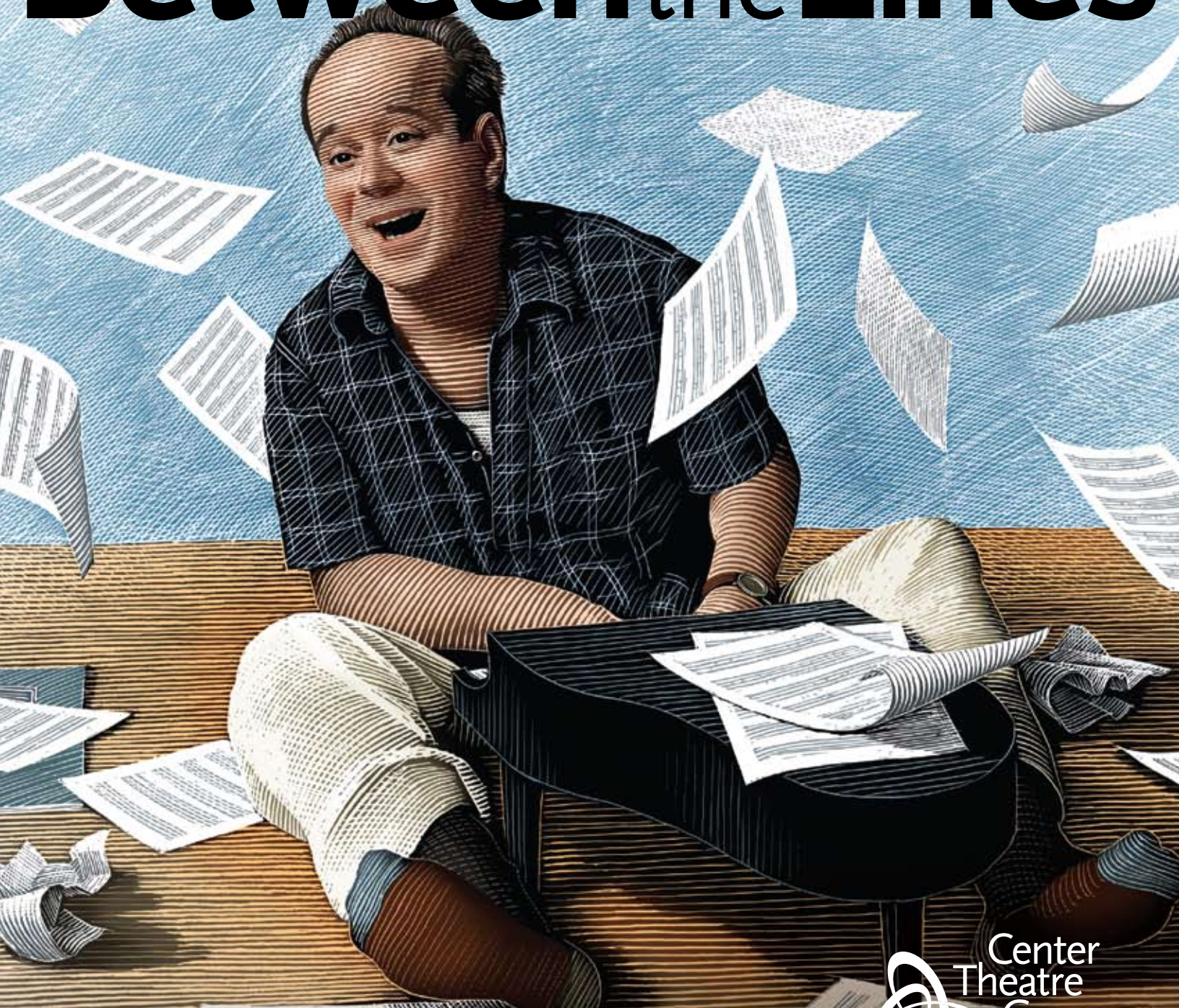


*The House of Blue Leaves* by John Guare  
Directed by Nicholas Martin  
August 30 – October 19, 2008  
New Mark Taper Forum

# Between the Lines



This production of *The House of Blue Leaves* is generously supported in part by Artistic Director's Circle Members **Laura & James Rosenwald** and **Orinocco Trust**.

