Déjà vu Plus Two:

ON THE NECESSITY OR SUPERFLUOUSNESS OF RE-SEEING,
PLUS A CRITIC'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FOOTNOTES

BY ADAM LANGER

DÉJÀ VU PLUS TWO: ON THE NECESSITY OR SUPERFLUOUSNESS OF RE-SEEING, PLUS A CRITIC'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FOOTNOTES

(FOR MAXIMUM EFFECT, THIS ARTICLE SHOULD BE READ A MINIMUM OF FOUR TIMES.)

"Once Is Not Enough"
Jacqueline Susann[1]

PROLOGUE

I'd always thought Jacqueline Susann was wrong; sometimes once is plenty. A theater critic sits in the audience, watches the play, returns home, writes as honest a critique as possible. Game over. It's a very democratic approach; everyone from the most opulent Broadway house to the converted gymnasium on Chicago's[2] northwest side gets one shot to send the critic home gushing with praise or dripping with invective.

But at the same time, maybe the one viewing/one vote approach puts a theater critic at a disadvantage. Unlike the book critic who can read a novel (or at least the press packet) a dozen times, unlike the music critic who can replay CDs *ad infinitum*, unlike the art critic who can spend six hours studying a Bruce Nauman installation even if it only merits about six seconds, the theater critic usually gets only this one chance. And, God forbid, what if the critic hadn't gotten enough sleep the night before, what if the critic's pen ran out of ink while he was trying to scribble down a key piece of dialogue, what if while the critic was madly writing in the dark, a gunshot went off on-stage and damned if the critic had any clue who had fired the weapon? Could an infinite number of factors—from what the critic had eaten for dinner to the argument that may have been had with a fiancée about the state of their apartment—affect the critic's impressions?

Most everyone has learned to appreciate a film once hated[3]; a book that was impenetrable in a college lit class miraculously becomes accessible.[4] If one can't step into the same river twice, can one at least see the same play twice? Would seeing the same play four times necessarily mean writing the same four reviews? Duke Ellington[5] wrote that "the spectator can't get it all the first time; repeated viewings multiply the satisfaction." This was the thinking that guided my brief foray into guinea-pigdom, motivated by a true desire to discover how seeing a play more than once would affect the critical process—or, put less pompously, whether seeing a play four times would make me appreciate it more, understand it more, or just drive me out of my frigging skull.

My guess was that a critic, or at least *this* critic[6], would, of course, not write the same review four times, but would probably have the same overall impression, with minor variations.[7] But this couldn't be confirmed without empirical evidence. Thus, in April 2001, the adventure began. One play. Four[8] different times. Four different stimuli. Presumably, four different critiques.

Ground rules would be essential. I would write four separate overnight cri-

[1] This popular trash novelist authored both "Valley of the Dolls" and "Once Is Not Enough." The latter was made into a 1975 Kirk Douglas and Alexis Smith film with a particularly salacious print advertisement that titillated the then-underage author, who was later appalled to realize that the object of his 4th-grade crush, Michelle, had seen the R-rated film with her stepfather.

[2] The nation's third most populous city (second if one ignores Los Angeles, which is fairly easy to do) is the author's birthplace and hometown, a city famous for nurturing the careers of Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Carl Sandburg, David Mamet, Steppenwolf Theatre, Richie Allen and deep-dish pizza. The author grew up on the city's north side, the youngest of three children in a melting-pot neighborhood composed largely of Jewish, Indian and Russian families.

[3] Cases that come to mind for this particular critic include Michelangelo Antonioni's "Blow-up," which creeped the critic out so much the first time he watched it with his college girlfriend that he had to fast-forward through one scene featuring mimes.

[4] The author used Cliffs Notes to fake his way through a college lit class about Flaubert before devouring "Sentimental Education" years later.

[5] Ellington's "New Orleans Suite" takes its place as one of the author's Top Ten favorite jazz and pop albums. The others, in no particular order, include Miles Davis' soundtrack to "Elevator to the Gallows," Bob Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks," The Clash's "London Calling," Joni Mitchell's "Court and Spark," Charles Mingus' "Ahh-Umm," U2's "The Joshua Tree," Stan Ridgway's "Mosquitoes," Tom Waits' "Rain Dogs" and Junior Wells' "Hoodoo Man Blues."

[6] The author has identified himself as a critic ever since he provoked the displeasure of his second-grade teacher

tiques, each about 500 words long. Each critique would be written cold. No cheating. No looking through previous notes or drafts. The reviews would be written independently of each other. I would buy my own theater tickets; no grinning or arm-squeezing by pesky, seductive or just plain irritating PR types would influence my opinion. I would choose a production that appeared thought-provoking, worthy of repeat consideration. Which, thankfully, ruled out Neil Simon's "The Dinner Party."[9] To each performance, I would introduce and note a number of variables to see if they changed my impressions.

Selecting the right production, though, was tricky. To make the experiment as objective as possible, I endeavored to choose a new play about which I had few preconceptions, preferably one by an author who had not inspired any definite, preformed opinions. This immediately ruled out Harold Pinter's "Betrayal" (then running in a limp revival, starring the ordinarily reliable Juliette Binoche[10], that left me desperate for the movie—one of my all-time Top Ten films[11]), "Aida," "Annie Get Your Gun," "Bells Are Ringing" and, for that matter, any other musical[12], including "Follies."[13] Narrowing the choice down to a straight play didn't simplify the selection. Easily rejected were

at age seven. His brief review of a student assembly performance of songs including "Guantanamera" (". . .And then the third graders sang a song in which they screamed the words they knew and whispered the words they didn't. . .") was the only one Mrs. Shachter refused to affix to the classroom bulletin board. This experience was followed by stints as film critic for his 6th-grade newspaper *The Demonstrator* (he delivered rave reviews of Mel Brooks' "High Anxiety" and the James Bond film "The Spy Who Loved Me"), opinion editor for Evanston Township High School's newspaper (he was particularly taken with the film "Rumble Fish") and critic and editor for the Vassar College newspaper *The Miscellany News*, for which he reviewed whatever happened to be playing at the since-shuttered Juliet Theater (among the classics on offer there: "The Best of Times," starring Robin Williams and Kurt Russell, and "The Money Pit," starring Tom Hanks).

