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CHAPTER 6

BRUCE NORRIS

What's the progress for dogs? . . . We have certain responsibilities, [but] we don't have progress. I think every generation is one away from a holocaust.

Bruce Norris¹

[If] we want to claim that we're changing the world, well we're changing the world in the same way a jester changed the world in Charlemagne's court or Genghis Khan's yurt. That's the kind of difference we make . . . I know a couple of people who really think that *Waiting for Godot* is an affirmation of all that's 'heroic in mankind' . . . If we could hook up . . . a belt and a generator to Samuel Beckett's corpse in his grave, you could power a small city with the spinning of his corpse.

Bruce Norris²

Bruce Norris is a social observer and social critic, even as that criticism extends to himself. He explores the human comedy, acknowledging that it derives as much from a determinism resolutely denied as from the manner in which individuals and communities seek to justify their worst instincts, or patrol the borders of what they assume to be defining affinities. His is a world in which love can be touched with danger, his characters confused as to its constituents and what its boundaries might be. He is committed to a theatre whose political utility he doubts, and which he suspects is sustained by the very people he is inclined to distrust, even if they are hardly different from himself. If there is an irony in his insistence that it has no power to effect change, the ironies which interest him go deeper than that as his characters pursue a meaning which is elusive and contingent. Writing plays, he suggests, is no more than a *jeu desprit*. He is certainly not interested in providing answers, sending audiences away with the idea that they have been enlightened, except, of course, they have been in so far as he stirs the water and leaves a phosphorescent glow.

His characters are often damaged, sometimes unaware of the source of that damage, or subsisting on denial. They are following a path which seems ordained because the terms of their existence are fixed, or they behave as though they are. But his plays are not versions of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, unrelenting, hermetic, though there are at times echoes of the reflexive humour of *Waiting for Godot*. The joke may be on mankind but he is as interested in the self-inflicted pain, the social ironies, which come from obsessions, prejudices, class and racial presumptions treated as though they have a natural authority, a coherence implying some natural order rather than learned behaviour. Like O'Neill, and the Nietzsche that playwrights read and admired, he sees little evidence of moral progress, human nature resolutely remaining the same along with the conditions of its existence. His are plays about human folly but equally about a wilful embrace of such.

Norris was born in Houston, where his family attended the same church as the Bushes, and grew up there in a largely segregated area, his parents having moved house to avoid the

possibility of bussing, which they believed would damage their children's education, Bruce having a brother and a sister. The only African-American he encountered until his early teens was the family maid, though, when he was seven, a social studies teacher introduced her class to the film of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* which had both an immediate and long-term impact in that he would write a response to it in *Clybourne Park*. In an interview with Tim Sanford, of *Playwrights Horizons*, he remarked on the fact that it 'wasn't really until a couple of years later that I put together the irony that we were watching a movie about someone asking a black family not to move into a neighbourhood when we had taken the other way out, which was we moved out of the neighbourhood. And so, either that social studies teacher was oblivious to what she was showing us, or she was subversive and trying to fuck with our heads a little bit . . . but it did . . . fuck with my head.'³ Still later, he saw the musical of the play, the actor in him realizing that there was only one part he could play, that of the white man, Karl Lindner, who tries to block the Younger family's access to their future. By the time he wrote *Clybourne Park*, however, he no longer saw himself as playing the role.

His father was a doctor and disciplinarian, 'who ran the house with enormous pressure to behave in a compliant fashion. And that had to do with language' which he was evidently committed to policing, on one occasion upbraiding his son when he used the word 'hooker'. By contrast, his mother was 'very lively and fun and subversive', once with 'aspirations to be a painter or costume designer'⁴ but giving these up to raise her family, a sacrifice which, he explained to John Guare, may have played a role in the fact that she became a serious drinker. He had, he said, genetically inherited conflict, his parents waging war on one another, his father being a subtle tyrant, not that the young Bruce registered this, being involved in acting in local productions, recalling, in particular, his appearance in *The Sound of Music*.

He performed at Houston's Alley Theatre (which is where he would get his Equity card), though when he went to Boston University it was as a scenic designer before he moved to Northwestern, in Evanston, as a theatre major. When he left, he found his way as an actor, in Chicago and New York, appearing at the Goodman Theatre and Steppenwolf as well as on Broadway (Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues*, 1985, Wendy Wasserstein's *An American Daughter*, 1997, David Hirson's *Wrong Mountain*, 2000), alongside a number of television projects with minor parts in films (*Class*, 1983, *A Civil Action*, 1998, *Reach the Rock*, 1998, *The Sixth Sense*, 1999). He lived in Chicago for eighteen years before moving to New York in 1997, ultimately abandoning acting because he despised auditions which he found demeaning.

His first play, though, *The Actor Retires*, a comedy produced at the small Remains Theatre in Chicago, in 1991, was, he explained, 'about my own inability to deal with vanity, the actor's narcissism, the actor's twin hats of being grandiose and grovelling . . . its characters, the producers, directors, whoever was being parodied, are portrayed as normal people whereas the sick one is myself. It was also a vanity project because I was in it.' Later, Steppenwolf Theatre commissioned him to write a play called *Blue Bonnet State*, which he described as 'autobiographical in a not very successful way that you have to get out of your system. They did a reading of it. I was in it, but that was part of the problem . . . It had that kind of self-aware autobiographical voice to it. And I didn't like that voice' (xi). It is now, he has said, hidden away forever though did lead to a second commission which turned out to be *The Infidel*, one rooted in part, again, in his own experience but also in a 1993 case involving a New York judge.

Judge Sol Wachtler, New York State's Chief Judge, had had a four-year affair with a woman. When this ended he had stalked her, sending obscene letters and a condom as well as making

a stream of telephone calls. This had culminated in him threatening both her and her daughter, masquerading as a Texas private eye. A central issue was whether he accepted responsibility for his actions and was ready to apologize. His defence was that he had been suffering from a mental illness exacerbated by the amphetamines and tranquilizers he had taken. He was sentenced to fifteen months in prison, serving thirteen. This being America – though it lies outside the scope of the play – on his release Wachtler wrote a memoir and a work of fiction, contributed to *The New Yorker*, was awarded a Chair at the Law and Psychiatry Institute of North Shore Long Island Jewish Hospital and, in 2007, had his New York law licence restored.

As to the personal dimension, while he does not regard it, or *Purple Heart*, which followed, as directly autobiographical both did reflect a moment in his own life. 'Both of these plays,' he confessed, 'are about something deeply personal to me. They're both about things that frightened me in my life, and they're both about things that have to do with love . . . Both plays share a vexed relationship between a man's sexual feelings and his romantic feelings for a woman, and those irreconcilable feelings are something I was going through at the time' (xiii). *The Infidel* was, he has said, his first real play.

It is, indeed, a play about relationships, love, the acceptance of an ordered life or a reckless commitment to a fantasy of possibility. It is also a play which ultimately mocks the desire for resolution, as if drama exists to pose questions only to answer them. Meanwhile, there is little attractive about the central character. He is certainly no Gatsby, blind to his own dangerous romanticism if in some way fascinating in his blind commitment less to a person than an idea of that person.

Staged by Steppenwolf in March 2000, it is set in a room in a federal building, sparsely furnished but with a television and VCR which will play a role in the proceedings as Judge Garvey, who appears in person and on the television screen, sits, in a neat suit (his prison garb having been temporarily exchanged for this), at one end of a table while at the other end, as a guard stands by, is a former colleague, Moss, a hearing officer, set to explore whether he deserves any degree of leniency. It proves a difficult task in that Garvey seems to have trouble concentrating or sustaining a conversation without misunderstandings and digressions. During the proceedings video and sound recordings are played in as evidence of his crime. Beyond the central question of whether he shows any sign of accepting responsibility for his actions, a requirement if he is to qualify for any mitigation, is the issue of his mental competency.

He seems strangely detached, having difficulty focussing, making jokes as if not quite grasping the significance of the situation. The opening dialogue is a series of questions not answered, or deflected, as he tries to explain that he experiences brief caesuras, that it was as if he were entering experiences halfway through, trying to understand the plot of his life perhaps because of the drugs he is taking, twice-a-day lithium to treat transient dissociative aphronia, a borderline personality disorder in which people can disappear for a moment into a void in their minds, a response to feelings of stress or abandonment, and he does claim abandonment. He certainly appears not to appreciate the gravity of his situation or what is required of him despite the fact, as he is reminded, that he had himself drafted the code which requires contrition for an amendment to a sentence. He is, at times, articulate, ironic, while confessing that he finds 'mastering that illusion of sincerity' required of him difficult, a self-defeating confession.

This dialogue, though, is interrupted as his dissociated state finds external expression. Images begin to appear on the television set, a car radio plays and the guard, now transformed

into a trooper, comes forward with a flashlight, playing out an encounter Garvey had had when he was pulled over for crossing lanes without signalling. His behaviour is as strange as it had been before this transformation. Apropos of nothing, he tells the trooper that he should be looking for a man called Claude Tompkins. When the trooper realizes that he is a judge, however, he is waved on his way, but not before that trooper has noted a cowboy hat on the seat, an item whose significance only becomes apparent later.

The action then switches back to the room where he has now been joined by his wife, Helen, who is also to be deposed. Even here, with so much at stake, they cannot resist bickering with one another over trivia even as he wishes to blame her for withdrawing love and sex and hence setting him on a path which made him seek both elsewhere. The irony is that she is the author of *Healthy Sex, Healing Hearts*, holding seminars, previously with her husband's assistance, for fee-paying customers, despite the evident failure of their own marriage in that regard. He, it seems, is not the only one suffering from a degree of disassociation. When she is asked for a definition of mental health she replies, 'An aversion to emotional extremes. An acceptance of the tedium of daily life.'⁵

Beyond a drama about a man systematically behaving in a way which undermines the resolution for which he should hope there is a debate about the legitimate response to life, to relationships. For Helen, men should embrace family, home, security, emotional stability, be, in other words, more like women as she conceives of them, noting that 'a slight increase in estrogen levels in men' frequently brings that about which 'is why geldings are more easily domesticated,' (153) a thought which comes too readily to mind as does her invoking of animals in which the male dies after sex, his biological function over. Men may continue to live but the day comes when they are like cities which surrender to the infidel: 'Every . . . amorous encounter follows a more or less predictable path. It is born and it dies' (155).

On the other hand, Garvey's crime is not only his possessive stalking of a woman, his surrender to excess, rejection of a bland existence. It takes a darker form even as the scene changes again, the guard now a bartender as Garvey, back in this scene from his past, swallows tablets and alcohol asking himself whether marriage was a contract whose terms were unclear, its fine print ignored: 'then thirty years go by and this woman has lain beside you, there she is, night after night, the hair goes gray, the flesh withers, the muscles go slack, she is becoming one with the bed, one continuous undifferentiated mass of beige on beige' (157). 'We're *captives*, you see? And it's *voluntary* captivity. We enlist' (162).

Then we are back in the room again where Garvey is joined by Casper, a lawyer, and Alma, the Hispanic woman he had pursued and, it turns out, threatened. Time has passed, unnoticed by Garvey. Now the evidence against him is laid out, the unsolicited gifts, the multiple telephone calls, answer machine messages and letters, his sudden appearance at her place of work and finally details of threats of violence supposedly from a man in Texas called Claude Tompkins, hence the significance of the cowboy hat in the car and his comment to the trooper. The recordings are played back, Garvey clearly identifiable as he spills out racial abuse. Video is played of him wearing the cowboy hat, lingering outside her apartment and being stopped by the trooper, the last a view from the dashboard camera of the police cruiser. He finally arranges to meet her outside the bar only to be arrested as he kneels down to present her with a ring.

Given the chance to respond, he does little more than suggest that he will one day return to his work in the law. Beyond that, and clearly as a comment with relevance to those who watch the play, he says, 'If you want some sort of climax, some moment in which great truths are

spoken well, check your ticket stubs because you have come to the wrong performance. Whereas in Greek tragedy it would arrive on cue with tears and soliloquies, this happens to be real life and, as such, does not conform to the niceties of dramatic structure ... however pleasing that might be to contemporary tastes' (183).

