Bigsby, Christopher. "Stephen Adly Guirgis." *Twenty-First-Century Dramatists*. London: Methuen Drama, 2020. 55–76. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350127579.ch-003>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 12:13 UTC.

Copyright © Christopher Bigsby 2020. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER 3

STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS

A play is not a cure for cancer. The best play in the world is not going to make peace. But it is going to create a community to perform it, and it's going to be performed for a community, and when those communities are spicy, when there's different ingredients in the pot, that to me is the most beautiful thing.

Stephen Adly Guirgis¹

Faith, by definition, is unaccountable. Typically, it can overpower the young, inherited, like political loyalties, from parents, a sudden explanation for a world still strange, a grid to lay upon the flux of life's mysteries. Later, it may be clung to, not without a certain strain of nostalgia, a resort in the face of loss or calamity, a reassuring structure, a bolt hole, the source of an unexamined confidence, a steady heartbeat in the small hours. With the years, however, it can seem to some a betrayal of the youth when it first bloomed, a confidence trick requiring the naivety of youth. According to Voltaire, perhaps not the best of sources in the circumstances, it was Ignatius of Loyola who said, 'Give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man,'² surely a claim not without some truth even as there is a feeling of menace about it, as if a soul were thereby kidnapped, the ransom to be paid over a lifetime.

There are those, of course, who cling to that early faith even as they conduct a continuing dialogue with themselves – doubt, of course, being a rite of passage, in some sense a trial sent to test the true mettle of belief. Yet if religion's sheer antiquity is the essence of its appeal, as if the past carries its own sanction, it is embraced by those who inhabit a secular present, two languages dangerously co-existing. How, after all, does it function in a modern world? Is it not possible to interrogate its claims, locate it in the context of attenuated lives, consider how it might survive in the face not only of a cosmic irony but a debilitated social context? And what of prayer which, in a boundless universe, is assumed to open a private channel directly into the source of some ultimate power apparently open to the most prosaic of requests. A prayer answered is proof positive. A prayer unanswered, evidence of the superior wisdom of the Godhead. This is one coin toss that is never lost.

There are not many playwrights today for whom such issues have any relevance, despite faint echoes of theatre's emergence from religious ritual, but, then, religion has always been suspicious of the Dionysian aspects of the stage. In a country supposedly saturated with religion, particular sects even associated with political beliefs as if, the Constitution aside, one faith implied another, an open declaration of belief seen as a requirement for public office, dramatists seem for the most part uninterested in this kind of metaphysic. To be sure, David Mamet rediscovered his Jewish identity but that existed to one side of his work. An angel descends in *Angels in America*. There are Mormons, to be sure, but Tony Kushner describes himself as an agnostic Jew, happy to criticize the theocratic elements in Israel. Sarah Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy* concerned a reincarnated Tibetan lama while Ayad Akhtar, as we have seen, explored the relationship between religious and cultural identity in *Disgraced*, perhaps the most obvious

example of religion providing an animating force for a contemporary playwright. Of course, the theatre requires a different kind of faith, a willingness to accept the proposition that time, space, identity are what a writer and actors assert them to be. This is a faith, however, which prevails only for the duration of the ceremony where religion requires that it should invade the being of its adherents, penetrate into what it proposes is a soul, the ultimate repository of an animating belief.

Why this preamble to an examination of the work of a contemporary American playwright? The answer is because his work carries the imprint of a faith embraced early, as it does of aspects of his own life. It is certainly not that he writes religious plays in a narrow or specific sense but that the journey he has gone on, personally and professionally, retains elements of that enquiry which lies at the heart of belief. His language can seem at odds with the proprieties expected of those with such interests, as if he were testing the limits of the permissible. I doubt his work is required reading in the Vatican. Most of his characters are not God seekers. They are certainly not at the centre of anything beyond their own often attenuated lives. Yet he is a man who consults a priest, seeking dialogue not just with a man but with what he represents, and whose plays acknowledge the desperation of those whose lives seem to lack a sense of true purpose, even as grace, if not redemption, seems a possibility even to those seemingly adrift and acquainted with despair.

At the same time his humour suggests someone entirely capable of stepping back from those he summons into being, the playwright himself sharing a certain affinity with God in that regard, breathing life into his own creations, watching as words are made manifest, literally embodied. And surely if there be a God he or she must have a sense of humour or how account for human existence, a thought at the heart of *Waiting for Godot*. The British novelist Rose Tremain, in explaining the moment she realized what it was to be the author of a story, capturing a world, remarked that, 'I wouldn't tamely and passively submit to it, I would assert my divinity over it.'³

Stephen Adly Guirgis was born and raised in New York. His mother was an Irish Catholic who had grown up in Newark, daughter to a deaf alcoholic printer 'in a household,' he told Bruce Weber in *The New York Times*, 'terrified of intimacy and marriage.' At nearly forty, she was an advisor to foreign exchange students, one of whom said she should contact him if she happened to go to Egypt. She did and met his brother, an Egyptian Coptic Christian. They were engaged three days later and, in 1963, settled in New York.⁴

They lived in a rent-controlled three-room, fourth floor, walk-up on Riverside Drive with a panoramic view of the Hudson River, a property, Guirgis once suggested, acquired with the help of a case of whisky for the superintendent. They were not well off, though it was an affluent neighbourhood. His father ran the Oyster Bar at Grand Central Station. From the age of twelve, and for twenty years, Guirgis himself would work in restaurants, beginning at Grand Central. Later he was involved in AIDS education, along with violence prevention and conflict resolution conducting workshops in prisons which, given his plays, must have provided good training. He was still doing these jobs when he was writing *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*. Philip Seymour Hoffman, who was to direct, asked him how much money he would need to let him give up the jobs and finish the play. When he explained, Hoffman simply gave him the cash.

For her part, his mother was interested in theatre and film, though with little spare money theatre visits were rare. In 1974, she took him to see the commedia dell'arte play *Scaping*, starring the multi-award-winning British actor Jim Dale who, for a while, became his model.

As he told Guy Kelly, in the *Telegraph*, 'Our building was full of artists, dancers and musicians when we were growing up in the 1970s.'⁵

He was taught to pray and go to mass, though would, he confessed to the Jesuit James Martin, whom he consulted when he was a playwright, sometimes use collection money given to him by his mother to play pinball, the source of some guilt, guilt always giving the Church house odds. He would add to that when he indulged in shoplifting. Even so, Catholicism, or the question of faith, would stay with him and feature in his work.

He attended Catholic schools, first at Corpus Christi, where he was taught by Dominican Sisters, at the age of eight or nine being disturbed when told the story of Judas which seemed to him incompatible with promises of forgiveness. Faith was to prove difficult but important and a subject to which he would turn as a writer if hardly in a theologically acceptable language. This, though, proved something that Father Martin had no difficulty in accepting but, then, he was himself liberal writing a book about the need for the Church to build bridges to the LGBT community, a work which led to a rebuke from Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Vatican's chief liturgist, as well as leading to a number of institutions rescinding invitations for him to speak.

Given the nature of Guirgis's work, it is no wonder he would turn to Martin for advice, a man who regarded his plays as deeply theological. For him, they were 'wildly profane, full of the kind of language not heard in church sacristies . . . but in locker rooms, bars, and traffic jams' because, 'that kind of in-your-face language not only reflected the milieu of the character but also prevented the presentation of religious themes from becoming either cosily conventional or piously sentimental, and probably helped open a window into theological questions for those normally put off by such topics.'⁶

Speaking in 2011, Guirgis explained that, 'Whenever I perform, I pray to God and ask him for help. I pray to Mary, because I figure she'll help me more because she's a woman. And I pray to the Holy Spirit to move through me as I act.' Speaking of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* he said, 'I discovered that there was a reason I hadn't written it before . . . The subject was terribly daunting for me, in almost every way. It not only touched on all my spiritual struggles, but it seemed too big a topic for someone like me to tackle . . . The last several years have been about trying to reconnect and get closer with whatever it is that God is. This play about Judas is part of that journey . . . It's a manifestation of a general spiritual problem that I have . . . I knew I needed to talk to someone about all his theology.' According to James Martin, 'a visit to the pastor of Riverside Church, where Stephen had attended kindergarten, gave him courage to continue . . . His doubt had led him back to his kindergarten and childhood parishes.'⁷

Guirgis thinks of himself as a lapsed Catholic, albeit one who has never quite cut the link to a God who represents a sustenance he needs, therapy sessions never filling the gap. 'When I was a kid and I'd be in trouble,' he has said,

I'd ask God to help me, and then once the fire was out, I wouldn't talk to Him anymore. When I got older, I began to feel I needed some help spiritually, just to function . . . But the thing is, when you get the help, you start to believe in the way of living that embraces that, and then here come . . . the responsibilities that go with it. To be a good person, to not steal, to be honourable in your relationships with women, with friends, to treat yourself lovingly. That's a lot of responsibility. So, your options are to forget the whole thing and go back to the existence without any spiritual connection. Or embrace the

spiritual connection, but then you've got to deal with the burden of living up to the admission policy.⁸

Perhaps the trouble he refers to is that as a teenager he would drop acid, smoke weed and drink beer.