[7] The critic cites as evidence William Mastrosimone's oft-performed "The Woolgatherer," which he was assigned to review on four separate occasions and which he despised with each cast he saw.

[8] The number four is chosen because it is more than three and less than five.

[9] The editor here has requested a footnote, but the author insists that his remark is self-explanatory, "Brighton Beach Memoirs" notwithstanding.

[10] The author, however, still cringes at the actress' hyena-like cackle—the only downside in the otherwise transcendent film "The Lovers on the Bridge."

[11] Others making the cut would be, in no particular order, Howard Hawks' "The Big Sleep," Buster Keaton's "Sherlock Jr.," Billy Wilder's "One, Two, Three," Wim Wenders' "Wings of Desire," Jim Jarmusch's "Ghost Dog," Orson Welles' "Othello," John Cassavetes' "A Woman Under the Influence," Jacques Rivette's "Up/Down/Fragile," and, tied for the last position: Charlie Chaplin's "The Great Dictator," Robert Bresson's "A Man Escaped," Carol Reed's "The Fallen Idol" and Francois Truffaut's "Shoot the Piano Player."

[12] The author notes that the last time he was truly inspired by a musical was in 1985, when he saw "Sunday in the Park with George." He realizes that, given his predilection for Top Ten lists, he should identify his favorite

Edward Albee's "The Play About the Baby"[14] and Tom Stoppard's "The Invention of Love"[15] (though Stoppard's "The Real Thing" is one of my ten favorite plays.[16]) I eliminated others simply on the basis of unappealing titles, e.g., "Six Goumbas and a Wannabe" and "Urinetown: The Musical)." Ultimately, the choice was narrowed down to three, all world premieres: Jon Robin Baitz's "Ten Unknowns," Kenneth Lonergan's "Lobby Hero" and John Henry Redwood's "No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs." When "Ten Unknowns" became a hot ticket, immediately selling out its run, and "Lobby Hero" did the same, the choice became "No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs" at Primary Stages. The fact that I was familiar with Redwood and Primary Stages only by reputation seemingly made it a perfect choice. I had absolutely no idea what I would be seeing, though the play's title assured me that it would almost certainly have been a work I would eventually have been assigned to review by the Chicago *Reader*.[17] There's something truly exciting about going to a play about which one knows virtually nothing.[18] My only regret was that the next three viewings wouldn't provide the same excitement.

musicals, but can't come up with anything after "Pacific Overtures," "Candide," "Guys and Dolls," "Fiorello!" and "A Little Night Music." He has trouble deciding whether Kurt Weill, George Gershwin, Gilbert and Sullivan and Leonard Bernstein are truly composers of "musicals," and consequently abandons the enterprise.

[13] See previous footnote.

[14] The author's usual reaction to Albee's work? Yuck.

[15] The author acknowledges he knows less about the play's subject, A.E. Housman, than he does about late actor-director John Houseman, whose stern face adorned the author's teenage bedroom wall after he got Houseman's autograph in the Bloomingdale's couch department. Houseman's was among the young author's three prized autographs, the others being those of legendary actress Glenda Jackson and one-time Chicago White Sox shortstop Bucky Dent.

[16] In the interests of full disclosure, the author also includes on this list the following plays: Shakespeare's "Hamlet," Simon Gray's "Quartermaine's Terms," Max Frisch's "Graf Oderland," August Wilson's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," G.K. Chesterton's "Magic," Arthur Miller's "The Price," Eugene O'Neill's "A Moon for the Misbegotten" and Eugene Ionesco's "The Killer."

[17] The Chicago *Reader* is the city's leading alternative weekly, with a circulation of approximately 200,000, where the critic worked for the better part of a decade as a features writer and theater critic. His first review was a rambling essay about an adaptation of "The Razor's Edge," which was as effective a stage vehicle for Chicago's Prop Theater as it was a cinematic one for Bill Murray. Though the author worked as a general assignment theater critic, his Jewish faith and predilection for writing feature stories about Chicago's African-American communities made him first choice to cover any play dealing with these topics. He managed to steer clear of controversy for most of his tenure, but was in fact banned from Chicago's Black Ensemble Theatre after having criticized the editors of BET's programs for a typo that mislabeled the film "Life With Mikey" "Life With Kikey." One of the members of the Northlight Theatre also once called him a Jewish anti-Semite for claiming its audience base was composed primarily of dentists.

[18] The author admits to having an unresolved childhood fear of going into a movie theater and seeing the wrong

VIEWING #1

"Once, yes, once is a lark/Twice, though, loses the spark
Once, yes, once is delicious/But twice would be vicious/Or just repetitious
Someone's bound to be scarred/Yes I know that it's hard
But no matter the price/I never do anything twice."
Stephen Sondheim, "The Madam's Song"[19]

Day of the Week: Wednesday. Time: 8 p.m. Seat #: Seat 3, Row 11 (last row). Weather: 50°F, clear skies. Hours of sleep night before show: 7 1/2. Attire: Lime green button-down shirt, blue jeans, black New Balance gym shoes, royal blue Jockey briefs (waist 32). Meal before show: Chicken soup with kreplach (from Second Avenue Deli), rye bread, and a tall glass of Pampryl banana nectar. Seated next to: A member of a prominent Harlem theater company and his wife. Enlightening comments about the play offered by person in next seat: None. He snored through much of the second act. Seated behind: An empty seat.

