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CHAPTER 2

DAVID AUBURN

There is a freedom with knowing that you can write a play and that that play will have a home [the Manhattan Theatre Club]. Maybe not for production, but at least a place where you can get a reading and eager listeners and people that take it seriously. And that's very freeing. It's unusual for a playwright in the 20th century – anything you try, anything you want to try to tackle – you know you can at least get a very receptive hearing for it. It's a very reassuring feeling to know one has that in the theatre.

David Auburn¹

David Auburn is interested in power – the power which comes from secrets withheld or exposed, for reasons good and bad, as in *Proof* and *Amateurs* – in the contradictions which define characters negotiating their identities and their relationship with others. Some are damaged in ways that disturb (*Proof*, *Lost Lake*) while, beyond them, as in *The Journals of Mihail Sebastian* and *The Columnist*, is a world whose interpretation prompts recoil or assurance. In these last cases there are real-life counterparts to his characters, conflicts internalized as well as a product of the world beyond.

Auburn was born in Chicago in 1969, leaving with his family at the age of two to be raised, first, in Ohio, where his father worked at Ohio State University. When he was thirteen they moved again, this time to Arkansas where his mother, Sandy, worked in the Division of Aging and Adult Services and his father, Mark, an expert on Richard Brinsley Sheridan (*Sheridan's Comedies: Their Contexts and Achievements*, 1977), was a professor of literature and subsequently Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his father's interests, the first play David saw was *The School for Scandal*.² Later, his father would become Dean of the University of Akron's College of Fine and Applied Arts back in Ohio.

During his high school days, according to *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, Auburn 'worked for local professional companies in such jobs as stage hand and assistant to the lighting designer.'³ On leaving school, in 1987, he moved to the University of Chicago where he was a political science major with the vague intention of working in international aid. Certainly, he had no thoughts of becoming a playwright. That changed, though, when he began to write and perform in sketches for a comedy group called Off-Off Campus, then in its second year. As he has said, the transition from sketch comedy to full plays was a gradual one: 'I kept writing and the sketches kept getting longer ... If I hadn't been exposed to that great Chicago sketch-comedy tradition, I probably never would have started.'⁴

In his second year they took a show to the Edinburgh Fringe, he turning down an offer to work for Senator Paul Simon, which, given his major in political science, might have seemed an opportunity not to be missed. As he has said, 'I remember being on the plane waiting to take off and thinking: This is what I want to do. I want to try and write for the theatre. In retrospect a lot of what I know about playwriting comes from writing those revue sketches. You develop a rough toolbox of techniques that apply very nicely when you try to write longer things.'

Writing and performing gave him a sense of the pleasure to be had from working in theatre: 'I . . . remember the first time I wrote and performed in a sketch that got a big laugh. I don't even remember the sketch, but I do recall the distinct feeling of sitting up on stage in one of those bent-wood chairs and saying a line and feeling a wave of laughter rolling at me and the headiness of that – it was something of a different order than just saying a funny line in a play that somebody else had written.'⁵

He became a theatre reviewer for the *Chicago Maroon*, the student newspaper, which gave him free access to theatres, including the Goodman, Remains (staging innovative and experimental works), Theatre Ooblek (which presented plays without a director), and Steppenwolf. Coming from Little Rock, he explained, he felt like a kid in a candy store.

When he left, in 1991, by now majoring in English, he won a one-year fellowship from Universal Studios and Amblin Entertainment, travelling to Los Angeles to write screenplays. They came to nothing and he decided to go to New York saying, 'I figured if I'm going to go broke trying to be a writer, I'd rather do it trying to be a playwright than a screenwriter',⁶ though he would, in time, become a screenwriter as well as a playwright.

Once in New York he took up various part-time jobs including working as a copy editor at Lincoln Center. Hearing that the Juilliard playwriting programme, a residency rather than a degree programme, had just started, he applied, submitting two one-act plays. When he was accepted, in 1992, he was one of only three writers, joined by four more in his second year. He studied under Marsha Norman and Christopher Durang and among the work he produced was a one-act play, *Fifth Planet*, along with *Skyscraper*. Halfway through his time at the Juilliard the latter had a reading at the Berkshire Theatre Festival and then, at the initiative of the director, Michael Rego, a production at the Greenwich House Theatre, forming a company, the Areca Group, to do so. Meanwhile, *Fifth Planet* was given a workshop at New York Stage and Film. As a result of *Skyscraper*, he was approached by the Manhattan Theatre Club who expressed an interest in whatever he might write next.

Asked how you establish a career as a playwright, he explained that, 'the key for me was finding ways to get together with groups of like-minded friends, and self-producing, in whatever grubby conditions we could. The knowledge and relationships that came out of that were ultimately what led to professional productions . . . Basically, we all went to ATM machines and hoped we could take out enough cash to finance the bar or the basement or whatever it was that night. These were very bare-bones productions.'⁷

Meanwhile, he wrote material for publishers and a documentary film company before travelling to England where he joined Frances Rosenfeld, who would later become his wife and who was spending a year at Pembroke College, Cambridge, working on her PhD for Columbia University (she would eventually become Director of Public Programs for the Museum of the City of New York). It was while he was in London that he began work on what would become *Proof*. He sent it to the Manhattan Theatre Club and there was a reading with Mary-Louise Parker. Before that, and before *Skyscraper*, though, he had a number of one-act plays staged in somewhat unlikely places, beginning with *Damage Control*, produced at One Dream Theater, New York, in August 1994.

A comic set piece, this involves two men, dressed in suits, who discuss which tie would be appropriate for the older man to wear and whether or not he should display a handkerchief. He is about to appear before television cameras warned by his communications director that 'the handkerchief denotes a whole patrician world of privilege . . . chauffeurs, Andover. Custom

tailoring' though a Kleenex would suggest that he was 'sloppy, potentially unprepared,'⁸ Kleenex, anyway, being a registered trademark and hence not be mentioned. Only gradually, as the relationship between the two men deteriorates, in an ever more bizarre conversation, does it become apparent that the reason for the television appearance is that he is about to confess to an affair, discussing whether he should refer to the person concerned as a minor, a pre-pubescent, an adolescent vixen, a pre-teen temptress or a statutory rapee, though he has a preference for the conventional, and all too familiar, 'mistakes were made,' that his had been a 'regrettable and profound error of judgement' that 'in no way impedes my ability to carry out my duties and responsibilities' (59). The prepared speech, it turns out, had been partly drafted by his wife: 'She hates you,' he is told, 'She kept us in there drafting that thing for days. She loved it' (60). Given the astonishing list of public officials, from a President of the United States to Presidential candidates, Senators, Congressmen, who found themselves in just such a situation *Damage Control* is hardly a satire. Anthony Weiner, a former congressman, sentenced to twenty-one months for sending obscene material to a minor, was merely one of many. Incidentally, his campaign chief resigned while his wife divorced him.

He followed it with *Fifth Planet*, a two-hander in forty-four brief scenes, staged at the New York Stage and Film Festival in Poughkeepsie, and two comedies, *We Had a Very Good Time* and *Miss You*, the latter only five pages long as were two other plays, *Are You Ready* (staged by the West Bank Theatre in New York City) and *What Do You Believe About the Future?* (1998). *Three Monologues*, produced at Middlebury College in Vermont, were even briefer, each running to a single page.

The play which first drew attention, though, was *Skyscraper* which had a brief run at the small Greenwich House Theater on Barrow Street in Greenwich Village (it later became the Barrow Street Theatre) where it was staged by the newly-formed Araca Group, named for the grandfather of one of its founders. *Skyscraper* was its first production and Auburn's first professional one. It is partly a comedy, partly a contemplation of time, relationships and loss. It is set, for the most part, on the roof of a skyscraper on the eve of its demolition. Once the tallest building in Chicago, it is now seemingly insignificant beside the Sear's Tower with its 110 floors. It was designed, we learn, by Dankmar Adler, who did, in fact, design the Auditorium Building in 1889, the year the building in *Skyscraper* was supposedly constructed and which, at the time, was indeed the tallest building in Chicago (far from being demolished, it was declared a National Historic Building).

The principal character, Louis, is himself 110 years old and claims not only to have known Adler but to be the nephew of Adler's actual partner, Louis Sullivan. But then he also claims to be the man who flew a B-25 into the Empire State Building in 1945 killing eleven people (in fact fourteen) because it was blacked out (in fact there was thick fog) while making love to his wife and drinking beer (it was flown by William Franklyn Smith). Fact and fantasy interweave in his mind even as his short-term memory proves equally fallible, though one distant memory takes concrete form.

The play opens with a brief street scene in which all six characters encounter one another in the rain. Vivian is a suicidal young woman who will climb to the roof to end her life. Jessica wants to stop the demolition and manages to break her arm while trying to photograph its artistic glories. Her lawyer, Jane, is a nymphomaniac whose love life is so complicated that it requires a virtual Venn diagram to chart. She even manages a tryst, on the roof of the skyscraper, with Raymond, owner of the demolition company whose brother, Joseph, a one-time

submariner, unbeknown to him, has been restoring elements of the building which he is about to demolish. Clearly there are more than a few elements of farce about *Skyscraper* though after the prologue it opens with a scene in which Louis fights to stop Vivian committing suicide, assuring her that everything will be all right, failing, finally, when she steps off the edge as police sirens are heard. It turns out, though, that Vivian had died a century earlier, a memory so vivid, and an event so traumatic, that it had stayed with him every day thereafter and had drawn him back to the place where it occurred.