From Corpus Christi, where students were closer to his economic level but mostly black and Latino, he moved to Xavier High School, a Jesuit school in Manhattan until, as James Martin explained, he 'underwent back surgery to correct a childhood curvature of the spine, which put him in a full body cast and kept him out of school for six months,'⁹ his problem with walking leading him to enrol in his third school, the Rhodes School on West 83rd Street, the model for the school in *Catcher in the Rye* and whose pupils included actors Robert De Niro, James Caan and Ana Ortiz (of *Angry Betty*). He remembers that in his first day there, 'I was smoking a cigarette somewhere outside, and someone opened a vial of blow and dipped both ends of the cigarette in it and said, "Here, man, it's better this way,"' the beginning he has said, of a lot of lost years.¹⁰

Following graduation, and time spent as a bike messenger, he applied to the State University of New York at Albany with no clear idea what he wanted to do, changing his major three times and taking seven years to complete his supposedly four-year degree. At school, at the age of eight or nine, he had played the role of the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and went to see *The Sting* with his mother, returning for a second viewing and buying the music. In the eleventh grade, he had appeared in a number of school plays playing Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* but though he wanted to be an actor did not think of majoring in theatre until his sister bought him a ticket to see John Malkovich in Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*. He immediately returned to Albany and changed his major, going on to work under the director and professor Langdon Brown, Jurka Burian, an expert on Czech theatre, fascinated with the connection between theatre and politics, and the director Al Asermely whose productions had included Mihail Sebastian's *The Star Without a Name*, staged at the Theatre of the Riverside Church.

He studied playwriting starting, but not finishing, a play, and also appeared on stage, taking the lead in Richard Greenberg's *Eastern Standard*, a comedy which nonetheless dealt with AIDS, insider trading, homelessness and gay relationships. Fellow graduate and roommate Glenn Fleshler would go on to appear in *True Detective* and *Hannibal*. Another graduate, John Ortiz, would join with Philip Seymour Hoffman to found Off-Broadway's The Latino Actors Base. This was in part a response to the failure of producers to employ Latinos even in plays in which the parts specified such. This became the LABYrinth Theater Company, a place where actors could work out. It was to be a multi-cultural group concerned with forging its own community through its work, study techniques and productions. No one was paid an annual salary, the company receiving a \$15,000 grant from the city, otherwise raising money from beer parties. Some of those involved had no professional background. One of those who would play a prison guard in *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* had been a New York policeman.

When he graduated, Guirgis founded a small theatre in the Bronx, leaving it to found another in Santa Fe before returning to New York where, after an audition, he joined LABYrinth, at the time one of the few non-Latinos to do so. Those involved were all encouraged to play different roles so, though he had joined as an actor, there came a moment when Ortiz, for whom he had written a paper back in Albany, asked him to write a one-act play in exchange for

a pair of sneakers. The result was *Francisco and Benny* (1994), a one-act play featuring David Zayas, who would appear in the television series *Dexter*. Its success with the company surprised him. There were other plays, *Moonlight Mile*, staged by LAByrinth (then spelt Labyrinth) in 1995, the first full-length play he had written and described as a working-class romantic comedy, and *Den of Thieves*, a wild comedy featuring a compulsive shoplifter and over-eater called Maggie, and Paul, her sponsor in a 12-step programme, who has been theft-free for 682 days but is now enrolled in a major crime having once been a member of 'the greatest non-violent Jewish crime organization of the twentieth century,'¹¹ with 'a family history of criminal philanthropy.' (24) Other works included *Race, Religion, Politics* (1997), featuring blue collar workers in a bar, and *Boom Boom Boom Boom* (1998), the latter set on an Egyptian cruise ship and performed at New York's Center Stage.

The plays he went on to write reflected the racial and cultural mix of the company as of the city which was his home and in some ways his subject. As he remarked to Bruce Weber, 'I've lived my entire life in New York, and it informs everything . . . Sept. 11 reinforced for me that whatever I was writing about, it better be something that really matters to me because we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. And for me it's stories about people in pain in New York.'¹²

Guirgis credits his education as a playwright as in part coming from studying acting with William Esper – who had himself studied with Sanford Meisner and taught his Stanislavski-derived technique at his own studio in West 37th Street – and with Maggie Flanigan who also ran a studio on West 27th Street. Guirgis has said that he has a preference for working with actors who have been Meisner trained.

Eugene O'Neill set the action of *The Iceman Cometh* in the Golden Swan, better known as the Hell Hole. Here, he gathered the flotsam of society, those who had stepped out of the social world deadening themselves with drink, the 'superfluous ones' of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* itself set in a gloomy cellar in Moscow, though, like O'Neill's play, infused with a dark humour. The Hell Hole was located in Hell's Kitchen, that area of New York between 34th Street and 59th Street, 8th Avenue and the Hudson. Here, he would recite by memory the words of Francis Thompson's poem 'Hound of Heaven'. In retreat from Catholicism he would intone a work, known to Catholic schoolboys, about God's pursuit of those seemingly lost. The poem ends with submission to God. Thompson himself was a man who did battle with addiction and depression and his poem apt enough to an O'Neill familiar with both.

At times O'Neill would be joined by Dorothy Day, a communist rediscovering Catholicism, who would sing to him: 'In the heart of the city/where there is no pity/the city which has no heart.' It was a time of lost souls running away and towards faith whether God or something else. Meanwhile, as in *The Iceman Cometh*, there was always the escape of drink and a fantasy of possibility.

Guirgis's *In Arabia, We'd All be Kings* (1999), a play of orchestrated voices, is also mostly set in a bar in Hell's Kitchen, though now in the mid-1990s at a time when the old bars have closed, as a movie theatre is making way for an underground shopping mall, and New York is being reshaped by Disney which is, apparently, spreading 'like the AIDS', except here, in this world of lost souls, where friends have also succumbed to entropy. When an ex-prisoner, who had, apparently, been raped in prison, enquires about his friends he is offered a roll-call of the dead. Wilfred has died and 'after he died, his mother, she got so depressed, she died. And then her husband and his brother, they went out one night, and they died – except they got

killed ... Carlos ... he dead too,¹³ Carlos who had been 'working in a lavatory for science ... 'cuz you know how he was always innerested in, like, the stars and mechanics' (226), logic, vocabulary and grammar not being prevailing modes. The final irony, apparently, is that he had died on his payday before he could cash his check. Outside, meanwhile, black men have been shot by the police – 'you know how they do' (228).

Like O'Neill, Guirgis gathers a cast of those on the fringe killing time as it is assuredly killing them. They are, besides the bar owner and bar tender, an ex-prisoner, a junkie, a drunk, a crackhead, a prostitute and a john. They are outsiders in another sense being Latino and Latina, African-American, Italian-American, Irish, the last a bar tender fired before he appears. If one man is in prison then prison seems a natural state. As Miss Reyes, a Latina in her thirties, remarks, 'My first man was a black, he got locked up. Then I had an Irish, they locked him up. Demaris's father was Italian, he's still locked up, for all I care' (224). Her relationship with Demaris, her 17-year-old daughter, on medication, already with an experience of prison and at risk of losing her baby, is hardly good as she asks, 'Can you believe she came out of my uterus ...?' (223)

The bar is a kind of limbo in which communication can be frustrated. A conversation with Sammy, in his late sixties or seventies, and described as being 'almost dead', leads nowhere, his memory hazy and conversation barely functional. 'I ate a banana in 1969,' he observes, 'thought it was an avocado' (218). These are people as much trapped in their language as their circumstances. Words are a way of keeping their distance, mechanisms of power, except they have none. Language spills out of them but signifies nothing. The other America, in which people live ordinary lives, is closed to them. They have their own dreams but these are not the American dream of success rewarded. Theirs is a hermetic existence, prison an ever-present possibility, emotional needs deflected. Anger is a heartbeat away, reflecting, as it does, frustrations at lives not fully lived.