About ninety seconds before the close of John Henry Redwood's new play about racism and anti-Semitism in 1949 small-town North Carolina, there is a moment as sublime as any that has come before. At twilight on the Cheeks family's ramshackle porch, Mattie Cheeks and her two daughters help lead her Aunt Cora—a spectral figure clad in black from head to toe—into the house where she has not set foot for ages, ever since the time she was sexually assaulted by a group of white men. The moment, staged in a bluish, painterly glow, is subtle and pro-

movie—perhaps the result of attending a Charlie Chaplin festival at the Carnegie Theatre at age four, only to be greeted with a scary coming attraction for "Dirty Harry."

[19] The song was featured in the film "The Seven-Percent Solution," a riff on Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud adapted from one of the author's favorite childhood books. A reinspection of the material, however, determines that it certainly would not be counted among the author's Top Ten books. These would, however, include: "Chance," by Joseph Conrad; "Pride and Prejudice," by Jane Austen; "Sentimental Education," by Gustav Flaubert; "If on a Winter's Night a Traveler," by Italo Calvino; "Great Expectations," by Charles Dickens; "Blindness," by Jose Saramago; "Cannery Row," by John Steinbeck; "The Sleep Book," by Dr. Seuss; "The Power and the Glory," by Graham Greene; and "Jane Eyre," by Charlotte Brontë.

[20] The author still has an unpleasant visceral reaction to matinees, based on childhood experiences in which he was forced to forgo Sunday afternoons at home watching Chicago Bears football games or playing fast-pitch softball and instead was stuffed into a chocolate-brown three-piece suit and lodged in row K of Orchestra Hall to hear the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

found in its silence; one expects Redwood's drama to end here. Unfortunately, the interactions and dialogue that follow blunt that moment's power and, as with the play's other missteps, detract through the process of addition. Like its over-reaching, self-consciously provocative title, which refers to a sign one of the play's characters once observed in Mississippi, the play strives to say too much and teeters on the border between melodrama and didacticism.

The play centers on the seemingly idyllic family of strong, noble Mattie, her hard-working husband, Rawl, and their 11- and 17-year-old daughters, Matoka and Joyce; the family's interactions are observed by Redwood's least satisfying character, Yaveni Aaronsohn, an Orthodox Jew researching the Cheeks family to study the "similarities in racial suffering" between blacks and Jews.

When Mattie is raped and impregnated by one of the white men who assaulted her Aunt Cora, Mattie's dilemma of whether to divulge or keep secret the identity of her assailant comprises the play's main conflict. In Mattie (Elizabeth Van Dyke) and Rawl (Marcus Naylor), Redwood has created a complex, plausible couple placed at odds by a violent, racist society. Van Dyke, rock-solid and quietly dignified, and Naylor, who veers effortlessly from ideal, selfless father to simmering, jealous, cuckolded husband when he learns of his wife's pregnancy but not of her rape, are particularly effective. But the meddlesome, Polonius-like Aaronsohn—whose rabbinical demeanor masks guilt and self-hatred—seems designed to create as little offense and as much philosophical power as possible. The opening scene, where Aaronsohn and Rawl play chess, is hackneyed, too crassly symbolizing the play's racial conflicts. As Aaronsohn, Jack Aaron delivers a lethargic portrayal redolent of Dustin Hoffman's painfully studied, shuffling Willy Loman. And the play's bloody resolution, which apparently solves Mattie and Rawl's conflict through a violently heroic Boo Radleyesque intervention on the part of the sepulchral, Miss Havisham-like Aunt Cora, has a hokey *deus ex machina* convenience to it.

Under Israel Hicks' direction, Redwood's play feels one dramaturg or one strong-willed director away from a more searingly effective work of considerable quality. Two key monologues—one in Act I, in which a younger Aunt Cora in flashback describes her sexual assault and subsequent isolation, the second in Act II, in which

Aaronsohn details his attempts to court a *shiksa* by assimilating into *goy* culture—are thematically crucial but dramatically extraneous. One cannot quarrel with Redwood's humanity and decency, but sermons don't always make great drama, especially when one is preaching to the converted.

INTERLUDE: THE INTRODUCTION OF THE FIRST VARIABLES—THE FRIEND AND THE MATINEE

In order to add a layer of differentiation between the first and second viewings, I added two significant experimental variables. First, I chose, against my better judgment, a matinee.[20] Secondly, I attended with an opinionated, outspoken friend.[21] Even the most jaded critic cannot be completely unaffected by the strong opinions and comments of those seated nearby.[22]

After this second viewing, as my friend and I discussed the play, I continued to see liabilities in the script, while she found fault with the direction, stating that she found its pacing sluggish. She also found the characters shallow—Mattie too noble, her daughters too cute, Yaveni Aaronsohn too much the wise, biblical sage. But while I continued to find two of the play's monologues fairly extraneous, she found them to be the show's most engaging elements. And she found the play's violent resolution unsatisfying and morally problematic. "How does continuing the cycle of violence solve anything?" she asked. "And why is that supposed to be a happy ending?"

[21] The author chose his college friend, Amy Topel, who acted in his first produced play, "Almost Twenty," and currently serves as sous-chef at the restaurant Verbena. The author and Topel have had frequent disagreements on films, from "The Lost Boys" (a teen vampire flick, which he enjoyed and she did not) to "September" (the purportedly "serious" Woody Allen film, which she enjoyed and he did not) to "Life Is Sweet" (which she accused him of despising because his own dysfunctional family too closely resembled the one in the Mike Leigh film).