Ironically, it does end in tears. Caught making a phone call during a recess he had telephoned not the woman he had so manically pursued, but his wife, asking her 'Why did you stop loving me?' (185) As they all prepare to leave, Moss now tells a story, '*To himself as much as anyone else*,' recounting an experience from his own youth when his mother kissed his brother on the lips at bedtime but never him until he sought to kiss her, only for her to push him away and wipe her mouth with the back of her hand. 'I never kissed her again,' (186) he confesses, love denied leaving its mark.

The characters exit, Garvey now in handcuffs, but the play has not ended. As music plays, snow begins to fall and Alma appears in a winter coat. The door to the bar opens and Garvey steps out. This is the scene from the surveillance videotape, except that the police are not in view as he kneels before her and says, '*Mi preciosa. Mi flaquita. Mi chulita*' (My precious. My dear. My darling) (188). He is, he says, 'awake at last,' but awake to what? His arrest is a moment away, the death of a dream from which he refuses to awake. What he had hoped would open a door in his life is about to slam.

It is a play of some stylistic bravado and one which signals what will emerge as a motif in his work, a sense of an unfolding logic in which his characters are trapped, victims of their own impulses if also evidence of a certain determination as they look, seemingly fruitlessly, to discover meaning beyond the mere unfolding of events. For Garvey and his wife, something has been lost, the future offering nothing but entropy. Love, which to Garvey was to redeem what seemed a life drained of purpose, dies or defers to obsession. What remains is not transcendence but irony.

His next play, *Purple Heart* (2002) was, he explained, 'a huge moment for me when it was done at Steppenwolf. It was when I was making the transition from actor to playwright. It was my first show in the main house so it felt like a validation.'⁶ Looking back from the perspective of 2013, he said that it, 'is like my special child that no one ever recognised ... It's an oddly personal play and about something which I haven't written about in a while, which is – for lack of a better word – love. And how it is expressed in unexpected ways.'⁷ Nonetheless, it was also a play which he recalled writing out of a sense of rage even as he misremembered writing it during the invasion of Iraq which occurred in the following year, though the echoes of 9/11 were still in the air and it was a decade on from the Gulf War.

The play is set in late 1972, during the Vietnam War whose images he recalled watching on television when he grew up, never believing that America would become involved in further wars. When it was later staged in London, Iraq had happened, as had the invasion of Afghanistan, to his mind two illegitimate wars which had destroyed any optimism he might have felt about an end to the country's overseas ventures. *Purple Heart*, however, is not concerned with the rights or wrongs of Vietnam. It is about loss, private trauma, the contradictions and ambiguities of love, a life continued when its point is no longer clear. Vietnam is seen only out of the corner of the eye. It is an explosion whose echoes, though, still sound for the characters in the play and still echoed three decades later when it was written.

For much of the play love seems in scarce supply. A man, we slowly learn, has died in Vietnam three months earlier leaving a wife who had anyway not seen him for six, sent spinning

into depression and alcoholism, her world diminished, except it gradually emerges that he had been violent himself, suffering from what was surely the stress of war. He had been obsessed with details, like the character in Ernest Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River' for whom a concern with such details, controllable, precise, was an attempt to hold at bay what was not controllable, mere anarchy. We never see this man but his absence registers even as his pain is acknowledged, both he and his wife victims, closing down as the body does certain functions under stress in order to preserve existence, except that in his case this was itself, it seems, to no purpose.

The play is set in the living room of a house in a medium-sized city in the Midwest, though that location plays little role in the play, except in so far as the caustic atmosphere works against any assumption of an average home in a heartland America presumed to be a place of comfort. Carla, a woman in her thirties, lies on a couch, insensible to what is going on around her, in particular to Thor, her twelve-year-old somewhat foul-mouthed if bright son, obsessed with mail order magic tricks which he tries on anyone who will let him. 'I hate you. Lazy whore,' he says to her. 'Watch what you say to me, you little piece of shit,' she replies, mother and son in disharmony. Thor never mentions his dead father but the war has plainly registered as a boy who is into practical jokes enquires how to make punji traps, shit-smeared stakes used by the Viet Cong, is fluent in the language deployed by Vietnamese prostitutes, improvises a flame thrower, and has discovered how to make napalm.

Carla has failed to do the shopping and has liquor concealed in the laundry basket. The sympathy offered to her by neighbours, who have turned up with food as an offering for her loss, fails to address her real feelings, indeed become a constant irritant and reminder of the very fact that has left her with no resource but alcohol. The third person in the house is Grace, her mother-in-law, passive-aggressive, whose disapproval provides the backdrop to this dysfunctional family. Her idea of casual conversation is to tell Carla of a neighbour's oesophageal cancer. 'There's one thing to be grateful for,' she adds, 'We have our health,' (22) this addressed to a woman who has anaesthetized herself with vodka and is pregnant for, beyond the alcoholism, and Norris, of course, had seen such at close hand, there is the issue of Carla's questionable relationships with men.

Grace wears a hearing aid which malfunctions from time to time and she has a tendency to mishear as she also has a tendency towards a cruelty masked as concern, unless that concern itself masks love if not for Carla then for her son whose memory is in danger of being lost, the two people in this house being a last link, each seemingly wrapped up in themselves. On the other hand, she offers a mixture of advice and bland reassurance of a familiar kind even as it seems not to register the nature of her daughter-in-law's despair: 'When Gene [her husband] died I felt for quite some time that I wouldn't be able to go on. I did. Yet here I am . . . you will feel better someday, I think I have enough experience to say so' (24). At the same time, her own mother, she explains, had been born with her internal organs reversed which made her 'by no means convivial', her father meanwhile not being one to complain. Perseverance in the face of problems seems to have been a virtue in her family.

Carla lacks this cheerful assurance. Her husband dead, she is invited to 'Go home. Remember life? Remember living *people*?' (46) even as his commander turns up to present a posthumous medal, accompanied by a photographer to catch the moment. She steps away even as Grace moves forward, adjusting her make-up as she has evidently adjusted her emotions. Life must go on except that Carla cannot quite see why.

It is not a play without humour, Thor given to making ironic comments, Grace's hearing aid to precipitating confusion. Even Carla is capable of moments of wit as she contends with her mother-in-law. For a time, it could almost be a dark sitcom, with family members, at odds, firing off each other, but then it takes a sudden turn as they are joined by another character, Purdy, a corporal in the military who lost his hand to a mine and who visits, though with quite what in mind is never clear. He is a link not to the dead man, who in fact he may not have known, but to Carla since he had found himself in the same hospital as her when, having travelled to her husband's funeral, its open casket a brutal reminder of his fate, she broke down, her hands tied to prevent her doing damage to herself or others. This is the husband who used to hit her in front of the children and who carried a photograph in his wallet not of her or their children but of a young, very young, Vietnamese prostitute sitting on his lap. How, then, love this man? Why a sense of loss? Why a sense of unjustified guilt when the cause of this lay elsewhere in a system which so readily accommodated the need for violence abroad with a seemingly reassuring normality at home, a world of 'comfy sofas and football games and beer and rock and roll and *Playboy* magazine and *The Tonight Show* and *Hollywood Squares* and Hallmark cards . . . and the theatre and church on Sunday' (56). The reference to theatre, in such a list, incidentally reflecting Norris's own scepticism about the world in which he moves.

The Christian love which Grace believes herself to offer, the need, Purdy recalls, 'to love our enemies as ourselves,' supposedly embraced by a Christian country waging war abroad, is, he points out, 'the very same voice, which, with equal urgency, counsels others that the proper thing to do is to roast their enemies' bodies and then say a prayer as they begin dining on their flesh?' (92)

It is some time, however, before this past is revealed so that what had seemed her indifference to her son, her need for liquor, her wilful complicity in her own decline, is only slowly seen to be a result of trauma and with it the possibility that she had in fact loved the man who had abused her and whose own behaviour had been disturbing. There is a painful ambiguity when Carla finally, and seemingly unambiguously, says, 'I loved him so much . . . I miss him so much' (108–9). What is it, after all, that Carla is trying to blot out if not a sense of loss, albeit for a man who exists now only in the minds of these four people in the domestic world of a mid-American home.

It is, Norris has said, in part a play about 'a man who has a thwarted love relationship with a woman,'⁸ and, he might have added, she for him. It is not only war that can be corrosive. Love, too, it appears from *The Infidel* and *Purple Heart*, can contain contradictions, its intensity or ending creating collateral damage if also consolation. As Purdy remarks, 'it's such a historically ill-defined and ambiguous notion, pathetic, really, the concept for which more lives have arguably been lost, next to the concept of a *god*, this concept of *love*, a word best spoken through clenched teeth,' but 'I suppose one is forced to fall back on a word like "love" in order to explain his feelings and . . . I'm trying to say, in a roundabout way, and I do hope you won't *laugh* at this . . . because I'm fairly certain that the feeling is at least partly reciprocal, that feeling' (109–10).

Is this what he has come to tell her, a woman whose beauty had struck him when he saw her in the hospital? Is he perhaps himself drawn by love, this man himself damaged by 'buried ordnance,' carrying a wound of his own thus earning himself the Purple Heart of the title, the medal awarded to those wounded or killed in battle, though there are others in this play who qualify for that, Carla having been handed it as if it could fill the sudden void in her life. There seems to be a reconciliation at the end, as she and Grace reach out to each other, Carla pregnant,

though bleeding, except that the play ends as Thor produces a trick can of snakes which his father had arranged to be sent to him. The snakes duly spring into the air but as Purdy remarks, 'Once the snakes are out of the can, how do you get them back in again?' (118) a question which applies equally to a distant war, to the wounds it causes and to love's pleasures and pains.

There is, however, another Purple Heart, beyond that offered for war wounds, though equally a product of war. Speaking of his time in Vietnam, Purdy recalls, 'There was a village. It had been burned the week before. We were on patrol. Came to this village. Behind this hut there was a woman on the ground. A dog had its head inside her rib cage . . . It ran away with something in its mouth. Something purple. Looked like a heart' (116).

There were reviewers who thought this an anti-war play, regretting the absence of more evidence from beyond this Midwestern home, but you do not have to stare into the sun to feel its heat while there are other wars in this play, not least one which a woman declares on herself. As a character in Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* remarks, if two people love one another there can be no happy end to it, one dying before the other. Nor is there any accounting for the ambiguous nature of love, nor for its power to offer consolation only to have such withdrawn. We never see the figure at the heart of the play but do witness the damage caused by the death of a man also at war with himself before he went abroad to wage it on others. Those we do see are all damaged, including Purdy who bears the literal wounds of war and seems studiously polite but is almost a Pinteresque character, ominous, his motives unclear. He describes his hand as 'a little creepy' and that could apply equally to himself.

In the *Chicago Tribune* Michael Phillips found it a mixed bag praising Norris's use of language while finding it hollow. 'Like "The Infidel"' he suggested, 'which drew you ever deeper into one ambiguous creation's psyche' it 'resists easy classification,' confessing, though, that 'This is an excellent sign. Norris is a slippery fish, and well worth encouraging.'⁹ Eleven years later, on its British premiere, *Time Out's* Andrzej Lukowski found it, 'a cracking play, a smart excoriation of sentimental assumptions about veterans and war widows that shows Norris's fantastically caustic language and scathing contempt for polite society was in place long before his big West End hit [*Clybourne Park*].'¹⁰

He followed this play set in the living room of a Midwestern city with a ninety-minute drama set in a nursing home activity room. *We All Went Down to Amsterdam*, 2003, (whose title derives from a scout song, the joke of which turns on the word 'damn' which should not be uttered) features three employees of the home and a man, Mr Wood, recalling his wife and baby but still guilty about some event whose nature does not become clear until the arrival of a stranger who speaks of his fear of water stemming from a childhood swimming lesson when something clearly occurred. Strangers who enter plays are rarely harbingers of joy. As in the song, there is something not to be spoken, not to be acknowledged, opening the door, as it threatens to do, not only on the past but on a view of human nature.

