Bigsby, Christopher. "Christopher Shinn." *Twenty-First-Century Dramatists*. London: Methuen Drama, 2020. 189–216. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350127579.ch-008>>.

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CHAPTER 8

CHRISTOPHER SHINN

Sexuality is too complex, too linked to social and economic structures, too enmeshed in our personal pains and traumas, to ever be a conflict-free area of human experience.

Christopher Shinn¹

We persist in refusing to come to terms with who we truly are, but at the same time there is a deep desire to know.

Christopher Shinn²

There is a sense in which all writing could be said to bear the impress of the author, as of the moment, even as the imagination may seek to transcend the lodestone of the self and the times. There are, though, writers for whom the self is not just a generator of stories but the ground on which they stand, their work a therapeutic gesture, a means of understanding as they travel back along the line of their own doubts and insecurities the better to discover themselves along the way. Sexuality – celebrated, threatened, staged as fragile epiphany, remorseless vulnerability – becomes a language read in translation, whose imprecisions, imperfectly rendered necessities, are to be dramatized as fact and metaphor, its particularities to be respected along with its confusions.

In 2012, Christopher Shinn learned that he was dying. He was suffering from Ewing sarcoma, a condition in which tumours form in and around bones and which usually affects the young, most often between the ages of ten and twenty. Shinn was thirty-seven. At the time, the five-year survival rate was 7 per cent. He underwent nineteen cycles of chemotherapy, along the way suffering a relapse. Despite radiation of his lung, tumours continued to appear, particularly on his foot. At the same time a personal relationship came to an end. He decided to write one final play to be called *An Opening in Time*, though another, *Against*, was discussed with Rupert Goold and Robert Icke who were now at London's Almeida Theatre and who flew out to see him, unaware of his condition, though his treatment had ended six months earlier in February, 2014. As a result of that treatment he had improved, without entirely missing the bullet, his leg below the knee being amputated. He was now declared free of the disease, though with no certainty that it would not reappear. He sent a first draft of *Against* to the Almeida in December 2015, though there was still a sense that he was living on borrowed time.

It is notable that the approach had come from a British theatre in that he had found a natural home there. His first three plays opened at the Royal Court Theatre and some half of his plays received their premieres in London. He has his own reasons for this, suggesting that productions are more expensive in America and that as a result tickets are also more costly. This, in turn, influences the age of audiences and the energy he felt from that audience. Britain also has a system of subsidies to a degree that America does not, the US favouring subscription seasons so that audiences enrol in a series of plays rather than choosing one in particular. He also appreciated the longer rehearsal period in England. Despite the fact that his 2008 play *Now*

or *Later*, a play concerned with an American presidential election, was a success at the Royal Court (the most successful he has had in London) it was not picked up in America for four years. He did, though, find venues in America – the Vineyard Theatre, Playwrights Horizons and the Goodman – and was happy with their productions; but, despite Hartford being his hometown, it was not until 2015 that one of his plays, *An Opening in Time*, was presented at the Hartford Stage. Speaking in 2017 he noted that he had not had a production in New York for ten years.

As to the importance of the Royal Court, he has said that,

The embrace I felt from the Royal Court Theatre was profound, and it influenced the course of my writing in a deep way. They did my first play, and when they passed on the commission I wrote for them, they produced another play of mine. They commissioned me again before the second play opened; the same thing happened with my next play. To receive commissions before critics chimed in made me feel so valued as an artist. It signalled that I could risk following my own path as a writer and not worry about creating work others would praise. The fifteen years I was embraced by the Court allowed me to become the artist I am today.³

Beyond that, speaking to Robert Icke, in the context of a production at Britain's Almeida Theatre, he has said that, 'if I were to be provocative, I would say for whatever reason, I think my psyche just aligns a bit more with the European psyche. I just feel that you guys are more aware of the world. I don't know if that's just proximity to other countries, or ... there's just a bit more social historical awareness than in America, which I just think fits the kind of work I am trying to do a bit more.' He was undeniably an American playwright, 'just because that's where I am from, that's where I live. I think about my country a lot, and I feel very American, but I feel I have certainly had better experiences [in London] ... So, even though I think of myself as very American, I feel like London is pretty much my artistic home, certainly where I feel comfortable ... where I do what I do. This is where it all seems to really make sense to me.'⁴ Dominic Cooke, who directed both *Now or Later*, at the Royal Court, and *Teddy Ferrara* at the Donmar, added to that the enthusiasm of British audiences for American plays.

In an interview with Clemency Burton-Hill, in the *Spectator*, Shinn confessed to being an admirer of British playwrights Caryl Churchill and Edward Bond, and of the 'integration of the social and the psychological [in English theatre] that we don't quite have, I think, in America, where the psychological is seen as separate from the social and the political.' Tennessee Williams, he suggested, 'was a political person, but he didn't write political plays ... Perhaps there's something repressed about the human experience, and any play that threatens to undo that repression is too scary to us as Americans? Or else, we just don't see ourselves as being shaped by the social and the political.'⁵ Of course, Williams did write political plays, including his 1938 *Not About Nightingales*, and he was acutely aware of the struggles of those left economically stranded and the victims of racism (*Orpheus Descending*). Nor was he the only American dramatist for whom the psychological is intimately connected to the social and political, Arthur Miller scarcely standing alone, though he did lament what seemed to him to be a national lack of historical awareness. So why the claim?

The social and political would certainly constitute one element of Shinn's own work, one which his comments are clearly designed to underscore, but, at the same time, it would be hard

to think of writers for whom their own lives, emotional states, anxieties, sexual concerns, were more immediately relevant to their plays. It is not so much that his dramas mirror his life in a strictly autobiographical way in terms of plot, though there are strong echoes, as that they reflect his personal psychology, private traumas finding correlatives in terms of his characters. Beyond the plays, he speaks with surprising candour about those linkages, acknowledging, as few other writers would, moments of despair, panic, feelings of isolation and even abandonment, seeing in them the root of his drama, acknowledging the self-doubts which sent him into regular therapy, a recourse equally of a number of the figures in his plays who struggle to understand themselves and the pressures which bear upon them. At times it can seem that he is monitoring his state of mind, along with that of his society. His experience of, and readings in, psychotherapy proved key to him both personally and in terms of his work. 'When I was in my mid-20s,' he explained, in an interview with Elizabeth Williamson,

my father died [of leukaemia] and I read Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, because I understood that I had denied the reality of death up to that point in my life. Becker referenced some psychoanalytic writers and that got me into that world. I was fascinated by analytic theory because the question of human motivation—especially hidden or disavowed motivation—was central to it. Motivation is central to drama as well. So immersing myself in this world was like learning a new vocabulary for the central questions of my world. [a] fellowship [from the American Psychoanalytic Association] allowed me to see these concepts and ideas about motivation in action, as analysts discussed their highly dramatic cases. What I suppose impressed me most was hearing about the depths of human suffering that remain more or less hidden in our society. The psychic agony we typically only see in tragic dramas plays out in therapists' offices every day. This gave me more confidence that I could represent the tragic areas of the human psyche in my playwriting work, and that audiences would be able to connect with these characters, see them not as unique outliers but as everyday people.⁶

Shinn seems to have a repertory company in his plays which consists of actors, or would-be actors, writers, or would-be writers, gay characters – in their teens, twenties or thirties – current or previous drug takers, some on anti-depressants or stimulants, in or out of therapy or Alcoholics Anonymous, often struggling to define themselves, conscious of internal and external tensions, unsure of how they relate to themselves or others. The plays themselves stage conflicts which are seldom resolved, simply embodied in characters who represent contending interpretations of experience and possibility. If he has a central concern it is with the nature of love in its various manifestations, with sexuality and an imminent violence, the impulse towards an empathy frequently resisted, intimacy sought and denied. He writes about privacies and a public world which bears on them. He is concerned to drill down into the psyche but also to reach out into a world which is both context and an extension of private tensions. After all, where else are the roots of violence if also of the need for reconciliation?

He was born in 1975, in Wethersfield, four miles south of Hartford, Connecticut, where Peter Carey chose to set his novel *Parrot and Olivier in America*, an improvisation on the life of Alexis de Tocqueville and which describes his romance with the daughter of the governor of Wethersfield prison, the last still a feature of Wethersfield. It was in this town that Shinn would set both *Four* and *An Opening in Time*. He has described his mother as having grown up

deprived of culture but introducing him to it. He would attend Hartford Stage, remembering seeing an O'Neill play there when he was ten. He both wrote and acted. His father, by contrast, an investment manager, came from an upper-middle-class family. Wethersfield was economically diverse and Shinn has described his exposure to that diversity: 'My father, who was not particularly sympathetic toward the poor, nonetheless had a great interest in the different neighborhoods of Hartford, and we'd often go for early morning weekend drives through the city's streets. Here I saw the most profound and unimaginable poverty – and only five minutes away from my middle-class town. This really excited my imagination: What was it like to be rich? What was it like to be poor? When I got to NYU, I met kids who clearly did not have exposure to different classes and I was astonished at their ignorance.'⁷

That sense of the politics of daily life would inform his later desire for a theatre that would engage with such issues. One of the reasons for what he felt was the relative absence of politics in contemporary American drama was that non-profit theatres relied on corporate funding and wealthy individuals so that 'liberal audiences and funders are deeply invested in the current structures that have allowed them to make and preserve their wealth, and it's unlikely that they are truly interested in seeing work that questions the ideological foundations that support their class status.' Beyond that, 'There's a sense among artists today that the world is the way it is and that's it.'⁸

It would not be difficult to come up with a list of American playwrights for whom this is not true. Indeed, the history of American playwrights, from O'Neill and Glaspell, through to Miller, Mamet, Shepard, Wilson, Kushner, Nottage, Wallace, would seem to prove the contrary as they severally engage in a debate with the assumptions and values of their society. At the same time, it was Kushner who confessed, 'I am vexed and challenged by the difficulties of representing political struggle on stage without embarrassing everyone.'⁹

Nonetheless, it does suggest one of Shinn's own motivations, even though he was not interested in political struggle in the same way as Kushner who had a clear ideological position. Likewise, his suggestion that, 'I hope my plays can be so emotionally truthful that they break through that impenetrable shell of narcissism that characterizes the contemporary American and deliver them over to the tragic core of their vulnerability,' does not rely on a suspect and un-argued assumption – is narcissism a function of contemporary Americans or, indeed, of Americans in general – to accept the thrust of plays which are in truth designed to disturb, expose, generate a sense of empathy. In the end, though his emphasis is on distinctive aspects of gay life, he insists on what Freud called the narcissism of small differences, that exaggeration of difference by those who otherwise share a common experience.