The police sirens had not been for Vivian, then, but for him since it was assumed he was about to jump. This brings all the characters together in a final scene in which farce merges with more serious concerns to do with the necessity of memory, the need to preserve the past, and the problems of allowing it to haunt the present. There are, in a sense, two plays here, interlaced but different in tone. For all the humour of Louis' wild inventions, his relationship with the fantasy Vivian – who reappears, briefly, to him as the play edges towards its conclusion – has tragic elements while the other characters are sketched more lightly. Vivian tells him to forget about her but that is impossible. There are moments when he forgets her name but never the moment she stepped into space, at the end he himself swaying at the edge held back by Jessica because 'we need what you can remember,'⁹ though what that is, is far from clear since memory has proved a construction as liable to demolition as the building. What remains from that distant past is a photograph, that and a ghost, the embodiment of figures everyone holds in their minds of those they once knew and who stay with them if not, as here, physically manifest then as memories whose vividness survives time, figures who in some way shape those who retain them as more than nostalgic gestures. These are mental photographs of those lost but never quite abandoned because a part of a present ever linked to the past, which is why the demolition of buildings threatens a link between now and then, why the death of others removes witnesses to our own lives and our sense of ourselves.

The interactions in the prologue seem arbitrary. People on a street run into one another. There seems no logic to it. Human relations, it appears, are a matter of pure chance with no meaning beyond that generated by contingency, in a way a parallel to the playwright's own summoning of characters into existence. As Joseph remarks, 'I'm at work and I watch people . . . I am up very high: the top of a skyscraper. I can look out over the whole city. Someone is coming down the block . . . Someone is coming toward him. They can't see each other. They can't see what's going to happen. I can: I'm up so high I can see the pattern. They move on. What happened? This is the part I can't know. Was it a collision? They smack into each other, get mad. They yell. They apologize and move on' (41). This is, in effect, a description of the prologue.

Interestingly, given the play which would follow, Joseph, the former submariner, turns to mathematics in explaining relationships between any arbitrary conjunction of people: 'I know math. You have to, on a nuclear sub . . . How many possible relationships are there in the group? . . . There's a formula . . . The formula is $N \text{ times } N-1 \text{ over } 2$. . . So, my submarine with 36 men. Let's plug it in. $N=36$. $N \text{ times } N-1 \text{ over } 2$. . . It's 1,260 . . . Divided by two is 630 possible relationships . . . Do Chicago: three million people. The answer is unreal: 400 trillion. So high that what happened to us is a lot like randomness' (41).

Jane's multiple sexual partners, turning on chance encounters, Louis' presence at Vivian's suicide, the gathering of these characters occasioned by a decision about the fate of a particular building, may be reducible to a mathematical formula but that is the stuff of human interactions, chance reinvented as fate. Neither Jane nor Joseph have ever known love. Now they come

together. 'What are the odds that this is love?' (42) she asks, but we have just been offered the calculation. On the other hand, it is a series of chances which led to the creation of the skyscraper, requiring, we are told, a number of necessary inventions, the bringing together of those who would create the beautiful art work it contains in the form of a mosaic, the collaboration of strangers, to bring it into being. Contingency can lead to form as to its dissolution. The building was 'invented', an 'idea' which took form, with 'its own aesthetic,' (15) just as a play comes into being, with its component parts, moving from inspiration through craft to realization. The play, Auburn has remarked, was part of his learning experience.

A playwright is a crafter of plays, like a wheelwright, like an architect, combining the aesthetic with the functional. The three dimensional is imminent in the two, words or drawings inscribed in the knowledge that they would be physically embodied in space. Arthur Miller was a carpenter as well as a playwright and the two professions are congruent. I once saw him use a hot wire to sign a newly-completed garden bench he had shaped, doing so, he told me, with the same pleasure that he signed a play. There is surely a sense in which *Skyscraper* is, in part, concerned with the power to give form to the imagined as memory can give substance to the ephemeral.

The New York Times review was not without its scepticism. While granting that it 'fairly teems with intriguing notions,' Peter Marks thought that 'none of them, ultimately, amount to much' finding it '[as] rigorous – and emotionally arid – as a master's thesis.'¹⁰ But, staged in a small Off Broadway theatre, it was reviewed in *The New York Times*, which was something in itself, while it received more positive responses from *Variety* and *Curtain Up*. The former praised its skill in capturing a sense of loss, thinking it a natural for film adaptation, the latter its mix of humour and poignancy, maintaining the Greenwich House's reputation for new drama.

More significantly, the production caught the eye of those at the Manhattan Theater Club who asked to see his next work. He worked on the play which became *Proof* during his time in England and had finished it by the end of 1998 offering it first to the Araca Group (later producers, at Auburn's urging, of the award-winning musical *Urinetown*), but it was picked up by the Manhattan Theatre Club and opened in May, 2000, following development work at the George Street Playhouse. Later that year it moved to Broadway where it ran for 917 performances. The following year, ten years after he left the Juilliard, it won a Drama Desk Award, a Lucille Lortel Award, a Tony Award and a Pulitzer Prize and, in 2002, opened at London's Donmar Warehouse with Gwyneth Paltrow in the part played by Mary-Louise Parker in New York. In 2005, adapted by Rebecca Miller (she and Auburn sharing the screenplay credit), it was made into a film with Paltrow and Anthony Hopkins. This all came as a total surprise in that, having only had one full-length play presented Off Broadway, Auburn had imagined he would see *Proof* produced, perhaps, by a group of friends, on a small, intimate stage with no future beyond that. A Broadway production seemed inconceivable, let alone productions across America and around the world together with a film, albeit one with which he was not entirely happy in his view not translating particularly well to that medium in that it was too much like a filmed version of the play.¹¹

Proof retained two elements which had formed part of *Skyscraper*: mathematical proofs and a ghost haunting the central character. Where in the former the poignancy and melancholy had been subordinated to comic and even farcical elements, however, here they were embedded in characters who were substantial. In *Proof*, loss is wedded to anxiety. There is nothing 'emotionally

arid' about them nor, despite the mathematical elements, even the suggestion of a Master's thesis. The word proof, indeed, while applying to a mathematical formula also has other resonances having to do with the establishment of truth in human relationships, the true state of affairs, evidence, a test of, a defence against, feelings. The word itself derives from the Latin for 'test', and, indeed, this is a work in which people are tested.

At its heart are two sisters, one fragile, sharply intelligent but disturbed and vulnerable, the other controlled and controlling, logical, rational, each distrustful of the other, tested, in part, by how they respond to the needs of their father. They see the world, define reality, differently, both having evidence for their version but equally both being capable of self-deception. The rationality of mathematics co-exists with emotional needs. It is a play not without comedy, generated by those differing perspectives, even as it explores genuine human needs and dilemmas. Secrets are exposed, motives questioned. If a mathematical mystery is resolved, existing as it does, outside the messy world of human interactions, other mysteries remain deeply imbedded in the human.

As to the play's origins, Auburn explained them in a conversation with Charles Newell back at his alma mater, the University of Chicago, before an impending production of the play: 'I had been playing around with two ideas which just seemed interesting to me, dramatically. One was about two sisters who find something after the death of a parent and whatever conflict might come out of that. The other idea was about someone who was worried that they might inherit a parent's mental illness. Along with that I had an image in my mind of someone who was sitting alone on their birthday . . . I saw someone coming up behind her and saying, "can't sleep?"' The question was how to put those two ideas together. As he explained, 'I eventually came around to thinking that a mathematical proof might be very interesting to find.' He was struck by the fact that there have been a number of mathematicians who have suffered from mental illness: 'that gave me a bridge to my other idea and the play came out of that mix.'¹² The first draft came quickly. He knew the setting and the characters. It took a further nine months, though, before everything was in place. The figure at its centre was in part based on people he recalled from his days as an undergraduate at Chicago, where the play was set. These were eccentric figures, assumed to be brilliant, but whose career plainly lay behind them, melancholic characters, products of the intellectual environment of a university.

He explained that he had been reading books about mathematics, one in particular being G.H. Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology*. Hardy, a pure mathematician, had written the book conscious that his skills were declining, that his profession was a young man's so that his own achievements lay behind him. It seemed to him that writing about mathematics was itself a melancholy experience. He worked on number theory and found a beauty in equations, resisting a utilitarian approach. To him the patterns of mathematics are like those to be found in art or poetry, images or words fitting together. He took pride in never having done anything useful. His pleasure lay in creating something which he judged to be worthwhile. Perhaps it is no wonder that Auburn responded.