[22] The author cites the film "Fatal Attraction," which he saw at the Poughkeepsie Plaza Mall and whose most memorable scene was of Anne Archer walking out on Michael Douglas, if only because the gentleman sitting in the seat behind the author shouted out to Douglas' character, "You best go back to that blonde chick now; else you won't be getting no action tonight." The author also cannot help recalling Jim Jarmusch's film "Stranger Than Paradise" without hearing the soundtrack of his father yawning and sighing "*oy vey*" throughout.

[23] There were notable differences between the play's first and second performances. For one thing, Elizabeth Van Dyke, on this occasion, raised the level of her performance from excellent to electrifying, taking charge of the pace, not letting up until the final curtain call. Secondly, Marcus Naylor was more quiet and brooding, deliberately underplaying lines he had sold hard the first time, perhaps to make certain they wouldn't be perceived as laugh lines.

VIEWING #2[23]

"You're giving me the same old line/I'm wondering why
You hurt me then/You're back again/No, no, no, not a second time."
"Not a Second Time," John Lennon and Paul McCartney[24]

Day of the Week: Sunday. Time: 3 p.m. Seat #: Seat 1 (aisle), Row 10. Weather: 48°F, misty rain. Hours of sleep night before show: 7. Attire: Brown teddy-bear-colored shirt, blue jeans, black New Balance gym shoes, powder blue Jockey briefs (waist 32). Meal before show: Two slices of matzo, a bowl of split pea soup, and a tall glass of Pampryl banana nectar. Seated next to: A friend from college (see footnote 22). Enlightening comments about the play offered by person in next seat: See above. Seated behind: A man with a violent sneezing habit.

The title of John Henry Redwood's play proves misleading. Clearly it's designed to draw parallels between the black and Jewish experiences in America. Fair enough. The complicated and problematic historical relationship between blacks and Jews has received surprisingly scant attention in American drama. But here the black-Jewish theme is handled simplistically and becomes somewhat tangential to the more compelling aspects of Redwood's play, weighing down an engaging, atmospheric drama—about a black family struggling to stay together in racist, southern American society circa 1949—with more philosophical baggage than it can ultimately sustain.

That said, when Primary Stages' memorably eerie production focuses directly on the Cheeks family's interactions—particularly those involving matriarch Mattie Cheeks, rivetingly played by Elizabeth Van Dyke—Redwood's drama can be spellbinding. Lovingly disciplining her young daughters, Matoka and Joyce, flirting with her husband, Rawl, on their slanted porch,

[24] The author went through his pre-teenagedom convinced that The Beatles were the greatest musical group ever, but hasn't listened to one of their albums from start to finish since the 1980s. He wonders if overexposure and repeated listenings have made their music utterly unbearable, or if, 21 years later, he still can't get past John Lennon's murder. He recalls the night he spent in December 1980 dreaming that he was, in fact, interviewing Lennon and Yoko Ono for NPR, only to be awakened by a telephone call from his sister informing him that she'd heard sportscaster Howard Cosell announce that Lennon had been shot. He also recalls the next day in school when a girl with a locker down the hall from his was singing Beatles songs and her boyfriend—who in a bizarre, ironic twist grew up to become, no lie, a public-radio reporter for "The World"—berated her by saying, "Why don't you sing something good? Why don't you sing some Zeppelin?"

or desperately reaching out to her silent, witch-like Aunt Cora, who spends the duration of the play concealed behind a black veil, Van Dyke makes Mattie the play's moral and dramatic center. When she is raped by a white man, her decision to keep secret her attacker's identity, thus protecting her husband from risking his life by seeking revenge, seems a heroic and, given the play's historical setting, understandable act of martyrdom.

The aforementioned family relationships are more than sufficient material for a captivating drama, but Redwood insists on finding parallels for Mattie's struggles—in a labored flashback to a time when Aunt Cora was also sexually assaulted, and also in the character of Yaveni Aaronsohn, a haunted, wandering Jewish scholar studying the Cheeks family. The result is a drama that feels more schematic than organic, particularly in the case of Aaronsohn, who delivers a lengthy monologue near the end of Act II, explaining his tortured odyssey from Russian *shtetl* to Munich to the Deep South, where he denied his Judaism in order to woo the woman he loved. The monologue has a didactic, anachronistic air, and his character seems less genuine human being than a carefully plotted sequence of characteristics and biographical details. This is a result both of the performances—Van Dyke is brilliant throughout, while Jack Aaron's Aaronsohn lacks requisite charm—and of the script. Redwood daintily touches upon the issue of black resentment of white paternalism. But the author seems more interested in providing universally palatable lessons about the violent cycles prejudice engenders within all races and religions via convenient plot twists. The play's climactic moment, in which Aunt Cora murders and dismembers rapist Joe Flood, thus allowing Mattie to win back her husband, seems too easy a solution for the complex social issues Redwood seeks to address. Redwood certainly would have preferred to create something more than the well-wrought, socially conscious, character-driven melodrama he has, in fact, devised. But his ambitions undermine his drama.

INTERLUDE: INTRODUCTION OF THE SECOND SET OF VARIABLES—THE CRITICS

". . .And Nietzsche, with his Theory of Eternal Recurrence, he said that the life we live, we're gonna live over and over again the exact same way for all eternity. Great. That means I'll have to sit through the Ice Capades again. . ." Woody Allen, "Hannah and her Sisters"

There are some unspoken rules by which critics tend to abide. For one thing, it's generally thought improper for a critic to review works by his or her friends and acquaintances. The closer a critic gets to the subject, the harder it is to be fair. At the same time, being more familiar with a playwright means being more informed. With this in mind, I scheduled an interview with John Henry Redwood, assuming that he would provide me with greater insight into the play.

Unfortunately, Redwood begged off. Which meant a new variable was needed. I decided to violate another cardinal rule of criticism—to not read any other critiques. I scoured reviews to see if they might influence my opinion. There was a general consensus; the reactions were all lukewarm.