At school he encountered an African-American boy and for the first time had a sense of people being different from himself which was a key to something more immediately and personally relevant as 'this deep sadness started to emerge: I had these feelings and thoughts about being gay, yet no one else was gay, no one was out, no one talked about it.'¹⁰ He has spoken of feeling alienated from friends and family at that time and as a teenager turning to drink, driving while under the influence. This led to therapy which would be a key for him understanding both himself and his work. He would even recommend analysis to would-be playwrights when he went on to teach at the New School in Manhattan. As he has said, 'Art and psychoanalysis at their best offer us the possibility of knowledge, and confrontation too with our inability to fully know ourselves, and the dangers and temptations of believing we can.'¹¹ Asked why he wrote, he replied, to face one's pathologies, explaining that if he had not been a playwright he would have been a psychoanalyst treating disturbed children.

These were days, though, when growing up gay was difficult so that when he was seventeen and heard President Clinton refer to gays being scapegoated he felt in some way validated, but the sense of alienation and trauma would echo through his work. Nor was Wethersfield an entirely comfortable place to live. A gay man was murdered there, a fact which, he confessed, haunted his childhood. Also at seventeen, though, he saw a production of José Rivera's *Marisol*, set in the Bronx. This seemed, to him, to put the real world on stage in a way he had never seen before, even as it had a magical realism dimension to it. It included a scene on a subway and theatre's possibilities suddenly became apparent to him.

From public school in Wethersfield he went to the Greater Hartford Academy for the Arts and twice won a student playwriting competition. He was fifteen when he wrote his first play, though at that stage he found poetry more compelling. He then attended NYU, as an undergraduate majoring in the dramatic writing programme, one of his mentors being Tony Kushner whose *Angels in America* had given him the sense that it was possible, in the American theatre, to combine politics with the deeply personal. Indeed it was he who suggested the value of psychoanalysis (in 2013 Shinn was seeing a therapist five times a week). His time as an undergraduate was not relaxed, struggling, as he did, with the tensions of coming out and with relationships which proved to combine affection with betrayal. In 1995 he began a relationship which quickly fell apart as his partner succumbed to depression and anxiety, a condition from which, he realized, he also suffered. In February 1996 he wrote *Four* in a single week, the only play, he explained, he had written in his late adolescence, though he was, in fact, twenty-one, being born in May, 1975.

He graduated in 1997 and briefly attended Columbia University before completing an MFA in fiction writing, in his early twenties writing both poetry and fiction, being an admirer of Raymond Carver. He was, in fact, interested in all forms of writing, theatre simply being where he ended up, where he had success. It was the Royal Court's acceptance of *Four*, in the middle, he explained, of a first serious – if troubled – relationship, which determined his option for drama.

Attempts at placing it had come to nothing, though he sent copies to every major regional and non-profit theatre, eventually, as he explained to *American Theatre*,¹² flying to England, sending copies of his plays to major theatres, one arriving at the Royal Court along with a note saying that he thought his play better than two recent Court productions. To his surprise, he received a promise to produce *Four* the following year, when he was twenty-three. It was, he has said, the production responsible for his career. *Four*, he explained,

was written in the winter of 1996, in the midst of a troubled first love. I wrote *Other People* in 1998, while reeling over the end of this relationship. A year later, angry at a mentor, I began *What Didn't Happen*, which I wouldn't finish till late 2003. In the fall of 2000 I started *The Coming World*, but put it aside when my father became ill and I fell in love again. The relationship was brief; I wrote *Where Do We Live* in its aftermath. My father died in early 2003, and in the year following I reworked *The Coming World* into its present form. These plays were written to exact revenge and bring the dead back to life. They failed.¹³

Four reflects Shinn's experience as a teenager. As he has remarked,

It took place in the town in which I had grown up and focussed on a 16-year-old closeted boy. I had been a closeted 16-year-old and when I look at the play now, it feels like a cry

of loneliness that I had carried my entire life. All the characters are lonely and there is no one in the world they can truly share that loneliness with, though they attempt to do so in disturbed ways. This was the truth of my adolescence and it continued to be. It would be years before I could put all this into words.¹⁴

The play reflects the anxiety he felt as he grew up with an awareness not merely that he was different from those around him, but that he was unable to confront his true nature or reveal it to others. The question of identity is further complicated in the play by the racial background of characters negotiating their place in the world. Struggling to understand others goes hand in hand with trying to understand themselves.

It is set on the Fourth of July in Hartford. At its heart is a sixteen-year-old, June, a would-be actor, named for the month he was supposed to be born. He is gay but has told no one except Joe, a forty-year-old black man, a professor of literature he had met on the web and now meets in person for the first time. They share little beyond their sexuality. June admits 'I don't really like America,' feeling that it has 'done a lot of bad things.' He is alienated by the political system and the jingoism which means that 'America always has to be the best,'¹⁵ while Joe professes to love everything about the country; 'Movies. Fast food. Cars. Freedom' (11). They drive, Joe insisting that driving 'has got to be the most American thing there is' (7). Together, they visit a movie theatre.

These scenes intercut and overlap with those which feature sixteen-year-old Abigayle, black, middle class, looking after her mother while her father, Joe, is ostensibly at a conference in Boston while in fact busy picking up June, a boy of her own age. Abigayle, too, bored with living in a place where nothing happens, goes for a ride, in her case with Dexter, half Puerto Rican, half white, a basketball player and seemingly not too bright. His parents had broken up when he was young, his father leaving home, though he keeps a photograph to remind him of when things were different. He smoked his first reefer at seven and had sex with a girl of thirteen. They drive around apparently as aimlessly as Joe and June, even though Joe clearly has an agenda of his own, taking June's hand and placing it on his crotch. June is confused, until this point concealing his own sexuality while accusing a one-time friend of being gay.

The characters are at times permitted a sudden articulacy, even lyricism, as they tell stories, charge the banal with a certain grace. Even Dexter, aware that he lacks Abigayle's fluency and intelligence, is capable of rhapsodizing over the Fourth of July fireworks in that they bring people of all backgrounds together in a momentary state of wonder, his demotic bluntness segueing into something more transcendent: 'I love the fireworks. In the sky like that. That's unreal . . . Everybody standing there, all these people . . . I know you say that there be, like, drunk people and kids running around being assholes, and niggers with guns and Latin Kings with knives and white boys with baseball bats and shit, but once the shit starts, you know, *everybody* stops. *Everybody* looks up at the sky. And is like . . . you know? Everybody's looking up there' (33). Language runs out on him but there is a sense that for a moment he sees a connection between those who, linguistically and socially, he thinks of as existing in another world.

His confidence in himself, though, is fragile. Until now he has been known to all. He played basketball. He was written about in the newspaper. Yet something is adrift. He may not pray but believes in God even though the God he believes in is failing him in some respect: 'I'm always

thinking, God, God, God, man, God, brother, help me out. God, man, what you doin,' God, man, look at me, you know, I mean. . .' (34). Once again language fails him.

The action switches to Joe and June in a motel, a place, Joe remarks, so anonymous that 'you can reinvent yourself. Or *become* yourself,' (35) this being what the characters are all doing. June submits to Joe, and not unwillingly, as on another bed, on the other side of the stage, Abigayle and Dexter also have sex, in the subsequent scene the action switching between the couples, both now once again driving.

It is Joe who breaks into unexplained tears while June is no more sure of who he is than he was before, resisting the idea that anyone knows what it is that he wants, especially Joe. The two part where they had met, Joe giving him a pack of condoms and what turns out to be a sparkler, some way short of the fireworks which had enthralled Dexter.

Abigayle returns home to a house empty of all but her mother, unseen throughout, a woman who is sick and craves only love while her husband, unbeknown to her, is having sex with a sixteen-year-old boy. Abigayle cries, picking up the phone, to speak to whom is unclear. Meanwhile, June lights his sparkler looking up at the sky as fireworks explode, fireworks seen, too, by Dexter 'his eyes fixed on the silent sky. It spins and swells with color . . . The fireworks continue their garish, gorgeous assault' (50). The characters are all left alone, having experienced no more than momentary contact yet having glimpsed something which might lead them out of themselves.

The words garish and gorgeous stand as perimeter markers of lives which potentially contain both. They speak of God as if there might be a meaning which eludes them. There is an Andrew Wyeth quality about them in their solitudes, a touch of Edward Hopper as these characters share the same frame but little else even as there are moments when they are capable of a strained lyricism, a sense of something beyond themselves. They feel an urge to connect but physical connection leaves something unconsummated. A distant sky lights up though whether as promise or symbol of a cold continuity is unclear.

The two sixteen year olds are unformed, alienated from their surroundings and themselves, trembling on the brink of something, wanting to escape but unsure how to do so or what it is they seek. Betrayal is in the air. Meanwhile, the mother's world has shrunk to a single room, a Beckettian figure, an image of the isolation the next generation fear, a hint of their possible future.