By contrast, Lenny, the ex-prisoner, has a way with words even if they have a tendency to slide away from coherence. Insinuate becomes 'instigate' while even his threats jump logical tracks. Objecting to Skank, the suitably-named junkie, taking peanuts he says, 'Please eat a peanut with those filthy hands so I could decapitate them right off your wrists like a lawnmower' (210). His language, though, conceals a vulnerability. For all his bravado, he lives with his mother and is easily threatened by his girlfriend, Daisy, who suggests she might call his probation officer, a girlfriend who is, in fact, mistress to Jake, the bar owner. Relationships here are temporary, often with a cash value. As Jake explains, 'I leave my wife now, whaddya think happens? She takes everything, I end up on a park bench wit' you and your pals. ... If I wanted someone wit' feelings, I'd get one I could take out in public' (282).

Sammy's language never quite escapes its own circularities: 'What you doan tell'em,' he explains to the bar tender, 'ever if they know, they still doan know ... 'cept if you doan want them to know. If you doan want them to know, then they know ... they always know, 'cept if they doan know, which is why you got to tell 'em. Should shoulda' (250).

When Lenny applies for a job handing out flyers he undermines whatever chance he had, forfeiting his application fee if this is not itself a con. Meanwhile Charlie, a crackhead, has been regularly beaten but believes he has Jedi powers which he will one day use if necessity calls. For all of them there is a gap between what they are and what they believe themselves to be.

Beyond this place, though, are people finding God, attending AA, dieting, living a life so alien as to be unreal. Meanwhile, Jake tells Daisy, 'I seen thousands like you, thirty years in this sewer! You know what you are? You're garbage ... loser garbage' (286).

At the end, the bar is changing, the old décor, the old ways, no longer acceptable. Demaris is arrested for soliciting. Sammy dies in the bar, placed in the street to avoid trouble with the police. Time is moving on leaving them in its wake. The rough edges of society are to be smoothed, gentrification to displace those at odds with the new dispensation, products, as they are, of the forces which now displace them. Nothing is resolved because nothing can be. Guirgis's mid-1990s seem very like O'Neill's 1912. New York might be disembarassed of those out of tune with the times, the new image being of a place safe for tourists and those going about the American business of business. Yet these characters still struggle to survive from moment to moment using what they can, including one another, knowing that defeat is a natural state for them yet getting by, survival being a kind of victory. As for Arabia, that is a place of fantasy where all things are possible, the pipe dreams of O'Neill's play transposed to another time, the farm of Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* where present problems will be resolved.

Speaking of *The Lower Depths*, Tolstoy doubted that theatre-goers would respond to characters so remote from themselves, unaware, as they were likely to be, of their own moral failings. Critics proved more receptive. So they did of Guirgis's play. *The New York Times* reviewer found it harrowing, pulling no punches but avoiding the merely sociological, while, reviewing a production at the Hampstead Theatre, London, in 2003, Paul Taylor in *The Independent*, observed that, 'You might call Guirgis's bleak, blackly funny play a kind of barbed elegy for a way of life that was on its way out, were it not for the stark, unsentimental clarity with which he presents the predicament of these denizens of the lower depths. What is impressive, though, about the punchy, street-smart writing ... is the refusal to reduce the characters to sociological specimens. There's a humaneness of approach here.'¹⁴

His next play, *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*, is no less bleak. It is set largely in the yard of a special twenty-three-hour lock-down wing of protective custody on Riker's Island, New York's principal prison, with its ten thousand inmates, most not yet convicted of a crime, and ranked in the ten worst correctional facilities in America. It features, at its centre, Angel Cruz, an African-American in his forties, a former bicycle messenger, with a year of college, awaiting trial for the attempted murder of a cult leader, and Lucius Jenkins, an African-American in his forties, a serial killer. Since Lucius has discovered God and Angel has attacked a fake evangelist, faith is one of the issues addressed in a play which is coruscating in its language, at least at the beginning, a brutal introduction to debates over the morality of the justice system, the extent of personal responsibility, the existence or otherwise of God which follow.

The play opens, indeed, with a scene which makes David Mamet look restrained as Angel struggles to recite the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father, who art in heaven, Howard be thy name. Howard? How art? How? How-now? Fuck! Mothahfuckah ... fuckin'. "Our Father, who aren't in heaven" ... who aren't? Fuck, fuckin', fuckin', shit!'¹⁵ It is a fractured prayer which precipitates a cascade of obscenities from the other inmates, all fluent in a denatured language, words a form of blunt force trauma. Valdez, a prisoner guard, is no less violent in his attitude for all his language lacks a scatological edge.

Lucius, meanwhile, splices words and ideas together, a convert whose expression of religious zeal is barely coherent, words triggering other words by association, a rambling aria as the fractured elements of his life are brought together and fly apart, his grasp on reality being tenuous.

When Angel is assigned a white woman lawyer, Mary Jane Hanrahan, it is not only language which comes between them, though there is a linguistic gulf. She begins by mistaking him for

someone else, as a Public Defender overloaded with work. Yet she is not without sympathy for him, as we learn in a monologue, herself coming from a poor background and attending a private school on financial aid, her father stabbing another father at a school event in response to a racist remark. Angel seeks to replace her with another lawyer called Langdon Brown (the name, of course, of one of Guirgis's teachers at Albany, a tip of the hat to one of those who had helped him on his way) but theirs is now a growing partnership.

Angel is charged with attempted murder having shot a man in his backside. Leader of a cult, the self-styled Reverend Kim, who claimed he was the Son of God, while driving a Lexus and with a million-dollar portfolio, who had been deported from his own country and convicted of tax evasion, had lured away a friend and this was, in fact, the inspiration for the play. As Guirgis explained: '... a really close friend of mine joined the Moonies, and there was a period of my life when I devoted a lot of time trying to get him kidnapped and deprogrammed, and I went on stakeouts ... but it never ended up working. And then I went into therapy, and I learned that ... people are going to do what they're going to do.'¹⁶ What he learned in therapy, beyond that, was that this was in part connected to his own life and his need to move on. When the play was staged his friend came to a performance. He was still in the Moonies, having married in one of their mass ceremonies.

Angel had also attempted a kidnapping: 'Two years in the makin'! surveillance, kidnappers, fuckin' deprogrammer.' Like Guirgis's attempt, it failed. As Angel complains, 'what can you do about it? Nothin'! ... scientologists sued the Cult Awareness Network, bankrupted them, and took over the damn Cult Awareness Network! Same office! Same phone number! But when you call the mothahfuckahs up, you speaking to one of them!' (138–9) The prison system seems to evidence a similar control.

Beneath the humour which, despite the brutality of the language, modified as the action unfolds, is laced through the play, there are serious discussions, in particular between Angel and Mary Jane. He insists that interventions are possible and necessary, even if they fail, while she believes that individuals are responsible for their actions and hence the consequences of those actions and that they will only change if they decide to do so: 'regardless of how close we may *think* we are to someone else, we have very little control over their choices and absolutely zero responsibility for the consequences those choices bring on them' (142). For Angel, this leaves no space for altruism, for friendship, indeed for responsibility. Why else, he asks, would Mary Jane be a Public Defender rather than making money working privately.

Such debates, however, seem beside the point when Angel is beaten and raped and, a month later, the Reverend Kim dies, precipitating a murder charge and Angel's attempted suicide. He faces a life sentence without parole, except that his lawyer now encourages him to lie on the stand, at risk to her own career.

Meanwhile, is Lucius, serial killer, for whom murder seems incidental, a charlatan, like the man Angel killed, or is he the source of a possible redemption? He certainly seems to help a guard who he urges to abandon his job in the prison, and to such good effect that he and his wife fly to Florida to be witnesses at Lucius's execution, reconciled to one another. Was he molested at the age of five and did he turn to drugs to block out the pain of that? Is he, as he claims, an undiagnosed manic-depressive paranoid schizophrenic and if so did he have free will when he killed, sadistically, mercilessly, or is he himself the result of other people's decisions?

Mary Jane ends up disbarred as Angel falls apart on the stand to be returned to prison, eligible for parole in 2038. Only Lucius, a child killer, and the guard he advises, seem to have

peace, except that Angel at the end finally takes responsibility for a murder he had not planned to commit. Is God no more than the desperate consolation he appears to be for one man or the sense of moral acceptance he seems to another? And where does Guirgis stand? Interestingly, in answering a question about his approach to writing, he said,

most of the time, I pray. And that's what gets me started. It's not so much that I'm a religious person, because I'm not – I don't even know if there is a God – but I think that writing is not a solo venture. I think that writing is a collaboration between you and something else. And I think that the act of prayer – whether you're praying literally to someone or something or not – that the act of prayer is a form of practicing humility. It's a sublimation of the ego. And once I'm able to do that, then it allows whatever's out there to come in. It gives me a release and gets me started.¹⁷

This seems curiously close to the mood of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* in which Angel makes his way towards humility, in which there is a need for something to fill an internal space. If Guirgis starts his works with a prayer the play itself begins similarly, albeit with a broken one, unfocused, desperate, subsequently giving way to a misleading fluency, misleading because these are characters aware that they inhabit a disordered world in which justice is little more than a word, a world charged with violence. At its heart, though, lies a debate about where responsibility begins and ends, and the nature of a faith which relieves or imposes that sense of responsibility, a faith which potentially breeds vulnerability and consolation alike.