The tension slowly builds, past cruelties having present echoes. Revenge is in the air even as a battle wages between the custodian and one of the inmates who complains of his harassment. These are separate people sharing only their circumstances, perhaps not a plight restricted to those who find themselves forced together with those with whom they have nothing in common, guarding their privacies. For Mr Wood the past is less consolation than threat. As often in Norris's work, what is repressed forces its way to the surface, humour, as in Beckett or Pinter, less solace than the source of a dispiriting irony. He has described it as, 'sort of a comedy'

and 'sort of sick'.¹¹ These are characters aware of what has been lost. In 2018 Norris said that he regarded the play as unfinished.

There is loss, too, at the heart of his next play, *The Pain and the Itch*, which opened at Steppenwolf Theatre in June, 2005, before moving to Playwrights Horizons in New York, the following year. The loss here is of a moral compass, a sense of values which go beyond the pieties of a liberal elite. It is a play which seems to move into familiar territory, that of an American family tearing itself apart, in this case in several directions, husband battling with wife, brother against brother, one of those against his mistress, even mother love being in short supply, each with secrets suddenly exposed, wounds to open. There is the same corrosive wit which characterized *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *August: Osage County*, the same sense that beyond this family something is falling apart on a wider scale. For much of the time it seems a satire of rich liberals whose politics begin and end with a fashionable rhetoric which places social justice on a par with the choice of the right food or drink, cant about honouring emotions, concern with the threat from invading animals, the caffeine in Coke, chemicals in the environment, children's games involving guns, swords or martial arts. They are against genetically modified food as they are against George Bush and anyone who voted for him: 'you TGI Fridays customer. You TJ Maxx shopper with your iceberg lettuce and your ranch dressing and the right to vote.'¹² Quite what they are in favour of, though, beyond their own self-satisfaction, is far from clear.

In 2015 a development at Liverpool Street station in London uncovered a group of what had evidently been hastily buried skeletons from the Black Death plague of 1665. Just below the surface of modern life lay evidence of pain, a more primal experience. In the intricately constructed world of *The Pain and the Itch* there are other buried bodies, other evidences of what has been hastily covered up, of primitive instincts beneath what passes for contemporary civilization.

The occasion is a Thanksgiving dinner, though this rapidly devolves into vituperation and invective even as it is almost the length of the play before the audience is made aware of the dangerous current that has been flowing beneath the surface but which eventually, and in a dramatic twist, breaks surface. The brittle arguments, practiced insults, recalled injustices reshaped as weapons, suddenly seem minor beside the immediate cause.

The family consists of husband and wife, Clay and Kelly, she being the one who brings in the money, he relegated to looking after their daughter Kayla when he is not playing golf. The power clearly lies with her, she even demanding that he kill his cat in case it brings any disease into the house (toxoplasmosis), a sensitivity which is eventually revealed as ironic since far worse has already invaded their home. At the same time, she is worried about glue traps for pest control because they cause animal suffering and are sadistic, despite not being beyond a certain sadism herself when it comes to treatment of her husband. Sex, it turns out, is not much on her agenda while he amasses videotapes of pornography left casually around the house.

Kelly polishes her liberal credentials the better to reflect her sense of her own moral superiority, itself, it transpires, suspect. She expresses concern for other people while more concerned with her lifestyle than their lives. Her equilibrium, though, which she works so fastidiously to maintain, is easily disturbed. The castle of her detachment has already been stormed. She may maintain a sexual distance from the husband who has retreated to pornography, but her sexual defences have already been breached.

Clay's life reverberates with its vacuity. He seems to have no function beyond echoing his wife's paranoia. He segues with ease from discussions of trivia (whether an avocado is a fruit or a vegetable) to social analyses which collapse of their own weight. This society, he declares, in a Mamet-esque speech, 'our society, as a whole . . . (*Flailing.*) Okay. Once again. What does that *mean*? Society as a whole? I don't even know what that *means*. I can only talk about *us*. The things that motivate *us*, because -' (11) He loses his way linguistically, as he does in other respects.

Both claim to have been abused, though this seems little more than an attempt to climb on board what evidently strikes them as a fashionable cause, her abuse consisting, she insists, of 'Neglect alternating with sarcasm,' 'emotional *abuse*', (50) Clay explains in the face of his mother's scepticism. She claims as an authority Alice Miller, the Swiss psychotherapist and psychologist who, ironically, given that Kelly invokes her, had argued that a child's need for love was often exploited by parents for their own purposes. Clay, meanwhile, insists that he was more abused than his brother, a case, it seems, less of abuse than sibling rivalry.

Clay has not seen his brother, Cash, a plastic surgeon, for some while, the reason only apparent later in the play. For much of the time Cash appears a sardonic observer, offering quips from the sidelines, suggesting a sense of detachment, even from his trophy girlfriend Kalina, an immigrant beautician, not quite a master of the language, treated with casual contempt but with secrets of her own which link her to this family in freefall. She is startlingly anti-Semitic and racist, but herself the victim of genuine and terrifying abuse in her own country, and here is where the play becomes more than a critique of certain liberals. Clay and Cash's mother, Carol, who struggles with her memory and tends to deal with contention by blithely ignoring it, declares herself a socialist blind to what that has meant for Kalina living in a socialist country in which, as a girl, she had been repeatedly raped by soldiers and suffered a botched abortion, a confession which elicits no response from this family with its expressed concern for the fate of others, beyond Cash's determination to correct her English. They see no connection with their own lives, except that there is one which, when revealed, explains the title.

It turns out that she was infected by the soldiers and has passed that infection to Cash who has then passed it to Kelly, he having an affair with his brother's wife. Finally, that infection has passed to Kelly's daughter, Kayla, who has developed a rash, the visible evidence of a connection, the itch which they, unlike Kayla, do not wish to scratch.

There is another character, albeit one we never see. She is a maid who lacks English and to whom the family condescend even as Carol accuses her of theft, albeit of half of a twelve-dollar loaf, that being the kind of loaf this family buys. She, it turns out, is the reason the story of the evening unfolds.

The Pain and the Itch begins oddly in that a character called Mr Hadid is being consoled though who he is and why he should need consoling is far from clear. For some reason he constantly asks about the cost of everything, including the house, as if taking an inventory, trying to get some purchase on who this family are and what they value. For most of the play he is a marginal figure, his presence unexplained, until it becomes apparent that he is in some way responsible for the action, prompting a series of scenes which are then played back as police might reconstruct the prelude to a crime.

The story of their Thanksgiving, in a family in which there is little evidence of cause for thanks, is retrieved for the benefit of Mr Hadid, replayed in an attempt for him to understand its significance, what generated the momentum that led to an action which preceded the first

scene but of which the audience will remain in ignorance until the play nears its end. In one sense, fate had its hand in a series of events, conversations, which seem no more than evidence of contingency as Clay, chasing what he presumes is a squirrel, accidentally smashes a window which triggers an alarm which in turn precipitates a telephone call from the police who overhear an accusation of theft against Mr Hadid's wife, the maid, whose headscarf suggests she is a Muslim. This in turn leads to a police raid and her arrest shortly after she has injected herself with insulin, suffering, as she does, from diabetes. When they refuse to allow her to eat she goes into a coma and dies. Where does responsibility lie since there is a logical connection between what has happened in this discordant house, with its tensions, suspicions, racial prejudices, sometimes overt, sometimes implicit, and the death of a woman? Nor is this the only evidence of human cruelty and dereliction.

No one's hands in this family, celebrating an American festival, are clean. 'Basically,' says Clay, 'we're about the family,' in a play in which the family, an American icon, implodes, while beyond them is a world with its own cruelties, sometimes buried but sometimes, as in the plague victims, forcing their way to the surface. It is surely not simply about 'the shallow nature of the liberal views espoused by members of the urban bourgeoisie,' as Charles Isherwood suggested in his *New York Times* review, adding that the practices in the play were 'too unrelievably repellent to be mistaken for the real behaviour of real people.'¹³ Indeed in speaking of his work Norris has remarked, 'I would say it's not about a mission to unmask the privileged bourgeois hypocrites . . . and it's not a campaign to bring down the American way of life. I guess, if I were to be pretentious about it, it's a campaign to bring down the species. I think as a species we have some big problems that are unsurmountable. I think we are . . . doomed, and our responsibility is to just be perpetually vigilant to our worst tendencies.'¹⁴

The cruelties in the play, indeed, have more than an American accent, distrust of those who fail to share a language, a faith, an ideology being too familiar to be denied. As Norris suggests, we seem hardwired to seek advantage, privilege our own, condone or ignore the pain of those remote from ourselves but also those closer to home where betrayal is an instinct not always denied. He has declared himself a pessimist believing that 'Optimism is dangerous. It provides a soft cushion: we become less vigilant, and we need to be constantly vigilant to the worst excesses of our behaviour . . . Our competitive instincts outnumber our cooperative instincts by a factor of 3.6 to 1 . . . As a species, we usually do the wrong thing.'¹⁵

It was John Galsworthy who suggested that the optimist is someone, 'who cannot bear the world as it is, and is forced by his nature to picture it as it ought to be, and the pessimist one who cannot only bear the world as it is, but loves it well enough to draw it faithfully . . . the true painter of human life one who blinks at nothing' and may thus be its true benefactor.¹⁶ Norris claimed that he was a pessimist but not a cynic: 'Cynical would imply one is indifferent to outcomes. I'm very sad about the outcome of things – but I feel unable to do anything about them.'¹⁷

He has named his favourite author as the British economist and philosopher John Gray, whose 'recurrent theme is about the folly of optimism.'¹⁸ Gray rejected the Enlightenment's assumption that history is progressive along with the notion that human nature advances in the way that science does, one evidence for the contrary being the American use of torture as well as the damage wrought by communism. Why, then, write plays? 'What I'm doing, by writing plays, is just completely selfish. If you want to change the world, and you go into theatre as a way to do that, I feel you've chosen the most inefficient means possible.'¹⁹

Perhaps, too, it is worth recalling another Galsworthy observation, in relation to *The Pain and the Itch*. He insisted that dramatic action is 'what characters do, at once contrary, as it were, to expectation, and yet because they have already done other things. No dramatist should let his audience know what is coming; but neither should he suffer his characters to act without making his audience feel that those actions are in harmony with temperament, and arise from previous known actions, with the temperaments and previous known actions of the other characters in the play. The dramatist who hangs his characters to his plot, instead of hanging his plot to his characters, is guilty of cardinal sin.'²⁰

In 2006 Norris staged another play at Steppenwolf Theatre, which once again proposed an apparently unchanging human nature, the capacity of people to be blind to their own hypocrisies, a comedy with an increasingly dark undertow. *The Unmentionables*, set in a Western equatorial country, begins with Etienne, a sixteen-year-old black boy, telling the audience, in what is described as halting, thickly French-African-accented English, that if they think they will be improved as people from watching the play they would be better off going home to watch television, inviting them to demand their money back, even as the usual announcements about cell phones and the use of cameras are made. It is a meta-theatrical gesture which is not repeated until the end of the play, even as Etienne turns out to be a key figure within it.

The events unfold in a house reaching back to colonial times but now bearing the marks of what is described as American good taste. In other words, for all the passage of time there is a certain continuity as the Americans gathered here serve their own purposes even as they insist that they have come to improve the spiritual or material well-being of the native population. Dave is a missionary who sets up a school trading education for religious indoctrination. It is not, as Auntie Mimi, a woman with political power, observes, 'giving to make them sit in a classroom while you lecture to them about Jesus Christ, and only *then* do you give them a bowl of Kellogg's Frosted Flakes. I do not call this giving.'²¹

His partner, Jane, is an actress who has given up her part in a meretricious television show, having been inspired by pictures of suffering Africans, wishing to do 'something meaningful for a change, rather than waste another year of my life churning out mindless, moronic shit for the consumption of an audience of shitheads,' (36) bearing in mind that the play had begun with the suggestion that the audience should abandon the theatre for, presumably, just such television programmes. Ironically, it is her appearance on television which gives her leverage in a country whose heat and conditions she had not anticipated and which prompt an illness which may or may not be real.

They are sheltering in this house, owned by an American businessman because their school has been burned down, their activities evidently not appreciated by some in a country whose politics are corrupt, his predecessor having been killed and his body dismantled, his homosexuality evidently not to be tolerated. Dave is, it turns out, a virgin, a symbol of an innocence which, it seems, can contain its own dangers. At what point does innocence become self-absorption, wilful ignorance?