Bruce Weber's review for *The New York Times* found praiseworthy Redwood's treatment of family relationships, but saw hyperbole in his characterizations of Aunt Cora and Yaveni Aaronsohn, faulting their self-revealing monologues. "In the end, they have the sad, braying quality of a pulpit confession," Weber remarked, concluding that Redwood's might have been "a better [play] with no outsiders at all." Writing for *Variety*, Robert Hofler lauded Elizabeth Van Dyke's performance and Redwood's depiction of the family, but was less enthused about Aunt Cora, who "never really emerges as anything other than a dramatic device," and Yaveni Aaronsohn, who delivers "a Big Speech, which puts a hole right in the middle of Act II." Beneath a typically unsubtle *New York Post* headline, "Didactic Drama D—n Disappointing," Donald Lyons said the play lacked credibility and "dramatic force," and that its characters were "a world of moralizers who lecture us." The *Daily News*' Robert Dominguez allowed that the play has "strong moments" but ultimately "fails to live up to its powerful title," and he suggested, oddly, that the "constant threat of sexual assault on black women by white men" was anachronistic. Michael Hogan's capsule review for *Time Out New York* criticized a "flat" production, which "persistently errs on the side of earnestness." Finally, another *Variety* critic, Toby Zinman, asserted that the play has "has nothing to say about current vexed relations between Jews and African-Americans, and compromises its sentimental strengths with this manufactured agenda."

VIEWING #3[25]

"Once is all right, twice is okay, the third time's a hit in the head…"
Old Yiddish truism[26]

Day of the Week: Wednesday. Time: 8 p.m. Seat #: Seat 1 (aisle), Row 9. Weather: 41°F, misty rain. Hours of sleep night before show: 6.5. Attire: Navy blue herringbone[27] suit, white shirt, loud orange tie, black shoes, navy blue Jockey briefs (waist 32). Meal before show: Beef with broccoli and egg drop soup from Hunan Park II[28], plus a glass of ginger beer. Seated next to: A woman reading a biography of Harry S. Truman. Enlightening comments about the play offered by person in next seat: The woman said that the play brought to her mind experiences she had had with racism in 1950s Delaware. Seated behind: A couple discussing cervical cancer. Other important influencing factor: Someone seated nearby was experiencing deodorant failure.

At a brisk pace, getting from one end of the stage to the other at Primary Stages might take five seconds. For Rayme Cornell playing the haunted, eerily humming, black-veiled Aunt Cora—whose character personifies the sufferings of African-Americans, particularly women, at the hands of white male society—it takes the better part of a minute. It's not a long time. But, as is also the case with John Henry Redwood's socially conscious melodrama, it's a lot longer than is necessary to depart Point A and wind up at Point B.

As this night's performance began, a cold, misty rain was slanting down, taxicab tires splooshed

[25] During this performance, some actors continued to redefine their characters while others stuck to rote line readings. Marcus Naylor favored underplaying, while Elizabeth Van Dyke gave an over-the-top performance, excessively laughing and crying. Jack Aaron's line readings and mannerisms often seemed Xeroxed from performances #1 and #2. The audience didn't seem to be in tune with the production on this night. One of Mattie's lines, which had received many mutters of assent in previous performances ("You've gotta listen to learn, but first you've gotta learn to listen") was interrupted here by a spectator's cough and then silence. The result was an uneven production, as if the actors no longer trusted the script completely; one wonders if they had read their reviews.

[26] The phrase was one often repeated in Yiddish by the critic's mother.

[27] The author does not know what this term means exactly, only that it was used by the salesman who sold him the suit. The author further asserts that he can discern little difference in his attitude toward the play caused by his clothing, although after the show, a number of people called him "Sir."

[28] The restaurant is rumored to be a favorite of actor-writer-director Alan Alda.

through dirty puddles, and the Hell's Kitchen air was thick with yesterday's mussels marinara. And, as I sat inside watching the story of the Cheeks family, I couldn't help thinking how inviting their bucolic lives seemed—their quaint water pump with its dip cup, a chess set on the porch, a tree stump serving as a chair, a little girl skipping rope and singing, the warmth of the family, Rawl—grin wide, arms spread apart—welcoming the embraces of his daughters Joyce and Matoka as his wife Mattie looks on, touched by their affection. And then, after being lulled into this state of contentment by the idyllic country life, I stopped myself: "Wait a second. How can a drama about racism, anti-Semitism and sexual violence seem so comforting?"

Sure, Redwood's drama is not concerned only with its audience's comfort; soon, this "perfect" family will endure a rape, an unwanted pregnancy, a couple split apart by 1949 southern-American society, and finally, the gruesome dismemberment of a white oppressor, whose death incited wild applause and a shout of "You go, girl!" from one spectator. But while the Cheekses may face great challenges, its audience rarely does, largely because Redwood, ironically, avoids controversy when addressing controversial topics. Certainly, a drama that ends its first act with Mattie declaring "I'm pregnant!" and her 17-year-old daughter Joyce sobbing, "Oh, mama! No!" isn't going to win a lot of points for subtlety. Still, the painstakingly structured drama has pathos and suspense, particularly in its depiction of Mattie's inner turmoil when she chooses to conceal her attacker's identity from passionate, hotheaded Rawl, thus saving him from his own anger while sacrificing their marriage. But whenever the plot gets rolling, Redwood sets up a roadblock, inserting overwrought, often unwieldy moralistic lectures on irrefutable topics, such as the twin sufferings of African-Americans and Jews, as delivered by the sagacious Yaveni Aaronsohn, a supposed scholar with no discernible source of income who is researching the Cheeks family for a book about prejudice. Plus, despite some solid performances, the leisurely pacing of Israel Hicks's production assures that the audience will have more than enough time to prepare itself for each of the play's revelations.