There is a hollowness at the heart of these characters, unsure of what they want, the direction in which they wish to travel. Their conversations skirt around needs which never quite come into focus, sex not an answer in itself even as they hope that it may unlock meaning. Indeed their moments of physical contact are empty of content, touched with desperation. Beyond them, the splash of colour in the sky seems to offer a moment of respite except that June ends holding a solitary sparkler, doomed to splutter and fade, while Abigayle grasps a telephone through which she may or may not connect to someone else. Meanwhile, she is trapped in a house with a demanding mother, her father having seduced a minor in a motel room, a man who himself is locked in desires which lead him nowhere but to online searches for encounters with neither past nor future.

For Charles Isherwood, writing for *Variety*, and reviewing the 2001 production at the 74-seat TriBeCa Playhouse, *Four* 'justifies the positive buzz surrounding his talent,' Shinn having 'a delicate ear for the disparate voices of the play's quartet of characters who share an aching loneliness that manifests itself in ways impulsive and determined' finding the overall sympathy

and subtlety of his writing 'memorable'.¹⁶ Reviewing the same production, Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, welcomed a 'smart, broken hearted new play' which staged 'the desolation in desire,' a work which 'throbs with an adolescent anguish and self-consciousness ... tempered by a sober, precocious empathy that can embrace a varied scope of humanity without turning characters into types.' Shinn, he declared 'promises to be a playwright to be reckoned with'.¹⁷

In 2000, his second play, *Other People*, opened at the Royal Court, though its run only lasted two weeks at the 90-seat Theatre Upstairs. Later that same year it was presented by Playwrights Horizons' New Theater Wing in New York. As he has explained, 'I was really hurting then ... I wanted to examine my loneliness, which I felt was determined not only by capitalism, not only by the shallow alternative culture that rebelled against it, but by my own conflicting desires as well. I was interested in finding an internal solution to my unhappiness, alongside investigation of forces outside of myself.' At the time he had been, 'a wreck ... writing just to survive psychically'.¹⁸

At its heart are characters as deracinated as those in *Four*, insecure, fragile. Theirs are temporary existences as they wait for an epiphany that never comes, living with failure or, in one case, a success which fails to address an essential despair. Gestures of contact tend to be rejected, needs never defined clearly enough to be realized. Sex is self-reflexive, masturbation a fact and image in that these are people obsessed with their own physical and emotional states, seeking but fearing a love which evades them. At moments they offer mutual support but are so trapped in their own necessities as to fail in the empathy they affect to offer and whose centrality they nonetheless sense. Their conversations are laced with the jargon of psychotherapy or New Age diets, mind and body to be protected, theories of existence embraced as a way of making sense of what disturbs them. They all carry wounds of one kind or another, are aware of the threat of dissolution. Anxiety, guilt, vulnerability define them, even as it is these that they flee.

Set in New York City's West Village around the Christmas and New Year of 1997, it features six characters. Stephen is gay, an actor and would-be playwright, like Shinn from Connecticut, who gets by writing movie reviews for an online magazine, a job he is barely hanging onto having previously been a bar tender. Together with Petra (a woman just returned from Japan where she was a stripper), both in their mid-twenties, they await the arrival of Mark, Stephen's former lover, back from rehab having found God, though Stephen insists, 'we were never really in love, we were in need ... something passed *between* us, and it was *genuine*'.¹⁹ He is, as Petra observes, nervous, spilling words out, editing himself as he proceeds.

When they are joined in a restaurant by Mark he becomes even more loquacious. Language is evidently his way of holding anxiety at bay, even as it also leads to self-revelation. He is, he confesses, 'beginning to really *figure* out my patterns ... just, *pathological* sex and this really degraded self-loathing "love" instinct I mean not-love but – but – I'm lonely, you know ... I'm kind of hating my life still' (57). He is plainly not figuring out anything which is why he is in therapy.

The men (they are joined by Darren, who Stephen had met in a café) are all writers, though Mark, a former crack addict, differs in that he has written a film script and has money, though his new-found faith seems to be what matters to him having had what Stephen characterizes as his Marianne Williamson moment, she being a spiritual teacher and founder of a meals-on-wheels programme for those suffering from AIDS.

For her part, Petra, makes her money from working at a strip club even as she tells a client, a teacher, of her disgust at being propositioned at the age of eighteen by her professor, a National Book Award winner, leaving her stunned, unable, she explains, to move. She had dropped out of her undergraduate degree after eighteen months. The client, called simply Man, claims, untruthfully it turns out, to suffer from herpes and hence has to avoid sex. He comes to this club, he explains, because 'it is so distant from my life. That is why I go to movies, and plays,' (80) that last, of course, not without relevance to a play whose characters are likely to be distant from the lives of Shinn's audience.

Mark, meanwhile, invites Tan, an eighteen-year-old male hustler and dealer (though also a student of acting at NYU), back to the apartment where he is guest of Stephen and Petra, an act of kindness misconstrued, or perhaps not since he later joins him in a hotel first watching as he masturbates and then having sex with him as they take drugs, his new spirituality evidently no protection. The second act begins in an apartment with Stephen now joined by Darren because, he declares, 'I've just been feeling such a need to *connect*' (83). Darren has sold a meretricious screenplay, a romantic comedy, with a deal to co-produce the soundtrack, for three hundred thousand dollars, and is about to fly out to Hollywood. This, though, seems beside the point as he puts on a pornographic tape and makes an advance to Stephen. This is a play in which the characters do not so much make contact as use one another.

In the third act it is Petra who confesses that, 'I'm in pain because I am not loved' and who offers a central proposition of the play and, surely, Shinn's defence of his own work: 'I'll tell you exactly what people want: love. As stupid as that sounds.' In talking to Man, she describes a video of a mother abusing her baby which, when a nurse comes to rescue it, clings to that mother,

So whatever you want to call it . . . the baby wants – love – so the love is inappropriate, so what, it's what the baby knows . . . I'm in pain because I am not loved . . . the promise of love is so fleeting and inconsistent so to get noticed – people do – what they do is – just like you cheated on your wife, you see it in art too, the terror of not being loved, safe art, meaningless art, pandering art, commercial art, titillating art, outrageous art, can we sell it, can I sell myself, will I be rewarded with money, with prestige, with recognition – all those things which are perversions of love . . . If there were more love to go around. And more consciousness and less fear. People might make beautiful things . . . Art can never be better than the person who made it . . . You can't love yourself . . . Reality exists when the other person walks into the room. Life is other people. (112–13)

For Sartre, in *No Exit*, as Man reminds her, hell was other people but so, she replies, is heaven. Is this a sentimentality? Can Shinn himself not be accused of titillating, outrageous art, in terms of its sexual directness (there is nudity in the play) and there is, after all, a narcissism to his characters. The other people who walk into their lives remain strangers, except that Petra does seem to forge a relationship though surely not one based on love, at least on her part. Her new partner is in search simply of companionship which falls short of addressing a need which goes beyond that. She decides to leave, while having no particular destination in mind.

The play ends, as does the year, with Petra in her room, reading, and Stephen, alone, motionless, with his eyes closed. As with *Four*, nothing is resolved. He now has a grant to enable him to write, though we have learned nothing which suggests whether he has the talent to do

so. Mark has abandoned God for contact with another human being, though the relationship is fragile, his convictions compromised. Man has found and lost the woman he had hoped would offer him consolation. Petra is about to step into an unknown world, her career as a stripper probably at an end but still in search of an elusive love.

Is it true, incidentally, that art can never be better than the person who made it? Hardly, though in 2017 a number of actors, directors, producers lost their jobs when accused of sexual harassment and worse, their work retrospectively regarded as suspect, productions abandoned, one film reshot to exclude the accused man. But what of Caravaggio, a murderer, Wagner, Degas, Pound, all anti-Semitic, the adulterous Janáček, the incestuous Byron, Flaubert and his rent boys, Pirandello who had his Nobel Prize medallion melted down to contribute to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia? What of civil libertarian Arthur Koestler revealed as a rapist, the incestuous Eric Gill whose sculptures are in Westminster Abbey? The list is a considerable one and, in the end, surely beside the point. The works survive in their own right. There is, perhaps, a yearning, on Petra's part, for a world which survives the accommodations she has made, for a moral clarity she has hitherto found lacking, but the world does not oblige, moral clarity being as hard to achieve as the love she restlessly seeks.

Shinn followed this with another brief play dealing with the limitations of love, with characters living lives of quiet desperation on the margin of society and spinning stories with the power to deceive themselves as much as others. *The Coming World*, which opened at the Soho Theatre in London, in 2001, was concerned, he explained, with 'three souls on a beach in a working-class American town attempting to deal with an ineffable pain.' It features twin brothers, one 'an introvert who has rejected the hypocrisy of his community by withdrawing deep into himself,' while the other 'is an extrovert who tries to exploit the empty and cynical culture he's in, to wring as much pleasure and power out of it as he can.' A third character, Dora, 'has a hand in both worlds, aware of an inner life that promises access to deeper truths but also an unbearable isolation. The play is about her struggle to make up her mind about which world to live in, the inner world or the outer one. The choice she makes is the one I was still making then: the choice not to make a choice, the choice not to look more deeply.'²⁰

Ed, with a history of drug taking and gambling, has managed to accumulate a debt to a local gangster and is trapped by his own naivety and addictions. To pay that debt he raids Dora's video store injuring her face in the process before committing suicide. Ed's twin brother, played by the same actor, is a computer programmer who has tattooed his own body. He and Dora – on pharmaceutical drugs and in therapy – are drawn together briefly in a play which moves around in time, audiences invited to fill in the spaces, too many spaces in that it remains gnomic, more a sketch for a play than the thing itself. Here, as in all his work, though, he has a talent for mastering the disjunctions, the digressions of everyday speech, so many monologues giving way to moments of communication, a dialogue in which private concerns fluctuate with a desire to connect, solitariness seeking a mutuality in which his characters are seldom willing to place their trust for more than a moment.