Something, however, survives. Mary Jane sacrifices her career for a principle. Angel accepts responsibility even as his initial action, casually violent, had been in the name of moral affront. As he insists, in a final confused prayer, which begins with that same mixture of spiritual need and obscenity which marked his first speech ('Hail Mary, you're a lady, talk to your fuckin' Son.'). 'I just wanna be good . . . I wanna be a good man' (203). Even as he begins his sentence he recalls a petty theft from his youth and prays that good things should come to his victim even these years later: 'I *am* a man, God!' he cries, as he is handcuffed and led out of his cage, 'I am a man that is sorry,' (204) but not for himself. He is the equivalent of Gorky's 'good man' Luka, in *The Lower Depths*, who believed in the necessity for truth and pity on mankind.

It is not hard to see why the name of Joe Orton is sometimes invoked in relation to Guirgis. There is the same bizarre premise to his plots, the same celebration of those on the margin, the same caustic humour and disregard for authority. There is an almost manic energy to his work, a scatological imagination, a fascination with the sometimes opaque nature of language whose ambiguities generate what can seem like a series of vaudeville performances. Where Orton's anarchic spirit is born out of a contempt for those who held him, as a homosexual at a time when such was illegal, in contempt, and for a system which he delighted in subverting, Guirgis, like Tennessee Williams (who, he explained, became 'a subconscious model for emotional content'¹⁸ for him), celebrates those who are bruised, searching for connection, even as they resist such, never quite grasping the logic of their situation. He creates an urban kaleidoscope of characters, a soundscape in which profanities, in-articulations, obscenities, somehow have a harmony, a rhythm, a lyricism which compels.

Orton was content to tear the temple down using ridicule and a humour designedly caustic. Caricature was a weapon since he was equally distrustful of the civilizing order of art. Guirgis constructs a parallel world to that just out of sight, the ordered existence represented by law

and order, daily civilities, production and consumption. His characters live on their emotions which always threaten to break surface. Sometimes they have difficulty comprehending their situation or the nature of the relationships they need but which they are equally liable to distrust. They may inhabit a familiar environment but these are not the figures of a realist play. Some dimension is missing from characters who are not there to play out a moral logic, discover truths, resolve issues. They perform themselves in what can seem a carnivalesque series of encounters, contradicting themselves as much as others, expressing an unfocused anger.

Reviewing the original production in *The New York Times*, in 2000, Ben Brantley welcomed a play 'which has so much intellectual vigor and sophistication on the one hand and so much anguished passion on the other . . . whenever it appears that "Jesus" is settling into neatly fenced, familiar territory, it slides right beneath expectations into another, fresher direction. It has the courage of its intellectual restlessness.'¹⁹ It won a Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival and was nominated for an Olivier Award when it reached England in 2002, where it played first at the Donmar Warehouse before moving to the West End.

Fifteen years later, Jesse Green, reviewing a Steppenwolf production of the play in *The New York Times*, observed that, 'it achieves the doubleness of great art, burrowing deeper the higher it flies . . . In 2017 "Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train" seems to ask whether justice, and even God, is possible in an unjust society. No wonder it's so profane.'²⁰

Our Lady of 121st Street (121st Street, incidentally, being the address of Corpus Christi School), which opened in September 2002, directed, as with his other early plays, by Philip Seymour Hoffman at the Centre Stage, brings together a cast of characters united only by the death of their one-time teacher, Sister Rose, whose body has, unfortunately, disappeared from the funeral parlour as have the pants of a man who had chosen to sleep there. Farce is obviously a breath away, except that there is another current flowing.

One man called Rooftop, because of his habit of having sex on the top of buildings, descending with pigeon feathers on his back, has flown in from Los Angeles where he has a radio programme. Here, though, he is at times barely coherent smoking marijuana as he struggles to total up his thirty years of sins, running to the thousands, as he confesses to a priest. Twelve years of Catholic education has apparently left him with little more than a mastery of Latin when it comes to peace of mind. Before leaving he had betrayed his wife Inez whose remarriage to a stolid reliable man had, we learn, been a compromise resigned, as she is, it seems, to settle for a life in which love is not the driving force.

Those gathering for the wake, absent a body, bicker among themselves in conversations which recall old sleights, fraught relationships, blending misunderstandings with aggression even as old friendships survive. Norca, a Latina in her late thirties, who had been treated kindly by Sister Rose, is seemingly unaware of her contradictions as she declares, 'Sister Rose could lick my ass, all I care . . . I ain't tryin' to say nothin' bad about the bitch – ain't tryin' ta disrespect her. I just don't wanna talk about that penguin bitch' (48). These are characters trapped in the circularities of language. Pinky, mentally disabled and in his late thirties, tries to make sense of the priest closing confession before noon: 'If it's not noon, then it's not noon. 'cuz if it wasn't noon, but it *was* noon, then it'd be noon. But I don't think it's noon,' (63) an echo of Sammy's speech in *In Arabia, We'd all Be Kings*.

Pinky is an easy victim for those after his money even as his relationship with the gay Edwin suggests that there are human connections, he having assumed responsibility for him on the

death of his mother, looking after him, anxious about his whereabouts. For his part, Edwin, a Latino, is sensitive about his sexuality. Asking Rose's sister, Marcia, if he seems gay he is told 'exceedingly'. If he were to have a complete make-over, he asks? 'Completely made-over gay,' she replies. (85)

The priest himself, a war veteran who has lost his legs, no longer believes in God, is not allowed to say mass, and is uncomfortable among black people while Sister Rose, it turns out, had been abused as a child and became an alcoholic, handing out punishment to her charges, even as she had worked with Pinky to keep him out of a special school. The one thing she seems to have done is care in a world dominated by gangs, drugs, violence.

Slowly, farce drains away, real pain acknowledged, language no longer street smart, aggressive or defensive. As they meet up again after many years so past wounds are opened, truths exposed. A child died, a marriage broke, friendships were strained, a damaged child became a vulnerable adult. Loyalties have been abandoned or affirmed. In a sense this is a high school reunion in which they face how far they have or have not travelled, what they have become. At moments it is as though they were back in school replaying old relationships, time momentarily reversed even as it is time that has made or unmade them. Some have evidently succeeded, or seem to have done, escaping from the world of 121st Street, drawn back, though, as if to pay a debt. Others have not strayed far.

When Sister Rose's body is found only half remains, the other half, it is assumed, thrown into the river. No reason is given or sought. It is simply something that has happened. The play ends with the return of day as a man, Balthazar, a cop, recalls his dead son. Earlier in the play he had told the story as though it had applied to someone else: 'I once knew a guy, a couple detectives went to his apartment to inform him that his son had been raped and murdered in the playground up on a hundred thirty-seventh . . . You know what his reaction was? And keep in mind this was a man who loved his son dearly, O.K.? His reaction was: He wouldn't leave the house to I.D. the body until after the Knicks game was over. . . . It was "the playoffs," he said. They watched the whole fourth quarter together in silence. He served them ham sandwiches and warm beer. And this is a man who lived . . . for his son' (8). Now, as the play ends, he confesses, 'I'm the guy with the ham sandwiches.' He had had a hangover and allowed his seven-year-old son to go out to play alone. He still carries that son's rosary. As another day dawns on 121st Street he remembers suddenly how, as a baby, that lost son had reached up to try and catch the wind, copying the gesture as he recalls it. Told that the memory must be a consolation, he replies, 'It hurts . . . hurts a lot' (105), lapsing into silence as the lights fade to black.

The achievement of the play lies in the ebb and flow of language, in a humour balanced with compassion, the former side-stepping the potential for sentimentality. It lies in Guirgis's creation of a community of souls from disparate individuals each with their own demons, disappointments, acts of sudden consideration, confessions of vulnerability. If it features a priest who has lost his faith in God, those broken by experience, concerned with who they are and how they are perceived to be, haunted by guilt or a sense of failure, it also expresses a sense of a shared humanity, those capable of acts of friendship and love even as its confession can be inhibited in a world in which intimacy carries its own dangers.