The businessman, Don, married to the seemingly vacuous Nancy, hair dyed blond, twenty years his junior and with a child-like sentimentality when it comes to her dog, boasts of bringing work to the country, ignoring the price in terms of the environment, the 'concentration of atmospheric mercury downwind of the plant,' the 'arsenic in the groundwater ...', the forty percent spike in infant mortality within a three-mile radius of the production

facility,' (62–3), charges brought against him by Dave, all facilitated by a cosy relationship to the government.

At the same time Don insists that he is not only concerned with the bottom line, that he is 'a person with feelings,' (71) anxious to understand, to show empathy, defending Dave on the grounds that he and Jane are guests in his house, a moral fastidiousness which seems not to extend beyond its bounds. He even admires Dave as an optimist, in Norris's vocabulary not a positive quality more especially since he is a man for whom religious faith takes primacy. These are all people who say they wish to make a difference even as what seems to motivate them is a desire to make a difference in their own lives, to respond to a sense of personal dissatisfaction, incompleteness. As Norris has said, 'Either [the American characters] have decided to go there to make money but are telling themselves it's for the good of the community, or they've gone there to do good for the community but in fact are trying to gratify their own egos, so it's all about what people intend and what they say they intend.'²² Nancy, wishing to offer evidence of her own emotional involvement in the world, declares that she had lost someone in 9/11 but, pressed, explains that it was her brother's wife's sister's best friend in high school's cousin, 'things like that,' she explains, being 'just extremely hard for me to recover from.' (79) Where, in such a world, does authenticity lie?

The Unmentionables is not an indictment of those who seek to help those in need, but an exploration of tangled motives, the degree to which self-concern lies at the heart of actions. It is not simply a demonstration of the continued impact of neo-colonialism, though it is plainly that, but of the blindness – moral, political, social – of those who intervene in a world of which they know little being equally myopic about their own actions, convinced that they are agents of progress.

The play takes a sudden turn when Dave disappears, apparently kidnapped as his predecessor had been. The tension grows greater when Etienne tries to retrieve a track shoe he had left in the house (a reward for doing the military's urging and burning the school) and is seized and interrogated as to Dave's whereabouts. Given the urgency, they debate whether or not he should be tortured for the information, the ticking bomb scenario actively debated in America following 9/11, torture becoming official American policy with even the Democrats signing up to it. Here, only the doctor, cynical but rational, disagrees, resisting the panic which overtakes the others. Even Jane finally agrees only for Dave to reappear having spent time on the beach. Don, the chief advocate, is reduced to stuttering self-justification: 'I, uh ... I don't know, I do still contend that, uh ... there's a fundamental ... a responsibility that we ... that all of us ... uh ...' (127).

In the face of what has happened, they all turn inward, Nancy going in search of her sleeping pills, Jane asking the doctor to replace the pills she has been taking only to be told that they were placebos, while Dave is in tears having doubts about his faith and sexuality. The play ends as Etienne once again addresses the audience reminding them that he had advised them to watch TV instead of a play which is '*depressin*'. Make pipo feel bad,' (131) precisely the accusation often levelled at Norris.

To one side of the action throughout, apparently detached, sceptical, ironic, is a black doctor, 'who gets stoned all the time and who's a completely morally irresponsible person.' He, Norris has said, is 'like me, and so gets to be my voice in the play.'²³ It is the doctor who underlines how little things have changed: 'what is interesting about the *Americans*' he says, is that they are convinced that 'they are very *different* ... You always say to us, no no no, we are not like the

Belgians or the French or the English . . . *We don't want to prosper*. No, the Americans, you see, they must always believe they have come to this country *for the good of the world* . . . we never mention that this is the same thing people have been promising to us for the past five hundred years' (93–4). Is this a lesson that will be carried away from the theatre after this ninety-minute play when Etienne declares, 'Timah go home'? (131) They watch, 'for about ninety minutes,' Norris has said, 'and then . . . go home and I don't think the experience really exists outside of those ninety minutes.'²⁴

And there is, of course, a question as to how far art can impact on the world beyond the foyer. David Hare, in the mid-1970s, had to admit that socialist theatre in Britain, far from shaping the culture, had proved irrelevant to those who went out and voted for Margaret Thatcher, and continued to do so. Brecht may have changed theatre but did he change the world? Olafur Eliasson, the Icelandic-Danish artist, though, has said that art can make the world 'felt'. It may capture it in a way that statistics and analyses do not, and that that may be a spur to thought and with thought comes the possibility of action. There have certainly been occasions and times when gathering together for a performance was subversive and even illegal, governments sufficiently convinced of theatre's capacity to threaten their authority to ban it, but propinquity may be no more than the condition of consumption, a momentary sharing with no residue beyond the pleasure of the moment, a consolidation of existing convictions, or a fond memory.

Yet plays exist in the world and are as real as anything else which bears upon our consciousness. Terrence McNally has insisted on the ability of theatre to change minds, citing *Death of a Salesman* as a play which forced a re-examination of how people felt about national values no less than familial relationships. Why, then, does Norris so frequently insist that they are written for the sheer enjoyment of doing so, and consumed as a passing pleasure? Well, he does not entirely. He has spoken of his plays as candies with a bitter centre, and that bitter centre is designed to provoke, disturb, leave a taste in the mouth. Is that a taste which survives the journey home? He suggests not but some tastes are remarkably persistent. There was a play, though, which arguably did have an impact on the world, which left its taste beyond the moment, one which he had known from his early days at school, and it was to that play that he now turned.

In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry staged a play on Broadway, the first by a black American woman to be presented there. In many ways it reflected her own family's experiences. Her father had been a real estate broker and, in 1938, bought a house for his family in the Washington Park Subdivision of the South Side of Chicago (a house, ironically, designated an historical monument in 2010). The problem was that this was an all-white area and legal attempts were made to force them out, invoking a then common restrictive covenant. Hansberry herself was nearly injured when a brick was thrown through their window. She described their time there as hellishly hostile. The case reached the Supreme Court. When her father died, eight years later, she claimed that American racism had been partly to blame. It was a battle, though, which clearly inspired her. At the University of Wisconsin, she became involved in a campaign to integrate a dormitory. She then became a staff member at Paul Robeson's *Freedom Newspaper* and was involved in the Civil Rights movement as well as protesting the execution of the Rosenbergs.

A Raisin in the Sun opened in March 1959 and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best play before being staged around the world. It ran for 530 performances. Her

second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, closed on her death, by pancreatic cancer, five years later. Her final work, *Les Blancs*, begun in 1960 in response to seeing Jean Genet's *Les Nègres*, but not finished until after her death when it was completed from her notes by her husband, Robert Nemiroff, addressed the subject of colonialism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa.

A Raisin in the Sun concerns the efforts of the Younger family to move into a new house in a white area only to find themselves approached to withdraw, mirroring her own family's experience. As noted earlier, the only character Norris could identify with when he first saw the film of it as a child was that of Karl Lindner, the white man who tries to buy them off. 'That's a lesson,' he confessed, 'that sticks with you, the lesson that you are, essentially, the villain in someone else's story . . . Many years later,' he explained, 'I thought, what if we turned the story around and told it from the opposite angle, the angle of people like my family, the villains, the ones who wanted to keep them out?'²⁵

Accordingly, he decided to revisit the play setting the first act in 1959 and the second fifty years later, though this time focussing not on the Younger family, battling with their own problems as well as with those who try to stop them realizing their dream, but on two white families, the first in 1959, selling to the Youngers, and the second, in 2009, as a white family wish to buy and rebuild the house, the area being gentrified, their plans to be approved by the local housing association, one of whose representatives is a great-niece of Lena Younger. It was a play, he has said, 'aimed specifically at white people, taking a swing at people like me and all our insincere etiquette around race.'²⁶

It is set on Clybourne Street in Chicago, in a modest three-bedroom bungalow, as, in the first act, a white couple, Russ and Bev, prepare to move out of the house the Youngers are buying (Clayborn Park, without the 'e', is a small playground close to Steppenwolf Theatre which itself is on the corner of North Halsted and Clybourn Avenues). All seems to be well as they banter with one another but, as with *The Pain and the Itch*, and beyond the question of race which quickly emerges, there is an issue not to be addressed, a pain suppressed. There is a reason they are moving, beyond the convenience of the new location. They had a son who had served in the military during the Korean War, now six years in the past. One day, two-and-a-half years before the action of the play, he had gone to his room and hanged himself. His effects are upstairs in a trunk, evidently the last thing to be brought down as they prepare to move, and not only, perhaps, because it is a two-person job.

Russ no longer attends Rotary, the first intimation of something wrong, underlined when Bev says, 'please don't say *what's the point*' insisting that, 'I don't intend to live the remainder of my life like that and I think you could take notice of the fact that talking that way *frightens* me.'²⁷ A dream had died for them as, for another reason, it had nearly for the Youngers. He is wrestling with despair, sitting up until three in the morning, she increasingly lonely, desperate at potentially losing more than a son, offering to play cards with him, suggesting that he take Sominex as though his despair can be addressed by a good night's sleep or simple diversions. Time has not healed him nor does it seem likely to even as Bev subsists on denial.

Into this house, already tense, in which a white couple are not simply the abstract threat of Hansberry's play in which they do not appear, comes an asinine minister, evidently at Bev's suggestion, with his own blithe nostrums for what he characterizes as Russ's tendency to *brood* which he insists is '*not productive*' (19). The problem is that their dead son, Kenneth, far from being a hero, had killed civilians, that in one sense the community would be glad to see them

go, relieving them of the social embarrassment of their presence, except it emerges that they have sold their house to a black family thus compounding their offence.

Their only contact with the black community is by way of their maid, Francine, to whom Bev condescends, blithely unaware of her crassness, along with Francine's husband, Albert, quietly tolerant while, like his wife, conscious of the casual and unacknowledged racism to which they are submitted. 'I don't know *what* I would do,' Bev tells Albert, 'without a friend like Francine here, and on a *Saturday*,' as if her relationship with Francine were anything other than that of demanding employer, understanding nothing, and caring less, about those from a world not her own, Francine having three children of her own to look after.

The issue becomes sharper with the arrival of Karl Lindner, the go-between from Hansberry's play, and his deaf wife Betsy, in some ways a personification of the deafness of this community to the issues at stake. Karl is sensitive to 'cold beverages,' but not to much else beyond his own sense of racial privileges to be maintained. He takes pride in the community tolerating what is presumably a Jewish store keeper called Gelman, replacing the former owner with the impeccably American name of Kopeckne, but is affronted by the fact that the new owners of this house will be coloured (corrected, by Jim, to Negro, anxious not to offend on the level of language but happy to do so in other respects, as he is when he explains that he had come to speak to the man in the house).

He meets unexpected opposition from Bev and Russ, not least because an appeal to respect the wishes of their community means nothing when they have been treated with such disregard and hostility because of their son's offences: 'I'll tell you what, I don't give a shit if a hundred Ubangi tribesmen with a bone through their noses overrun this goddamn place, cuz I'm *through with all of you*, ya motherfucking sons of bitches' (49). The first act ends as Russ prepares to bury his son's trunk in the back yard, a trunk containing his last letter to his parents.

What is striking about this act, in a play prompted by Hansberry's drama, which in turn was generated from her own experience of bitter race relations, is the degree to which it places at its heart the trauma of a white couple stunned by a loss which has drained their lives of meaning, a couple who, for all their own insensitivities, fail to embrace the racism of neighbours whose callousness they have themselves experienced. To be sure, representatives of those neighbours evidence the same calculated hostility as in Hansberry's play, Karl Lindner reprising his role, but there is something else going on here. The crimes committed by Bev and Russ's son in the Korean War foreshadow those perpetrated in Vietnam and the Iraq war, the latter finally concluded in the year of *Clybourne Park*'s premiere, crimes of a kind itemized in Pulitzer Prize-winner Chris Hedges' book, *Collateral Damage: America's War Against Iraqi Civilians*, published in 2008.