 Center  
Theatre  
Group  
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L.A.'s Theatre Company

Ahmanson Theatre  
Mark Taper Forum  
Kirk Douglas Theatre

601 West Temple Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Welcome

# The Center Theatre Group production of John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves*

christens both the newly renovated Mark Taper Forum and this inaugural edition of *Between the Lines*, Center Theatre Group's web-based magazine. Guare's celebrated black comedy wages a wickedly funny attack on the kitchen sink dramas that pervaded 20th century American theatre, while also providing an insightful critique on the "American dream." In the same irreverent spirit, we approach *Blue Leaves* from all angles in the hope of enhancing your appreciation of this much-loved play.

## Between the Lines

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# THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES



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10



11

**1 JOHN PANKOW**

**Artie Shaughnessy**

An aspiring songwriter  
and a zookeeper in Queens

**2 KATE BURTON**

**Bananas Shaughnessy**

His wife

**3 JAMES IMMEKUS**

**Ronnie Shaughnessy**

His son

**4 JANE KACZMAREK**

**Bunny Flingus**

His girlfriend

**5 MIA BARRON**

**Corrinna Stroller**

A Hollywood starlet

**6 DIEDRICH BADER**

**Billy Einhorn**

A Hollywood bigshot

**7 JAMES JOSEPH O'NEIL**

**White Man**

**8 RUSTY SCHWIMMER**

**Head Nun**

**9 MARY KAY WULF**

**Second Nun**

**10 ANGELA GOETHALS**

**Little Nun**

**11 JAMES B. HARNAGEL**

**M.P.**



Pope Paul VI was driven around New York in a Lincoln-Mercury limousine, shown here in a Ford Motor Company public relations photo.

“When famous people go to sleep at night, it’s us they dream of.”

— BUNNY IN THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES

John Guare’s *The House of Blue Leaves* takes place against the backdrop of Pope Paul VI’s historic 1965 visit to New York City. The play combines elements of black comedy, farce, psychological realism and theatre of the absurd to take aim at the trials and tribulations of American dreamers.

Artie Shaughnessy is an aspiring songwriter with big dreams of Hollywood glory — but little talent. After a frustrating performance of his original songs, Artie returns to his cramped apartment in Sunnyside, Queens. In actuality, Artie is employed as a zookeeper. The momentous occasion of the



Pope's visit only heightens Artie's perception that he is trapped inside an uneventful life.

To realize his dreams, Artie plans to throw himself at Hollywood with his girlfriend, Bunny Flingus, who drives him to distraction by refusing to cook him any gourmet meals until he invests in their relationship. Unfortunately, Artie is also tethered to a stay-at-home wife, nicknamed Bananas. Egged on by Bunny, Artie finally takes action. Despite protesting that he is "too old to be a young talent," Artie contacts his childhood friend, Billy Einhorn, now a Hollywood bigshot, and finagles an invitation to Tinseltown. Elated by his good fortune, Artie invites Bananas to accompany him and Bunny to their curbside seats to watch the Pope's passing motorcade.

Unbeknownst to Artie, his teenage son Ronnie has gone AWOL from the Army and returned home with a plan to assassinate the Pope with a bomb. He snuck into the apartment through the fire escape and is hiding in his old bedroom, waiting to spring his plan.

Ronnie's plot is interrupted when Artie returns to the apartment with Corrinna Stroller, a Hollywood starlet and Billy's girlfriend. Artie stages an impromptu audition with his songs for her benefit, but the performance is interrupted by the appearance of three fanatical nuns. Denied the opportunity to witness the Pope's passing motorcade, the nuns clamor to glimpse the Pope on Artie's television set. The general hysteria gets ratcheted up another notch when Corrinna announces that she has a pair of tickets to the Pope's Mass at Yankee Stadium. In the pandemonium that ensues, Ronnie's bomb accidentally explodes.

In the aftermath, Artie's friend Billy Einhorn arrives from Hollywood to mourn the tragic explosion and to visit his old friend's family. Artie takes advantage of the sad circumstances with a desperate move to realize his own dreams. However, life unfolds with unexpected results for each of the characters, and Artie ultimately finds himself confined to his apartment with his wife — and one final decision to make.