The *Washington Post* review aside, in which Peter Marks regretted a lack of authenticity in a 'middling script', as performed at the Kennedy Centre, Guirgis could hardly have hoped for better reviews of the original production. For Bruce Weber, in *The New York Times*, Guirgis was 'the poet laureate of the angry,' a writer with 'one of the finest imaginations for dialogue to come

along in years.²¹ John Heilpern, in *The New York Observer*, declared, 'I've rarely loved a play as much as *Our Lady 121st Street*. The immensely gifted Stephen Adly Guirgis just fills me with hope, desperate though he is. His urban voice is startlingly fresh ... Mr. Guirgis writes in infectious liberating fury and sadness,' while his 'ear for the vernacular is perfect ... *Our Lady of 121st Street* is the best new play I've seen in a decade.'²²

With his next play, *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (2005), he returned to a central theme, the nature of faith and the tension between individual freedom and the divine. As he explained in an introduction to the published version, it had its origin in a moment which occurred when he was nine or ten and decided that the story of Judas did not make sense given that God, as he was taught by the nuns, was all merciful. As George Steiner observes in *No Passion Spent*, 'We know nothing of Jesus' motives in electing Judas to never-ending damnation. Whom the God of Abraham and Moses had chosen for his followers he now chooses, in a counter-choice that is a sacrament of exclusion, for humiliation and chastisement. It is Judas's name, it is the imputation of venal betrayal and deicide which are howled by Christian mobs in the massacres of the Middle Ages, in the pogroms. ... The scapegoat has been designated, the pariah thrust into the darkness. A strange prologue to a discourse on love.'²³

The young Guirgis was hardly up to such analysis but from then on, he says, 'I was in no hurry to seek out God ... I did believe that "God" existed – I still do – but that was about it.' The 'I still do' is obviously important, even as the word 'God' seems to be no more clearly definable than it had been for his younger self, another word seemingly just as good, and also written with a capital letter. As he has said, 'I do know that I am in continuous need of the Spiritual and that I usually go to great lengths to avoid it ... I think a connection to the Spiritual is essential to us as individuals and to the world as a whole. I think our survival depends on it.' It follows that people who are spiritual 'have a responsibility to stand up, be counted, and gently encourage others to consider matters of faith and to define for themselves what their responsibilities are and what it means to try to be "good."' His play, he hoped, would provoke a consideration of 'What is it' in this context, 'that we need to overcome in order to truly be "Ourselves"?'²⁴

It is hard to think of another playwright who would write in this way. All members of Congress may be happy to declare their faith (Krysten Sinema, Democratic Representative for Arizona aside), desperate not to offend the supposed sensitivities of their electorates, but American dramatists seldom nail their religious or spiritual convictions to the mast, even if their plays do often address the very question Guirgis identifies. Of course America scarcely lacks spiritual hucksters or those, at a price, offering short cuts to the Self, something psychiatrists also sell to those adrift but with cash to hand. Religions spring up like seedlings after a forest fire, reaching up to the light. Church, as in Lewis's *Babbitt*, can be an adjunct to the secular, a kind of club indicating social acceptance, much like those American societies, sometimes oddly named after animals – Lions, Elks – dedicated to doing, if not necessarily as individuals being, good while American presidents have a tendency, in State of the Union addresses, to tell American how good they are in a country blessed by God, a reassurance which is itself an indicator of doubt. In a capitalist country, with a national dream of material advancement, O'Neill suggested, there was a tendency to attempt to possess one's soul by possessing the world. For Willy Loman, meaning lay in being 'well liked'. What they had in common was a search for meaning, a sense of insufficiency which needed to be earthed in something no matter how hard that was to define. What was often missing was a sense of transcendence, an awareness that the happiness they were told it was their fate to pursue, if not

necessarily possess, could not be constituted only by home ownership, a two-car garage, or the accumulation of wealth.

George Steiner, in his book *Real Presences*, argues against the idea that God 'is a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational thought,'²⁵ at a time when the principal challenge may be to learn anew to be human. Rather He is a 'real presence' in the creative act and though I can't imagine Steiner in the audience to *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, there is something apt about his quotation from Wittgenstein: 'When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there.' Language and art exist because there is another, itself a reminder of what it is to be human, while 'No serious writer, composer, painter has ever doubted . . . that his work bears on good and evil, on the enhancement or diminution of the sum of humanity in man. . .' (144). The serious, of course, does not exclude the comic or there would be no Shakespeare, no Beckett. And where, then, is God except in the urge to engage in such issues as if they had an urgency beyond the moment. Nihilism is always in the wings, awaiting its cue. Art, Steiner has said, tends to be an argument for the existence or absence of God when it is not assuming His function of creating something from nothing. 'It may be the case,' he adds, that 'nothing more is available to us than the absence of God' while insisting that it is necessary to take the risk of embracing the opposite conviction if one is not to be 'left naked to unknowing.'²⁶

This may all seem too much weight to be borne by a play which is at times riotous with invention, which deploys a language which might appear to resist seriousness, ludic, fanciful, with characters so many pop art gestures, though Steiner insists that in all 'art-acts there beats an angry gaiety,'²⁷ and reference is made in the play to Kierkegaard, Hegel and Thomas Merton, the American Catholic theologian. But Guirgis makes a bet on the existence of God and in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* engages with the idea of the Spirit directly, as he does with guilt, love and redemption, albeit scarcely in the language of theological disquisition. Beneath the humour, indeed, beyond the cast of characters summoned from death to offer witness, is a serious engagement with issues to do with justice, forgiveness, human autonomy. For him, the comic and the serious are not at opposite ends of the spectrum. He deals in the tragi-comic.

The first act carries a title: Domine Adiuva Incredulitatem Meam, Lord help me in my unbelief. It opens with a lament by Judas's mother having buried her son, poignant, lyrical, resistant: 'I loved my son every day of his life, and I will love him ferociously long after I have stopped breathing . . . on the day of my son's birth I was infused with a love beyond all measure and understanding . . . The world tells me that God is in Heaven and that my son is in Hell. I tell the world the one true thing I know: If my son is in Hell, then there is no Heaven – because if my son sits in Hell, *there is no God*.'²⁸

Invisible to her, Jesus kisses her cheek as Judas had kissed his as a sign to those who awaited to arrest him. Then we are in a place called Hope where a judge, dead since 1864, presides over the appeal of Judas Iscariot, the prosecuting attorney being from Hell, the defence lawyer, the daughter of a Romanian gypsy from Harlem and, disturbingly, a parish priest, insisting that love versus justice must produce a synthesis of mercy and forgiveness. She carries a writ signed by God in whom she does not believe. To the sound of music and dancing camels, whatever that sound is like, Saint Monica, mother of St. Augustine, appears, black and speaking as it is doubtful saints ever did: 'Yo, Judas, you got change for thirty pieces of silver, mothahfuckah?!' (18) The action then switches back to the courtroom where Mother Teresa is called as a witness, accurately recalling, and quoting, Thomas Merton's observation, in *Seeds of Contemplation*,

that, 'Despair ... is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves' (38). One must, she says, 'participate in one's own salvation' (39).

In a cross examination which becomes a dialectic (hence the reference to Hegel), she confesses to taking money from criminals and dictators, opposing abortion and the condemnation of anti-Semitism. She is, then, a suspect saint, believing that ends justify means, but does that invalidate her fundamental beliefs?

One by one, the disciples are summoned, offering historical details, exploring the paradoxes of faith. Simon, in particular, offers the defence of Judas that his action was not so much a betrayal as a necessity if Jesus was to 'realize his destiny and fulfil his mission,' (45) an interpretation considered by Steiner when he says that Judas had acted as he did, 'to fulfil Scripture and the will of God. So as to compel the Passion and Resurrection of his master who might otherwise ... have flinched from unendurable agony.' For some, he points out, until the late fifth and sixth centuries, Judas was 'revered for his self-sacrifice, for the necessary holiness of his deed. It was he who had triggered the miracle of the Cross and, thus, of salvation for sinful humanity.'²⁹ And the one who colluded in this was Jesus, as Sigmund Freud, summoned to the stand in a second act titled *Sic Deus Dilexit Mundum*, God so loved the world, avers.

Among those also called forth is Pontius Pilate, who attempts to take the Fifth, responsibility broadening out beyond Judas, even as they wish to wash their hands of it as Pilate did literally, the Pilate who claims he was made a saint by the Ethiopian Church, which indeed he was. In the play he lives in Heaven. These are interrogations which lay genuine historical facts before the audience along with stories generated, perhaps, by the desperations of faith.