It is not that Norris becomes distracted from the issue of a black family trying to buy in a white neighbourhood but that he seems to be interested in seeing this in the wider context of an unyielding or, at best, contradictory human nature. American racism sinks its roots into something altogether more primal, clan loyalties and prejudices having a history longer than that of the American Republic, shifting in form and expression but a default setting, it seems, resisted, transcended but of remarkable persistence.

So what difference would fifty years make, the second act taking place in 2009, in the same bungalow but this time bearing the marks of the intervening period characterized, as it is, as evidencing a general shabbiness? The area itself has suffered from white flight. Gelman's store has been torn down, as has its successor, the only white person remaining being a mentally

damaged man who had worked in the original store. The same actors appear but now playing different roles. Norris had thought of precisely mirroring the first act but abandoned the idea: 'I had originally thought I wanted to take the same collection of characters as in the first act, and line-by-line and scene-by-scene reproduce the structure of the first act intact, in order, in a ham-fisted way, to say nothing has changed, nothing is different. But that became a useless exercise.'²⁸ It does, though, begin with what seems the same kind of ostensibly inconsequential conversation, the same games, which had opened the first act.

This time it is whites who are buying, planning the demolition of the house and the erection of another, community complaints now focussing on what is perceived to be a property which would be out of keeping with the surrounding ones. In both periods monetary values are what is at stake.

The actors who had played Francine and Albert now appear as Lena and Kevin, their descendants, like their counterparts having three children. For Lena, the house, which had belonged to her great-aunt, and in which she had played as a child, has a history, 'part of my *history* and my *parent's* history' and '*respecting* that memory: that has value, too,' (79) being a link back to a time when buying the house involved something beyond negotiating modifications and constructing a koi pond. Unlike their forebears, Lena and Kevin are international travellers, apparently skiers while in the first act Jim, desperate to justify racial distinctions, had claimed that black people did not ski. Things have changed and things have remained the same. The echoes are clear. In the first act Karl, in response to suggestions that in principle everyone had a right to live where they wished, replied, 'But you can't live in a *principle*' (35) while in the second act it is Kevin who responds to his wife's suggestion that she is concerned less with her personal connection to the house than with the principle by observing that 'you can't *live* in a *principle*' (86).

Race is a subject to be skirted around even as it is central to the history of the house and community. It is Lena who points out that the changes in the area have an economic and even political motive deploying the same arguments used against her great-aunt – 'It happens one house at a time,' (96) – the difference being that the argument deployed by those wishing to stop black people moving into a white area – that it would depress property values – is now used in reverse, whites moving into a black area driving prices up.

The whites, anxious to gentrify the property, are desperate not to seem less than liberal except that the issue of race seems unavoidable and duly breaks surface, Lena, in the context of a discussion about property, reminding them that they live in a country where black people were once regarded as themselves property. For his part, Steve, one of the couple anxious to conclude their plans, (played by the actor who had played Karl in act one), objects that, 'Every single word we say is – is – scrutinised for some latent – Meanwhile you guys run around saying N-word this and N-word that,' before telling a racist joke whose offence, Lena declares, is not that it is racist but that it is not funny before herself telling one.

The past, though, is not easily buried. Indeed, it takes concrete form when the trunk buried by Albert fifty years earlier is disinterred. As everybody but Dan, who had uncovered it, leaves, he removes an envelope containing the letter Kenneth had written to his parents before killing himself and, as he does so, the figure of Kenneth, wearing his military uniform, appears, the lights change and we are back in 1959 as he writes the letter. His mother, Bev, joins him and Francine enters, the Francine who will later discover his body. Bev turns to Kenneth and, with an irony which reaches out beyond the moment, beyond the question of race relations, beyond

even what is about to happen and which she is powerless to prevent: 'I think things are about to change. I really do. I know it's been a hard couple of years for all of us, I know they have been, but I really believe things are about to change for the better. I firmly believe that' (115). They are indeed, but not for the better. Hers is a Panglossian view upheld even following her son's death and, in a sense, consonant with that of a country ever glimpsing the green light across the bay, pursuing happiness (the word happiness, incidentally, substituted by Thomas Jefferson for the word property but somehow always allied with it) and with a sense of the irrelevance of history to the national creed of advancement.

It is in some ways a play about the persistence of perceived difference, the seemingly ineradicable impulse to defend your own, no matter how that may be defined, race against race, religion against religion, nation state against nation state. It is about marking out territory, arbitrary but patrolled as if sanctioned. As Norris has said, 'It's going to happen 50 years from now. It's going to happen a hundred years from now. The details may change. It may be Hispanics versus Asian-Americans. It may be Hindus versus Muslims. We don't know, but the behaviour of humans tends to repeat itself,'²⁹ which, of course, is underlined by the way in which the second act mirrors the first, language, etiquette, social behaviour changing even as the instinct for suspicion and prejudice remains.

Beyond that, however, lie the divisions within the family or, indeed, the self (Hansberry had her own divisions not only being married to a white man but also being a lesbian). It is about language as denial and weapon, about human nature and its disturbing consistency, rationality's losing battle with emotion, what lies below a surface civility. What else motivates anyone, Norris asks, but an Ayn Rand-sanctioned selfishness, or, given his next play, Adam Smith-sanctioned, something no less true of liberals such as himself, even if the price to pay is guilt, which, after all, may have its own perverse pleasures?

At the same time, it is a funny play, much of the humour generated by the gulf between the characters, their lack of self-awareness, their desperate attempts to adjust their language to what they presume is socially acceptable. On the other hand, humour can itself be an agent of prejudice not always neutralized by a claimed irony. It can, in Norris's words, be disruptive.

Clybourne Park received overwhelmingly positive reviews on both sides of the Atlantic. In America it won both a Tony and the Pulitzer Prize while, in England, it won the Olivier Award for Best New Play. Reviewing the Woolly Mammoth Theatre production, Peter Marks commented on its humour finding it, 'one of [the] feistiest, funniest evenings in years.' It was a 'delectable comedy of inadvertent bad manners' one of whose strengths was his 'sophisticated take on the treacherousness of language.'³⁰ Reviewing the London transfer to the West End, in *The Telegraph*, Charles Spencer observed that,

I raved over Bruce Norris's drama about property and racial tensions in America when it opened at the Royal Court last summer . . . The good news is that *Clybourne Park* seems every bit as intelligent, funny and provocative on second viewing, and this welcome West End transfer proves a thrilling shot in the arm for London's commercial theatre. The first thing to be said is that the play is often outrageously funny as it tramples over politically correct pieties, revealing that racism is still a live issue in the States, even though most middle-class whites prefer to forget the fact. But the piece also has emotional depth.³¹

Norris followed it with something of a fantasy, a dark comedy about free will versus determinism, which opened at Steppenwolf in 2010. It was Benjamin Disraeli's Mr Beckendorf, in *Vivian Grey*, who remarked that, 'Man is not the creature of circumstances, circumstances are the creatures of men. We are free agents, and man is more powerful than matter.'³² The truth, or otherwise, of that, of course, would be aided were it possible to see the future or test the feasibility of taking different paths, a familiar trope of science fiction. Here, that is the central device of a play which, at its heart, has what may or may not be a figure from the future depending on whether what we see is real or the projection of a character suffering from delusions. There is, though, one central inevitability which structures human lives. We are born to die and spend our time in denial, looking to discover some meaning, no matter how slight, no matter how contingent, that can hint at an agency which seems refuted by the very terms of our existence. It is that inevitability, or, rather, the pathway to it, which is debated in the play by a woman who wishes to lay claim to her freedom, to be in control of her own destiny.

A Parallelogram has distant echoes of J.B. Priestley and Edward Albee in that it plays games with time, and, as in the latter's *Three Tall Women*, presents three stages of a woman's life using different actors. It begins with Bee, in her early thirties, a woman who is living with Jay, late forties, early fifties, who has abandoned his wife and children for her, only for her to suffer from what appears to be uterine cancer necessitating a hysterectomy and something altogether more serious.

In truth it is hard to see what really brings them together or what their future might be. She asks him how he would feel about his life if he knew there was nothing he could do to change it. It is not something that engages him. It is that question, though, which is in part answered when Bee is allowed a glimpse into that future with the aid of a device, wielded by Bee 2, Bee 3 and Bee 4, in their sixties and seventies, which puts her in touch with her future selves. While these do not resemble one another exactly, Norris explains in a note on the characters, they do dress similarly and grow alike as the play proceeds, even to the extent of mirroring one another's mannerisms. Are these, though, projections of a brain tumour she develops or genuine figures from the future, as Marley's ghost offers Scrooge glimpses of paths taken or to be taken, though Scrooge is granted an epiphany, the possibility of change, which here seems denied.

The play begins with strange electronic sounds, as the lights come on to reveal Bee 2 in a shabby sweatshirt, with thick glasses and a tote bag, smoking a cigarette. In her hand is what looks like a remote control. This is the device which, when pressed, can revisit and animate the past, fast forward, rewind, mute the action, a past which now reveals Bee and Jay in conversation even as Bee 2 remains there but unseen. Jay divides his time between watching sport on television and bemoaning the lot of men. When he leaves the room for a moment, though, Bee and Bee 2 speak to each other, Bee alone being able to see these older women though later she will assume other forms, other characters who are visible. Jay smells the cigarette Bee 2 had been smoking. Something, then, is detectable, passing through the membrane of time. Bee 2 brings news to her younger self that her fate is fixed, including the fact that she is going to take up smoking.

Convinced that change must be possible, that different decisions can be made, Bee is allowed to replay scenes in the hope that things will have a different outcome. It seems they will not, apparent changes swiftly corrected. When Jay cuts his foot on broken glass she is allowed to replay the scene so he can be warned. He treads on the glass just the same. This is the world of John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra*. The implication is disturbing, she desperately insisting

that, '*My life is not meaningless*. I am going to make a *difference*. A significant, tangible, *positive* –' She breaks off, interrupted and unable to see how she might bring this about more especially since Bee 2 gives her no grounds for optimism.

The news she brings is dispiriting. Bee is informed that she will one day look in the mirror and see a fat, near-sighted old woman, watching television and smoking. Beyond that, she is told not only that she will not be remembered, or those she had once loved, but that major events, such as the Holocaust or 9/11, will not either, since everyone is essentially only concerned with themselves, the past disappearing in the rear-view mirror. 'I know it's not a nice thing to say . . . but remember nine-eleven? I know it's not nice, but listen – fifteen, twenty years from now, you're gonna be downtown and you'll be on your way to lunch or the dry cleaners . . . and you'll go past that spot and you'll be like, oh yeah, there's that fountain where those planes ran into those buildings – But other than that you really won't think about it that much' (30). She has a further piece of depressing news. Most of humanity will be destroyed by a global plague, though, Bee 2, with calculated humour, suggests that at least parking will be easier.

There is a reason, then, for what appears an attempted suicide, Bee overwhelmed, it seems, by what strikes her as the futility of existence, exacerbated by the fact that Jay will, apparently, return to his former wife as she will establish a relationship with JJ, the man who mows their lawn, a relationship which, she is told, will end before he dies, falling off a ladder. Jay's former wife will also die, leaving him alone. For the most part, Bee 2 remarks, old age is horrible but at least passions and commitments now fade to the point that she will no longer 'give a shit'.

With a push of the button, Bee is in a hospital room. Bee 2 is now dressed as a doctor, renamed Bee 3 though still in possession of the time-shifting device, or perhaps it is only a pager since she challenges Bee's suggestion that she is a later version of herself. Is she, then, from the future or a projection caused by Bee's brain tumour, a glioblastoma, one of whose side-effects is a problem with vision, potentially seeing things that are not there? If the latter, Bee 2, 3 and 4 do not exist but the earlier smell of cigarette smoke had come from somewhere.

Increasingly desperate, Bee declares, 'Even if I can't change anything about the ultimate – I mean, yes, the world will still be a terrible, horrible place and our lives ultimately meaningless – but what if for, like, two *seconds* . . . If for one tiny little moment I make things *nicer*. . . even if it's a lie and totally fake and we're all just deluded and lying to ourselves, still – doesn't that count for *something*? At least we can *pretend* things will get better! What's wrong with that?'³³ Given the projected history of her decline and the prophesied cataclysm, a great deal, hence Norris's contempt for those who would make *Waiting for Godot* life affirming.