In what was a rush of productions, *Where Do We Live* followed at the Royal Court in May, 2002, its American premiere coming two years later at the Vineyard Theatre in New York. Explaining why he wrote it he said, 'In the fall of 2001, my father was dying, I had been through a devastating break-up ... and instead of dealing with my pain, I tried to escape it by being very social ... Everyone – myself included – seemed so terrified and disdainful of feelings, in

themselves and in art. Then 9/11 happened.²¹ The effect was for him to stay in his room, isolate himself and write.

The play was a response to 9/11, set before and after the attack, a before narcissistic, socially divided, lacking transcendence, and an after in which nothing is really resolved, divisions persisting. It opens on 9 August 2001, in a bar as businessmen check stock prices. George W. Bush has been elected, the stock market is rising, money not only a currency but a language, a unit of human exchange. The dialogue intercuts between them and Stephen, a man in his late twenties, who tells the story of a neighbour, Timothy, whose wife has disappeared while he himself has had a leg amputated at the knee (somewhat ironically, or even spookily, since Shinn will later suffer a similar amputation). He helps Timothy even though it seems to have made his lover/partner, Tyler, an actor, jealous. Selflessness seems aberrant, attracting suspicion. A thought occurs to him, 'It made me think about empathy ... How it comes to be. On an individual level, a societal level ... how you imagine other people, their lives,'²² 'other people', of course echoing his earlier play and Stephen is a writer for whom this is more than a philosophical question, as it is for Shinn.

Back in his apartment building a young black man, Shed, deals drugs wary of a white man such as Stephen informing on him, even as he himself wishes to get out of the drug trade. Lily, British from Chorleywood (20 miles northwest of London), which she describes as 'fucking crap,' girlfriend to his white supplier, seems vacuous reading stories about movie stars, bored, taking pity on Timothy whose lack of sexual contact with anyone she remedies by a casual act of masturbation as if she were doing no more than beat an egg, and there is a question of how far Shinn, with a concern for empathy, settles for a caricature, his gay characters granted a depth denied to Lily who is, it appears, no more than she seems. Shed, meanwhile, contemptuous of his father, enjoys the homophobic lyrics of a CD which blasts from a player.

In a gay club Stephen meets Leo, an Asian man who is taking American studies at graduate school, specializing in queer representation, but who feels out of place and out of tune with those who speak of gay oppression. 'How can you even believe in homophobia,' he asks, 'Gay people are supposed to be oppressed but come on ... I believe ... that Iraqis are oppressed and whole continents are oppressed in brutal ways – but *this*? ... And why would anyone here want to believe they're oppressed? It's not a pleasant way to exist' (247–8). Amidst the gossip and chatter of a room in which men are popping pills it seems a serious question, one taken up when Stephen and Tyler return to their apartment where they have been reading Eric Hobsbawm's comments on Rwanda and on the fact that society survives by changing, that the present is not the point of arrival. Tyler, on a trust fund, seems to lack the empathy of Stephen, a man with personal, social and political sensitivities.

Mediating between Stephen's passionate political views and those of others is Patricia, a young woman who insists that while he deals with his trauma 'by identifying with the pain of others, trying to understand it, in order to solve it,' (265) others' personal history differs, and that he should tolerate 'a certain amount of narcissism ... make room for just – who people are,' or look for who 'someone might be instead of who they are.' (266) Tyler, after all, the son of an alcoholic, had tried to kill himself, the personal taking precedence over the public while Dave, a white drug dealer in his late teens, is one of those who believes that 'Things don't change ... Nothing changes' (270).

In a debate over welfare, a gay man celebrates the passage of a bill restricting it, saying that his father had worked two jobs and he himself had never claimed, insisting that you 'can't

expect the world to give you things. . . No one ever gave me anything,' while Stephen asks, 'as a gay man . . . can't you identify with other groups' (283).

Things do, though, change, or perhaps only seem to, as the action moves to 27 September 2001. Shed has now stepped aside from dealing to work in a hotel only to be laid off because of 9/11, his father observing 'it's not your fault – it's just the world.' Fighter jets fly overhead. People wear face masks. With war in Afghanistan only just over a week away, Stephen contemplates a country in which people are disconnected 'from their leaders – and disconnected from each other – all these various groups occupying the same space' without being able to find common ground: 'how fractured and isolated they are – like New York, too, in some ways.' (302) In many respects, this is a key to a play in which characters do, indeed, occupy the same space while remaining separate from one another, negotiating, among other things, the degree to which they are defined by their past, their social context, their sexuality. Stephen's liberalism coexists with the conservatism of the businessmen who end the play, or almost so, chanting 'USA' and calling for the Afghans to be bombed into the Dark Ages, as the Bush administration threatened to do to Pakistan if it failed to cooperate in that war. The final words go to Stephen as he raises a glass to 'where we live' and Patricia replies, 'Cheers,' (308) an ironic and deliberately inconclusive ending, Shinn seldom nailing his colours too firmly to the mast.

We never see Stephen's liberal principles transfer into action, beyond giving the occasional cigarette and ten dollars to his crippled neighbour. He is happy to argue his case, even at the cost of personal relationships, but there is no sign that he will be socially committed, demonstrate, actively challenge the system or the power which gives it force. No one's opinion changes, indeed there is no sign that 9/11 will bring about anything but a desire for revenge, a consolidation of existing attitudes. Drink, drugs, sex, are not just the accompaniment to life. Designed to intensify experience, they serve to insulate from a reality which disappoints, oppresses, separates individuals and groups from one another.

There is another division, though, and one reflected in his other work, namely a concern with the gulf which exists, particularly in gay relationships, between love and sex. This is, perhaps, his justification for the repeated, and explicit, sometimes overly explicit, sexual acts which are laced through his work. As Patricia observes, 'I always wondered why gay men had all these friends in the way they do. It's so clear. It's so they can separate their sexual and emotional needs, because they're frightened to combine them. Boyfriends who don't have sex, sex without having to have a boyfriend' (28).

The play is called *Where Do We Live* and though it lacks a question mark one is clearly implied. Do we inhabit a self, impermeable to the needs of others, in a society which can seem likewise? Are emotional, sexual, metaphysical needs ever in alignment? How much autonomy do we have, individually or collectively, in that we are to a degree the products of contingency? On one side of an apartment building are two gay men whose relationship shatters because they see the world differently, make different demands, while on the other side is a man damaged in a traffic accident along with his son unsure of who he is or wishes to be. Elsewhere in the city are men who have suffered the loss of colleagues in the ash and detritus of the fallen towers and who see the world in Manichean terms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this early in his career, Shinn was still being praised as a new talent. In the *British Theatre Guide*, Philip Fisher, commenting on the Royal Court production, observed that, '*Where Do We Live* creates more of an impressionist sketch of New York as seen by a gay thinker than a full-scale portrait but it confirms Shinn's great promise.'²³ Responding

to the American premiere, at the Vineyard Theatre, Off Broadway, in 2004, Charles Isherwood, greeted 'an exceptionally fine new play' with 'its subtle, perceptive, admirably economical writing,' praising the way which it 'captures, as no playwright yet has, the strange, terrible continuity of those days in New York — how, for most people, little really changed, even as we were being told that everything had.'²⁴ At the same time he regretted that it had taken it two years to cross the Atlantic.

Shinn followed *Where Do We Live* with *On the Mountain*, produced by South Coast Repertory, in Costa Mesa, California, in January, 2005. To a degree an updated version of Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*, in which a young biographer in search of a collection of love letters by his poet subject visits and infiltrates himself into the life of the woman who was their recipient. In Shinn's case it is not letters which are at issue but the recording of a song and the subject not a poet but a musician. Besides Henry James, the inspiration came from the case of Kurt Cobain who on his suicide had left behind a song originally titled 'On the Mountain' but which was subsequently, after much contention, released as 'You Know You're Right'.

In Shinn's play, the singer is Jason, also a suicide, while the woman, a recovering alcoholic, is called Sarah, and the man who, unbeknown to her, is trying to locate the missing disc, is Carrick. What he is looking for is concealed behind a photograph of Sarah's daughter, Jaime, a depressive and would-be writer of sixteen, in fact the product of her mother's one-night stand with a musician who had moved on. This is also a figure, gender aside, based squarely on Shinn himself. While Sarah is following a 12-step programme with Alcoholics Anonymous, Jaime is in therapy, her friend's father being an unemployed violent drunk while a school friend spends time watching people having sex in cars, which perhaps explains the therapy.

By the time Sarah finally reveals the disc to Carrick, however, he has, at least ostensibly, fallen for her and confesses his motives for searching her out. The two make love as Jaime discovers the disc and plays it. Later, though, unbeknown to Sarah, Carrick steals the disc and leaves. Jaime, however, had recorded it and the play ends as Sarah moves in time to the music.

Beyond the Jamesian parallel, with its issues of personal morality, it is a play which picks up issues from *Where Do We Live* as Sarah declares, 'you have to create your own world . . . you get sober, you stop hanging out with bad friends — you do whatever you have to do, because if it's just a shitty world and there's nothing you can do, then I can just go drink and anyone can do whatever they want because it's a shitty world, and no one has to look after their own actions . . . I listened to the shrink who put [Jaime] on Prozac, I listened to the social worker who said take her out of school . . . unfortunately you have to live in the real world' (238). As to her one-time lover, while Carrick praises him as an amazing artist, she insists he was an addict, a liar and a fraud who wrote music to become rich so that he could get high. Even art, it seems, can be compromised by its creator, an echo of the issue raised in *Other People*.