Christ appears to Judas to assure him of his love insisting that Satan is not real, being a mere construction. The play ends with an extensive speech by the chairman of the jury which has just found Judas guilty. He has, he says, played Tom, in *The Glass Menagerie*, as had Guirgis, and having done so met the girl who would become his wife, sitting in tears with her in a car outside the house of a friend who had died. Three years into their marriage he had slept with a student, an act of betrayal. 'Do you know who Auden was, Mister Iscariot?' he asks. He 'was a poet who once said: "God may reduce you on Judgement Day to tears of shame, reciting by heart the poems you should have written, had your life been good" ... She was my poem, Mister Iscariot. Her and the kids. But mostly ... her ... You cashed in Silver, Mr. Iscariot, but me? Me, I threw away Gold ... That's a fact. That's a natural fact' (110–11).

Jesus washes Judas's feet as the lights fade. A play about betrayal, responsibility and shame, about transcendent value and love, extends beyond an act of treachery by a man who may have acted out of personal motives or served a higher cause.

Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, found it 'a heavily footnoted position paper on a big, big subject.' Guirgis had, he suggested, 'overfilled his slate with historical references and characters, all ultimately making the same point.'³⁰ For Michael Billington, reviewing its 2008 production at the Almeida, it was reminiscent of *Angels in America* in its 'gloriously intoxicating brew,' witty and exuberant, while, unusually, bringing religion into modern drama.³¹ Charles Spencer, in England's *Telegraph*, confessed that it was an 'astonishing play that knocked me for six ... often wildly comical as well as deadly serious.' It was a remarkable play and 'a sensational hit.'³²

His next play, *The Little Flower of East Orange* (East Orange being a city in Essex County, New Jersey), carries an epigraph from Saint Thérèse of Lisieux which offers a gloss on a play

which features, and celebrates, a character who has lived her life out of the limelight: 'The splendour of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not rob the little violet of its scent nor the daisy of its simple charm.' In an introduction to the published edition Guirgis explained its origin. Attending a retreat, he had encountered a woman who had lost her mother to cancer and was 'very angry and very sad and very inconsolable and alone.'³³ She had, though, opened up to him when he showed interest in her. Months later, he had found himself in a similar situation as his own mother lay dying of cancer and he realized not only why that woman had felt as she had but that his expression of concern had concealed his own fear of loss. He began the play when his mother was alive but she died before he completed it. He moved in with his father realizing that 'his life had just gotten ripped out from under him,'(xi) leaving him alone.

He has often spoken of his difficulty in sitting down at his desk to write, finding reasons not to, like others embracing distractions. This time he had reason enough. With the death of his mother, 'the whole world essentially stopped.'(xi) It took him several months to return to a play which dealt with family relationships, doing so not by addressing the fact which had brought him to a halt, but by writing a comic scene. The delay meant that the theatre which had originally commissioned it stepped aside and it was staged by the Public Theatre.

It was simultaneously a play with autobiographical roots and one which he was anxious should not be seen as such since this denied the role of the imagination, the function of the unconscious, the way in which memory, experience and emotions shape art. It was to be a family play in that it was to confront and stage experiences common to all, faced with relationships simultaneously simple and complex, with a sense of loss which art, perhaps, has the ability, and even the obligation, to address and to which it gives form if not consolation.

The play, like *The Glass Menagerie* (and like that work this is a memory play), has a narrator, Danny, who tells the story of his mother, Therese Marie (Marie being the original first name of St. Thérèse), in the hope that it will prove therapeutic, he being addicted to drugs and alcohol. Danny is a writer whose mother asks that he not write about her until she is dead, a writer in the family being a blessing and a curse.

It begins with Therese's arrival in hospital. She is unconscious, an anonymous figure with no form of identification. She had disappeared when Danny, in rehab in Arizona for drink and drugs, was making out with the daughter of a Republican state senator. He is summoned back by his hysterical sister as a Jamaican nurse sits with his mother until she wakes, confused, carried back in time, memories sliding over one another, her father, Francis James, appearing as a ghost as she momentarily flatlines. The sounds of a carnival, a carousel, saloon singers, mix with the frantic activities of surgeons and nurses fighting to bring her back to life, Danny's broken narrative blending with fragments of Therese's memories and fantasies, the nurses seemingly privy to her thoughts. Sportsmen, film stars, politicians visit her, Bobby Kennedy upbraiding her for not voting for his brother suggesting that this was because her father was a Democrat and that he had been violent to her.

Slowly a portrait begins to cohere. If she has been damaged, that seems to have begun long ago. Her parents had both been deaf (Guirgis's father-in-law, it is worth recalling, having been a deaf alcoholic), her father also a violent drunk who had beaten his wife and Therese when she was aged nine, her head being smashed against a boiler, a scene played out against the backlit impression of a tenement building. When she threatened to call the police if he hit her sister or mother, Danny tells us, he ceased to hit them but continued his assaults on her, this man who was respected in the community and had an acknowledgement from the Pope. This is a reason,

perhaps, for that same Pope entering Therese's consciousness as she hovers between life and death in a hospital ward, fragments of her life retrieved, some real, some fantasies which nonetheless unlock truths hidden away.

Slowly, her consciousness returns and she identifies herself, offering her address as 440 Riverside Drive (in fact one of New York's great apartment buildings, the Paterno). Danny arrives with his girlfriend from rehab, Nadine, who, still high on drugs, is the only person other than Therese who can see the ghost of Francis James, the grandfather who lives on in memory, a memory here made manifest. In describing Nadine, Danny invokes, without sourcing, D.H. Lawrence's poem "Self Pity", 'I never saw a wild thing sorry for itself' (490). and, despite the lithium, the clozapine and the dope, she lacks precisely that sense of self-pity. Back in the hospital, meanwhile, Justina, Danny's younger sister, plays the violin, crying as she says, 'I fuckin' hate you!' (50) to the woman she both loves and resents.

This is not, though, simply a play, echoing O'Neill, about family tensions, the collateral damage caused by an Irish patriarch cascading down the generations to those who subsist on denial or turn to drugs as an escape, though there has been pain enough beyond that literally suffered by a woman who still carries the scars of her upbringing. They seek something beyond the immediate, are aware of an insufficiency. There is anger in this family, in part a product of the very self-pity absent in Nadine. They are drawn together and thrust apart, much as O'Neill's characters had been in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, love and revulsion alternating or even existing in the same moment, but what they seek is a state of grace, consolation, redemption, what Mary Tyrone had lost along the way. As Danny explains, 'even during all the decisions and talks and thought and fights that led to my being where I am, and Mom being where she is, and Justina being left all alone – grace never left. And what is "grace"? . . . Grace, to me, is that thing that I constantly spit in the face of. If there's a God, he loves me. But I don't seem to love him back enough . . . Why? 'Cuz somehow I felt undeserving . . . and angry, and completely fuckin' powerless' (51).

The second act, which is where Guirgis re-entered his play when he began to write again following his mother's death, features a seemingly familiar dialogue between mother and son as she questions him about a girlfriend from whom he has long since separated and, as he insists, greatly to her advantage. It is a conversation, however, which quickly devolves into mutual accusations for if Danny had retreated to rehab in an attempt to save himself he is repeatedly summoned back as Therese ends up in hospital having, it seems, flirted with a death which the Church forbids her to claim. 'Why do you think I did what I did,' she asks, 'if it wasn't to let you and Justina be free? . . . the only reason I didn't commit suicide is because the Church forbids it – and if I took my own life I wouldn't be able to see the three of you in heaven!' (59)

Nor is she the only one in the family who has flirted with death, Therese's father, mother and sister all dying from smoking while she and her son are drinkers and Danny is a depressive barely able to look after himself let alone his mother. Justina is the practical one but she, too, lives on the edge. Finally, Danny prevails and his mother returns to her apartment where, slowly, truths begin to spill out. We learn that following an accident at school Therese had undergone back surgery only for it to be undone when she had to carry her drunken father upstairs, her mother herself being drunk. Rather than confess to the truth she had spent ten years in and out of hospital never telling her father who remained ignorant of his role, denying the significance of her injuries. Thereafter, it seemed to Danny, she had lived a life of abnegation, caring for her parents in decline, sacrificing herself for her children even to the point, it seems, of being prepared to take her own life if her faith had not prevented it.

For her part, she refuses such an interpretation. She had travelled the world, married the man she loved, carried her children, enjoyed the arts, lived a life which seemed full to her. She had not, she insists, been a victim and advises her son not to regard himself as such but to seize his life, which, of course, would be more convincing if she had not herself had suicidal feelings.