Redwood's instinct to write about the troubled histories of blacks and Jews is laudable, but by setting his play in an era before the relationship between the two groups became more problematic, he misses the chance to confront, surprise or even anger his audience. When you write a play called "No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs" and you do not offend anyone other than the most ardent Jim Crow apologist or Zionist conspiracy nutjob, an opportunity has been squandered.

INTERLUDE: INTRODUCTION OF THE THIRD VARIABLE—THE PLAYWRIGHT

For the fourth performance, I finally got to meet the playwright, who proved engaging and jovial, just the sort of person I would rather not write anything negative about, particularly because when he found out that I was a playwright as well, he offered to introduce me to a number of friends.[29] He also told me a charming story about a childhood friend of his who inspired the character of Yaveni Aaronsohn, the Orthodox Jew who admits to a fondness for pork chops. Apparently, growing up in Brooklyn, Redwood lived above an Orthodox family whose kids liked visiting Redwood's mother and sneaking bacon when she was cooking breakfast. Knowing that the children were violating their religion, the high-minded Mrs. Redwood started cooking beef bacon instead. It seemed as though our conversation would make it tougher to criticize his play, since many of its elements became understandable after I knew his background and life philosophy.

INTERLUDE: FEATURE STORY

When John Henry Redwood first saw Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," he was less than enthused.

"I remember thinking, I didn't like those people," he says. "I don't like going into a theater and spending two hours looking at people I don't like."

Now, as he sits beside me in the Primary Stages theater while the stage crew sets up for the evening's performance, he is thinking about whether he has ever written a character he hasn't liked.

[29] He didn't, by the way.

"No. No, I don't write them," he says finally.

Redwood is an imposing figure. Tall and bulky, with a presence that brings to mind his surname, he has, as an actor, played both Paul Robeson and Troy Maxson—a role made famous by James Earl Jones—in August Wilson's "Fences." And if his rich basso profundo suggests the timbre of a hellfire preacher, it shouldn't be particularly surprising; before he turned to acting, writing and directing, his first call was to the ministry. He studied at the seminary at Drew University in the mid-1970s and has graduate degrees in both history and religion. Now, Redwood says, he tries to preach through his plays.

"My goal as a writer is to write about the triumph of the human spirit, but at the same time, I also use the theater as my ministry and as a place of teaching," he says. "My preaching is in my script. When I write, I write from a foundation of love. I want to show love between people regardless of their ethnicity.

"Rappers say they write their songs about the way life is," he says. "Maybe I choose to write about what I feel life should be. I've done some hustlings, I ran crap games in the street and busted into parking meters growing up in Brooklyn, but I chose to go a different way, and I want to write stories about ordinary people trying to live."

Redwood's interest in blacks and Jews comes from growing up in Brooklyn and attending Thomas Jefferson High School, which he says was 75 percent Jewish and 25 percent black. His father's family came from Halifax, North Carolina.

"I wanted to show a parallel between anti-Semitism and racism," he says of his play. "Some reviewers feel I didn't do it too well and they knocked it."

Though the playwright says he tries not to focus too much on criticism, he's heard a lot about Aaronsohn's character and might revise it for a future production. Beyond that, he says, gesturing around him, "My biggest critics are the people who sit in these seats."

"My biggest problem is when critics become nasty and personal," he says. "That says more to me about the critic than it does [about] the play. It says what kind of human being that person is. I have no idea who these critics are. I didn't ask them to come and critique the play. They came to do that. They didn't pay; they came for free. I have no idea who these people are. I have no

idea what their prejudices are or what qualifies them as critics. I look at critics the same way I look at policemen. It would be mind-boggling for me to take a job that might require me to kill someone. I wouldn't want to put myself in that position. By the same token, I wonder who a person is who likes to take shots at defenseless people, which artists are."

VIEWING #4[30]

Prosecutor: You must have spent a good many hours in sleep since last August?
Arthur Groomkirby: I dare say that would be true, sir.
Prosecutor: You must have eaten a good many meals, and absorbed a fair amount of food.
Groomkirby: Yes, sir.
Prosecutor: It would be true to say, would it not, that the normal processes of what is known sometimes as metabolism, whereby body tissue is constantly being built up and broken down, have been going on unceasingly since the 23rd of August last year?
Groomkirby: I couldn't say, sir.
Prosecutor: I suggest to you, Mr. Groomkirby, that in view of these changes, the man you say was in Chester-le-Street last year is not the man who is standing in the witness box at this moment.
N.F. Simpson, "One Way Pendulum"[31]

Day of the Week: Saturday. Time: 8 p.m. Seat #: Seat 1 (aisle), Row 8. Weather: 68°F, clear skies. Hours of sleep night before show: 5. Attire: White shirt, ink-stained blue jeans, black New Balance gym shoes, gray Jockey briefs (waist 32). Meal before show: A roast beef and Brie sandwich on French bread. Seated next to: An actress complaining about the dryness of her hands. Enlightening comments about the play offered by person in next seat: None overheard. Seated behind: A New York couple having trouble understanding the Southern dialect used in the show.

There's an art to giving a good sermon. Rabbi Mescheloff of the synagogue in which I was bar mitzvahed

[30] This particular performance was the most quiet and contemplative of the four, and the relationship between Mattie and Rawl was more understated than ever. One wondered, though, whether this was a conscious acting choice, or whether the actress playing Mattie was simply suffering from a cold.
[31] Simpson's little-known and rarely produced play, also produced as a difficult-to-find feature film directed by Peter Yates, is one of the most bizarre and hilarious absurdist exercises the author, who discovered the play at the Skokie Public Library, has ever read. Simpson disappeared from public view in the 1980s and was last heard to be living on a houseboat.

didn't have it. He never could get to the point. One time, he preached about Hoagy Carmichael; another time, he preached about umbrellas; a third time, he free-associated about cigars. Playwright John Henry Redwood, on the other hand, knows how to stay on message. You go with one point. You don't stray from it; you hammer it home.