So, where the comedy, especially in a play in which nothing is secure, privately or publicly, in which suicide, disease and mass extinction are invoked? It lies in ironies exposed by juxtaposing hopes and realities, conversations, real or imagined, between a woman and her alternative selves, the moment-by-moment fun to be had from shifting back and forth as if life were a video, the future traveller offering comments on what has yet to occur.

It is often said of science fiction that ideas trump character and there were those who levelled this criticism at Norris. For all the decline and pain foretold, for individual and society alike, Bee lacks substance perhaps precisely because the ironies are generated not only by a sense of an individual in thrall to time but by juxtapositions carefully and knowingly contrived, though what, after all, had *Three Tall Women* been, both commenting on the dark humour of time's deprivations, human beings bio-engineered to die.

As *Variety*'s Steven Oxman remarked of the *Steppenwolf* production, 'This is a substantive, funny and even fitfully moving work about humanity's lack of substance, a meaningful play about meaninglessness.'³⁴ When it reached Second Stage in 2017, *The New York Times* was unimpressed but Sara Holdren, in *Vulture*, thought it had gained a new political relevance: 'For me, it's a play that springs directly from the ashes of November 9, 2016 [the election of President Trump]: How do we live when we feel powerless to bring about change, even in ourselves? What do we do when the system seems all-encompassing, unbeatable? If there is any hope to be found in Norris's unsparing send-up of our human attempts to give a shit — and then to do something, *anything* with our compassion — then it is a Pandora's box kind of hope, frail and perhaps doomed with the rest of our efforts.'³⁵ Indeed hope was the last item in Pandora's box. However, as Beckett well knew, hope was the very thing that would lead mankind to persist in a doomed search for coherence and purpose.

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* was published in a significant year – 1776. It was later praised by Thomas Jefferson, which is hardly surprising since Smith was an advocate of American independence. It argued that there should be no regulations on commerce and that division of labour would encourage the accumulation of capital which should be guarded against theft. He called for free trade and a market economy. He believed in saving to invest and regarded taxation of capital as counter-productive. He was a believer in self-interest.

There is a reason that he is the man who opens Norris's *The Low Road*, whose premiere was at the Royal Court Theatre in 2013, five years on from the financial collapse occasioned by the greed and hubris of American banks liberated from regulation by President Clinton and later George W. Bush (the right-wing Cato Institute, founded by the Koch Brothers in the spirit of Adam Smith, preferred the word mis-regulation to deregulation, blaming the lack of a genuinely free market and what it curiously described as a misplaced altruism).

Norris, who has called himself 'a big economic lefty' explained to Michael Schulman, in *The New Yorker*, that the inspiration for the play was 'the ascendance of Paul Ryan during the 2012 Presidential race [in which he was the Republican nominee for Vice President]. "I just kept having this nausea during that election . . . because that man with those cold, soulless blue eyes was articulating this horrifying vision—and there were people who were persuaded by it."³⁶

A play about the excesses of capitalism itself revels in excess with some fifty characters played by twenty actors, lasting three hours, part farce, part ribald comedy, spanning two centuries. It is a picaresque in that it follows the life of a patent rogue from humble beginnings, living on his wits, amoral, the anti-matter to the medieval romance, yet here with that same entitlement which defines those with power and money who determine the parameters of the world in which he exists.

It is a parody of a Henry Fielding novel, a Brechtian fable, a tainted morality play, a burlesque, a vaudevillian account of the unchanging values of a society presided over by those for whom life consists of the pursuit of profit, and of a human nature no less unyielding and implacable in seeking advantage over others. It delights in anachronisms not least because while language changes what it expresses does not. The devices of theatre are brazenly displayed less out of a desire not to deceive than as a reminder of the artifice of human interactions, of social roles which are presumed coeval with identity, sanctioned as authentic by implacable, if unexamined, social codes. Indeed, there is a moment when a play-within-a-play is performed, intended by those who stage it to dramatize the process of slavery, only for it to prove a travesty as those who promote it wish it to conform to their prejudices, perhaps an admission of the theatre's

incapacity really to effect change. Indeed, the play ends with an acknowledgement that the theatre itself is liable to be sustained by the very people whose money has derived from suspect profits.

Norris's Smith steps forward to deliver a lecture, calling for the house lights to dim. A sign reads: 'Professor of Moral Philosophy, University of Glasgow', but this Adam Smith is not time bound. In fact, he held that post from 1752 to 1764. Here, his references swing from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first. In describing the Mohegan people of Massachusetts (as a warrior duly appears, obligingly posing as thunder sounds and lightning flashes), he explains that their belief that a benevolent giant would bring peace and blessings to their grandchildren is the reverse of the truth as 'their descendants were to be placed in internment camps and, in subsequent generations, work in gambling casinos and sell discount cigarettes.'³⁷ A gunshot rings out and the Indian drops dead, a preface, as it turns out, to a narrative whose scenes Smith introduces, the story of a baby left at the door of a brothel with a note declaring him to be the son of George Washington, promising a reward if he is taken in and raised to the age of eighteen (the young Jim later cutting down an apple tree and then lying about it, one of many jokes in a play which blends farce with social commentary).

Mrs Trumpett, brothel owner, has the same groundless optimism as the Mohegan brave as we discover when his real father, in due course, arrives to tell him that far from being George Washington's son, he is the offspring of a Nantucket whore and her customer, a man who turns out to be not just a confidence trickster but a thief into which trade he intends to induct his previously abandoned son, not realizing that that son has already perfected his own craft as a swindler.

What follows is a series of scenes as the child grows, though, for one whose life is effectively staged by a professor of moral philosophy, not morally, a brothel not being conducive to ethical behaviour. He learns something from the callous behaviour of British troops whose attitude towards the whores is the same as that of the country they represent, taking what they want and giving nothing back, effectively thieves themselves. So, what is true on a personal level is equally true at the national level. This is self-interest in action, unregulated, with no care for others.

There is something of Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* about *The Low Road* as Jim eventually sets out into the world only to be stripped naked when the money he has stolen from the prostitutes is, in turn, stolen from him. He had told the prostitutes that he was investing their money, seemingly in tune with Adam Smith's precepts though actually a Ponzi scheme, and Bernie Madoff was arrested for just such a scheme two years before Norris's play, the same year as the economic collapse prompted by the corrupt practices of banks. Indeed, what links the characters is a series of thefts, each person concerned for their own advantage.

Smith himself even enters the story, a brief Hitchcockian appearance, temporarily lodging in the brothel while not indulging in its suspect pleasures, though perhaps because he missed the offer, his presence, however, giving Jim a chance to look at what he has been writing, a passage which comes from the second chapter of *The Wealth of Nations*: 'Every individual endeavours as much as he can to employ his capital in support of domestic industry. He neither intends to promote the public interest nor knows how much he is promoting it. He intends only his own gain' (21). Smith paraphrases his own work: 'if the fruits of a man's labour may be enjoyed without regard to consequence . . . once his prosperity is thus achieved, the rest of the damnable world can stick it up their fucking arsehole' (22). In this case, the domestic industry turns out to be slavery.

The Low Road is an ironic bildungsroman, innocence swiftly corrupted in a society in which everyone pursues his or her own advantage, each taking the low moral road, though with the sanction of a professor of moral philosophy whose views have become the bible of a country declaring the virtue of each man being self-made, self-sufficient, self-interested. It is a non-teleological farce, full of cut-and-paste ironies, with a tumble of characters, in which even those who appear to place the interest of others before their own are exposed as selective racists while Constance, the daughter of an apparent Christian philanthropist, declares that property is theft half a century and more before the French anarchist Proudhon (who had himself inveighed against slavery) declared as much, she, meanwhile, being a highwaywoman and hence adept at relieving people of their property. When she declares that 'Profit is the result of the unequal exchange of goods or services' (56) she is referencing Marx as influenced by Smith, while Jim prefers a Darwinian defence of advantage even though he seems to be about to lose his own as he falls into the hands of Hessian troops.

Smith closes the first act by inviting the audience to consult their souvenir programmes and spend the interval drinking and smoking, the latter, of course, outside the theatre. With the second act, we are in the present and at what appears to be the very expensive and exclusive World Economic Forum in Davos (though it is not identified as such), where the elite – politicians, film stars, journalists, representatives of think tanks, billionaires – gather to discuss entrepreneurship, the state of the world economy, the marketplace, while, on occasion, protesters gather in the snow to complain at the direction society is going. It begins with a panel discussion in which serious issues are debated, Adam Smith being invoked as a justification for international and national competition. An American, perhaps significantly named Dick, described by Norris, in a stage direction, as '*bumptious . . . think Mitt Romney*', recalls telling an inner-city child who wanted to know how she could make the world a better place that she should first help herself so that she would have the money to be able to help others, a principle, he explains, which justifies bankers otherwise accused of greed. Davos, incidentally, was where Robert Louis Stevenson finished *Treasure Island* in which, of course, its characters scabbled for gold. As Constance declares, 'There never was *justice* in this world . . . There was only ever *violence* and *gold*' (105).

The discussion is suddenly threatened, though, when a British delegate, Ed, objects to the fact that his fellow conferees seem to have learned nothing from the economic collapse and calls for more regulation. Having crashed the car once, he asks whether the same driver should be given the car keys again. Dick, however, has just published a book titled, *The High Road*, a book which looks back to the period of the first act and which celebrates America's gift to the world, economic *freedom*, except, of course, we have seen what that amounted to.

Control begins to slip away from the panel when they are asked how much property they own and Ed suggests that they should be discussing the failure of capitalism which, of course, is not what Davos is about and not what Adam Smith was about. Dick settles for a shrug: 'ya know what? Life's not fair,' to which Ed replies, 'But why *legislate* unfairness?' (93) calling for taxation which Dick dismisses as socialism. Slowly things disintegrate. Security is called as protesters swarm in. Finally, as everyone leaves, Smith walks in and we are back where we were at the end of the first act, Jim facing death at the hands of Hessian troops until detained as a hostage on the presumption that he really is the son of George Washington.

Jim and Blanke, a subversive slave he has purchased, are taken up by a wealthy philanthropist and Charlotte, his pampered daughter, Jim quickly fleecing him of money though the

philanthropist is himself a supporter of slavery and the profit it makes. How else, after all, could he support his charities? Placed on trial, Jim deploys an argument equally used by those who precipitated the twenty-first-century financial crisis: 'when that market does miscarry we do but magnify the fault if we would punish those of us most fit to set it right by freer exercise of his business . . . which only flourishes when untethered from burdensome regulation' (139). In 2017, President Trump proposed overhauling the Dodd-Frank legislation of 2010, with its restriction on financial institutions trading for their own benefit, his advisors being ex-Goldman Sachs bankers. Immediately bank shares rose.

A bribe secures Jim's release only for him to die, inexplicably, with a knife in his chest, leaving behind a child, the result of his assault on Constance, she dying after its delivery along with the rest of her fellow Christians and Jim's slave, Blanke, though not before a spaceship, complete with seven-feet tall aliens in the shape of bees, descends explaining, through a communicator, that mankind will be destroyed by global warming (the apocalypse invoked in *The Parallelogram*), a result of their own collective self-interest preventing any action which might have obviated it. When he dies, convinced that it must be possible to act, Adam Smith observes that he is buried in a grave which will one day be covered in asphalt as a parking space for a Taco Bell, a Pizza Hut and a Lady Footlocker.

Jim's son survives to be one of those who will vacuum up the world's riches disbursing 'a very *miniscule* fraction' to charity, even 'to the maintenance of this very theatre . . . I mean, you don't suppose these buildings are *free*, do you? . . . And who has that money? Not *artists*, certainly? Why, kings, have it, as they always have, as well as bankers and businessmen and thieves. For if you look *very* carefully, you're sure to find a thief or two in the family of every millionaire' (146–7).