# The House that Ruth Built

In *The House of Blue Leaves*, the nuns scramble for a pair of tickets to attend Pope Paul's Mass at Yankee Stadium. This time-honored landmark, baseball's first triple-decked structure, opened to the public in 1923, after a record-breaking \$2.5 million in construction costs and a surprisingly brief 284 days of labor. Babe Ruth christened his team's new home with a three-run homer in the inaugural game between the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox. Ruth's tremendous drawing power is largely credited with making the majestic 70,000-seat stadium possible — and accounts for its early nickname as “The House That Ruth Built.” The stadium was almost completely demolished in 1973 and rebuilt as a modern facility for the 1976 baseball season.

Yankee Stadium has played host to an impressive list of dignitaries and figures of world-renown outside the field of baseball, including boxing greats Joe Louis, Muhammed Ali, Ken Norton and Sugar Ray Robinson. Knute Rockne delivered his famous “win one for the Gipper” pep talk at Yankee Stadium during a Notre Dame-Army football game in 1928. Concertgoers have been entertained by the Isley Brothers, U2, Billy Joel and Pink Floyd. And, of course, faithful Roman Catholics have thronged the stadium to attend the celebrated Masses officiated by Pope Paul VI in 1965, Pope John Paul II in 1979 and, most recently, Pope Benedict XVI in 2008. This historic ball park is being demolished after the 2008 baseball season, and a new stadium, on adjacent park land, will open in 2009.

## Talk About...

### The Cult of Celebrity

Andy Warhol famously remarked, “in the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes” — and arguably the future has proved him right. Today’s celebrities are born from the passing popularity of a clip on YouTube.

Who are the celebrities in your life? Who do you find yourself talking about? Is there a celebrity that you’d admit following as a guilty pleasure? Do you have a “favorite” celebrity? When you have run into a celebrity in real life in Los Angeles, what was he or she doing? Is there a celebrity you *hate*?

### The Timeliness of *The House of Blue Leaves*

Guare’s play was first produced in 1971, when the nation was saddled with an enormously unpopular president and a debilitating, bloody, unpopular war. The economy suffered from stagflation, the cost of living increased 15%, the dollar plunged on international markets and the national deficit escalated into the hundreds of billions. The technology emerging in 1971 included the pocket calculator, soft contact lenses and the supersonic Concorde jet. The first video game — Pong by Atari — would not be available ’til next year.

What do you miss about the good old days? Have times changed or have they pretty much stayed the same? Did Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to New York City in 2008 generate as much excitement as Pope Paul VI’s did in 1965 or Pope John Paul II’s in 1979? Why? What has and hasn’t changed?

Guare's play *Muzeeka* was produced in the Mark Taper Forum's second season; Barrie Chase, Philip Proctor and Wallace Chappell featured here.

## Setting & Context

# The Role of the Audience

**“The kitchen sink writer writes a sloppy and sentimental play, and then hopes that attention to surface detail like the presence of real running water will give the play the appearance of reality.”**

— JOHN GUARE

As a child growing up in New York City, Guare (rhymes with flair or Fred Astaire) attended the theatre *a lot*. In his essay, “The War Against the Kitchen Sink,” he recalls performances that likely influenced *The House of Blue Leaves*, his breakout success as a playwright. Guare was in the audience as a boy when Ray Bolger egged them into a rousing chorus of “Once in Love with Amy” during *Where’s Charley?* Guare witnessed many great crowd-pleasing stage clowns like Bert Lahr, Zero Mostel, Beatrice Lillie, Nancy Walker, Judy Holliday and Barbara Harris work their magic on audiences. Their old-school style of performance – reaching over the footlights to include the audience in the alchemy of theatre — may well have found its way into Guare’s characterizations of Artie Shaughnessy, Bunny and Bananas.



“I realized that the audience could play a role in the play...”

As a young playwright, Guare admits to being exasperated with the “kitchen sink” conventions of natural realism in American theatre. In the typical realistic production, the audience sits at a comfortable distance peering voyeuristically through an imaginary “fourth wall” into the lives of the characters onstage. Guare was bowled over by the realization that Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on a typical kitchen sink scene in act one, but moved inside its main character’s mind in act two. He was also fascinated by Laurence Olivier’s performance in John Osborne’s *The Entertainer*, in which the actor, in character, addressed the New York audience as though it were a “shabby audience at a cheesy English seaside resort.” “I realized that the audience could play a role in the play,” Guare writes. “The audience was not a passive witness as it was in realistic, naturalistic plays, barred from the play by a brutal fourth wall.”