Charles Isherwood, now writing for *The New York Times*, was still referring to him as an up-and-coming playwright of exceptional talent, though while finding his writing 'impeccably true to the jagged rhythms and syntactical aberrations of real speech,' thought that 'the prosaic exchanges in "On the Mountain" never suggest deeper spiritual crises glimpsed through the minutiae of daily living.'²⁵

His next play was both deeply personal and politically engaged. It was personal in that it partly emerged from a period in psychoanalysis during which he had discovered destructive feelings in himself, a level of violence which surprised him. For this reason, *Dying City* is set in

an apartment like his own, looking out on the same skyline he saw every day, while the three characters it features contain aspects of himself. It was politically engaged in that it was also a response to the Iraq war. He had himself demonstrated against it, having no faith in George W. Bush, while nonetheless feeling that in some degree it was justifiable, a defence of human rights, a resistance to oppression, a division reflected in the play as brothers are played by the same actor externalizing the argument which Shinn had with himself.

It was not, he confessed, an easy play to write. Indeed, never someone to understate when it comes to describing his own state of mind or sensibility, he has said that, 'Writing it was an agony. I don't exaggerate when I say that at times I thought it would kill me. My hair changed color while I was working on it and there were whole weeks when my heart rate remained so elevated that I thought about going to the emergency room.'²⁶

The play consists of a man and a woman on stage, except that the identity of the man changes, Peter and Craig being twin brothers, one gay, the other straight. When one exits, the other enters, but at a different time. We see Craig on the eve of his departure for Iraq, Peter, an actor, in the present. They come from the Midwest and a working-class family, Craig's wife, Kelly, a therapist, from a moneyed background. The play opens as Peter, unannounced and, it turns out, unwelcome, arrives at Kelly's apartment a year after Craig's death as a soldier in Iraq, apparently as the result of an accident. That traumatic event has echoed through time and left its mark on both of them, as has 9/11 with its dust and death. Peter arrives at the apartment, however, having just precipitated a trauma of his own, walking out in the middle of a production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as a result of a fellow actor's homophobic remark, O'Neill's play, of course, featuring tensions within a family which are here played out within and between Shinn's three characters.

Peter is another of Shinn's actor narcissists, whose first film was meretricious but which he justified as acceptable given the state of Hollywood. Meanwhile, he patronizes his fellow actors and is reckless when it comes to personal relationships having, he finally confesses, broken up with his lover in favour of a man who claimed to have been abused as a child. Craig is no less narcissistic, about to leave his wife telling her that he had never loved her from the moment they married, she being a therapist used to offering understanding to others while failing to read the man she loves.

In the course of the play we discover that Peter has betrayed his gay lover as his brother had Kelly. Love, it seems, is problematic, the ideal easily abandoned, while sex carries with it a charge not untouched with violence, a violence echoed in Iraq, the photographs from Abu Ghraib forging the connection: 'The one thing I did consciously think about was how the photographs from Abu Ghraib reminded me of hardcore pornography, and so I saw a link between what was happening in a war with what was happening in our sexuality. And that got me thinking about the overlap between violence and sexuality.'²⁷ Violence is not something brought back from Iraq but taken there. The brothers had been introduced to it when young, Craig being beaten by his Vietnam-veteran father and then beating Peter in turn. Peter's violence is of another kind, emotional, sexual.

At one moment, in the background, the television plays an episode of *Law and Order* with its reassuring message that violence can be contained, that rationality defeats the irrational, even as the evidence for that, beyond a formulaic crime series, is lacking. There is a reference to Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* with its ironic take on events but also the implication that ironic distance carries its own problems appealing as it does to those of like mind.

It turns out that Craig's death had not been an accident but suicide, the explanation contained in the emails which Peter reads out to his brother's widow, a woman still struggling to grieve over a man who had cruelly denied loving her. There is, indeed, grief in the play but it is not only for a dead brother or husband. It is for the loss of trust, for a compromised ideal, for a human nature so flawed that it does damage at the private and public level. Peter had been for the war but argued against it because his lover was in favour of it. Craig himself, originally a defender of the war turns against it, sending emails to his brother who confronts Kelly with them, though for what motive is unclear, perhaps even to him. 'The city is dying,' Craig writes, 'and we are the ones killing it . . . I do not blame my men. They were told they would be heroes bringing freedom, and instead have been told to invade people's homes and take their freedom. They are ordered to protect themselves from violence by actively doing violence, which leads to more violence to protect themselves against.'²⁸

What he realizes, though, and what is central to Shinn's drama, is that 'the horror I feel here is not just a consequence of the war, but is horror at the core of me, of who I have always been' (265–7). At one stage Peter recalls a line from *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: 'It was a great mistake, my being born a man' (272). The following lines, not quoted, but perhaps with more relevance to Craig, are, 'I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death!'²⁹

The play ends as Peter leaves and Kelly prepares to, packing even as *The Daily Show* plays with its laughter and applause so inappropriate to the occasion. As ever in Shinn's plays, nothing is resolved. The images of Abu Ghraib remain on the web. The war in Iraq left its deadly legacy while the human potential for violence, betrayal, abandonment remains what it has ever been. Speaking in 2013, Shinn remarked that, 'When I grew up . . . I grew up with the image of the artist as somebody who could be central to the culture in a big way, and that was the kind of artist I wanted to be. And I remember feeling with *Dying City* that I might get to be that kind of artist.'³⁰ Ben Brantley described it as a 'crafty and unsettling' play remarking that 'Anyone who doubts that Mr. Shinn ("Four," "Where Do We Live") is among the most provocative and probing of American playwrights today need only experience the creepy, sophisticated welding of form and content that is "*Dying City*," first produced at the Royal Court Theatre in London last year.'³¹ It went on to be a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

His next work, *Now or Later*, also engaged with political issues melded with private tensions. In 2007 he considered writing a play about megachurches but in the process of research, as he explained to Lisa Timmel of the Hartford Theatre Company, interviewed someone who worked for Barack Obama, then in the process of running for the presidency, whose policy was to reach out to Christian voters by talking about his own faith. Indeed, the previous year he had given a speech on politics and religion to a Washington conference in which he described the moment when, in a church on the Southside of Chicago, he had affirmed his Christian conviction, hearing God's spirit beckoning him. At the same time, he was anxious to acknowledge the importance of the Muslim faith even as he called for the need to reach out to evangelicals. For anyone wishing to be elected there were constituencies to be addressed, not least because Obama had been attacked by Christian fundamentalists, one of whom, Alan Keyes, who himself ran for both the Senate and the presidency on three occasions, had declared that Jesus Christ would not have voted for Obama but who, according to his daughter, had thrown her out of the family home when she came out as a lesbian.

For Shinn, the religious right prompted thoughts of homophobia while that, in turn, brought Islamic fundamentalism to mind. What had started out as a play about megachurches now became one about political strategies and religion, these issues coming together in what he has called a 'very condensed play'. 'But the most important thing for me to do,' he explained, 'was to find a personal story to tell, so once I settled on a college-age kid, recent scandals involving freedom of speech on campus started to fascinate me . . . As I researched recent presidential candidates, I was struck by reports of Al Gore's difficult relationship with his son and John Edwards' son who died in a car accident. I began to build up a story from what I imagined to be the immense pressure of being a politician's child. As soon as I realized that at a certain age a child's actions could easily have a political impact, the links between the political and the personal became very clear. All political issues have a personal component and vice versa.'³²

As it happens, in 1992 he had worked briefly in Bill Clinton's campaign and recalled that he had applied to Boston University to study political science before opting for NYU's playwriting programme, so that an interest in politics had co-existed with his theatrical commitment. The play, which opened in London in 2008 but which took a further four years to reach America (which fact, he said, reflected its title), the year in which it is set, takes place in real time. Despite the specificity of its setting – the action occurs late night on election day in a Southern state – this is not a play about Obama. The candidate, whose victory is confirmed in the process of the play, is white.

All is going well until a photograph appears in an online blog. It is of his son, John, and a friend, attending a party, the former dressed as Muhammad, the friend as an evangelical pastor called Pastor Bob, presumably based on Pastor Bob Coy, a former Las Vegas casino manager who founded Calvary Chapel, Florida, the state's largest megachurch with 20,000 worshipers, and who, in 2014 would leave the church as a result of sexual 'improprieties' and, in 2017, be accused of molesting a four-year-old child. These facts, which might have led the play in a different direction if available at the time, were not germane. The fancy dress choices are a response to Pastor Bob's homophobia (also what leads them to use a dildo and simulate a sexual encounter) along with what strikes John as the hypocrisy of those at his university attending a 'naked' party who had attacked him for upholding, in a student newspaper, the right of those who had posted cartoons of Muhammad around the campus on the grounds of free speech. As John points out, one of the girls who attended the party had been reduced to tears by what she saw as an attempt to dehumanize Muslims apparently seeing no contradiction between that and a fundamentalist culture: 'the cartoons were critiquing a culture that does not allow women to bare their forearms, let alone attend "naked" parties.'³³ He is accused of being a cultural imperialist and caring more about Muslims than male violence on campus.

Shinn's thumb, though, is not on the scales. He has never been a simple polemicist. The essence of his plays lies in conflicting ideas, divided selves, differing interpretations of experience which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In discussing this play he has invoked Harold Pinter's Nobel Prize address in which, quoting from his own comments in 1958, he had said, 'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false,' Shinn adding, 'I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art, . . . I feel we can never arrive at a final truth, an ultimate understanding of why something happened – whether at an historical level or in an artistic realm.'³⁴ It is not that there is no truth in drama, Pinter insisted, but that the truth to be found

is not singular: 'the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.'³⁵

Like Pinter, as a citizen Shinn felt differently, the obligation to distinguish between what is true and what is false a civic responsibility, even as the interference pattern of the personal psyche will always render the resultant conviction in some way provisional if not compromised. In the case of Pinter, it was almost impossible to hope for an entirely rational response from him towards the United States and its unfolding history. Indeed in that same Nobel Prize address he referred to a brutal, scornful and ruthless United States.