Nor is Norris inclined to let the audience off the hook, not least because, as he has said, theatre is 'a luxury product generally consumed by the privileged',³⁸ predominantly white and inclined to embrace bourgeois attitudes. He takes pleasure, therefore, in discomforting them. Beyond that, he has insisted that, 'I don't think activism grows out of theatre, really. People don't go to theatres because they want to change the world – they go because they enjoy theatre. And if you want to change the world you don't think to yourself "I know how to do it! I'm going to write a play that rich people will see"'.³⁹ What, then, was the objective behind this play and others? What he wants to do, he has said, is to unnerve, disrupt, create doubt.

For Michael Billington, writing in *The Guardian*, 'It would be too simple to say Norris is offering a diatribe against capitalism: what he shows is how the US, for all its good intentions, has tended, when confronted by divergent paths, to take the low road of profitability rather than the high road of principle. But this does scant justice to a play that is rich, turbulent and satirical'.⁴⁰ *The New York Times* was less generous when it opened at the Public Theater in 2018, praising the exuberance, bustle and bawdiness of the first act but finding the second too unsubtle as if doubting the audience's capacity to draw conclusions of its own.

In June, 2009, Mark Sanford, Governor of South Carolina, went missing, telling his staff he was going hiking on the Appalachian Trail only to be discovered at Atlanta airport having flown back from an assignation with his Argentinian mistress (who, appropriately, had a degree in international relations), not the first extramarital affair he had conducted. At first his wife had stood by him.

He was far from the only politician confronted with evidence of adultery while in office. Indeed, the list is impressively long and of long standing, reaching back to Thomas Jefferson

and Alexander Hamilton and on, in 2008, to the less impressive John Edwards, presidential candidate, and Eliot Spitzer, Governor of New York who resigned when it was revealed that he had spent \$80,000 on prostitutes. Spitzer's wife, Silda, also stood by him as he made his public apology. Two years later, as noted earlier in relation to David Auburn's *Damage Control*, Representative Anthony Weiner distinguished himself by sending what were coyly described as sexually explicit photographs to several women. If there has been what can seem a tradition of sexual betrayal by public figures so there has of wives required (as in the case of President Clinton) to stand by their men until, as in the case of Weiner and Spitzer, the impulse to repeat the offence proves too much even for the most understanding mate to take. Both divorced their husbands. Norris has said of Weiner, 'He's a moron because he could have overcome his problem so easily by saying: "I'm an idiot. Everyone tell me what an idiot I am. Everything I did was boneheaded, and I humbly ask your forgiveness" . . . instead, he lied at first, and later basically said to people: you don't have the right to judge me.'⁴¹

It is hard not to feel a sense of *schadenfreude* when faced with those who have acquired wealth and position and then thrown them away seemingly having convinced themselves of their immunity, Donald Trump's frat boy conversation about his celebrity endowing him with rights to women's bodies being a case in point, though he had inexplicably acquired immunity. Perhaps they are like those who choose to climb a rock face without ropes delighting in the possibility of a fall, never so alive as when they flout what seems the inevitable. It is not tragedy which comes to mind so much as farce except that there remains some residual mystery. What really drives them? Does deceit run so deep that it is not only others who are fooled? Is there some predisposition which goes beyond the individual, something hardwired into the male psyche, the hunter never satisfied so long as there is prey? Or is it a certain dismay at the thought of domesticity as if that were a surrender of possibility, a settling for inevitability implying a life determined, a fate embraced, as if such unsubtle rebellions were a blow against destiny?

And what of the women? Are they hardwired for submission, eternal victims of betrayal? It seems not, at least in Norris's 2015 play, *Domesticated*, being practiced at their own betrayals and gifted with the same competitive urge, resistance fighters with tactics to deploy. Men and women, it seems, are destined to dance the same dance they have ever done, an Escher-like iteration, convinced that it is possible to break the logic not of their individual lives but of the species.

Norris began thinking about *Domesticated* during the Lewinsky scandal. It features a man for whom an honest apology seems impossible and begins, or nearly so, with him, a politician, Bill Pulver, standing at a podium, his wife, Judy, beside him, to announce his resignation following an encounter with a prostitute dressed as a schoolgirl who, following a struggle, or accident, had struck her head, falling into a coma. This is not, it turns out, his only foray into paying for sex, having spent an impressive \$74,000 (\$6,000 less than Eliot Spitzer), over a ten-year period, this man who, perhaps significantly, is a gynaecologist turned politician. It is not, though, that he feels his resignation necessary, regarding himself a victim.

If he has evidenced a certain male imperative, however, he has done so in a new context, surrounded by women not only disinclined to go along with a familiar narrative, involving a grudging apology followed by redemption, but – wife, daughters, female attorney, television host – seeking some kind of advantage. The wife, indeed, writes a book, some of the profits of which will go to a charity. Judy Pulver outlines the various stages someone in her position goes

through, beginning with the drinking stage and moving to the monologue stage, insisting, accurately as it turns out, that she will be doing most of the talking. Indeed, following Bill's public confession neither he nor his attorney's husband speak, even as their lives are laid out by the women around them, some of the play's humour coming from the fact that, while addressed, the men are not permitted to respond. When Bill does try to speak he is told 'You do not control the discourse in this house.'⁴²

Ahead, though Norris could not know it, lay the explosion of anger, and the resultant solidarity, in 2017–18, prompted by revelations of sexual exploitation by men in positions of power whose sense of entitlement had, as they assumed, left them immune, only to discover that power suddenly shifting. For Pulver, rich, privileged, seemingly powerful, things fall apart. He is surrounded by women (he being the only male in the cast, though there is a transgender figure in a bar), who come together in their determination to change the rules of the game though in doing so raise other questions as Judy finesses marital affront for career advantage. She is given primacy in the first act, even as their adopted daughter, thirteen-year-old Cassidy – Asian, asthmatic – presents a school report about the mating behaviour of animals, effectively a commentary on her father's approach as well as a frame for the play which begins with her delivering a slide show in her school uniform, natural enough until we learn of her father's predilection for prostitutes similarly dressed and, indeed, for his wife to dress in the same way for sex. Her lecture is on sexual dimorphism which, as she explains, is about the advantages and disadvantages conferred by gender in the animal world.

Norris has confessed to being obsessed with strange animal facts, adding that,

one of the things you notice when you're zoologically fixated is strange reproductive behaviour. So, when I knew I wanted to write a play about a relationship falling apart, I put it in the context of the animal kingdom. I thought since my interest in animals began in my childhood, it made sense for that to be our window, too . . . The fact that we try to draw any distinction at all strikes me as ridiculous. It's a weirdly arrogant position to take that we are a special animal that doesn't have habitual behaviors . . . We make war, we lie to each other, cheat, and have other really predictable behaviors . . . But people find it insulting and pessimistic to say humans have identifiable animal tendencies. It feels too deterministic to say we can't improve ourselves . . . I don't think there is such a thing as a better society handed down through the generation.⁴³

In that sense, *Domesticated* echoes the assumption behind his other plays. There is a constancy to human behaviour which makes a nonsense of the idea of moral progress. Technology changes. We gain ever greater control over our environment, can even prolong life, but the nature of that life remains the same and if that can generate humour it can also darken into an irony which stops short of tragedy because we suppress knowledge of our nature, the determinism against which we might otherwise rebel, the struggle being what lifts irony in the direction of the tragic.

It is not that Pulver's wife and daughters lack power, the advantages of wealth. They have a Mexican maid (who when, for the first time, they lose their money, has to teach them how to use the washer and dryer, along with the vacuum cleaner). Seventeen-year-old Casey, with a Feta cheese intolerance, moves in the world of cotillion balls even as she expresses contempt for those who value money herself wishing to help people by circulating a petition protesting

genital mutilation in Africa at the same time barely registering the fact that her father is sobbing. She is expelled from school for posting sexually explicit images of her fellow pupils on the school website in aid, she says, of charity, charity being a justification advanced by the privileged in the play even as they are not always sure what the charities might be supporting. Meanwhile, it emerges that Bobbie, a friend of Judy and who is defending Bill, had had a sexual encounter with him, sexual indiscretions and betrayals not entirely being restricted to men, Judy herself, we learn, having had an affair with a married man when young (as it happens her thesis advisor and Chairman of the Ethical Studies Department), followed by an abortion, the moral high ground in this group of people evidently not being very high.

The first act concludes as Cassidy announces its end to the audience before opening the second with a continuation of her increasingly inappropriate, if disturbingly relevant, high school report, this time describing the fact that within the matriarchal clan of the Spotted Hyena, the female is dominant, an animal in which the clitoris elongates to form a pseudo-phallus which is licked by others to signify submission, this being a natural segue to an act in which Bill is released to speak.

Eighteen months on, still in denial, he endeavours to justify himself, refusing to be silent, wear a hair shirt for all time as if, he tellingly remarks, he was a dog to be disciplined. Talking to a trans-sexual bartender, he explains that love is no more than a rationalization of sexual desire and marriage a trap set by women whose terms and conditions are 'the three R'S ... Restriction, Reproduction, and real Estate' (47). Men are required to fulfil their biological function and then become redundant, even as they must remain tied to a woman whose affections have transferred to the children he has conspired in creating. He is tempted to believe that promiscuity is a defining human characteristic as his wife is repelled by the idea that, for her husband, sexual gratification comes before anything else. They have a brutal meeting, crude and unforgiving. Sympathy is in short supply, even from strangers, until he seems at the epicentre of contempt, punched in the eye by a trans-sexual when he challenges her new identity. So, he spirals down, stripped even of temporary employment, self-destructive, last seen as he and Judy sit at opposite ends of a bench as their daughter is inducted into their old college and he sings, a redundant and seemingly futile attempt to retrieve a past no longer more than an irony.

Even so, cruelty is not restricted to him. As Norris has said, 'Too often we come away from these scandals with simplistic conclusions like men are bad, women are [expletive]. We demonize ourselves rather than asking if there's something species-related going on that we're really not interested in talking about.'⁴⁴ How far, he asks, and seems to answer, are we determined in our responses? Are we ever truly domesticated and if we were would that be at a price? In a sense he is replaying the tension at the heart of Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* as the individual looks to claim instinctive freedoms while society, civilization, requires the suppression of those instincts resulting in feelings of discontent. For Freud those instincts are immutable, in particular those relating to the desire for sex and the tendency to violence.

When Cassidy, briefly, resumes her high school report it is to describe a zombie worm (real enough) in which the male is microscopic in size, living out its existence within the female's genital sac, no more than a vestige of an earlier species and doomed one day to disappear altogether. Is this, then, to be the fate of men, at least as Bill would be inclined to see it, with no function beyond that imprinted on their DNA, an expression of hamartia, a tragic flaw which precipitates a chain of events ultimately irresistible in its logic except that there is no catharsis,

simply an error built into the system. Bill is a man of high standing brought low, less a tragic figure, though, than one following a process observable across time and species. Men and women, it seems, are simply domesticated examples of an underlying principle.

For Norris, the play extended far beyond capturing the shenanigans of hypocritical politicians. When it was staged at Lincoln Center, with characteristic directness, he said that it was aimed at 'Steve and Cynthia Moneybags, and everyone else who donates staircases to Lincoln Center,' who 'frequently want to see plays about artsy people or people without money, or want to see some representation of their socio-economic that is flattering or renders their concerns as psychologically profound ... But in my opinion, the external behaviors of that class vastly outweigh any external or psychological concerns of that class. Like politicians, their good public reputation is paramount to them, much more than they are willing to admit.'⁴⁵

It is hard not to feel something of Mamet's influence in Norris's predilection for provocative plays addressing race and male-female relations, the kind of plays designed to provoke arguments in audiences liable to divide along racial or gender fault lines. Beyond that, though, he invites a debate about the extent to which there is true freedom of action, the possibility of change. Despite the attempt to outlaw male sexual aggression, to call men to heel in 2018, the dog is likely to continue to have its day as men and women have different agendas, needs, clinging together and driven apart by forces which seem factored into them.