Meanwhile, Danny, having visited the Dublin House (a real Upper West Side bar), ends in prison having attacked the owner of a deli, a fact concealed from his mother by Justina who has returned to look after her, in time to be present when she died. Her children are thus seemingly free, except that it is clear they never really will be. The play ends with Danny staring at his life, aware that he has stood outside that life waiting not for absolution but to begin living, insisting nonetheless that, 'I firmly believe that grace does not remain invisible to anyone who's looking for it. And even those who aren't. My mom taught me that. Grace is like your next breath. Until you die, it's always there,' (103) except that he is now handcuffed to a detective and led off stage as the lights fade, the handcuffs which had been taken off in the opening scene. The play, it seems, was narrated by a man already confined, explaining his own path to this point even as his possibilities have been closed down.

Where, then, did grace reside except in a woman named for a saint, damaged in more than body and not unacquainted with despair? Her insights may be clouded at times by morphine, her relationship with her children difficult, but she has proved capable of charity, choosing to relieve her father of a guilt which might have destroyed him, never giving up on those children even as they carry the scars of their upbringing. Denial runs in this family, sometimes as evasion, sometimes as grace. In Albee's *The Zoo Story*, Jerry suggests that kindness and cruelty together are the teaching emotion. Here the combination is compassion and faith, a refusal finally to surrender to despair. Nor is she alone in this. The son of a patient in the hospital is talked out of suicide by an orderly, perhaps a moment of sentimentality in a play which otherwise resists it.

The Little Flower of East Orange received somewhat short shrift from Ben Brantley in *The New York Times* who, while recognizing that 'every now and then a scene erupts into original, explosive life,' objected to shifts of style and language, to the fact that it 'meanders into various side roads' and that its script evidenced a 'structural sagginess'.³⁴ Kerry Reid, writing of a later production in the *Chicago Tribune*, praised the 'sculpted threnody and rapprochement among Danny, Therese and Justina' but felt that the various parts failed to cohere, while the 'grasping for grace ultimately feels clumsy'.³⁵

There is, perhaps, a sense in which this play, for all his anxiety that it should not be seen as primarily autobiographical, bears the marks of the loss which Guirgis suffered during its writing. Reconciliation, the search for an understanding of relationships, of sacrifices made, responsibilities accepted or refused, become suddenly central in such circumstances, and the way in which these can be integrated into drama a challenge. Perhaps the focus does soften at moments while earthing the concept of grace in character or action can be problematic, the secular and divine origin of such evading precise designation. Therese looks to God while it rests, perhaps, in her own selflessness, albeit compromised precisely because it is secular, not a gift from without but generated from the ambiguous motives and emotions of a human being whose flaws are an essential part of her. Who does Danny set out to forgive but himself, even as he acknowledges and acts upon his sense of duty, albeit one which fails because he succumbs at crucial moments to his addiction? Grace is elusive. If it were not it could be accessed and defined more easily.

The television drama *The Wire*, created and largely written by David Simon, offered a dystopian vision of those on the edge of society, their language and actions brutally direct, their fate, for the most part, determined. Power became the currency of a culture in which the vulnerable went to the wall. It simultaneously offered a naturalistic insight and a metaphor, the street a correlative, a model of capitalist society in which people consumed products as they did themselves. On the face of it in *The Motherfucker with the Hat*, which opened at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre on Broadway in April, 2011, Guirgis enters a similar world, as addicts come up against the limits of their possibilities, seeking their own advantage, deploying a denatured language, except that the mood is radically different, closer to Tennessee Williams's celebration of those potentially broken on the wheel of experience, outsiders not so much with their noses pressed against the store window of the desirable as content with their discontents.

Humour is their defence, sometimes calculated, sometimes inadvertent as they contradict themselves. Praise segues into insult, love is announced and denied, sometimes in the same sentence. The importance of trust is asserted even as it is betrayed. Some social or linguistic limiter is missing from their language and behaviour. Yet somewhere is a remembered past when there was a seemingly genuine harmony, even if the signs were already present of its loss, and loss is a central fact of his characters even as the sheer energy and pace of their unspooling lives prevents it pausing them, though it does for a second at the end of the play. Asked what had triggered the play, he replied,

I was responding to a lot of things that were going on in my life. I think the primary engine of the play is something that's probably recurring in my work: a main character past the age where they should already have grown up and matured emotionally [is] still trying to do that. I was experiencing how the world can be different as an adult than it was as a child. When we're young we form close friendships with people of the same sex ... and there's a sense of loyalty ... Then, when we get older, a million other things influence us and sometimes those values are lost.³⁶

There is a sense in which these adults remain adolescents, always on the edge, ready for a fight, with ideas of relationships which amount to little more than desires to be immediately realized, though somewhere there is a memory of loyalties which once prevailed but which no longer hold. Guirgis does not write denunciations of American capitalism, laments over the lives of those in Hell's Kitchen, attending Alcoholics Anonymous, scrabbling around in the detritus of urban life, though that is where his characters live. He writes urban comedies with, implicitly, something to say about those who watch. If they condescend to those characters they miss the point in so far as the denial of real intimacy, the ironies of misdirected lives, are scarcely restricted to those for whom the meaning of their lives always seems to elude them, their best intentions subject to what seem the urgencies of the moment.

There is a scene in season one, episode 4, of *The Wire* in which the only words, bar one, spoken by the two detectives are variations of the word fuck, more than two dozen in all. It became one of the most celebrated episodes of a celebrated series. Apart from the different nuances of the word it is funny simply by virtue of relentless repetition. The second word uttered is 'Motherfucker'. In *The Motherf*cker with the Hat* – the word Motherfucker being curiously changed in England, the home of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, to Motherf**ker – much

the same is true. The sheer torrent of fast-paced vulgarity is the root of humour, each character trying to top the other.

Guirgis has said that he begins with dialogue, one character's speech inviting a reply, plot being generated out of language. If, as in *The Motherf**ker with the Hat*, the language is scatological it is because it is a street language, immediate and direct, the humour generated by its exuberant supererogation, as by the fact that it co-exists with a different vocabulary, no less extreme for being fashionable cant. He had felt he was finished with plays about angry people but anger would be a driving force of his central character, a man, Jackie, recently out of prison, who suspects, not unreasonably it turns out, that his girlfriend has been having an affair on finding a stranger's hat in her apartment. Though on parole, and apparently dedicated to turning his life around, with a job and a sponsor to keep him on the moral rails, his first thought on discovering the hat of an unknown man is to acquire a gun to exact revenge. But these are all characters who live on their instincts.

Veronica is an addict who has been having an affair with Jackie's AA sponsor, Ralph D, while he was in prison, and whose own wife now has an affair with Jackie. Their relationships are as circular as Jackie's denial, summed up by his cousin Julio as, 'Except for the fact that it actually happened, it didn't really happen' (31). Jackie likes to believe he has a code, though it is hard to detect what it might be. As Guirgis has said, AA may be a genuine and helpful organization but its members are not, certainly as evidenced by Ralph whose relationship with Veronica she ends with a speech whose sudden change of direction is typical of Guirgis's comic method: 'It's over for real! So please don't give me no static about it, 'cuz I'll wrap a fuckin' bedsheet 'round my head and go straight up Bin Laden on you – I'll fuckin' destroy you! ... And I'm being nice about this 'cuz it ain't like we had nothin' it was something.'³⁷

Guirgis's is an aesthetic of excess. Character is pressed towards caricature, language beyond the bounds of normal discourse. Insults are piled on insults, obscenities on obscenities, until they collapse of their own absurdity. Linguistic redundancy becomes a virtue. There are no norms of behaviour to be breached except a certain nostalgia suggests that something has been abandoned along the way while beneath the accelerating dialogue, verbal jousting, farcical performances, there is a hint of genuine pain and vulnerability, of a love which somehow survives betrayal and anger. The play ends as Veronica throws Jackie out, the man she had apparently once loved, though when he leaves, as a cassette tape plays one of the songs they had once shared, she calls his name even as she stands alone, loneliness being what they all fear.

Commitment may be what on some level these characters yearn for but it is also what they evade, afraid of what it means. They take on roles, exist in a world of contradiction, deny themselves the very thing they need. There is, though, a world beyond this circus. At times they borrow its language, parrot the clichés of a fashionable world which they invoke without quite seeming to be part of, as though they are trying on roles for size.

*The Motherf**ker with the Hat* is a wild comedy with a relentless drive, for good reason played without an intermission. The frenetic action and scattergun language conceal moments of emotional insight as genuine needs are buried in a moment-by-moment battle for advantage. The play, which was his first to open on Broadway, prompted enthusiastic reviews from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and the *New Yorker*. It ran for a hundred and twelve performances and was nominated for a number of awards, including a Tony, winning several for acting. In Britain it was staged by the National Theatre and again prompted positive reviews.