The film director Louis Malle has observed that Guare’s plays actually need a live audience to make them “work.” And indeed, it was the audience that brought success to *The House of Blue Leaves*. In order to bust down that “brutal fourth wall,” Guare embraced the kitchen sink premise in *The House of Blue Leaves* and then threw in everything *but* the kitchen sink. His play concocted a heady and wildly experimental mix of farce, social commentary, black comedy, vaudeville songs, direct address, poetical

language, theatre of the absurd and realistic drama. Early critics were divided; detractors felt that the comedic elements undermined the serious issues of the play. Others praised Guare’s depiction of the dark underbelly of the American dream and the destructive impact of the media on people’s dreams and personal lives. Audiences, however, responded in droves, packing the off-Broadway premiere production, starring Harold Gould and Anne Meara. The play won several Obies and the New York Drama Critics Circle award for Best American Play of 1971, and soon became a popular staple of community theatres and university and college theatre programs across the nation.

In 1986, *The House of Blue Leaves* was revived at Lincoln Center in an all-star production directed by Jerry Zaks and featuring John Mahoney, Swoosie Kurtz and Stockard Channing as Artie, Bananas and Bunny. Critics remained divided over the play although many acknowledged that the play’s irreverence, subversion and absurdist power were more readily accepted by revival audiences than when the play premiered — and none could deny the audience’s response, which took the standing room only production to Broadway some 15 years after the play’s original debut. John Simon of *New York* magazine described it “as if Ionesco had collaborated with George Abbott.”

“ I WAS IN EGYPT IN 1965 and got a packet of clippings from my parents about the Pope’s visit to New York. My parents said, you might think you’re seeing the world, but the world has come to us. And they wrote me all about the joy of seeing the Pope on Queens Boulevard. I started writing *The House of Blue Leaves* — where in the play a boy wants to kill the Pope — that day in Cairo.

Slow-motion event: 1981. I round the corner onto Times Square and see on the Times Tower, flashing in lights above the Crossroads of the World, the Show Biz Capital of the Universe, the fluorescent neon lightbulb wattage blinking at high noon: POPE SHOT. I stop. I count the letters. Again it flashes. Eight little letters. Eight little letters that simply mean — “What will this do to my play?”

Writers are all heart. ”

— JOHN GUARE



# Playwrights on Guare

“...more than anyone else’s, his plays radiate the joy of writing.”

“If you ask a playwright who his/her favorite American playwright is, more often than not the answer is Guare,” says Richard Greenberg (*Three Days of Rain*). “I think this is because, more than anyone else’s, his plays radiate the joy of writing. ... The only line his plays follow is the gorgeous, swerving line of his imagination.” Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*) identifies Guare as “the first playwright that I sort of thought, ‘oh I probably want to write like this.’ ... When I was in college, I read *The House of Blue Leaves* and thought that this is how you could write poetry for the stage and it wouldn’t sound like T.S. Eliot.” Paula Vogel (*How I Learned to Drive*) acknowledges three gods of playwriting: “María Irene Fornés, Caryl Churchill and John Guare. I’ve read all of his plays. I love his writing. He’s major. I do a whole rap on how he has influenced me as a feminist writer, and I think Guare is the heir to Tennessee Williams in this respect, in terms of the construction of female character.”

“When I read *House of Blue Leaves* in high school, it was like a lightning bolt,” says David Lindsay-Abaire (*Kimberly Akimbo*). “Like a lot of John’s work, it’s hysterically funny and profoundly sad at the same time.” According to Craig Lucas (*Prelude to a Kiss*), Guare showed “that conventional wisdom about what constitutes a play was interesting but not necessarily useful in creating a new one. ... John opened that door for me, rather, he threw it wide, it fell off its hinges. I felt freed.” “I feel very comfortable in the world of Guare,” comments Christopher Durang (*Beyond Therapy*). “I love ... the comic writers who keep surprising us in the midst of their humor with sudden intrusive blasts of sadness, sentiment, fear, the whole spectrum of human emotion.”