Redwood's play concerns blacks and Jews, racism and sexual violence, but the theme that holds it together is home—the strength of those who have one to call their own, the rootlessness of those who don't. When 17-year-old Joyce, the daughter of Mattie and Rawl Cheeks, reads a book on the front porch of their Halifax home, it is, significantly, "The Iliad," by Homer, who wrote of the legendary wanderer Ulysses. Like Ulysses, the blacks and Jews of "No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs" are wanderers who have been or will be forced to leave their homes behind. Though the play takes place in 1949, a year after the creation of the state of Israel, scholar Yaveni Aaronsohn is still essentially homeless; anti-Semitism has forced him to move from Russia to Germany to America, where he studies the relationship between blacks and Jews. At play's end, he's on the move again.

"You've been traveling the whole country looking for forgiveness," Yaveni is told by Mattie Cheeks, who has a profound understanding of his predicament; her veiled, black-clad Aunt Cora, a victim of sexual violence, has been wandering the North Carolina woods since her husband was lynched for trying to kill the men who raped her. Mattie's husband, Rawl, will leave home too after learning she is pregnant by another man.

Though the Cheeks's home takes up almost the entire stage at Primary Stages, it becomes clear at the end of the play that everyone will have to leave it. An insupportable, racist society will bring together blacks and Jews not only as victims of prejudice, but as fellow sojourners, searching for a world where they can finally feel they belong. The test for Aaronsohn and the Cheeks family at the end of the play is whether or not they will be strong enough to recapture a sense of home even after they've been driven from it.

One wishes that Redwood could have been subtler—that he could have toned down the melodramatic revelations and been somewhat slyer in his construction of parallels between characters' biographies. But that would necessitate a playwright who was more concerned with his art than his mission, and not the other way around.

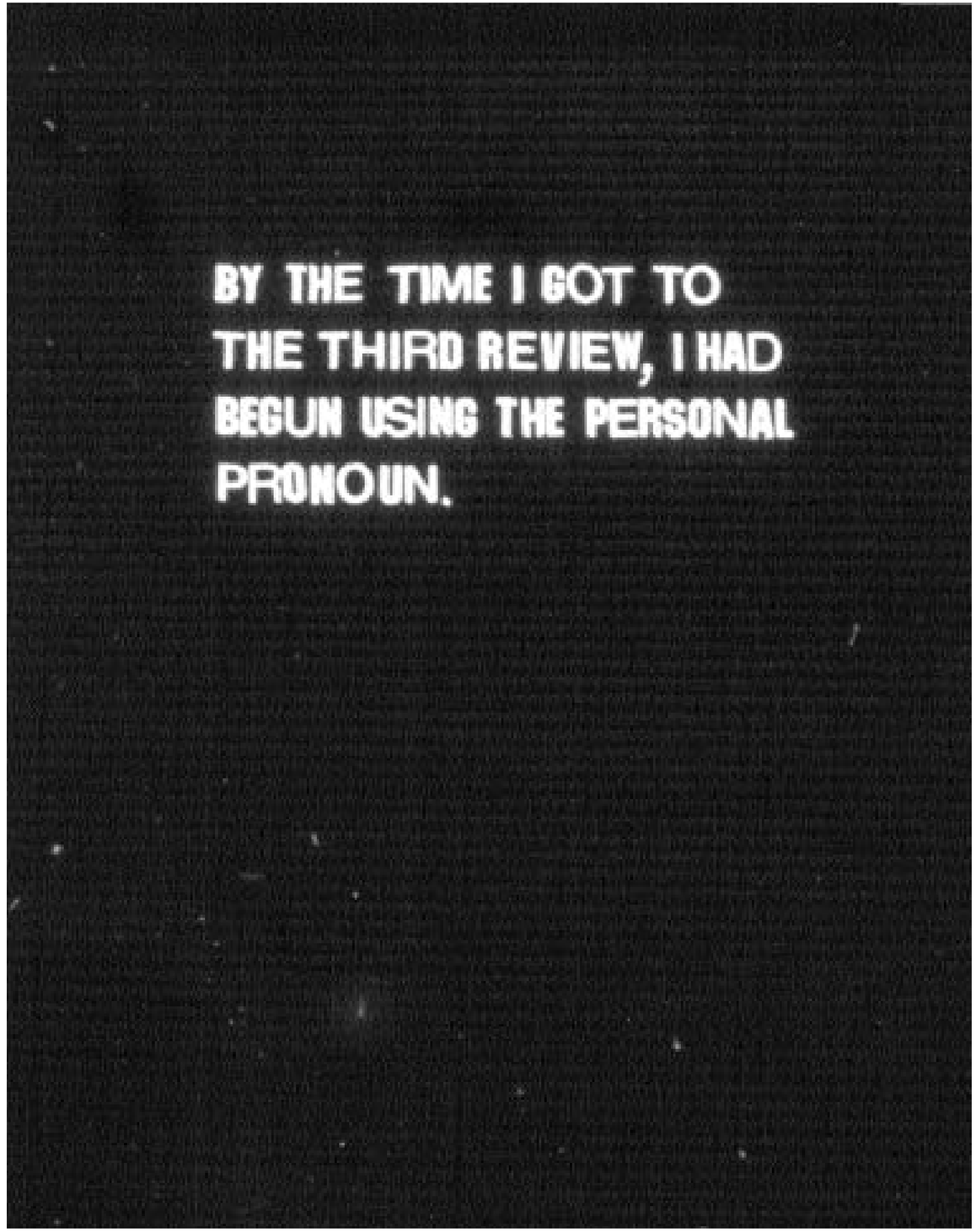
Critics might say that these priorities are out of order, but the passion that the actors bring to their performances and the way audiences respond to them suggest that he might be on the right path after all.