Proof opens in the early hours of the morning on the back porch of a house in Chicago, though his description of the play as in some ways a very conventional back-porch drama that happens to be located in a campus setting is surely deliberately disingenuous. Twenty-five-year-old Catherine sits alone, an air of exhaustion and the haphazard about her. She is plainly on edge and is surprised as suddenly her father, Robert, a former professor at the University of Chicago, appears behind her. He carries a bottle of champagne to mark what is seemingly her

impending birthday. He, we later learn, had been a major figure contributing to game theory, algebraic geometry and nonlinear operator theory, albeit while being psychologically fragile. It was the Nobel Prize-winning mathematician John F. Nash Jr., celebrated in *A Beautiful Mind*, whose achievements co-existed with mental illness. As he remarked, 'I would not dare to say that there is a direct relation between mathematics and madness, but there is no doubt that great mathematicians suffer from maniacal characteristics, delirium, and symptoms of schizophrenia.'¹³

Robert upbraids her for failing to use her own talent as a mathematician and for a moment they discuss prime numbers, clearly a point of contact between them even as she reminds him that she had been distracted by looking after him, dropping out of university to do so. He had, it transpires, been ill, an illness which had begun when he was twenty-three or twenty-four. She is, it seems, waiting for the genetic shoe to drop, he having completed his major work by that age and she fearing both that she has missed her chance (even as, secretly, she herself has an extraordinary talent) and that she may succumb to the same mental decline, evidence of which being his conversations with non-existent people. The problem is that her father is in fact dead and this conversation a product of her disordered state, perhaps proof that she is, indeed, in thrall to the same fate, his imminent funeral precipitating something more than anxiety.

Ironically, given that he is dead, this relationship lies at the heart of a play which moves backwards and forwards in time as she sees in the past seeds of what may be her future. Also ironically, what turns out to have been a painful experience was not without its advantages. Acting as a carer for a man of brilliance, rendered helpless and confused, she had been able to conceal her own ambition and achievement rather than suffer the exposure of standing alone, confronting her own fears, as now she will have to do. She had built a carapace around herself which is threatened by those who seek to intrude, even when they do so out of concern and even, to her surprise, out of love, suspecting that their motives might be tainted, as perhaps they are given that they, too, fail to inspect what it is that drives them.

Her reverie, though, is interrupted by Hal, one of her father's former students, whose own career seems stalled as he realizes that he is not likely to make a major contribution to his field. He is going through Robert's papers in hope of discovering something of significance even as they seem no more than the jottings of someone detached from reality. 'It's like a monkey with a typewriter,' Claire observes, 'A hundred and three notebooks full of bullshit.'¹⁴ For his part, Hal is also a member of a band of mathematicians who play a piece called 'i', a mathematical joke since that stands for an imaginary number, the imagined being not without its significance given Claire and her father's conversation with figures with no substance. For three minutes they play nothing. The imaginary plainly plays a role, pure mathematics itself being abstract, in a play in which the mind creates its own reality. When she suspects that Hal may be stealing a notebook, however, Catherine calls the police only to insult and even assault them when they arrive, further evidence that she might be following her father along the path to dementia. Certainly, in the course of the play she shifts her perception of events, an instability which may be revealing of an inner confusion or of the trauma of losing the man who has been the focus of both her emotional life and professional aspirations.

Until this moment there was always someone further down the line, ahead of her, in his talent and its collapse. Now, she is head of the line. Having suppressed both her own talent and her fear of what it may mean, she is at a tipping point. Conflict, in this play, is not only that

between herself and others but within herself. The death of a parent may precipitate feelings of abandonment, vulnerability, exposure, but also a sudden, if unlooked for, liberation from the past. She becomes her own person even as she is unsure who that person might be.

When her sister arrives for the funeral she sets about taking control, tidying her up and suggesting that she should leave Chicago to join her and her husband in New York. What seems like concern, however, turns out to be self-interest since she has decided to sell the house, this woman who had sacrificed nothing for her father, though picking up the bills, but is now happy to displace her own sister from her home, suspecting that she is anyway unstable and may need residential care – what she learns of Catherine's behaviour reinforcing her sense that she might be succumbing to her father's mental illness, and we have, after all, seen her talking to a figment of her imagination and first summoning and then turning away the police.

The act ends, though, with a surprise foreshadowed by a conversation between Hal and Catherine in which she invokes the figure of Sophie Germain, an eighteenth-century woman who, for a while, under a man's name, had worked on Fermat's Last Theorem and prime numbers, quoting verbatim, and at some length, from a letter written to Germain by the German mathematician Carl Gauss (some of whose mathematical breakthroughs occurred while he was in his teens) in which, having learned that she is in fact a woman, he praises her genius. She has, she says, memorized the passage. Why? Because she has a secret of her own, giving Hal a key to a drawer in which he discovers a notebook which proves a theorem about prime numbers that 'mathematicians have been trying to prove since ... there were mathematicians' (47). He assumes that, even in his madness, and when he was beyond the age at which he was at his peak, Robert had revealed true genius. The theorem, though, Catherine confesses, was her own, the work of someone who had not even been to graduate school, dropping out of her undergraduate programme to look after her father.

She has kept it secret, it seems, because she is afraid that inheriting a mathematical ability she may also have inherited the thing she fears most, the mental problems which she has witnessed at first hand, that genius and madness may, indeed, be close allied as Dryden (in *Absalom and Achitophel*) had proposed. It is a moment of triumph but simultaneously of vulnerability, as others may now see the connection which she herself has sought to suppress. Auburn had originally intended that she would have solved Fermat's Last Theorem but that had finally, and inconveniently, been solved in 1994 and published in 1995 so that he settled for a less precise, more generic theory.

The second act begins four years earlier, when Robert was seven months into what would be a nine-month recovery from his condition. Paid for by her sister, Catherine has enrolled at Northwestern University, half an hour's drive away, a sign that she believes that their problems are now behind them, except that we have already witnessed the after to which this is the before. He forgets it is her birthday, a fact which would seem no more than forgetfulness except that it may equally be a sign that all is not well.

With the second scene we are back to the present, picking up where the first act ended as Claire refuses to accept Catherine's authorship of the theorem seeing it as further evidence of her sister's following along the path of their father's illness, making a claim for which there is no evidence. The handwriting, she declares, is her father's and not her sister's. She demands proof. Catherine turns to Hal for support, a man who is not only a mathematician but someone with whom she has slept. He is equally sceptical suggesting that even if it is Catherine's handwriting this may mean nothing more than that her father had explained it to her. Suddenly,

trust is an issue, as is betrayal. As she points out, if she has indeed solved the problem herself that immediately casts a shadow over his career, a man bested by a woman whose abilities were either inherited or learned in a house in which mathematics was a language.

The action then switches back in time again. It is three and a half years earlier. Robert feels inspired, in touch with insights he thought abandoned years before but anxious to share the work with Catherine. It seems that he might, after all, have been responsible for the formula she would later claim except that when she reads it out it is not evidence of his recovery but of its end. 'Let X equal the quantity of all quantities of X,' it begins, 'Let X equal the cold. It is cold in December. The months of cold equal November through February . . . In February it snows. In March the lake is a lake of ice. In September the students come back and the bookstores are full. Let X equal the month of full bookstores . . . The future of cold is infinite. The future of heat is the future of cold. The bookstores are infinite. . . (73–4). As she reads, so she realizes that he is disappearing once more into his own darkness. When he starts to shake uncontrollably she puts her arm around him, comforting him even as she herself is discomforted. A door had closed for him, a door opened for her and there is no certainty that on the other side might not be a darkness just as deep.

Back in the present, a week on from her claim to authorship of the proof, Claire has handed the notebook to Hal who had at first failed to support Catherine's claim. He is plainly attracted to her but also has ambitions of his own as if he were a figure from Henry James' *The Aspern Papers* in which a man is ready to trade intimacy for secret papers. Catherine now appears ready to accept her sister's offer to help her relocate in New York, and therefore, it would seem, abandon her own plans and her future as a mathematician, except that her enthusiasm for New York is patently ironic as she enumerates its attractions as if reading from a travel brochure before adding what is more likely to lie ahead: 'Restrains, lithium, electroshock' (77). When Claire suggests that her husband-to-be might find her a job, Catherine asks, 'Does he know anyone in the phone-sex industry' (77). She will, she says, 'sit quietly on the plane to New York. And live quietly in a cute apartment. And answer Dr. Von Heimlich's questions very politely . . . I would like to see a doctor called Dr. Von Heimlich: please find one . . . while I'm blaming everything on you' (77). Irony edges towards hysteria. She has, it turns out, been asleep for a week. Claire now says, 'Don't come,' leaving even as Hal arrives, finally convinced that Catherine had developed the theorem and determined to convince her to stay. She hands the book to him saying, 'Here,' seemingly an offer of collaboration, an acceptance, for the moment at least, that she will continue with her work, that she is her father's daughter in terms of her talent but not her fate.

Is that, then, an indication that her fears were groundless, that everything is now resolved, that the proof once accepted her life will have the solidity, elegance, logic, balance of an equation, that in Hal she has found more than a collaborator? Surely not. The house has been sold, a familiar environment exchanged for the unknown and were her sister's fears entirely misplaced?

Auburn has said that productions work best when they play against the potential for sentimentality, though that potential is clearly there in terms of the relationship between a damaged father and his daughter, a relationship which survives his death. It is there in that we watch a man's decline and a daughter's evident care, her willingness to sacrifice herself and her ambitions for his comfort and security. It is there, too, in that daughter's struggle to find grace, finally to take a chance, quite possibly against the odds, on her own talent and a man who had

proved fallible. What resists that sentimentality is a series of human equations as he balances the motives and perceptions of two sisters, as he does the intellectual confidence and emotional fragility of Catherine.

