target. The piece was extremely compelling for the audience. The humor of the piece gave no indication of where it was going, so that the sudden turnaround in tone and attitude at the very end was a surprise and all the more effective.

Since September 11, 2001, there have been many plays written in response to the events of that day. The enormity of what happened has permeated the writing of most of the playwrights in New York City, on some level. Earlier this year, I saw two of these plays, given at two different theatres in New York City. There have been many more, but these two are by well-known playwrights in New York, playwrights who have their work done all over the United States and in other countries.

The first play I saw was called "The Mercy Seat," and of all the plays, is the one that is most directly related to 9/11. It takes place on September 12, the day after the World Trade Center disaster, and is set in an apartment in downtown Manhattan, where the streets outside are grey with layers of dust. "The Mercy Seat" is a 90-minute, two-character play by Neil LaBute, who is known for his plays "Bash" and "The Shape of Things," as well as for some films he has written and directed. He also directed the play. It was produced by the Manhattan Class Company, and ran for about three months in a small theatre in Theatre Row on 42nd Street. It starred Sigourney Weaver and Liev Schreiber. Both Sigourney and Liev are considered theatre stars and well as film stars, and their participation in the project gave it a heightened profile which brought it a lot of attention.

Although the play is set on September 12 against the backdrop of the events of September 11, it is really a conventional play about a relationship. The woman is the man's boss at a firm with offices at the World Trade Center. She has been the aggressor in the relationship, and she is older than the man. Both are married to others. They argue about what story to tell people about where they were when the Towers fell, because instead of being at work, they were in the apartment having sex. The man is not happy with his life or his marriage, and wants to use the event as a way of disappearing and starting a new life. The woman thinks it's not an ethical or moral thing to do.

I interviewed Sigourney Weaver, who told me that Neil LaBute got the idea for the play when he was stuck on a train on September 11 and was irritated by the inconvenience. He was struck by his own shallowness in having that attitude to an event of such enormity, and he

wanted to write a play about someone who was even more shallow that he himself. So he came up with this young go-getter named Ben, played by Liev Schreiber, who has an affair with his boss, and thinks about using the death of thousands and a world turned upside-down to cover for his disappearance from his marriage and job.

Mr. LaBute wants to show us the other side of the heroic. So much has been written about "heroes" -- the firemen, the policemen, and all of those who died while trying to save others. LaBute shows us "the angry whine of the morally flabby," that takes no notice of the lives of others and is so self-involved that catastrophe becomes a personal tool. The attacked and collapsed World Trade Center creates a crisis that calls forth different qualities, and LaBute is interested in showing us some of the worst characteristics of an ordinary man in contrast to the heroism displayed by many others.

Ben Brantley, the critic for the New York Times, wrote in his review of the play: The morning before the play begins, Ben had been on his way to a meeting at the World Trade Center and had stopped off to see Abby. At about the same time the first plane was hurtling toward the towers, Abby was providentially performing oral sex on Ben. Now Ben is officially among the missing, and he sees the chance to break away from his marriage, his suburban home, his job. But before Abby agrees to walk into the sunset with her lover, she wants to assess their relationship.

It goes without saying that this leads to much bickering and painful self-disclosures. In other words, they're the sorts of things that unhappy adulterous lovers in plays and movies usually talk about. Lovers scrapping in ordinary if

unpleasant ways automatically becomes a bleak statement on human nature when an apocalypse is the background.

As the play begins, Ben is alone in Abby's apartment, his eyes are wet, his face a blank. The grim joke here is that it's not the contemplation of unspeakable catastrophe that has reduced Ben to this state. It's self-pity."

Although this response to September 11, 2001 is actually a facile one, merely using it as a backdrop to heighten the tension between a man and a woman, it is also the one play that has a direct connection to the day itself. It does not embrace a discussion of politics or wider concerns in the world, as does the other play that I saw in the same time period.

The play "O Jerusalem," written by A.R. Gurney is one of those plays that looks at the wider question of world politics. A. R. Gurney is better known as Pete to the theatrical community in New York. He is a well-known playwright whose canvas has usually drawn on the lives of upper-middle-class WASPs -- or white anglo-saxon protestants. And his usual venue is the Manhattan Theatre Club, a well-established off-Broadway not-for-profit theatre. But he offered "O Jerusalem" to the very small Flea Theatre, an off-off Broadway theatre which was created by its artistic director Jim Simpson (who happens to be married to Sigourney Weaver). The Flea Theatre is a "downtown" theatre; it is on White Street in an area that was a business district in the early part of the 20th Century, and it is known for multi-disciplinary, eclectic work with a spirit of adventure. It is one of the places established artists go to take risks that commercial theatre would not allow.