John, meanwhile, is under pressure to issue an apology. It is too late to impact on the campaign but, to his father and his advisors, his behaviour had been potentially damaging and possibly dangerous and, indeed, reports of violence in Pakistan come in even as a video of the party surfaces. The question is whether the right to express himself excludes any concern for the consequences of doing so. He finally receives a call from his old analyst who reminds him that if he has a history, so do others, a truth equally of societies. He decides to allow an apology to be issued in his name. As his father appears on television to celebrate his election John asks, 'Did he come out?' (48) a significant formulation. Has he, he is asking, accepted who he really is?

John, however, has more personal problems. His gay lover has left him, unwilling to sustain a monogamous relationship, while at Ivy League universities 'queer theory professors teach that gay people who want monogamous relationships have self-loathingly internalized the value system of a patriarchal heteronormative culture' (17). There is evidently nothing quite like a university to combine passion with reductive language, liberal principles being invoked to defend illiberal views, abstract positions immune to practical consequences. More significantly, though, for the moment, and complicating John's response to the incipient scandal, is his relationship with his father, not least because when younger he had attempted suicide and spent time in therapy, though only, he suspects, because it is hard to be elected President if your son commits suicide. Is he right to be so cynical? There is evidence for and against. For John, what divides him from his father – also, he points out, named John, a sign to him of narcissism – is that father's opposition to gay marriage and his attending a rally with Pastor Bob, the reason for the Pastor Bob costume at the party. But Pastor Bob had also been a supporter of those helping with AIDS in Africa, working with the poor, showing concern for the environment.

In *Now or Later* the issues at stake are debated, though sometimes this can seem information-heavy with certain political truths spelled out to John, perhaps unnecessarily given his closeness, through his father, to the political system. So it is that John's friend, Matt, invokes America's actions against Muslim countries and elaborates reasons why they may legitimately be seen as giving offence, while his father points out the real dangers of his son's actions, politics requiring strategic approaches, patience, negotiation. Pragmatically, the gap between campaign rhetoric and subsequent action may be necessary. As Tracy, a black woman in her forties and part of the team, remarks, 'To be elected as a Democrat in the South in the '80s and '90s, there were some things you had to be on the right about,' (27) and not only then. I personally remember talking to Senator Fulbright in the 1970s and asking him why he was liberal abroad and conservative at home. He replied, 'You got to be elected, boy.' The problem of this shifting

of values according to audience, though, John insists, is that 'no one actually knows who you really are' (44).

There was potentially another problem. How, Shinn asked himself,

do you write a play set in 2008 in 2007 when you don't know what's going to happen? One thing that was really clear was that the conflict between the freedom of expression that most Western countries hold quite dear and a sect of fundamentalist Islam that does not hold those values . . . would be lasting. When there are differences that are so profound and apparently so unresolvable even if they . . . simmer down for a while I knew would bubble up again. I don't think I had a crystal ball so much as I knew the nature of trauma . . . [the] difficulty is that when it is not resolved it comes back again. And one reason I gave the play the title *Now or Later* was that I wanted to signal to the audience, on some subliminal level, that if the events in the play were not in the news now they would be later . . . I knew when I gave the play the title *Now or Later* it was a very open-ended title which could have lots of meanings . . . It is a play which came from very deep inside, within me, in my heart, not just because of the political issue but because of the very deep personal issues as well.³⁶

There were deep issues, too, in his next play, *Picked*, which opened at the Vineyard Theatre in 2011 and which he has described as a particularly cryptic and unsettling piece. It has at its heart an actor who, despite a single successful, if somewhat bizarre, film, has to deal with rejection, the loss of what he believes himself to value. Its title, as an epigraph indicates, derives from a line in *Hamlet*: 'one man picked out of ten thousand'. Kevin is the one man, a virtual unknown as an actor, who is selected by a director/writer for a film to be based on his own personality and thoughts, these to be derived from working with a neuromarketing company which uses scanners to monitor responses. Priding himself on discovering the truth in his character, he finds himself in a high concept, low plausibility, movie, truth not being readily available as he struggles to adjust himself to the bizarre demands of the producer while his relationship with his partner, Jen, slowly deteriorates.

Originally, he is to play two parts reflecting different aspects of himself, though eventually this gives way to the idea of casting another actor to play alongside him. Surprisingly, the film proves a success, even being nominated for an award, but, once over, Kevin finds his career stalled even as Jen, herself an actor previously unable to secure a role, becomes successful, as does his co-star. Her film, by the same director/writer, is about a woman with cancer who is gifted the power of empathy after an experimental brain operation, empathy being in short supply in her life and the movie industry as seen here. His relationship flounders and he goes back to college, living with regret. Finally, at a party, he is approached with the possibility of being in a comedy about a father and son with the same imaginary friend. It is, the casting director observes, 'really sweet' (194). He appears to be tempted, doubtless looking for truth still in the most unlikely of places.

The sense of insecurity to be found in so many of Shinn's plays finds its paradigm in the figure of the actor, always uncertain of the future, constantly confronted with judgement and rejection. In fact, the play was prompted by his failure, for some time, to place *Now or Later*, with a succession of producers, the playwright's plight being no different from that of the actor, while his involvement in the casting of his own plays made him sympathetic with those

desperate for parts, always reapplying for their own jobs. He was aware, too, that the play could be read as a metaphor for psychoanalysis, with its probing into the psyche of the central character. Here, after all, is a man whose craft, like Shinn's, draws directly on his life.

For Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, the play offered, 'ample evidence of this dramatist's singular gift for presenting human murkiness with precisely shaded clarity.' It seemed to him that *Picked*, was 'better than any play I've seen at finding the natural existential anxiety in the frustration and powerlessness of being a movie actor, a figure who is always to some degree the passive instrument of others.'³⁷

In September, 2010, Tyler Clementi, an eighteen-year-old student at Rutgers University, jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge. It turned out that his roommate, Dharun Ravi, had used a webcam on his computer to capture the moment Tyler had kissed another man before posting details on Twitter. Again on Twitter he encouraged others to view a second encounter. By then, however, Clementi was dead. In 2012, Ravi was tried and convicted of various offences in relation to his actions, though later an appeal court reversed some of the convictions. This was the trigger for Shinn's new play even as it reflects something of his own feelings as a young, gay man at school and university where, he confessed, he had himself come close to committing suicide.

As he has explained, 'Because people were most aware of the Clementi case, I let my mind wander in that direction . . . I wasn't bullied in high school for being gay, although homophobia was part of the culture I grew up in . . . I began to wonder personally about how much of my self-destructiveness had to do with structural oppression, and how much had to do with the universal agonies of desire, intimacy and rejection. Tyler's suicide, in particular, woke up a lot of those questions inside of me.'³⁸ He was not, though, content with how Tyler's case had been presented. 'Certainly,' he confessed, 'the Tyler Clementi story stimulated profound feelings in me . . . [but] When I saw that the initial impulse from many people seemed to be to sentimentalize him, flatten his psyche and turn him into a pure victim of a cruel roommate, I became very suspicious. I think the impulse towards scapegoating allows us to flee self-scrutiny . . . That way of thinking, all it really does is flatten conversation; it flattens discourse and the opportunity . . . for real serious thought and real serious discussion.'

His was also to a degree a response to another play: 'One reason I wanted to write a play on these themes for so long was my being frustrated when I saw *The Laramie Project* and realized that not only did it not represent the victim onstage, it barely touched on sexuality at all . . . It was a really asexual play. Sex is such a big part of life and especially when writing about queer youth, one has to deal with it directly and honestly.'³⁹

The Laramie Project (2000), by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project ('devoted to fostering an artistic dialogue with our audiences on the social, political and human issues that affect us all')⁴⁰ was a response to the brutal murder, in 1998, of University of Wyoming gay freshman Matthew Shepard, in Laramie Wyoming. He was tied to a fence post, beaten, robbed, and left to die. It was based on over two hundred interviews. As Shinn points out, by virtue of its approach, the victim himself does not appear. The drama circles around the death, with actors playing interviewees – fellow students, teachers, Laramie citizens, gays and straights, those who had dealt with Shepard, alive and dead. It was later made into an HBO film. It is an affecting work, the victim being the absent centre slowly constructed, the intersecting point of the stories other people tell, stories which equally construct a place and a state of mind. It was a crime which prompted politicians to speak out – Bill Clinton, Edward Kennedy.

It is not that Shinn is a critic of *The Laramie Project*, a genuinely moving piece. There was, after all, something entirely familiar about Matthew Shepard as there was about Tyler Clementi. Not only was he gay but, like Shinn, was fascinated with politics. It is also a drama about more than a particular case in a particular place even as it is the specifics which give it its force. It was that he wished to explore the complexity – personal, political, sexual – of an event which exposes the motives of those inclined to give themselves a pass even as the play is in many ways about power. Sexuality is at the centre of *The Laramie Project*. It could hardly be otherwise. For Shinn, though, its physical reality, the nature and centrality of desire, the connection between sexuality and violence, has always been foregrounded and would be again here, as fact and metaphor.