His next play seems to assemble a familiar cast of those spun off from the supposed centre of American society, grifters, thieves, prostitutes, those who have compromised themselves even as they reach out for something secure in relationships which nonetheless fracture easily as old fault lines open. Motives are suspect, the truth hard to discern, lies a natural response. Drink and drugs signal a trap from which they wish to escape, or a resort, a means to blunt the impact of their situation. Language can still slide easily into profanity and invective. Friendships are suspect, means to equally suspect ends. All seek advantage, practice deceptions. For the most part, these are characters on the make, trading on one another. The word 'love' is deployed to advantage. A young woman fakes pregnancy announcing that love makes her feel 'like I got chlamydia or something',⁷³⁸ even as she accuses her boyfriend of failing to reciprocate by invoking a past which is hardly likely to induce affection or indicate that the word love means anything beyond desperation: 'I been with drug dealers and murderers who treated me better than you! I been with crackhead-homeless in Van Courtlandt Park half naked in a blizzard who showed me more love!' (38) Despite her protestations to the contrary she is no more than she seems, a young woman who insists she is a student of accountancy while parading her ignorance and body, lying her way into a security she is not sure she wants.

But something is different about *Between Riverside and Crazy*, perhaps influenced by the fact that it is rooted in his own life, though in truth the autobiographical is never far away in his work. It is set in a Riverside apartment, with its view out onto the river, into which a tumble of people come, as they did when he himself moved into his family apartment, following his mother's death, to look after his father. These were not, as in the play, always people of the highest probity while also, as in the play, his landlord did his best to evict him in order to raise the rent. And while the play takes off from here there is something about that rootedness which gives a solidity to the central character, a retired black policeman who, for eight years, has been prolonging a compensation claim having been shot, multiple times, when out of uniform, by a white policeman. This, too, had its root in a real event when, in 1994, a black policeman, named Desmond Robinson, was shot, though the circumstances were different from those in Guirgis's play.

Walter 'Pops' Washington lives in the detritus of a once elegant apartment, an old Christmas tree still lit because no one has thought to turn it off, with dog shit on the floor. His life has evidently been on hold. He eats pie for breakfast, washed down with whisky. His son, Junior, uses the apartment to sell stolen goods even as he is enrolled in AA (which Guirgis knew well from personal experience and whose principles he endorses). Does he stay to look after his father or for the convenience of a place from which to trade? For his part, his father is concerned for his state of mind explaining that 'Hypertension run in our family – and he been hypertensing liked a motherfucker from the moment he moved back here' (12). While himself capable of deceit and in a state of suspended animation, seemingly content to drift, oblivious of his decline, he is tolerant of others and not simply out of disinterest. Meanwhile, he clings on to his decaying apartment as he does to a version of the past, which is not quite what it seems, out of a sense of stubbornness rather than resilience.

Junior's girlfriend, Lulu, wanders around, skimpily dressed, casually exuding sexuality, even rubbing up against Pops as though this were her primary means of communication, and she comes close to caricature, though there are hints of self-awareness. A third person, Oswald, Junior's friend, extols the virtues of a healthy life, having learned this from *People* magazine, while recognizing as friends criminals who appear on the pages of the newspapers. He was

based, Guirgis explained, on a friend who had been in recovery but ordered drugs and a call girl to his apartment. When he could not pay, 'a gun-toting pimp came upstairs and threatened to kill everyone.'³⁹

The imminent crisis is prompted by the arrival of yet another eviction notice but since he has had a legal rent-controlled lease from 1978 he is determined to stay simply waiting for his lawyers to secure the compensation, following his shooting, which he assumes will prove over a million dollars. Into this situation arrive two policemen, one a woman, a former partner. What appears to be a friendly reunion, however, turns out to be an attempt on their part to secure his agreement to settle his case, their own careers being on the line. Friendly jousting turns to threats as they point out not merely that he had been drunk when the shooting took place, and that they suspect the shooter never did utter the word 'nigger' (as, indeed, we later learn, he did not), but that they know of Junior's criminality and intend to arrest him if Pops does not comply. Beyond that, they point out that Pops has long since broken the terms of his lease and hence can be evicted with ease. He collapses only later to be attacked by Junior's drunken friend, Oswaldo, whose 12-step programme seems in temporary abeyance and who demands his credit card or, he bathetically adds, 'debit!' (41)

For the moment everything is unresolved until a supposed Church Lady from Brazil arrives who, with what appears to be voodoo magic, stirs Pops into sexual life for the first time since his shooting. She is, apparently, raising money for an orphanage, while having a surprising insight into his situation. His sexual exertions, however, precipitate a heart attack. When the detectives return, there is, they explain, no longer any money on the table but if he signs a non-disclosure form he will be secure in his apartment and his son's criminal record will be expunged. He agrees, but only if he is given \$15,000 from a discretionary fund, if his former partner hands over her \$30,000 engagement ring, and if her partner/fiancé, gives him his tie. He finally wins his battle but hands the ring to the Church Woman who, somewhat surprisingly, confesses that she is only a cleaner at the church, that she learned details of his life from the real Church Lady who she has persuaded to take her activities elsewhere, that there are no orphans, she having come to rob him.

The play ends, though, on a note of grace, that grace for which his characters often long. Pops, now smartly dressed, prepares to leave his apartment and as he does so gives the ersatz Church Lady the \$30,000 ring, knowing she is a fraudster but believing that she had helped gift him the freedom he now claims, convinced that she in turn can offer the same gift of belief to others. It is a note which echoes through Guirgis's work. It can seem a sentimentality, and perhaps it is, but the Catholic in him has never been entirely erased. Redemption always remains a possibility and how could it not in someone who had himself undergone the 12-step programme which calls for those who follow it to make a searching and fearless moral inventory of themselves and have a spiritual awakening.

Guirgis's characters seem trapped by circumstance, as by their own derelictions, and yet redemption of a sort remains a possibility. It is the Writer in Tennessee Williams's *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* who insists that "There are no lies but the lies that are stuffed in the mouth by the hard-knuckled hand of need, the cold iron fist of necessity."⁴⁰ Guirgis's characters give themselves the benefit of the doubt, deceive others and themselves, getting by from moment to moment by whatever means seem to hand. He has the same sympathy for them, though, as O'Neill does for those in *The Iceman Cometh* and for something of the same reason: he knew them and knew, too, what it is to be tempted by the dark. Pops, he has said, 'tells a big lie, but

why did he do it? Maybe I haven't told that lie, but what lies do I tell in my own life? The characters in the play hopefully have enough humor and intelligence to make us feel compassion.²⁴¹

He has said that, 'I think that anything anyone writes that's any good is going to have a lot of autobiography ... All these characters, at one time or another, I've lived or identified with in some way ... The characters are working class and below, and that'll probably be the way [I continue to write] until I start hanging out with rich people.' He has known something of the experiences of those whose lives he stages saying, 'Let's say I'm a guy in his 40s who grew up in New York City ... I was the type of person that wouldn't say no to much, so when you get to my age ... you're either in a [12-step] program or been in and out of a program – or you're not here.'²⁴² 'I'm a huge fan and believe 100% in 12-step programs,' he has said, 'They save lives. They elevate existences. Miracles happen in those rooms.'²⁴³

Guirgis has forged a poetry out of the language and lives of those he stages, as he has humour in their exchanges, alongside a defensive aggression. They hesitate to allow the intimacy which nonetheless at times they evidently need. They have glimpses of a world elsewhere but for the most part live and have their being within limits which they allow to define them and their possibilities even if they never quite lose their sense of something of value which evades them, a meaning just beyond their reach. They have not given up nor he on them. He may have left behind the formalities of the Church but he stages ceremonies of his own in which transformation is possible and redemption a reality.

Between Riverside and Crazy had its premiere at the Atlantic Theatre Company in 2014 before transferring the following year to Second Stage Theatre. It won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Lucille Lortel Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding New Off-Broadway Play, the Off-Broadway Alliance Award and the Pulitzer Prize, one of the judges for which being fellow playwright Lynn Nottage.

The figure of Pops surely owes something to his own father of whom he has said, he 'had a very working-class existence. He worked on his feet, there was no pension. He didn't really have anything when he died, no money, no nothing. He didn't have anything to give his children other than his rent-controlled apartment.'²⁴⁴ Like Pops, he had a dog bought for him when his wife died, a dog still owned by his playwright son who still lives in that same rent-controlled apartment.