Ben Brantley of the NY Times said of A.R. Gurney: This most

courteous of contemporary playwrights, known for his wry chronicles of upper-crust Protestant mores, has now focused on a fiery subject far from the country clubs of New England. [He] has set up camp in Israel and Palestine. And he is the first to admit that, like many a Western diplomat before him, he finds himself lost and bewildered there. **Mr. Brantley goes on to say:** "O Jerusalem," is Mr. Gurney's sincere, awkward attempt to wrestle with an ever-intensifying international crisis. He clearly feels self-conscious about his credentials in considering the issue."

I spoke with Pete Gurney about "O Jerusalem" and asked him how he got the idea to write something so different from his usual plays. He replied, "I was writing something else, a play I was in the process of completing about a tennis champion, called "Big Bill." I just couldn't think about tennis after 9/11 hit, so I put it aside. I was already interested in the Israeli-Palestine thing when September 11 happened, and I started trying to connect the two. American favoritism to Israel had led to the hi-jacking of planes, etc." He went on to say, "This is a tricky subject. It's not popular to talk about in New York."

Gurney went on to tell me that he had been very disappointed in George Bush. He felt that Bush had gone against the traditional WASP sensibility -- a sensibility that included a sense of charity, of obligation to spread the money around; a sensibility of people who read books and travel, and recognize a connection with other countries. He didn't like Bush's talk of "American Exceptionalism." and said that Bush had betrayed basic American values found in the old Puritan, North-East tradition. Gurney said, speaking of America as a whole, "We are the children of Europeans -- they can tell us things."

In an interview in the New York Times, Gurney said, "I've gotten increasingly steamed up by what I feel is a rightist turn in our country's political picture, and as a playwright I wanted to speak to the community about that. There's something very creepy about the fact that the president, who some people would argue wasn't elected at all, is taking steps that are so uncompromising toward the right. There's no attempt to recognize that more people voted against him than for him. The tax plan, his attitudes toward our international obligations, toward the environment -- these things are outrageous to me."

And speaking of the play itself, he said in the same article, "It was written very quickly early last summer, because of Iraq. It's a play about American imperialism and the arrogance and insensitivity of our foreign policy these days, which seems much more desperate now than it did even under Reagan. The jeopardy element is greater. Now I think we could cause serious, serious damage, not only to one country but maybe to many, many more."

Gurney decided to write a George Bush character, a Texan and oil millionaire, who came from the same background, the same schools; and yet someone who could work in a different way, so that old values would emerge, and who would arrive at a different viewpoint of the world's problems. Gurney created a sort of stand-in for Bush, a man named Hartwell Clark, who has the outer confidence and inner self-doubts of many Gurney protagonists.

Gurney told me, "I envisioned an American oil man with some experience in the Middle East who gets an appointment to a low-level diplomatic post -- Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs -- because he has a nodding acquaintance with Bush from two exclusive schools, Andover and Yale."

The job exposes him to anti-American sentiment abroad, and he begins to turn against capitalism, developing new convictions. The character says " I've spent most of my life pumping stuff out of the earth. I figure it's time to put something back."

Though the post is an insignificant one, through it the man is reunited with Amina, a woman who is a Christian-Palestinian activist with whom he was in love when he was a Fulbright Scholar in Beirut 30 years before. Amina wants Hartwell to put forward a peace plan in exchange for information from her militant son about a pending attack on a major American city. The plan and the warning are both dismissed by the State Department, and Hartwell is eased out of office as having questionable judgment.

Along the way Hartwell continues in his friendship and flirtation with Sally, an executive in the U.S. Information Agency. He's a womanizer and keeps trying to seduce both women. His crumbling marriage is mentioned, but only briefly.

Gurney said to me that he wasn't very good on plot, and that he wanted to tell a simple story in a simple way. But because the story is a big one with geographical sweep, told by a small cast of 5 actors, he decided to give it a Brechtian form. Gurney said, "The issues are so

close to use, it's not that far from 9/11, and there was all this pre-war talk." So he wanted to step back a bit and find a distancing effect. He distances the story by making it a play-within-a-play and setting it in the future.

The opening words are spoken directly to the audience by the character Sally: "This is a play that was written soon after the terrible events of September Eleventh, Two Thousand and One. It was discovered some years later, among the personal effects of its author. Because it is a long, rambling and tormented piece, we make cuts and changes as we perform it, indicating these adjustments as we go along. The title -- *O Jerusalem* -- is obviously from the Bible, probably from the 122nd Psalm : 'Our feet shall stand at thy gates, O Jerusalem.' Some critics claim that the title is reverential. Others detect a sly note of exasperation. In other words, is *O Jerusalem* a prayer or a sigh? Every time we do this play, we wonder ..."