Though the play goes beyond recapitulating the Clementi story, it does feature exactly the incident in which he was videoed by his roommate who watched his encounter on a remote computer, but that is only one element in a play which uses this as a starting point for an exploration of politics, personal ambition, private and public betrayals. At the same time, though the dialogue is sexually explicit, and there are preludes to sexual acts, he had learned from some responses to *Where Do We Live* that on-stage nudity and sex could prove distracting. What he is not interested in, and a view reflected by one of the play's more sympathetic characters, a student called Gabe, is presenting gays as victims. For Shinn, 'We're living in a time when people think of themselves as victims, whether they're oppressed or the oppressor, whether they're doing violence or violence is being done to them . . . This is what compels me and keeps me going: I'm sympathetic to the way trauma shapes people, but as a dramatist I'm also interested in questions of agency and responsibility.'⁴¹ So, Gabe insists, 'the way people make themselves out to be such victims – I'm so over it.' In a play in which the question of responsibility applies to all the characters, and the institution of which they are a part, 'This whole "blame the university" thing,' Gabe insists, 'it's so freaking easy to do. Because then you can't blame the person who actually chose to do what they did – another victim!'⁴²

The student who commits suicide is not like Tyler Clementi. He is an exhibitionist, with a message board on a porn site who posts images of himself, albeit under an assumed name. He seems undisturbed when his encounter with a man is caught on camera by his roommate. Indeed, Shinn is less concerned with the suicide itself than its ramifications for those who all have agendas of their own at a time when sexual identity, opposing rights and obligations, have moved to the centre of attention, when contending groups seek to impose their own interpretations and strategies.

In a sense, *Teddy Ferrara*, which opened at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 2013, to a less than enthusiastic review by Chris Jones in the *Chicago Tribune*, echoes an aspect of *Now or Later* in that it involves a university president planning to run for public office, in this case for the Senate (according to Jones a thinly veiled critique of Bob Kerrey, the former Democratic senator and president of the New School who, like his fictional counterpart, harboured continued political ambitions).⁴³ He is alarmed that a story involving an apparently gay student's suicide (not Ferrara's, which occurs later) may damage his campaign, the implication being that his death might have been a consequence of attitudes at the institution over which he presides. Again, as in *Now or Later* he is advised to issue a statement, to take control of the narrative. It is the more ominous in that he has to make up his mind about demands from a Social Justice Committee (Rutgers established a new Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities after Clementi's death) which require professors to ensure diversity in

their syllabi and that minority groups are included in reading lists, these to be monitored by the Provost's office. In other words, again Shinn raises issues of free expression, here academic freedom, versus the rights of those who might feel themselves marginalized or worse.

The Committee also calls for the establishment of gender-neutral bathrooms, on the grounds that transgender and 'gender variant' students do not feel safe in gender-specific bathrooms. For the president the issue is partly one of costs, there only being a few hundred who would qualify in a university of over 40,000. In fact, though, money is the least of his concerns, while Shinn is less interested in considering the legitimacy or otherwise of such demands than he is with the uses to which the various characters put the death of Ferrara. The play carries his name as a title not because it is about him but because it is his death which sets various hares running.

The play is set 'now'. In other words, though the 'now' was initially 2013 its relevance extends beyond that, and the issues raised, topical at the time, have remained contentious. In 2012 a number of cities and institutions (including the White House) established all-gender bathrooms but there was resistance and confusion and this is a play which is not without humour as characters struggle to make decisions which are more to do with their own ambitions than the justice of the causes they need to be seen to embrace.

Few characters emerge with their integrity intact. Drew, the ambitious editor of the student newspaper, publishes a story about the suicide of Ferrara, suppressing inconvenient truths and making others up. He hopes that it may be picked up by the media not because he is interested in justice but because it will enhance his career prospects. At the same time, he writes an article about a student election even though one of the candidates is a gay partner he has abandoned. Personal relationships, indeed, are characterized by betrayals, declarations of monogamy and loyalty preceding the abandonment of both. Tim, a fellow student, in a heterosexual relationship, turns out to be a closet gay, though the fact that he is attracted to Drew would seem to taint that relationship. A faculty member seizes the occasion to advance her own ideas.

Power momentarily moves away from those in charge of the institution who are themselves primarily concerned to protect themselves and the university, the two seeming synonymous in their minds. Jaq, transgender, who self-identifies as a man, speaks for those 'on the continuum' (44) but has no interest in queer students because they form a 'homogeneous group' (46). There are, it seems, limits to his continuum. Later, he interrupts a meeting to elect a Student Assembly President, attacking the candidates whose only wish is 'TO SUCK UP TO POWER,' (101), while calling for everyone to 'SPEAK UP FOR TEDDY' using a megaphone to call for a demonstration, blocking out what was to be a democratic debate. The president tears the megaphone away, an action which Jaq declares an assault only for the president to say, 'I don't give a fuck – I just got elected to the Senate. Fuck this place' (103).

Power is equally an issue in terms of personal relationships. Gabe, otherwise seemingly a voice for sanity, refuses a relationship with fellow student Jay because he is disabled. The play ends, or almost so, as Gabe, in some senses its moral conscience, is detained by the campus police, discovered with a fellow student in the men's room, the site of gay assignations, the university's expressed desire for tolerance coming up against distaste for the actual practices of those whose seemingly random encounters take place in unsavoury locations, a distaste, as it happens, equally felt by some of the gay characters themselves. The actual ending features Tim and his girlfriend Jenny as they walk off together, she unaware that he has had a sexual encounter with the self-obsessed Drew.

It is a long play, perhaps overlong, with a running time equivalent to that of *Macbeth*. The length is justified by the complexities of the relationships which are explored but the risk is a loss of focus. An anxiety about gay promiscuity does relate to other issues (Shinn himself confessing that a relationship in university had foundered on just such a question) but can seem over complicated. In the end it is not so much a play about the suicide of a gay man, or even homophobia, as about loneliness, the tangled nature of relationships, the disconnect between love and sex, the manner in which physical and emotional needs find expression. It is concerned with the struggle for identity and for a language which adequately expresses it, a language which transcends reductive categories. It is concerned with private and public actions and their consequences, with where responsibility lies. It asks whether demands for separate facilities, safe spaces, control of the curriculum, are compatible with freedoms to be claimed in other spheres, whether, indeed, difference is a value as opposed to a descriptor. As usual, Shinn does not adjudicate and the issues raised remain subject for debate.

American reviews were unenthusiastic. When it was staged, two years later, at London's Donmar Warehouse, however, Kate Kellaway, in *The Guardian*, found it a 'clever play' which explored 'loneliness, belonging, gay-stereotyping, victimhood.' It was, she declared, 'a brave, gripping, provocative play.'⁴⁴

His concern with violence did not end with *Teddy Ferrara*. Indeed, it became the central issue in *Against*, commissioned by the Almeida Theatre in 2013. He had been reading about Jesus and his message of non-violence and started writing in earnest in the spring of 2015, finishing a first draft by that Christmas, and receiving notes on it from London on New Year's Day. This was followed by a reading.

At its centre is the figure of a Silicon Valley multi-billionaire, Luke, who does what multi-billionaires are inclined to do once they have accumulated wealth and no longer find it offers satisfaction or meaning. He assumes himself chosen to address the world's problems. In this case he believes that God has spoken to him and tasked him with exploring the nature of violence. For Shinn, 'part of what this play is saying is that we have to look at all kinds of violence ... I was really just thinking about how people even think about non-violence, especially in America where we have a violent culture, not just obvious things like gun violence and racism and police violence but there is the violence of people who hurt each other in love. There is violence in power dynamics, and education, and the workplace. I thought what happens to a culture if you try to introduce a non-violent way of thinking in a really meaningful way ... and in a way that would really capture people's imagination. What would the reaction be?'⁴⁵

In truth, in the play, if the protagonist does capture their imagination he does so in a confused rather than meaningful way as people struggle to make sense of the violence which occurs in the public and private realm, and of him as a new messiah, a messenger of peace and love, the latter in particular seeming to evade him, intimacy being less something which excites him and more something, like his wealth, ever less satisfying. Wanting, he declares, his sexuality to be in the service of love, he continues to find love a mystery to be subordinated to other imperatives.

Clearly key to the structure of the play, no less than its emerging theme, is the figure of Luke who travels from place to place, hunting out the scenes of violent incidents, school shootings, sexual violence, the coercions of the work place, gathering data, trying to understand and even console, though he is hesitant to become involved, an observer and not the redeemer some

suspect him of being. The challenge, as Shinn saw it, was how to arrive at a balance between the protagonist and the various locations he visits, the accounts he elicits: 'If we have too much of a central protagonist that limits or minimises other stories. So what if I tried to write a real ensemble play?' As a result of the reading, however, he came to feel that 'Luke intensified and took over a bit more,'⁴⁶ though there comes a moment in the play when he declares, 'this is not about me anymore,'⁴⁷ even as, in truth, it seems increasingly to be just that. The root of violence, in other words, seems to lie in an uninspected self.

The Luke who emerges is a strange mixture. On the one hand he is passive, open to suggestions, conceding when challenged, wary of becoming no more than a celebrity; on the other hand, he has the disturbing confidence of someone in possession of the truth, chosen, he believes, by God, capable of a sententious, self-righteous and even sanctimonious language, failing to recognize need when he sees it.

His strongest supporter is Sheila, a woman who travels with him and to whom he professes love but who he is liable to address as if she were an audience rather than a true partner. 'I was to change the culture,' he tells her, 'and it's exactly the same – our consumption, our discourse, our apathy – our diversions.' He needs, he explains, to 'work on myself' as well as to 'Turn over some tables' (65) as if he does, indeed, have a messianic impulse. She can hardly have welcomed his response when she asks him to confirm his love for her and he replies, 'you say you want intimacy in your life. This is intimacy. I am sharing my deepest self with you. What I think is most true about who I am. God told me to go where there's violence, then to go inside – part of what he's telling me that there is violence in me' (66). Indeed, there is since he is in process of rebuffing a woman who confesses that she is lonely. For all his professed concern for his fellow man, his implicit rejection, or at least subordination, of Sheila suggests that if God has told him to go where violence is he does, indeed, not have far to travel, though, not entirely explicably, the two of them get back together, even having sex, his spiritual self now conceding space for the physical though the act itself is aborted.