EPILOGUE

"Feels like the very first time. . ."
Foreigner[32]

I VE ALWAYS BEEN one to trust my first impressions. When I was 9 years old, I threw one of the only hissy fits of my life because it was Yom Kippur and I wasn't allowed to stay up late to watch "The Maltese Falcon." Twenty-five years later, "The Maltese Falcon" is still one of my favorites. I don't know if I'd have the same opinion of the film "Gus"[33] as I did when I was 7, but opinions don't always change that drastically over the course of days, weeks or even years. When I was still a theater critic, one of my best tests for determining whether a play was good or not—before all the plays I saw started becoming indistinguishable, before I chucked all that away for a life that didn't involve turning every artistic experience I had into a glib 600-word piece that netted me a couple of hundred bones—was to walk into the theater with a splitting headache. If the play were good, my symptoms would disappear for two hours; if it wasn't, I'd go home and pop a couple Tylenol. Seeing John Redwood's play four times suggested to me that critical appraisals might not be as vulnerable to external stimuli as I had originally thought. Even the elements one might think would alter the experience—an actor having an off night, the elimination of a certain amount of suspense—don't always change one's viewpoint; one makes allowances for the former and tries to re-create the latter. Other factors that may seem to affect one's opinion—from the food consumed before a performance to the audience conversations overheard—turn

[32] The author admits to a guilty fondness for trashy 1970s and '80s arena rock and owns CDs by Def Leppard, Jethro Tull and Aerosmith. As the author writes this, he is blasting "Falling in Love (Is Hard on the Knees)" from Aerosmith's "Nine Lives" album on his boombox. Pleasing though it may be, this song would not make the list of what the author's college classmate once called "My Top Ten Strong Songs." This list would, however, include "Baltimore Oriole," by Hoagy Carmichael; "Snatch It Back and Hold It"; by Junior Wells; "Idiot Wind," by Bob



out to be much less influential than who you are to begin with. What changes over time is not one's perspective, but where one chooses to place emphasis. As the social scientists say, we conclude our experiment with a nonfinding.

My opinion of Redwood's play evolved to some extent—but more in details than in overall impression. I saw the same liabilities at the end of the process that I saw at the beginning, but perhaps understood my reactions to them better. Reading other criticisms of the play seemed to make my own slightly more forceful, but after speaking to the playwright, I toned them down, most likely out of guilt. I concluded from this experiment that the more times one sees a play, the further one becomes removed from the work, and the more one contemplates universal themes and, less universally, oneself; I noticed that by the time I got to the third review, I had begun using the personal pronoun. I'm not sure if there's a qualitative difference among any of the reviews, but the first seems the most honest; if I became progressively more insightful, introspective and sensitive, the subsequent reviews don't represent a significant change in attitude. From this I conclude that if the first cut isn't the deepest, it makes a more than adequate impression. And while this may provide more insight into the critic's mind than the play itself, it is also possible that some plays don't really merit being seen four times.

At the same time, I realized that one of the problems for critics and audiences is not that we don't see things four times—opinions are not as changeable as we may think. It's that we rarely see them for the first time. Coming attractions for films, voluminous criticism and feature articles, marketing schemes and advertising blitzes all give us a pretty fair impression of what to expect before we even enter a theater. And the more one sees and reads, the more difficult it becomes to be surprised. It still happens, from time to time, and it is an experience to strive for.[34] But I find it hard to remember seeing something for which I was totally unprepared. And I suppose that's why I keep going to the theater, and everywhere else: to recapture the feeling I had when I was a blank slate and everything was new. To recapture that first time.[35]

Dylan; "Dancing Barefoot," by Patti Smith; "Green Onions," by Booker T. and the MGs; "Till the End of the Day," by The Kinks; "Gun Street Girl," by Tom Waits; "Down to the Waterline," by Dire Straits; "I'm Not Down," by The Clash; and "Peter's Theme" from Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf."

[33] The author saw this Disney film about a field-goal-kicking mule at the Lincoln Village theater on Chicago's outskirts.

[34] The author's mental scrapbook of memorable "first times" includes hearing Patti Smith performing Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World" at the Riviera Theatre, watching Maurice Bejart's ballet company perform in Brussels in 1982, seeing the opening night of August Wilson's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" on Broadway, the opening moments of Alain Resnais' "Last Year at Marienbad" in Blodgett Auditorium, Bob Dylan singing "Blind Willie McTell" at Pine Knob, first encountering the character of Grace Poole in "Jane Eyre," the 1977 sneak preview of "Annie Hall" at the Edens Theater in Highland Park, Ill., the opening chords of Bruce Springsteen's "Out in the Street" at the Rosemont Horizon in 1982, the sung closing of Eight Bold Souls' "A Little Encouragement," the Alloy Orchestra's live soundtrack to Fritz Lang's "Metropolis," the final 30 minutes of Buster Keaton's "Steamboat Bill," the first time black-and-white fades into color in "Wings of Desire," the first sight of Rene Magritte's "Time Transfixed" at Chicago's Art Institute, Christo's "Wrapped Reichstag" in Berlin, stepping off of a train and into Berlin's Zoo Station.

[35] The author realizes, in this discussion of "first times," that to fully disclose the formative experiences that shaped his life as artist, human and critic (if not necessarily in that order), it would be appropriate to discuss in great detail the loss of his virginity, a torrid affair near the shores of Lake Michigan. He acknowledges with great regret that he has run out of space.