Michael Sommers in the Star Ledger writes: "Scenes are boldly abridged and humorously annotated, two supporting actors handle a score of smaller roles, and the many changes in location are suggested by enlarged photos on easels. The result is a swift and fluent narrative."

The Associated Press said that: "The play-within-a-play structure allows Gurney and company to cover an astonishing amount of ground. With the flip of a scenery card and an announcement by one of the actors, scenes switch from Washington, DC to Tunisia, to New England, and back."

Journalist Ted Merwin wrote: "The play is clearly influenced by the socially conscious drama of Bertold Brecht. The actors step in and out of character, preview the plot, hold up signs and pictures to indicate scene changes and locales, "decide" to skip certain scenes and abbreviate others, comment on each other's performances, and so on."

This may not seem unusual in today's theatre, but it is a departure for A.R. Gurney. It was an experimental step for a mainsteam author in terms of both the subject matter and the staging.

Michael Sommers of the Star Ledger says, " It is the 73-year-old author's most unorthodox and obviously political piece to date. Like George Bernard Shaw, A.R. Gurney is growing freer in his playwriting form as he gets older."

Gurney told me that he hated slides -- that slide machines break down, and the lighting on the actors is not good with slides. So he, and director Jim Simpson and designer Kyle Chepulis, decided to go with vaudeville easels and placards that could be moved around as the scene demanded.

The theme of the play -- We Are All In This Thing Together -- is spoken several times by various characters in the play, and the same phrase is printed in 12 languages on the cover of the program and on the cover of the printed version of the script.

Jim Simpson, the artistic director of the Flea Theatre and the director of "O Jerusalem," said that he asked the board of his theatre,

which is basically pro-Israel, to read the play before deciding to produce it. He wanted their support because of its unpopular stance. Jim told me that they got many e-mails saying the play was biased towards the Palestinians and protesting the portrayal of the mother of a terrorist as a sympathetic character. There were also threats against the theatre, saying there might be an "accident" there. Fortunately, nothing happened.

Interestingly, the only openly Jewish character is an Israeli limo driver who appears near the end of the play. The play is earnest, yet humorous, and lasts only 80 minutes. In Crains' Business paper, Gurney said, "It would be hard not to have a political outlook right now. Normally I used to write comedies of manners, but I couldn't write that right now."

Another first-time political playwright is John Shanley, the Academy Award-winning author of the movie "Moonstruck," and the author of many off-Broadway plays, and other movies. John Shanley is known for his edgy, imaginative stories. His plays are theatrical and often draw on his own dreams. They can be abrasive and unsettling, and they are always very funny.

I had an interview with Mr. Shanley, with whom I have worked twice. He always directs his own plays and he is a good director as well. His play,"Dirty Story," is about American involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is subtitled "A Savage Bloody Comedy."

Writing about "Dirty Story" in the New York Times, Bruce Weber

says, "Such is Mr. Shanley's sense of urgency that he has written in the most heavy-handed and message-laden of genres, the allegory. The play's four characters represent the Israelis, the British, the Palestinians, and, depicted as a swaggering, overweight, presumptuous, unnuanced and wealthy cowboy, the Americans."

Mr. Shanley, like Mr. Gurney, felt that he could not continue the project he was working on after 9/11. He had long been interested the the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and turned to this after 9/11 to discuss it through his work.

"Something's going on that needs to be addressed in our government and in the world," **Mr. Shanley said in a newspaper interview.** "We need a new appreciation of diplomacy and elegance in dealing with other countries, because it's completely absent. Calling France and Germany 'old Europe'? The 'axis of evil' statement? I can't even believe it happened." **Shanley went on:** "After 9/11, I realized I was going to have to write something about what was going on in the city and in the world. The streets have become politicized. Everything has political overtones, whether you like it or not. There's no other kind of play I could write right now."

Quoting from a recent New York Times article by Bruce Weber:" the list of recent dramas that voice -- with idealism, hostility, outrage, scorn, sarcasm, satire or plain fear -- an alarm at the nation's ever more conservative and imperialist drift is a long one."

In addition to the plays by LaBute, Gurney, and Shanley that I've

mentioned, the list includes "Resurrection Blues," Arthur Miller's play about the exportation of American values; "Homebody/Kabul," written before 2001, Tony Kushner's prescient work about the festering fundamentalism of Afghanistan; and "Book of Days," Lanford Wilson's play that attributes a corruption of American values to an alliance of the corporate world, the church and the Republican party.

In an article titled 'Theaters follow wartime scripts', the business newspaper Crain's, wrote: "Theatre executives say they can't remember another time when producers and playwrights reacted so viscerally to current events." Jim Simpson of the Flea Theatre summed it all up: "After 9/11 there was a sense that we are vulnerable and deeply involved. All of our perspectives have changed because of it."