Whatever the elegance of its methods, even its beauty, a mathematical proof is finally either right or wrong. The same is not true of human relationships. There are no uncontested answers, no ultimate proofs, no ciphers which, when broken, render up a clear truth. The theorem once solved leaves no residue, even though it may open new paths. This is pure mathematics. It may be applied by others but in itself is an intellectual exercise. G.H. Hardy (who, incidentally, had an early interest in genetics and hence the passing of characteristics from generation to generation) revelled in the in-utility of his work, regarding applied mathematics as not 'real', as repulsively ugly and intolerably dull. Lives, by contrast, while real enough, can be both ugly and dull. They lack the clarity of outline, the assurance of mathematics, not being resolvable, reduced to an exact formulation, but the power of *Proof* lies in the fact that the metaphor at its centre is finally inadequate to the characters it presents. Are Catherine's care for her father and her sister's concern for her equal evidence for, proof of, compassion? If they see the world differently is one correct and the other not? Is Hal's change of mind proof of his ambition or his love for Catherine? They sit on a bench, in different combinations, at different times, and debate what may be true while the ghost of a mathematician is hardly consonant with the profession which defined him but which also deserted him, entropy being a fundamental principle of all existence.

Why does Catherine stay with, and care for, her father? Is it duty, affinity, love? Certainly, there is greater intimacy between them than with either Claire or the man with whom, for a single night, she shared her bed. Claire supports her father and sister financially but seems not to be tempted by a more intimate engagement. Is it lack of duty, affinity, love? She seems not to have her sister's emotional commitment but is about to marry, albeit to a man we never see, while Catherine is surprised by a relationship with Hal not least because she knows herself his intellectual superior. Her commitment is to her father, now gone, his funeral disturbing her apparently more than it does Claire, the sister from whom she differs so markedly and yet to whom she is linked. She is the rational one in so far as the profession to which she is drawn depends upon logic, yet her sister is rational in a different sense, not only registering the value of her father's house but also genuinely seeking to provide for Catherine even if she fails to understand that her needs are not those she assumes.

And why has Catherine kept her secret, knowing its importance, unless she sees it as diminishing her father's significance while aligning herself with his fate, his early achievements ineluctably associated in her mind with his subsequent decline? And why does she summon him to mind beyond a troubling suggestion that her own hold on the real is beginning to slip, except that, beyond that, it is a way of keeping alive the person she has lost. She has proved an impossible theorem. Something is completed. The same is not true of her life. The play ends with possibility, perhaps even acceptance, but not certainty. The proof of their lives is not completed.

On 29 May 1945, three weeks after the end of the war, the Romanian lawyer, novelist, playwright and diarist Mihail Sebastian, born Iosif Mendel Hechter, was crossing the road to give a lecture on Balzac at the university in Bucharest when he was hit and killed by an army truck. At the time he was a press officer at the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At thirty-seven, he was Jewish and had survived a war in which many of his fellow Jews in Romania had

been killed. For nine years he kept a diary, ending in 1944. It was smuggled out of Romania to Israel and finally published in Bucharest in 1996, appearing in English in 2000.

On reading it, Arthur Miller was disturbed by yet another reminder of the depth of anti-Semitism. It was in his novel, *For Two Thousand Years*, that Sebastian had commented on the Jew's seemingly metaphysical obligation to be detested. That was his curse, his fate, and that role was played out once again in Sebastian's Romania. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum published the response of various writers to his *Journal*, including Miller for whom it was 'Unforgettable ... I read,' he said, 'with a gripped attentiveness.' It was 'compelling.' Mihail Sebastian's 'hell,' he concluded, 'is unique, even among European Jewish intellectuals because danger comes to him first ... from his closest friends and colleagues ... It is precisely his capacity to remain in touch with men and women who should have been his enemies that makes Sebastian an unparalleled diarist. [His] is a profoundly intelligent literary voice in the midst of political disempowerment, corruption, and carnage.' For Philip Roth, it deserved to 'be on the same shelf as Anne Frank's Diary' portraying 'the cruelty, cowardice, and stupidity of his worldly Gentile friends ... as they voluntarily transform themselves into intellectual criminals and, allied with the Nazis, participate with fanatical conviction in an anti-Semitic delirium that nothing can stop.'¹⁵ Sebastian and his fellow Jews survived when the Romanian government suspected they might not win the war and therefore abandoned their enthusiasm for murdering them. The diary, though, describes in detail the deportation and murder of tens of thousands of Romanian Jews.

During the war, Sebastian was not allowed to use his own name when writing, a name never mentioned in newspapers. It was impossible to buy copies of his books. He was fired from his job with a publisher where he was working as a clerk. A play was banned while another was written under a pseudonym. When he asked Nae Ionescu, a professor of philosophy at the University of Bucharest, to write a preface for his novel *For Two Thousand Years* he produced an anti-Semitic diatribe denying that Sebastian, as a Jew, could be a Romanian. Sebastian published it thinking it would be self-condemnatory. Bizarrely, a number of his friends were fascists, including Mircea Eliade who, after the war, established himself as a professor of religion at Auburn's alma mater, the University of Chicago.

David Auburn is Jewish by virtue of his mother, though he was brought up a Unitarian. In 2004, with the Keen Company (read 'fervent') in New York, then in its fourth season, he presented an adaptation of the *Journal*, in the form of a monologue, in the 99-seat Theatre at 45th Street (ticket price \$19). The play includes elements from Sebastian's essay 'How I Became a Hooligan', while the *Journal* (pluralized in Auburn's play) runs to 628 pages so that it was a challenge to reshape it for two acts. Explaining why he should take on such a venture he said, 'It was just the next thing that came along that grabbed me,' though it is hard to believe that given the fact that having read the book once he read it again immediately and went to Romania to research its background. He was struck by the fact that, 'It was a perspective on the war and the Holocaust I had never encountered ... But much more than that, I was captivated by his personality on the page, his humor, his incredibly incisive intelligence and his self-deprecation ... As with anybody's life, things happen and expectations build up, then dissipate ... Having some of those things I thought would be true to life's experience, but you can't afford too many of those in a play.'¹⁶ It was not, he declared, 'a dramatic work,' while one-person shows had never particularly appealed to him but, 'I hope we found a way to do it that'll feel different to people, even if you've seen a lot of one-actor shows.'¹⁷

But it is, of course, a dramatic work, a tragedy, indeed, as a man journeys towards his fate, struggles against forces he cannot control, nonetheless accusing himself of a failure to act. We enter into the mind of a man, aware of his faults, charting the state of his disordered society, his writing an act of resistance, at times the only source of resistance. Sebastian was, after all, a playwright and as such alert to the unfolding drama of which he was the protagonist. What use is theatre, he asks himself, in the face of events which make it seem an irrelevance, except that Auburn's play is in itself an intervention as he lays before his audience inconvenient truths through the person of a man long dead but whose testimony suddenly speaks from a past whose relevance has not been erased by time.

Auburn's suggestion that this was just 'the next thing that came along' implies almost a minor status, as do his remarks about the lack of appeal of one-man shows. It is not so. It emerges as a study of a man's existential plight ('I wait as I would for a train. My whole life is one long wait.' [49]), as it does as a reminder of how fragile is the divide between a civilized existence and barbarism. A decade before Auburn's play, 800,000 Tutsis were killed by Hutus in Rwanda. The year after that over 8,000 men were slaughtered at Srebrenica. The year before he staged *The Journals of Mihail Sebastian* 400,000 died in Darfur. Ahead, in 2017, lay the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar. This is not a play about one man, a writer, who died in 1945. It is about a recurring nightmare in human affairs as it is about a man's struggle to define himself, to understand what he has been and who he is in times which can seem inimical to man.

The part of Sebastian was played by Stephen Kunken, a fellow student from his days at the Juilliard and who had played Hal in the Broadway production of *Proof*. As a monologue, it was a demanding part, running to fifty-three pages in the published version. A note by Auburn explains that the bulk of the text is derived from the original, though he has written a number of brief passages where clarifications of historical events or situations seem to necessitate this and, indeed, the first sentence echoes that of the book. But then there is a curious, if insignificant change. In the original, Sebastian has been listening to a Bach concerto in G for trumpet, oboe, harpsichord and orchestra. In Auburn's version he listens to a Bach sonata in G minor for harpsichord and cello. Why the change? It is not clear, though it is an indication that this is not a mere cut and paste from the original diary. The process of selection effectively involves the creation of a character based, to be sure, on an existing text but an interpretation in the same way that documentary or tribunal theatre abstracts drama from transcripts of interviews or publicly available material only to reshape them. Of course, Sebastian himself, in his *Journal*, was about the same business, offering a version of himself, the events and conversations he chooses to record reflecting his sense of himself through what he chooses to prioritize. And the music? So important when his *Journal* begins, it inspires guilt later when everything, including the music, a pleasure and resource, feels trivial in the face of a world in freefall.