## Talk About...



### The American Dream

The “American Dream” refers to the belief that prosperity in the United States depends on one’s gumption and tenacity, not on class, privilege or place of origin. The theme has inspired many playwrights, from Clifford Odets to Sam Shepard. Does the “American Dream” still exist? Do you know anyone who has realized the “American Dream”?

### If I Could

John Guare: “Show business offers more solid promises than Catholicism.” Would you rather be a star or a saint? Why?

# The Big Boom

**“The real trick is to sell the explosion.”**

Guare’s script indicates that an explosion rocks the apartment during the second act of *The House of Blue Leaves* — but not to worry, the effect is mostly smoke and mirrors.

“It takes a synchronized coordinated effort to create an explosion,” says Jesse Aasheim, associate production manager for the Mark Taper Forum. Pyrotechnics are possible inside the theatre, but *The House of Blue Leaves* designers are layering together all of their disciplines to simulate the blast without using an incendiary device.

No matter. “The real trick,” says Aasheim, “is to sell the explosion.”

This particular production is taking a mechanical approach. “There will be smoke, certainly,” Aasheim allows, “but the primary effect will be a sound cue with speakers set in the location of the explosion, most likely with

a deep sub-woofer, followed by a lighting effect to create some sort of flash.”

The blast occurs down the hallway from the apartment so, following the blast, smoke will roll in through the front door. Smoke effects are designed and supervised by lighting designer Donald Holder (*Yellow Face*), utilizing a smoke machine, a fogger or a hazer. “Because an explosion suggests an immediate blast,” says Aasheim, “we’ll probably have a manifold backstage that fills with smoke, so that the smoke is measured and collected and ready to go on cue.” But before that smoke reaches the actors, it has to pass muster with Actors’ Equity regulations concerning the chemicals involved, typically requiring water-based smoke as opposed to oil-based or mineral-based. “The concern is that the smoke doesn’t wreak havoc with the actors’ voices,” Aasheim explains. However, he notes, inevitably someone in the audience starts

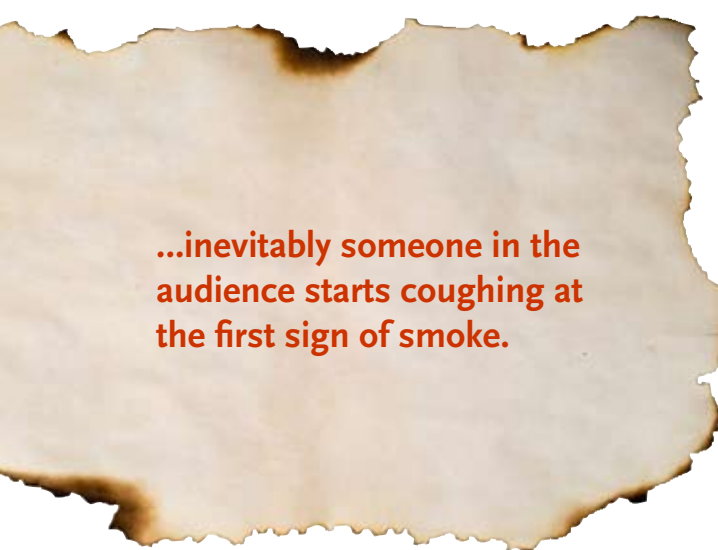
coughing at the first sign of smoke, “and once that happens, everyone coughs, no matter what type of smoke you use.”

After the boom, the flash and the rolling smoke, “it’s up to the scenic designer to determine how realistic we want the explosion to be,” Aasheim explains. While set designer David Korins (*Yellow Face*) has not revealed his plans, Aasheim predicts there won’t be any shattering glass, “but you can expect bookshelves to tumble and framed pictures to fall.”

How does that happen? These days, the fancy high-tech approach is to use electromechanical devices called solenoids that make it possible to push a button that flips a switch that causes something to shift a quarter-of-an-inch that sends something else into motion. Or, there’s always the low-tech approach, in which “crew guys backstage push something over with a stick,” says Aasheim.