Sex equally lay at the heart of his next play, *The Qualms*, a title which suggests a sense of unease. This features four couples, swingers, who are into wife swapping, and picks up on one issue raised in *Domesticated*, the necessity or otherwise for monogamy. In explaining its origins, Norris referred to seeing a documentary called *Lifestyle* which featured explicit scenes in which couples of various ages and appearances indulged in free sex while discussing the weather and football scores. Emerging into the light, he felt that there must be something radically wrong with such people. A few years later, while teaching a playwriting course at Columbia, he encountered a young woman who made money on the side by signing up to Sugardaddy.com, a site which brought together rich, older men, and those prepared, in her case, to prostitute themselves for money. Again, he was taken aback by the fact that the student saw no problem. It was, after all, a consensual relationship. So why was he judging her? 'Why,' he asked himself, 'do we find it so hard to tolerate people who have different values and customs? Does the mere existence of difference erode our certainty and call into question the choices (or compromises) we've made in our own lives? ... this is why I think democracy ... very, very difficult. And I think the reasons have something to do with sex, and our sexually-driven competitiveness, competition being 'the curse that dooms our species.'⁴⁶

The Qualms, he has said, 'for me, is as much about class-competitiveness as it is about sex. A new couple – with obvious advantages – attempts to join a group with fewer advantages, and one of them winds up feeling left out. He feels outraged that somehow the advantages he enjoys every single day of his life aren't being respected on this one. And when that happens to us privileged people – like those of us who can afford to go to the theatre – we tend to get pissed off.' Are there, then, no principles at play? Frankly, he observes, 'I don't think we operate according to "principles," any more than do animals,' though 'I wish we did.'⁴⁷ While he could never be a part of these swingers, he confessed to admiring them in so far as, at least in principle, they reject the idea of competition, the possessiveness implied in monogamy, even as competition is in fact never far away. At the same time, in truth there is little attractive about

those gathered together to celebrate what they insist is their freedom. Their respective sexual histories are disturbing, their present behaviour alternately banal and devoid of feeling.

Chris and Kristy are new to a group of people whose 'lifestyle' involves occasional meetings for a meal and sex, the latter conducted in what is called the party room. They do, indeed, propose a belief in resisting possessiveness, as if this was a utopian community, except that they are all in search of something, including an intimacy hard to reconcile with this America suburban *La Ronde* (a play, incidentally, much admired by Freud).

The evening is presided over by Gary and Teri almost as if this were a children's party, with condoms in place of balloons, or a social club which requires dues to be paid on time – 'check the website' – along with warnings against the risk of spilling wine. Couples are only to be allowed twenty minutes for sex, thirty for threesomes, given these characters, it turns out, an over-generous allowance. If this is Sodom it is a suburban version. Chris is a hedge-fund manager, recently married to Kristy and already with a certain tension between them, she having recently had a secret meal with a former partner. Quite why he now decides they should join this group is not clear. He arrives clutching an expensive bottle of wine, not entirely sure what the etiquette of barbeque and carnality might be. Indeed, he is obviously nervous if titillated by what he assumes will ensue. As the play develops so he becomes ever more obstreperous, clearly out of place, angrily resisting approaches or declaring himself un-attracted by the woman who makes advances to him, as Norris has said, thereby digging his own grave, letting the air out of the balloon of an evening which was supposed to bring people, literally, together. His seems the voice of sceptical rationalism, as he refuses to join in, resisting their attempts to defend their behaviour as principled and philosophically justified.

Those who gather together come from different backgrounds. One woman, French speaking, comes from Martinique and seems a cut above the others. Another woman is fat, one man black and of ambiguous sexuality, another an ex-army man. There is a deal more talk than sex as the characters move from cocktail party chatter to debating a range of subjects, from pornography, homosexuality and democracy to the suggestion that American foreign policy might be connected with the national fear of sex, words not so much being foreplay as the thing itself. Indeed, as a result tempers begin to flare, energy not directed in one direction going in another. Nor is the talk always on an elevated level, Teri suggesting that conflict in the Middle East could be avoided if everyone had sex with each other, while confusing Palestinians with Pakistanis. In this case sex results in violence as Chris has a physical tussle with another man, as a consequence scattering the food which they have brought to the party. The play ends, though, with the characters, even Chris, coming together to share not sex but banana pudding, though the stage direction indicates that there are no smiles, there is no closure and no relief.

For Norris, beyond the competitive manoeuvring, the small change of vapid conversations, discussions which never plumb the depths their subjects might seem to require, bizarre though they are, there are worse aspects of human intercourse.

I think what happens in the play is that everyone tries to top each other continually with theoretical ideas, like freedom, bestiality ... "Why shouldn't I be able to engage in bestiality?" Polyamory versus monogamy. Are people instinctively competitive? Are men competitive? Are women competitive? ... then finally at the end of the play ... Teri begins talking about the irreducible complexity of every individual life ... I don't like to

give that much respect in general . . . yet as an antidote to all the bullshit that we say that gets us into trouble, the positioning and posturing that leads us into war, those kind of tiny individual experiences can sometimes be the balm, the olive branch . . . it's in the contemplation of our actual private, intimate experiences of life that we can't undertake the more brutal, or ideological, actions that continually fuck us up.⁴⁸

Ironically, though, the tiny individual experiences in *The Qualms* are not themselves without aggression and lead to an act of violence not vitiated by a momentary cease fire, a brief and inconclusive gesture of commonality.

Bruce Norris's plays are irremediably funny and irremediably serious, the two intertwined. He is not just a critic of America's Cheeryble cheeriness, offering a minority report on its bland assurances about its present actions and future possibilities. He is equally prone to offer a critique of those, like himself, whose liberalism seems to confer a badge of moral superiority in the face of those whose wealth and position give them an assurance of their rights to the spoils of a Darwinian battle. He distrusts those who believe themselves to have a grasp on the truth, even as he is uncertain how firm the ground on which he stands is. He is argumentative in person and in his drama, aware that he takes pleasure in disruption, tossing a grenade onto the stage. What he is not is prescriptive, dogmatic, celebrating the resistant spirit so that audiences are clear where virtue lies.

In *Downstate*,⁴⁹ which opened at Steppenwolf's Upstairs Theatre in September 2018, and the following March at London's National Theatre (being a co-commissioned work), he offered an unsettling debate centring on a group of convicted paedophiles living in a down-at-heel residence in downstate Illinois. It is physically, but also morally, claustrophobic as they are required to accept restrictions on their movements even as they are encysted in past actions whose reality they resist. At times they tolerate what Eugene O'Neill would see as their pipe dreams while at other moments they turn on one another. Outside, is a hostile world (the house is attacked from time to time), theirs being an unforgivable crime even as they tend to see themselves as victims of a legal and ethical system which fails to understand, or acknowledge, actions which are alternately a product of genetic predisposition or the consequence of what they wish to see as genuine emotions. For one his rape of a minor was 'a mistake'. For another assault was a gesture of love, a love supposedly returned by his victim, as it was for the ironically named Felix who had molested his own daughter.

The problem is that into this world steps a man, Andy, who, urged on by his wife, wishes to confront his abuser, insisting that, years on from the offence against him, the perpetrator should confess to the full truth of his assault. Affronted innocence, it seems, is to confront and challenge corruption. In a Mamet-like twist, however, the abuser, Fred, is now in his seventies, living on food stamps and confined to a wheelchair following a beating, while his accuser comes from a troubled family, misremembers a key moment in the assault, and is inclined to think that paedophiles should be killed if not killing themselves. Indeed there comes a moment in which he swings a baseball bat at one of the inhabitants, as it happens a black man presumably not unacquainted with being the victim of aggression.

In one sense it is clear who the victims are. In another it is more ambiguous. The men gathered here are pariahs to be defined forever by their crimes, but they are proscribed, contained, harassed and, in one case, driven to suicide. Should there be a time limit on past crimes? Should there be a limit on how long victims should hold onto their pain if, indeed, they

have a choice, to seek some kind of public confession in search of what tends to be referred to as closure but which may segue into revenge?

The ground, in *Downstate*, is constantly shifting. There is a camaraderie in this group of outcasts. They are capable of humour, as of petty jealousies. Yet the oxygen seems to have been sucked out of this disordered house, presided over by a probation officer, weary of her work, capable of sympathy for those she is required to police even as she is alert to the lies they tell themselves and her, to temptations they are required to suppress but which may still be latent.

Norris has explained the origins of the play, and it is worth quoting him at length in so far as he explains not only the impetus behind it but also the wider context.

I know a lot of people (myself included) who, over the course of their lives, have been in sexual situations of questionable wisdom. Some have been the ‘victims’ in these situations and others ‘perpetrators.’ And a few years ago, I started doing a lot of reading about the things paroled sex offenders increasingly face—registries, residency restrictions, neighborhood watches, self-appointed vigilante groups, etc. These are *post* incarceration punishments, that don’t exist for any other category of criminal. And I also started thinking about how having a common enemy—a universally despised class of criminal (namely the pedophile)—helps the rest of us feel more virtuous about ourselves. And because social media inflames every group response, we can now all anonymously call for their violent deaths, or endorse some gruesome form of retributive justice, often wildly incommensurate to the crime that’s been committed. I think we’re living through an era of ‘payback.’ The entire 2016 election was apparently one massive act of collective psychological revenge by one group against another, elevating a man pathologically obsessed with avenging himself against his perceived enemies. And—I want to be careful how I say this—even positive social movements like #MeToo run the risk of tipping over into vengeance as those of us on the left attempt to purge ourselves of any stain of ideological impurity. And I fear that what gets left out of the current national conversation is any mention of . . . forgiveness. We’d prefer to luxuriate in our righteous hatred for each other right now, in a way that feels cruel and grotesque and tribal. So, with all of that, the thought occurred to me—how do we tamp down our retaliatory, visceral responses to these people we so easily despise? After all, pedophiles have to go on with their lives somehow, somewhere, right? And, I thought, to simply observe them going about their lives, living with the consequences of what they’ve done . . . that would require a pretty radical amount of compassion on the part of an audience . . . I often tend to satirize a particular class of people—the privileged—that I often find despicable. And I thought, ‘well, who do I extend my *sympathy* to?’ And I thought, ‘well I extend it to anyone to whom the world would *deny* sympathy . . .’ Many among us would prefer that pedophiles be killed. That would be the simple answer—to say these people are sick. They’re monsters. Let’s get rid of them. But we can’t do that. So what if we said instead, these people are human beings, and they’re living in a bad situation of their own making. Now what do we do?⁵⁰

Norris’s characters tend to circle one another, subject to wilful and accidental misunderstandings, words sometimes deliberately opaque, even rendered in foreign languages, the music they perform to in a minor key. Some things change. Manners alter, characters

express a certain sensitivity when it comes to those whose experience differs from their own but human nature, as he stages it, is unyielding, some of the humour of his plays deriving from his characters' conviction that this is not so. A view of life as psychological, social, economic, political competition, advanced as a mantra, a national ideal, equally sinks its roots deep into a human tendency to prioritize the self, grant one interpretation of reality, one clan, one nation superior while all the time a clock is ticking towards a destiny wilfully kept out of mind. Jokes in his plays, especially in *Clybourne Park*, are funny but at the same time caustic, human instincts leading equally to alliances or their denial.

Norris is a man prone to attack the very audiences who attend his plays, privileged, financially secure, as he does those who make their tax-deductible contributions to the theatres in which they are staged, public charity itself liable to be a marker of success, the losers probably never wishing to spend a few hours of their lives in such a culturally exclusive environment.

But if his plays have a satirical edge does this not imply the possibility of transformation? Surely, he has to stand somewhere in order to get a purchase on the world he presents. There has to be some principle, some way of ordering existence, shaping behaviour, that is more desirable, more attainable than that which he presents? Why else write? But does a wolf seek to improve its prey by attacking it even though in the long term, in evolutionary terms, that may prove so? He is the scorpion who stings the frog who, against its better instincts, carries him across the river only to be stung because it is in the nature of a scorpion to sting. It is in Bruce Norris's nature likewise to sting the theatre which carries him, and those who, in attending, support him, while aware that there is an illogic to his action since what does that say about his self-imposed task. Even paradoxes, though, can stir the mind, humour emerge from and generate a new insight. His characters are not free. They exist within the world he creates. The debate which runs through his plays, though, is whether within the greater theatre which is human existence there is any room for manoeuvre, any deflection possible of a seeming inevitability given that it is a journey whose destination is fixed. Is change possible or do we end up in Samarra, after all?