What emerges is a Sebastian at first happy to record commitments made and swiftly ended, love declared only to fade. That equivocation, though, extends to his politics, to those he admires and who in turn profess an admiration for his work. It is apparent that Nae Ionescu, a professor, and Camil Petrescu, in particular, are deeply anti-Semitic, adherents of the Iron Guard whose anti-Semitism co-existed with extreme nationalism and anti-communism. Sebastian seems to have the ability to separate their views from them as individuals. 'I refuse to believe in the professor's anti-Semitism,'¹⁸ he declared, in the face of evidence to the contrary. While alarmed at Mircea Eliade's right-wing views – 'All great creators are on the right' – he

insisted that, 'I shan't allow such discussions to cast the slightest shadow over my affection for [him]' (11–12). Why not? How is it possible to hold two antithetical worlds apart in this way, to make distinctions which in truth lack the subtlety to which they lay claim? 'To be disinterested and natural, never indignant or approbatory' he tells himself, 'that is the best of attitudes. I am old enough to have learned that at least' (12). It is as though he abstracts himself from his own life, becoming a mere observer, claiming the same indifference as Albert Camus's Meursault in *The Stranger*.

'All I want from life,' Sebastian says, 'is a little peace and quiet, a woman, some books, and a clean house' (8). Indeed, he accused himself of being too 'supple,' longing to express more 'intransigence, more rigidity' (13). He was happy to send an article to Ionescu for publication. He was nineteen and his real enthusiasm was for the theatre, for the idea that actors would speak his lines, his love of theatre, like Auburn's own, focussing on its collaborative nature. Yet at the same time he was watching Jews abused even as Camil Petrescu, who he regarded as having one of the finest minds in Romania, declared that 'the Jews provoke things' (14).

The play now jumps ten years. Mircea is more rabidly right wing than ever, supporting Franco in Spain, Italy in Abyssinia (another playwright, Luigi Pirandello, incidentally, melting down his Nobel Prize medal to donate gold to the Italian efforts). Still Sebastian tries to separate the man's politics from their relationship, even as events on the street suggest the danger of such views when translated into Romanian politics and the actions of the Iron Guard. How, though, he asks himself, can he forget his 'generosity, his humanity, his affectionate disposition,' (15) no matter the contradiction implied in his response.

The action moves to 1937, he still asking himself whether friendship is compatible with the beliefs and actions of those he seems to wish to regard as his friends even as they defend beatings in the Iron Guard headquarters, even as his play is withdrawn from production as a result, he is sure, of his being Jewish, even as he himself describes the woman he had loved for two years, and confesses still to do so, as 'ugly' with a 'Jewish nose,' (18) his ability to reconcile opposites, to equivocate, contain contradictions not being restricted to the public realm. When the Iron Guard succeed in the elections he declares, 'I am sufficiently unserious to look at events with a kind of amused curiosity,' (19) continuing to hold his tongue. He takes refuge in skiing even as a new vocabulary becomes respectable: yid, Judah's domination. Jews are forbidden to work as journalists. The world begins to close in, despite a brief political respite as a new government begins to arrest Iron Guardists and his play is reinstated.

For a while his diary is about a love affair and the success of his play, except that on the radio Hitler's speeches are to be heard. 'On such a day,' he asks himself, 'am I supposed to take a mere play seriously?' (26) At the same time, he insists, 'What a strong impact the theatre makes,' (27) even as it manifestly has no power to deflect a gathering storm. Why should Auburn have been drawn to Sebastian? In part, no doubt, for what his diary has to say about anti-Semitism, once again at large in the world, but perhaps also because he raises the question of theatre's social utility or irrelevance. Beyond that lie questions to do with loyalty, the ability to allow contradictions to persist in the face of evidence. Meanwhile, there is the paradox of Sebastian himself, whose moral paralysis, seeming indifference, lack of agency, belief in an immunity at odds with events, make him almost an absurd hero offering a metaphysical shrug in the face of an unfolding fate.

Munich comes. The theatres empty, a reminder that they do, indeed, exist in a social and political context. It is, he fears, the end of his career. Never again, he suspects, will people

respond to his words. Jews are stopped from returning. The war breaks out. Now he thinks of the Jews elsewhere, in a Poland already crushed. He asks himself how he would behave in a concentration camp or facing a firing squad. When Nae Ionescu dies, however, he finds himself sobbing, the man who had written an anti-Semitic preface for *For Two Thousand Years*, Sebastian equivocating to the very graveside.

He watches as country after country is defeated. The first act ends with the capitulation of France. He had shed tears for the death of an anti-Semite; for the collapse of civilization he has none. For half a year he lays his journal aside and is assigned to an agricultural detachment, even as he lives under a fascist government and there are battles on the street as the Iron Guard tries to take power, battles which mark the beginnings of a pogrom. The tone of detachment is now harder to sustain, the writer who observed and reserved judgement, hesitant to confront those whose rhetoric was menacing but which he had felt neutralized in some way by personal relationships. As he says, 'The stunning thing about the Bucharest bloodbath is the utter bestial ferocity of it. It is now considered absolutely certain that a group of Jews were butchered at Străulești abattoir and hanged by the necks on hooks usually used for beef carcasses.' A sheet of paper was stuck to each corpse: "Kosher Meat." Many more were killed in Jilava forest. They were first undressed . . . then shot and thrown on top of one another' (37–8).

For Sebastian, this was chilling news. Why, though, would Auburn choose to return to events now surely well known, if not in the context of Romania then elsewhere in wartime Europe? In 1994 I sat in on rehearsals for *Broken Glass*, Arthur Miller's play set at the time of Kristallnacht. There came a moment when he addressed the Jewish cast and told them of similar hangings from meat hooks in Germany. In the last decade of the twentieth century even his Jewish cast were shocked by what he said, unaware, nearly sixty years on, of details of the Holocaust, the Holocaust Museum in Washington only opening a year earlier. In 2004, when Auburn adapted Sebastian's diary, incidents of anti-Semitism in America were rising as they were in Europe.

The diary continues as his world shrinks. Jewish property is now expropriated. Previously, he notes, anti-Semitism had been 'bestial but outside the law' (38); now it was officially sanctioned. There is, though, still something of Kafka's Joseph K about him as he accepts the various blows he suffers as if there were some justification. He loses his apartment only to say, 'it is no misfortune to lose one's comfortable dwelling for another less comfortable.' When radio sets are confiscated he notes, 'It does not come as a surprise; it was even to be expected' (39). But with Germany's war on the Soviet Union Romania becomes a German ally. Five hundred Jews are executed, Jews and Bolsheviks seen as synonymous. Even then he writes, 'I seem to have accepted in advance whatever may come' (40). When he records the transportation and murder of his fellow Jews, and he and others are ordered to report, anticipating a similar transportation, he writes, 'Then came my old sense of futility, of submission in the face of adversity,' (41) while the mocking and persecution of Jews has become a public entertainment. Tennessee Williams, when asked the secret to happiness, replied, insensitivity. Harden your heart to stone while there is still time, advised Camus's character in *Cross Purpose*, it being what God had done for his own happiness. There is a sense that Sebastian has done much the same, echoing what the world offers him.

Suggestions that he should convert to Catholicism he rejects, his Jewish identity, towards which he could envisage being indifferent at other times, being now personally as well as publicly unavoidable, the wearing of a yellow star becoming compulsory, an order suddenly

and inexplicably reversed, the sheer arbitrariness being part of the oppression. There are, he notes, 'no brakes, no rhyme or reason.' It is an absurd world in which there is neither goal nor purpose, in which 'absolutely anything is possible,' a promise become a curse, irony no longer functional with one hundred thousand dead.

It was Sartre who quoted Dostoevsky as remarking that, 'If God did not exist everything would be permitted,' adding 'Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself . . . Nor . . . if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimise our behaviour. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. — We are left alone, without excuse.'¹⁹

This would seem to be Sebastian's state. He had reached a point where he confessed, 'I am frightened of myself, I run away from myself. I avoid myself' (45). His books, along with those by other Jewish writers, are banned, even the projected self represented by literature expunged. Unable even to write he recalls Jane Austen who did so on her knees surrounded by a family ignorant of what she was doing, but concludes that he is no Jane Austen. Indeed not, she, after all, being fine-tuned to moral distinctions, confident in a world reassuringly secure, even as the Napoleonic Wars were being waged.

The Russians enter Bucharest. It seems a victory until soldiers begin raping women and looting, though to him it seems right that Romania should be punished and he is curiously understanding of their actions since the Russians themselves had suffered so much, an ambivalence about people and events which had been evident throughout his journal. The play ends as Sebastian declares, 'One day I'll write a book. That's still the best thing for me to do,' even as he laments 'I can't say or write anything; words do not help me,' (53–4) two statements here brought together which in the original journal are separated by four months. He never wrote the book, his death as arbitrary as anything in his life. Plainly, though, words did help him, in that they were his resource through those years, and, when the journal was finally published, provided a path if not to understanding then to documenting something of the pathology of anti-Semitism and, beyond that, of all ethnic, racial, religious animosities.

In the original journal, Sebastian had begun to write for the theatre again and to earn from translations (*Anna Christie*, *The Taming of the Shrew*), though he still lamented that life was passing him by. He felt, he said, provisional and always alone, in the original journal though not in Auburn's play, remarking that, 'As soon as you give up being alone, everything is lost.'²⁰ The last entry in the original journal is on the final day of 1944. Five months later he was killed. From the *Journal*, Auburn shaped a play which while it does justice to the original presents Sebastian as an existential figure, accusing himself of inaction, even embracing it, aware of his contradictions, a playwright conscious of the limitations of theatre in the face of seemingly implacable forces, a Jew for whom in other circumstances that identity would have been irrelevant but who accepts that it is finally who he is.