In gauging the impact of the explosion on the apartment, the designers have to keep a particular eye on the details. Costume designer Gabriel Berry has to anticipate the impact of the blast on the costumes and makeup. The laws of physics will apply to the furniture and props on the set. “If we don’t get it right,” Aasheim assures, “our audiences will let us know about it.” In this case, the piano onstage in *The House of Blue Leaves* will most likely be wired for sound to recreate the piano wires reverberating to the concussion of the “ka-boom.”

The upside to the bomb blast in *The House of Blue Leaves* is that once things go crazy, the backstage crew doesn’t have to rush to clean up the chaos. “We don’t have to repair the damage during a brief blackout between scenes,” Aasheim observes. “Once that bomb goes off, the apartment and its occupants are headed further away from normal and into decline.”



**...inevitably someone in the audience starts coughing at the first sign of smoke.**

# Playlist

Songs to set the mood

*Time of the Season*, The Zombies  
(written by Rod Argent)

*You've Made Me So Very Happy*, Blood, Sweat & Tears  
(Brenda Holloway, Patrice Holloway, Frank Wilson, Berry Gordy)

*Spinning Wheel*, Blood, Sweat & Tears  
(David Clayton-Thomas)

*I've Gotta Be Me*, Sammy Davis Jr.  
(Walter Marks)

*Put a Little Love in Your Heart*, Jackie DeShannon  
(Jackie DeShannon, Jimmy Holiday, Randy Myers)

*Dominique*, Debbie Reynolds  
(Sister Sourire, Noel Regney)

*Do Your Thing*, Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band  
(Charles Wright)

*Touch Me*, The Doors  
(Robby Krieger)

*The Vatican Rag*, Tom Lehrer  
(Tom Lehrer)

*More Today Than Yesterday*, Spiral Starecase  
(Pat Upton)

*White Christmas*, Bing Crosby  
(Irving Berlin)

*Twisted*, Joni Mitchell  
(Ross and Grey)

*Animal Crackers in My Soup*, Shirley Temple  
(Irving Caesar, Ted Koehler, Ray Henderson)

*I'll Never Fall in Love Again*, Tom Jones  
(Burt Bacharach, Hal David)

*A Time for Us/The Love Theme from Romeo and Juliet*,  
Henry Mancini and His Orchestra  
(Larry Kusik, Eddie Snyder, Nino Rota)

## A Desert Island

If you were stuck on a Desert Island, who from *Blue Leaves* would you like for company: Artie, Bananas, Bunny, Corrinna, Ronnie, Billy, a nun or John Guare himself? Why?

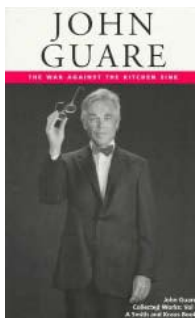
## Websites

[wgaeast.org/index.php/articles/article/65](http://wgaeast.org/index.php/articles/article/65)

A fascinating conversation between John Guare and Horton Foote

[www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

Meet the Pope! The official Vatican Website, with a link to secret Vatican archives



## Books

***John Guare: The War Against the Kitchen Sink***

by John Guare (Smith & Kraus, 1996)

This volume contains Guare's essay and five plays: *Moon Under Miami*, *Rich and Famous*, *Cop-Out*, *Home Fires* and *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*.

***Plays: I***

by John Guare (Methuen Drama, 1999)

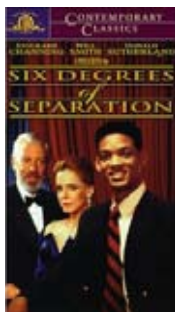
This volume includes *The House of Blue Leaves*, *Landscape of the Body*, *Bosoms and Neglect* and *Six Degrees of Separation*.

## Film & Video:

***Atlantic City***

directed by Louis Malle (Paramount, 1981)

Malle on Guare: "Guare's grace and inventiveness with words, his superb contempt for conventional psychology and plot coherence, and his brilliance at tearing apart the logical and the expected make him stand pretty much alone." Guare received a Best Original Screenplay Oscar nomination for *Atlantic City*.



***Six Degrees of Separation***

directed by Fred Schepisi (MGM, 1993)

The playwright's screen adaptation of his own award-winning 1990 drama

***Charlie Rose*** (November 23, 2000)

with Wendy Wasserstein, John Guare and David Henry Hwang (Charlie Rose, Inc., 2006)

A reflection on the 75th anniversary of the Yale School of Drama.

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