The portentous dialogue extends to other characters. When he meets a girlfriend of many years before, she tells him that she, too, had been called by God, in her case to be a teacher, telling him that 'I think you are ready to be loved,' (81) as a professor of creative writing tells his student, Anna, of her story featuring a character of the same name, 'The story never really problematizes Anna's conviction that her partners are incapable of getting to know her on a deeper level. As it's written now, Anna's presented as sensitive and mature, and her partners as shallow and narcissistic' (73). Is this a parallel to Luke's relation to Sheila? Certainly, there seems to be an echo when she declares, 'I just want to show that she feels like she can't communicate who she is anymore – so the routines they have ... she wants to find new routines' (74).

The difficulty is that it is never entirely clear whether Shinn is making a judgement of such language, in the way that the professor speaks of a 'patriarchal conception of intimacy' and refers to 'internalised heteronormative ideas,' (74) whether he regards it as denatured, or whether it is offered as a judgement of characters who so easily retreat from physical intimacy into stylized statements, a language drained of human content. Certainly, when a business partner speaks of a new venture which, through technology, will enable those buying objects to share their choice with others online as a way of moving 'consumption from the realm of the *isolated individual to a network of human relationships*' the speciousness is evident. It is Sheila, though, who asks 'Is he full of shit or what?' (90) The same question might be asked of Luke

who, it turns out, is to offer himself as a sacrifice, Jesus-like, though in the name of what is never entirely clear. His encounters change people, though not always for the good. When he meets Anna he provokes her into abandoning her wish to be an artist without replacing that ambition with any other.

His message of peace and love ends with him being shot dead by a truck driver who is afraid of change. The play, indeed, carries an ambiguous epigraph from St Luke, the protagonist's name clearly being significant: 'Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.' Unsurprisingly, given Shinn's resistance to easy resolutions, nothing is resolved. Is Luke a deluded rich man on a messianic mission, unsure of who he is and what he is trying to accomplish, or is he casting light on the way in which violence pervades all aspects of experience never entirely divorced from other instincts to do with a desire to connect. A school shooting, it is suggested, is a result of a failure to understand another person's need to be acknowledged. Perhaps. The need for explanation, however, may be no more than a refusal to accept that violence may have an opacity not amenable either to rational analysis or calls for love which itself may carry a virus. If a university is the site for rational thought in the play it is also the location of a rape.

Against prompted ambivalent responses from critics. In England, *The Telegraph* found it lacking in depth, a watery disappointment, and, at three hours, overlong, *The Independent* also objected to its length, finding it bitty and insufficiently focussed. In *The Guardian*, Michael Billington praised an element of deft satire but thought it coming close to saying that all you need is love. For the *Evening Standard* Shinn's intentions seemed difficult to decipher. By contrast, *Variety* welcomed a morality play, a convincing anatomy of the violence coursing through America's veins.

The tumble of characters, as in *Teddy Farrara*, along with a mesh of ideas, can make it difficult to distinguish the spine of a play which by its nature sets out to draw together different instances of violence and the central character's own journey, hence reviewers' tendency to be concerned with fragmentation and length. The central thesis requires a heterogeneity of instances and characters even as dramatic tension and a sense of coherence, literal and moral, necessitates homogeneity. Luke is to be the figure who pulls the various threads together but the nature of his own confusions makes that difficult to accomplish.

Against was not Shinn's only play of 2015. That year also saw the production of the play he had started writing in 2012 when his medical condition suggested he had little time left to live – *An Opening in Time*. As he has explained, 'I think I was thinking of myself. I couldn't do much but think about myself all the time. But I didn't want to write an "illness" play. My oncologist said, "Don't write about this. It's been done. There are enough plays about having cancer." And I said, "You don't have to worry about me. I don't want to write about this." I wanted to escape what I had. But maybe it's a paradox writing a play set in my hometown because it's not escaping myself at all.'⁴⁸ Indeed, in writing a piece for his home town newspaper, the *Hartford Courant*, he explained that,

I'd never thought of myself as nostalgic. If someone had asked me before I got sick how I felt about where I was from, I would have said that it was a good enough place to grow up: The schools encouraged creativity, the landscape was beautiful, the presence of history gave life richness. But I also would have talked about the loneliness of being a gay teenager who didn't feel he could come out. I would have mentioned conformity and

cliques and narrowness of thought. At the time I couldn't wait to leave home and go to New York City.

So, 25 years later, what accounted for my sudden homesickness, my deep desire to be back on the old streets? The obvious answer is that I wished to return to a simpler time, before I really understood that sickness and death are a part of life. But I don't think it can just be that; for all the happiness of my youth, there was so much sadness too. It wasn't a simpler time at all really.

Having been off treatment for a while now, I can see that the old landscapes gave me solace because in a scary time, they let me feel that however limited my future might be, my life had been long: there were miles and miles to replay in my mind, endless hours of places seen and lives witnessed.

'An Opening In Time' is my play's title because it has a meaning particular to its characters and story. But it also carries a personal meaning for me about what I went through: In an uncertain present, I discovered within myself the limitless memories of my past. They were waiting for me if I needed them.⁴⁹

It was, he has said, to be a late play in the sense that Shakespeare and Ibsen had written such late in life. Indeed, it carries an epigraph from *The Winter's Tale*: 'Come and lead me/ Unto these sorrows,' words from a bleak moment in that play. Why *The Winter's Tale*? It was because,

My sense is that this is a play where Shakespeare writes frankly about the difficulties in truly loving. I found this self-scrutiny inspiring and decided to copy it and write a play in which I explored my difficulties in loving through a variety of characters. I chose that quote as an epigraph because I feel that's what only *The Winter's Tale* does as a play – it leads us into sorrow – but it's what Shakespeare was doing in writing the play: leading himself into his sorrows. I wanted the readers of *An Opening in Time* to be prepared to enter their own sorrows through the play, but I also wanted to suggest to them that the play was my attempt to confront my own pain.⁵⁰

Shinn's plays, as we have seen, have always had a strong autobiographical element but here, as he assumed with death a real prospect, he wished to confront aspects of his life more directly. As he remarked,

I was at a challenging place in my life on a number of fronts and I began to think about plays in which it seemed to me writers were facing themselves squarely. Not only Shakespeare, but Chekhov and Ibsen were also on my mind. In their more mature plays we also see characters who seem to be stand-ins for their authors. The self-scrutiny and self-critique are palpable. I took inspiration from these works – that one way to deal with a difficult time in life is to try to face it through the creation of a work of art. Although *An Opening in Time* is not literally autobiographical, the conflicts and traumas the characters grapple with are familiar to me.⁵¹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his illness, he turned back to the place where he had been raised, a small Connecticut town plainly based on Wetherfield (street names place it there),

feeling that in some way that might open aspects of himself that he wished to explore and confront, in particular, issues to do with intimacy and love, not least because along with his illness he had had to confront the collapse of his relationship with his fiancé. 'At the time I began conceiving of the play,' he explained, 'I was dealing with illness and for whatever reason had profound memories of my childhood landscapes. I realized at some point that a precise sense of geography based on personal experience had been central to so many literary works I loved. I had never set a play in the real landscape of my everyday youth, and I had a strong sense that if I were to access that emotional and literal territory within, something very personally rich would emerge. Hopefully I have found a way to translate my deep experience of place into something universal and true.'⁵²

The central character is Anne, a woman in her sixties. Her marriage has ended with the death of her alcoholic husband and she returns to the home town where she had once had a love affair with Ron, a relationship which had broken up in acrimony. She returns, though, to be close to her son who has troubles of his own, as himself a teacher who has had an affair with an under-aged girl, and from whom she has been estranged, neither having addressed buried truths, the pain in their family. She takes up residence next to a family in which one of two foster brothers has been lost to drugs while the other is struggling to define his sexual identity. This is not quite the place of memory. Stores have changed, technology has entered into human interactions, time has moved on even as this is a town which lays claim to its distant origins.

He chose an older protagonist, he explained, because he felt that his illness had aged him psychically. It was to be a play about love and for all the other characters who constitute this sometimes edgy community it is the relationship between Anne and Ron, both school teachers, which is at its heart as they explore what had once driven them apart, each remembering differently, each capable of self-deception. There are paths not taken, misunderstandings, the stuff of life with its tangle of regrets but still an urge to connect, for some kind of reconciliation not only with others but with a former self.

If it is a play about love, though, it is also a play about loss and a late acknowledgement of responsibility for it. For Shinn, 'It's such a simple play on some level . . . It's really about regret and choices: What do you do when you come to regret a choice you made? I also wondered how things could have gone differently in many of my relationships and certainly during the period of my illness.'⁵³ It was, he said, a play which 'made me look deeper. Why have I had difficulty loving? Why haven't I been able to make successful intimacy last? When you think you are coming to the end of life, your defenses drop against fear, and you really want to know, who am I?'⁵⁴

Appropriately, the play had its premiere at Hartford Stage. Reviews were largely positive, *The New York Times* finding it anxiously wistful, praising the elliptical language, silences within speech which become a kind of eloquence, and this has always been a strength of Shinn's work, that and a convincing reconstruction of the failure of language always to express feeling, feeling, indeed, to make its way into words. There are times when the proliferation of characters can distract, perhaps in a desire to show that no one is immune to the flaws in the psyche which can distort relationships, but his work has consistently sought to explore the simultaneous desire to connect and the failure to do so.

Shinn has been a Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Dying City*, won an Obie for *Where Do We Live*, and a South Bank Award for *Now or Later*, but his work, with the exception of the Lincoln Center production of *Dying City* and the Goodman Theatre's production of *Teddy Ferrara*, has

tended to be staged in smaller, regional theatres or, indeed, in England where he first found a home and continues to do so, though his adaptation of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* opened on Broadway. At the same time, his reputation has steadily grown, *The New York Times's* Ben Brantley describing him as, 'the absolute best of a new generation of American playwrights.'⁵⁵ Happily, this is a fiercely contested position.