It was, on the face of it, an unlikely play for Auburn to write but it has an undeniable force, a compelling truth beyond its historical and contemporary relevance. What clearly fascinates him, beyond summoning the past into the present, is the idea of a man inventing himself from the contradictory elements of private commitments and a public presence, a man riven by profound doubts about himself, existing in a world without a moral spine, a writer unsure about the power of the word even as it is his final resort. Sebastian was a playwright dubious of theatre's power, except his silencing might have suggested otherwise, so that in a sense Auburn

is engaging not simply with a man who survived by chance, only to be killed likewise, with the contradictions which shape personal and social life alike, but with the problematic nature of the craft to which he is committed. A man, alone on a stage, speaks of a distant time, in a distant place, trusting that something crosses the membrane between that world and our own, between the actor and those disparate people, with stories of their own, who have assembled not knowing where they will be taken or what relevance they will see before the lights return and they step out onto the street which may or may not seem as familiar as it had before. In the end, a monologue is reminder of the fundamental requirements of theatre, that it exists the moment an actor steps onto a stage in front of an audience.

In his next play, in some ways with echoes of his earlier *Damage Control*, he would move from a monologue to a two-hander, betrayal still at stake, the psychological and the political again braided together in a context in which there is no secure moral ground on which to stand. In 2010 the Ensemble Studio Theatre, on West 52nd Street, New York City, staged its Short Play Marathon. This included David Auburn's *Amateurs*, a play which would prove politically relevant at the time and still more so later, especially in 2017 when accusations of sexual molestations would metastasize. In 2015 he would direct it for radio. It features a conversation between a political figure, currently writing his memoirs for three million dollars, and a young woman who has come to see him ostensibly to request money for her father's foundation, he having suffered a stroke. It seems an amiable enough conversation, he regarding that father as a friend. She had been an athlete, taking part in the Olympics at Sydney, coming eighth in a final. They share memories. He offers advice about fundraising, praising her father as one of the most decent men he has known. Not all, however, is as it seems. Her liberal enthusiasm conceals her real intent as the play takes the first of several twists. She suddenly asks why he had run a political advertisement showing her father kissing a black man, having cropped the other people present out of the picture. She wanted, she says, to hear what he would say, accusing him of being hypocritical, his values at odds with those of his society, poisoning the political process. Nonetheless, she keeps the cheque he writes.

For his part, he derides her politics, her desire to identify him as racist, homophobic, even as she hands him an affidavit which attests to the fact that at a political debate he had touched her twelve-year-old sister 'inappropriately', and made obscene comments to her trying to persuade her to perform a sexual act, an affidavit which would go to his wife and the head of his company and then to the press. She wants to destroy his career, marriage, reputation, his life. It turns out, though, that she has not told her sister of her plans as she has not considered the impact on his family. He now reveals to her that in 1961 her father had had homosexual encounters in a bus station and many other places throughout the country, even being arrested for lewd behaviour. He had kept a 'special apartment'. He shows her a list of men willing to go on record as having had sex with him, including a video. Rather than use it all, he and his team had settled for a single photograph which might have been cropped but nonetheless told a truth, if not the truth. He castigates her for being an amateur. No wonder, he says, she came in eighth in the Olympics, a remark which strikes home, a truth which can be deployed to distract from a more fundamental truth his having previously tried a series of different strategies to disable her attacks. She came to win but once again ends a loser.

Talking of the play, Auburn pointed out that it was written at a particular moment, pre-Obama. The impulse, he said, came out of the feeling that the people he supported could not do anything right while the other side were shrewd, effective, ruthless and confident. In 2010,

he explained, a year after Obama's election, the production had seemed cathartic. After the election of 2016, with revelations about sexual scandals, ruthless manipulations, cynical strategies, it seemed anything but cathartic being more relevant than ever, once more his side having been defeated by those far more ruthless than his own.

In *Proof* Auburn explored the tension between two sisters who see the world differently, feeling for one another but at odds, as he did about the relationship between a father and a daughter. In *The Journals of Mikhail Sebastian*, he wrote of a man whose life was lived against the background of a developing history, of a war and his response to it. In April 2012, at the Manhattan Theatre Club, he opened a play which explores the relationship between two brothers and in part that between a father and his daughter, played out against a war. *The Columnist* places at its centre a man who, as a journalist, once commanded considerable authority, and his brother with whom, for a while, he had shared a newspaper column but between whom there was considerable tension. Once again, he reached back into history not because it was insulated from the present but because it bore upon it.

Joseph Alsop was a syndicated columnist whose column appeared three times a week in three hundred newspapers. He was a man with direct access to those in power, but whose name quickly faded from view. He was related to the Roosevelt family and had patrician tastes, later becoming an avid art collector. He even designed his own Georgetown house with a bright yellow cinderblock exterior deliberately out of place amidst Georgian and Federalist homes, a fact which led to a law forbidding such in future. He revelled in rubbing shoulders with the powerful, believing he influenced their decisions and policies, being part of what came to be known as the Georgetown set, which included Katherine Graham, of *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*, as well as Frank Wisner of the CIA (whose anti-communism was fired by the behaviour of the Russian troops when they liberated Romania, he being in Bucharest at the same time as Sebastian), along with Robert Joyce also of the CIA. He attended Groton school and Harvard, where he graduated magna cum laude, and, at the age of twenty-seven, moved to the *New York Herald Tribune* (his grandmother, Teddy Roosevelt's sister, knowing the owners) and was a regular contributor to the *Saturday Evening Post*.

What attracted Auburn, though, was not initially the man, about whom he initially knew nothing, but his dissatisfaction with media coverage of the Iraq war of 2003, which in turn led him to wonder how journalists had responded to the Vietnam War. Interviewed on PBS in 2012, he explained that,

It partially began about eight or ten years ago when I realized I didn't know anything about the Vietnam War and set about the process of trying to learn about it. I read a number of histories. And the Alsop name kept popping up in footnotes. On the theory that sometimes the minor characters in the quarters of history are the most interesting characters, I read how influential they (Joe and his brother, Stewart) were at the time to the world of journalism and foreign affairs – especially Joe. And it interested me how forgotten he was now ... I wanted to get at what a magnetic and flamboyant and complicated person he was, how mercurial he was, how polarizing he was as an individual.²¹

At a time when newspaper columnists have lost much of their power with the closure of many papers, the loss of staff and the spread of social media, it is hard to exaggerate the power

they once had though, in the midst of the Cold War, Vietnam, like all wars, would pose a challenge. The national imperative seemed clear, action on the ground less so, especially as American forces were built up and troops began to die in ever-increasing numbers. *The Columnist*, though, which, apart from a single scene, takes place between 1961 and 1968, is less concerned with charting a drift towards disaster than with exploring the nature of a man admired for his bravura style but whose opinions seemed ever more divorced not only from those of fellow reporters, with whom he developed a mutual hostility, but from reality. This was a man who could be personable and offensive in equal measure and who regarded his wife as no more than a hostess ('She's everything I want . . . sparkling and bright . . . she'll fit in here').²² His relationship with his brother could be affectionate and contemptuous in equal measure. His artistic taste co-existed with socially distasteful attitudes. In short, he was a natural study for a playwright interested in conflicted characters, the connection between the private and the public, a man who would drift from national consciousness but was, for a crucial period, at the very heart of affairs, helping to shape public policy and opinion alike. Auburn moves him out from the shadows, a man whose opinions were public but whose private life was deliberately opaque.

The play, however, does not start in the 1960s but in a hotel room in Moscow in 1954 in which Joe has a sexual tryst with a young Russian who is initially given the designation 'Young Man' (until he offers his name, at which point the designation changes as if he is no longer to be objectified). The casual encounter turns out to be a trap. As the scene ends, there is a knock on the door. Later we learn that there are photographs, as indeed there were of the actual Joseph Alsop, though to avoid blackmail he immediately informed the American authorities while believing he could conceal his homosexuality from others. This, it seems, was in part the reason for his intensified hatred for communism and thereby his attitude to the war in Vietnam. Certainly, that is suggested in Auburn's play. Interestingly, though not in the play, Joe later had a relationship with Frank Merlo, Tennessee Williams's lover.

In *The Journals of Mihail Sebastian* he had staged the life of a real person, using his own words, albeit shaping them into dramatic form. In *The Columnist* he remains true to the facts of Alsop's life and attitudes while adjusting certain timescales for dramatic effect. As he acknowledged, 'Navigating the line between being true to broad historical facts and working on a character was one of the challenges,' insisting that 'I think people can come away from this play with a pretty accurate portrayal of the situation at the time.' The greatest licence he claimed was in his treatment of the relationship with the Russian man who, though there was such a figure, was 'a fictional character.'²³ He also moved the collapse of Joe's marriage back from the 1970s while the figure of his daughter was a composite of a number of his stepchildren.

Though the play opens with a scene of sexual intimacy, in fact there is little intimacy in the figure who emerges. When he marries, he confesses his homosexuality to his wife and there is no physical relationship between them. She was, as here, convinced that she could change him. He was not changeable. He draws people to him but, in his life and here, in the play, there is always a space between him and them. They exist to be used.

The man who emerges from *The Columnist* revels in what he takes to be his power. He is antagonistic to those he sees as challenging his authority, his interpretation of the world. He is inflexible, having no doubts about his views. His confidence, even arrogance, is in part a product of his background, a sense of entitlement which he shares with those who command the political realm. He writes 'for the people who matter' (19). His house in Georgetown seems

less a home than a location for parties, a way of keeping his fingers on the pulse of those who shape national policy. Indeed, in the second scene, at two in the morning, and with Susan Mary (her own daughter the result of her affair with the British politician and diplomat Duff Cooper), not yet his wife, he has placed champagne on ice expecting the arrival of guests coming on from inauguration balls, this being 1961, with John F. Kennedy the incoming President. 'He's *our man*,' Joe says, not least because he and his brother had promoted the ideas of a missile gap between the US and the Soviet Union which had played its role in the election: 'Don't think he won't remember that debt either . . . We're in an extraordinary position . . . this is *our moment*' (17–18). He 'understands the Soviets' but if he slips 'we'll let the White House know, *I'll let them know* . . . if he doesn't know what needs to be done, I'll tell him' (27–8). He was, as claimed here, the originator of the domino theory which held that failure in Vietnam would lead to communism sweeping through other countries.

He exists in the Washington bubble, friends with the rich and privileged. Susan Mary wears Chanel suits as do neighbouring children who are themselves attending parties. With little surprise to Joe, the scene ends with the imminent arrival of Kennedy who in his column he had praised as a re-awakening America from a period which he had characterized as ruled over by the equivalent of King Theoden of Rohan in *The Lord of the Rings*, self-indulgent and timid.

The action now moves on two years, to September 1963, as Joe's brother, Stewart, meets David Halberstam in a Saigon bar. Halberstam, twenty-four years younger than Joe, and working for *The New York Times*, shared his Harvard background but little else, especially when it came to the war in Vietnam. He complains to Stewart about a column written by his brother attacking his fellow reporters, in doing so reading from a genuine Alsop piece. In his book *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, Neil Sheehan, another Harvard graduate who worked alongside Halberstam, wrote that, 'The claim that young reporters on the scene were inventing bad news had become more ludicrous than ever by the late summer of 1963, because by now the majority of the established correspondents in Asia who regularly visited Vietnam saw the war in essentially the same terms that we did.'²⁴ This included reporters from CBS, NBC, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report*. He singled out Alsop and Marguerite Higgins of the *New York Herald Tribune* as those who in his view peddled the government line.

Joe Alsop, as Auburn presents him, is a man whose fixed ideas ultimately determine what he sees, inspired by his bitterness towards communism, intensified by Soviet attempts to compromise him, along with his ready access to those in power. He sees himself as the hub at the centre of a wheel of influence, his words on a page designed to shift people's perception of the real and consolidate him as the legitimate analyst of events speaking less truth to power than his truth as an expression of power.

Halberstam's indignation, however, is compromised when he invokes Joe's homosexuality, photographs of his Soviet tryst apparently now being circulated (in fact they were not circulated until 1970 at which time the CIA's Richard Helms managed to arrange for their suppression). Meanwhile, Halberstam was in trouble with his own newspaper, his reports being so at odds with government briefings. As Auburn has him say, while Joe has a privileged treatment, 'the rest of us are killing ourselves here, worked to death, living in hovels, eating crap, and taking literally *endless* shit back home for trying to tell a sliver of the truth about this fucked up place' (34).

Camelot, however, was about to come to an end, the following scene being set in November, 1963, even as Joe tries to get Halberstam and Sheehan fired from the *Times*, calling James

'Scotty' Reston (though described as editor by Auburn's Joe, in fact he was not editor until the following year, so another case of an adjustment to serve dramatic purpose). What follows is the assassination of Kennedy. Stewart is stunned, unable at first to write a column. Joe's wife is in tears. Joe, though, writes, rising to the occasion, handing his wife a handkerchief without looking up, a gesture by Auburn which effectively sums up his protagonist and his relationship to his wife. It is his brother who consoles Susan Mary, both of them leaving to join the grieving crowds while Joe continues typing, except that when they leave he lets out a single sob, a rare moment of feeling before he continues to type. According to Robert W. Merry's biography of the two Alsops, in fact Joe's secretary heard Joe sobbing uncontrollably, she observing, 'I didn't think he had that much emotion in him.'²⁵ Reportedly he spent the next days in a state of shock even as he did manage to write his column, accurately quoted by Auburn who, while forbearing to show him sobbing perhaps takes his cue from his seeming lack of emotion when it came to anything but politics and his fellow journalists.

Yet the assassination meant more to him than he was prepared to admit, something detected by his wife and fellow columnists. Two years on, Auburn has him confesses that, 'I feel like my life has been broken in half. I don't enjoy anything anymore. Not the town. Not the work' (67). His cruelty, as presented in the play, seems in part a product of a hope betrayed. Yet when Susan Mary advises Stewart that he should tell his brother about what turns out to be his leukaemia because, 'He can be very understanding,' they both laugh. The death of a President disturbs him, the possibility of the death of a brother evidently less so.

Joseph Alsop seems to believe that he is defined by what he does, rather as Willy Loman thinks that his real significance lies in his role as a salesman, blind to those closest to him who offer him what he cannot accept because his validation and vindication lie in the opinion of others. Joe does not, like Willy, need to be 'well liked', indeed is likely to be suspicious of such a desire, but he does need to feel that his identity is linked to his function as authorized narrator of an unfolding history.

The second act begins in 1965, as Stewart confronts Halberstam who (ahistorically – they being circulated years later) he accuses of sending the Moscow photographs to him. Then we are in 1967. Stewart is dead and Joe in process of divorcing (ahistorically, the divorce being in 1978). He is, suddenly, alone, his daughter dropping out of university to protest the war as, in fact, though not mentioned here, did the children of Secretary of State Robert McNamara, Assistant Secretary Paul Nitze and Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms.

Writing weeks after Alsop's memorial service in 1989, *Washington Post* journalist Robert Kaiser, recalling his time in Vietnam, wrote of him, 'One of my most vivid memories is of him getting drunk twice a day. Too much before and at lunch, then a nap, then too much before, at and after dinner. At those meals – as at so many in his own houses in Washington – he was often a cruel bully, attacking all who disagreed with him, particularly reporters who wrote stories he didn't like.'²⁶ It was a view endorsed by Isaiah Berlin who recalled Art Buchwald's play *Sheep on the Runway* (1970), which featured a character called Joe Mayflower, a deeply prejudiced, pretentious syndicated columnist. Buchwald was one of those who had received copies of the compromising photographs in the post, tearing them up. Buchwald denied any connection between his character and Joe, though the latter consulted his lawyers who demanded that the character's name be changed. It came to nothing and Joe's brother reviewed the play, denouncing the Mayflower figure as a caricature which, of course, in a wild comedy, he is. The audience included leading political and media figures.

The point of this, beyond underlining Alsop's centrality, the humour depending on people being familiar with his work, is that Auburn could have written a very different play about him, not a comedy to be sure but a darker version. His Vietnam scenes feature not Joe but his brother and focus on his politics and feud with fellow journalists rather than his drinking. He does, to be sure, come across as arrogant and a bully. What is evidently hard for Auburn to capture, and in some sense the paradox of Joseph Alsop, is his evident charm, calculated no doubt but frequently attested to. His bullying manner, no less toward his wife than others, is captured, along with his arrogance and hubris but aside from the brief excerpt from the column he wrote following the assassination we do not, of course, get a sense of his style or quite why he was such a dominant figure at the time which in fact turned, in large part, on his ability to produce an endless stream of scoops by virtue of leaks from those in positions of power. Here, the brothers, who came, after all, from the same background, with the same privileges, and who for many years shared a famous column, 'Matters of Fact', are frequently at odds. Joe's condescension towards his younger brother is in a sense as disturbing as his similar attitude towards his wife. As Auburn presents him he is as callous to those around him as he is towards those whose opinions do not match his own. He is plainly not a likeable character but, to Auburn, that was part of the fascination, part of the challenge.

Joe emerges from Auburn's play and, indeed, from history, not so much a tragic figure, though there are elements of that as he sews the seeds of his own destruction, as an irrelevance which, for him, is the same thing. He is a man blind to the fact that his virtues and vices are closely aligned. The strength of his views gave a tensile quality to his prose but also isolated him from others. Like Gatsby, he tended to see life through a single window and also like Gatsby threw parties, in his case not to capture Daisy Buchan but those with influence who might have utility and who anyway shared his elitist tastes and presumptions. He, too, had a secret to hide and was finally impenetrable, in the play and in life, in his case, though not in Gatsby's, his emotions carefully guarded, people kept at a distant even if he had passions to be contained, vulnerabilities not to be explored.

Auburn created a character who was himself seemingly not conflicted, who left damage behind him in so far as the policies he urged proved disastrous and those closest to him alienated, but who found himself stranded as the tide of opinion retreated, as those who should have mattered to him, and perhaps did, disappeared.

The play ends in the summer of 1968, a critical year, that of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy (the latter still lying ahead), the first evidence of how wrong Joe had been and the final death of a liberal dream. None are invoked, perhaps because there is no need, that year being so indelibly imprinted in history. There is, though, a demonstration on the Washington Mall, evidence of the changes which played their part in his growing irrelevance. Joe sits alone on a bench until he is joined by a man, Andrei, who years before had entrapped him in a Moscow hotel and is now an attaché at the Embassy, more in touch with popular culture than Joe is, or would ever wish to be. Andrei (only now identified by name) offers his apology but also thanks since in an indirect way it had led to his joining the diplomatic service. Joe's response, however, is to say that he will write about him in his column at whatever cost that may be to a man whose thanks are without meaning to him.

In a final scene, though, he abandons the story, tearing it from his typewriter. '*He stares at it,*' Auburn indicates in a stage direction, '*He doesn't move,*' brought to a halt by guilt, a sense of futility, a sudden conscience? It is not clear except that this is a man who had typed a story

following his friend's assassination even as his wife sobbed beside him. 'I have other ideas,' he says on the telephone, explaining why, for the first time in his life, his column will be late. Something has happened, something has changed, even as what it may be is not clear either to him or the audience. The ground previously so securely beneath his feet has begun to move. Is it possible that someone has finally penetrated his armour, that he has a sense of how alone he has become, that he is placing the need of another person ahead of his own, or was there something more in that encounter in a Moscow hotel than he can bring himself to accept?

In 2004, Louis Menand, writing in *The New Yorker*, quoted McGeorge Bundy as saying of Joe that, 'I have never known him to go to any area where blood could be spilled that he didn't come back and say more blood . . . That is his posture toward the universe,' while Kenneth Galbraith called him, 'the leading non-combatant casualty of Vietnam' after Lyndon Johnson, where once Henry Kissinger had remarked that, 'The hand that mixes the Georgetown martini is time and again the hand that guides the destiny of the Western world.'²⁷

Of course, today's audiences bring to bear the knowledge that however right he had been about Joseph McCarthy, whose anti-communist views might have been seen to coincide with his own but who he nonetheless despised and attacked seeing him as a populist chasing down the liberal elite and old New Dealers, he was wrong about Vietnam, one of the challenges in writing about a man decades after his death being not to import judgements from the present.

Joseph Alsop would be left behind by changing times. He became a defender of Richard Nixon and dismissed the importance of Watergate. What Auburn has done, though, is to reach back and reinstate him at the centre of a drama, to present him in his contradictions. Today, with many turning to social media for their news, opinions are cheap, evidence not required. Those in power feel free to attack any whose views they dislike, dismissing reporters and columnists as purveyors of fake news. Authority has shifted. Once respected figures are distrusted. What was previously tolerated in terms of personal behaviour is no longer, published for the delectation of readers.

There are still those who take pride in their links to power, as hawkish as ever Joe Alsop was, but there was a certain integrity to him which Auburn grants. He was never himself a populist, pandering to what he perceived to be a disaffected readership. He was a believer, if primarily in himself, guilty of an overweening pride, to be sure, of a disturbing coldness, of a myopia when it came to those who offered him a love with which he thought he could dispense. But he hewed to his craft, believed in the agenda he advanced, admittedly evidence to the contrary being ignored. He was loyal to his conception of the country and if he displayed a dismaying sense of entitlement nonetheless felt a sense of duty and in Auburn's play is granted a last moment of grace, ambiguous but in the context of what has preceded it, perhaps the beginning of redemption. History has passed him by. He stands as something of a curiosity but here, centre stage, he lives again.

Though not a political playwright, in the sense of arguing his corner, adopting a clearly identifiable position, Auburn is drawn to those whose private lives exist in a political context either being shaped by, or themselves shaping, the world they inhabit. He is fascinated by the ethical dilemma of seeking to preserve a private life in the face of forces which would seem to leave little room for such. Sebastian struggled to sustain relationships which were deeply politically compromised while Alsop was ready to sacrifice the personal to the public as are those politicians who he pictures ready to corrupt the system they serve or the relationships to which they are supposedly committed. Even in *Proof*, he is fascinated by ethical concerns at a point where private needs include ambition and public

reputation alongside the need for love. He has a tendency to root his work in actual lives, real events, carrying into his work an authenticating pressure even as he transforms the given, re-imagining it to forge something new.

With his next play, though, he would summon two characters into existence, detached from the outside world, struggling to get by, circling around one another and their own sense of a failure which they are resistant to admit and for which they cannot account. During a residency at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre's National Playwrights Conference in 2013, invited by Wendy Goldberg who had directed Arena Stage's production of *Proof*, he developed a two-character play, *Lost Lake* (not be confused with his film, *Lake House*, a time-shift romance which he both wrote and directed). A year later it was produced at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign before being staged by the Manhattan Theatre Club.

Set in a dilapidated lakeside cabin, it features Veronica, a black woman in her thirties, and the man from whom she is renting, Hogan, almost as dilapidated. Negotiating a rental for the forthcoming summer when she will be accompanied by her children, she describes herself to him as a nurse practitioner, except that neither turn out to be what they seem. He promises improvements before she arrives, which are never made, insists that he is close to his daughter, now living in Florida and with a scholarship to Columbia University, except that we learn that she wants nothing to do with him. He is being required to vacate the property as a result of a dispute which he claims is with the homeowner's association even as he co-owns it with his brother with whom he is in contention not least because he has stolen money from him, having previously been imprisoned for writing bad cheques. Truth is hard to pin down.

As for her, she is not a nurse practitioner, having dropped out of college when her husband died in a hit-and-run accident outside their building, being fired when her deception was discovered. In other words, these are two desperate people, barely holding on, both lying to others and perhaps themselves. When one of the three children she is looking after, Mia, her daughter's friend, nearly drowns she has a tetchy exchange with the girl's father, Charles, claiming to have rescued her only for it later to be revealed that she was on her cell phone at the time, Hogan coming to the rescue. Charles, too, it will turn out, is perhaps something more than father to her daughters' friend.

For all the tension between them, there is a level at which they recognize one another's desperation. In the final scene, set months later, in January, Veronica returns. Hogan has sent her five thousand dollars which she has come to return, knowing this to be the money stolen from his brother even though her situation remains desperate. She has lost her job and is barely getting by while her children are 'getting a little help right now,'²⁸ an ominous remark except they are being cared for by Charles, who also works to find her a job and it seems may be her lover. Meanwhile, Hogan has attempted suicide prompting his sister-in-law, who he had previously castigated, to offer to take him into their home. He breaks down in tears.

The play ends with the two of them together in a lakeside cabin, damaged, knowing they must leave, that they have failed, that they have read themselves and others awry, even as there are hints of new possibilities if they can bring themselves to embrace them. And she did return, who need not have done. Nothing, though, is resolved, even as, at odds with one another for much of the play, they recognize a shared desperation, a mutual recognition that they have closed themselves off from those who might still redeem them.

In 2018, he presented *Gun Show*, a brief play at Playwrights Horizons, recorded as part of *Playing on Air*, a public radio programme.²⁹ Two couples meet for dinner at a restaurant in a

New York where buildings tend to close down and reopen in a different guise, usually as banks. They are interrupted by news, on the phone, of a shooting in Ann Arbor which has left six dead, unsure whether to discuss it, not least as it quickly turns into a debate between the genders even as a waitress interrupts spouting waiter-speak and the reductive language of wine appreciation. The result is a blend of humour and serious discussion, the conversation veering in the direction of the trivial. In a discussion of the Second Amendment it turns out that one of the men owns a gun, having bought it at a gun show to defend himself. The confession is almost as disturbing as the news, a betrayal of what they assume is their liberal principles.

Auburn chose the subject, he explained, because he was aware of how serious discussion can be intertwined with the trivial and the dynamics of relationships. The issue is real enough, a constant fact in American society, but the conversation jumps around uneasily, not least because it is not a subject that people wish to confront. How, then, can comedy circle around this moral vacuum? Inevitably, audience laughter is prompted not only by the sudden disjunctions but by a certain degree of nervousness. As it happened, both of the actresses involved had had guns put to their heads.

Speaking of the one-act play Auburn has said that when the play 'is over you know everything there is to know about these characters, everything you need to know about these people. You are never going to see a sequel, never going to see act two.'³⁰ On the other hand, the strength of David Auburn's plays lies in part in the fact that his characters are ambiguous, their fates not assured, not least because they are unclear about themselves. They are frequently capable of denial, unsure of who they are or how they relate to those around them. That was no less true of his film *The Girl in the Park* (2007) in which, in the face of trauma, the central figure cuts herself off from others, resists their attempts to reach out to her.

He is as interested in what characters conceal, from others and from themselves, as in what they reveal, lives suffering reversals, sudden changes, whose effects are not predictable. We may not see the next act but that there is one, unknown, unknowable, is what leaves his characters fascinatingly poised. Of course, Mihail Sebastian had an appointment with a street accident which would terminate his life (even as in *Lake House* a similar accident would be avoided, time shifters having a special concession) but even he has a brief period in which he had begun his reinvention. The plays end with a lowering of the lights. The following evening the lights come up again as a different audience offer different interpretations, project different fates for those re-animated by the curtains' rise.