

Roundabout Theatre Company

HURRAH

AT LAST



From Page To Stage Production Guide

HURRAH AT LAST

by *Richard Greenberg*
directed by *David Warren*

PRODUCTION GUIDE

WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

How strange the truth appears at last!
I feel as old as worn out shoes:
I know what I have lost or missed,
Or certainly will some day lose
I know the follies whom I kissed,
Whom self-deception will accuse—

And yet this knowledge, like the Jews,
Can make me glad that I exist!
Although I must my self accuse
Not when I win, but when I lose:
Although this knowledge comes and goes,
Although the wind and the rain persist:
How glad I am that I exist!

With a hey ho, the stupid past,
And a ho ho, a ha ha and a hurrah at last.

What does it mean to be an artist in America today? If you are good at using your creative powers to craft a popular tale, it just may lead you down the road to riches. On the other hand, if your personal vision is somehow different—too bleak, too esoteric, too profound—you may find yourself hungry and sick and on the verge of eviction. Certainly there are levels in-between, but it is these two extremes that are examined by Richard Greenberg in his angst-ridden comedy, *Hurrah at Last*.

Through Laurie, a novelist, we come to know the starving artist. Shivering with fever, desperate for money, he is forced to celebrate Christmas with his well-to-do family and friends, one of whom is a very successful playwright. Laurie's plight allows us to examine our materialistic society from a humorous angle. For Laurie, money is the key to happiness, but only because he doesn't have any. The people in his life who do have money all seek something else for their happiness, whether it be respect for their work, children, or some peace and quiet. For each person in the play who desires something for their happiness, there is another who has what the first wants but it doesn't make them happy.

Inspired by a poem by Delmore Schwartz, the play serves to remind us that happiness, an elusive state at best, can best be won when we can let go of our desires and enjoy what we have and who we are.

—Delmore Schwartz
From "I Did Not Know the Spoils of Joy"



Oliver (Paul Michael Valley) grips Laurie (Peter Frechette) in an intimate scene in *Hurrah at Last*.

WHO'S WHO

Laurie (played by Peter Frechette): A novelist in his mid-thirties with an acerbic wit. Misunderstood by his family, he feels his talent is under appreciated and, like many artists, is full of angst about his income.

Thea (played by Ileen Getz): Laurie's sister, with whom he shares a strong sibling bond. Thea possesses a great maternal instinct, and is concerned that her family holidays run smoothly.

Eamon (played by Kevin O'Rourke): Thea's husband, who is very generous with his friendship and his money. A generally good-natured person, he is facing a difficult period in his marriage to Thea.

Oliver (played by Paul Michael Valley): A playwright and Laurie's friend, who is enjoying new-found fame. Oliver's exuberant affection for Laurie is something that puzzles everyone, including Laurie.

Gia (played by Judith Blazer): Oliver's fertile Italian wife, who aspires to be a singer and has difficulty communicating with those around her.

Sumner (played by Larry Keith): Laurie and Thea's father, who is so quiet that he seems to blend into the scenery. Perhaps not surprisingly, he shares his true feelings only in the calmest of moments.

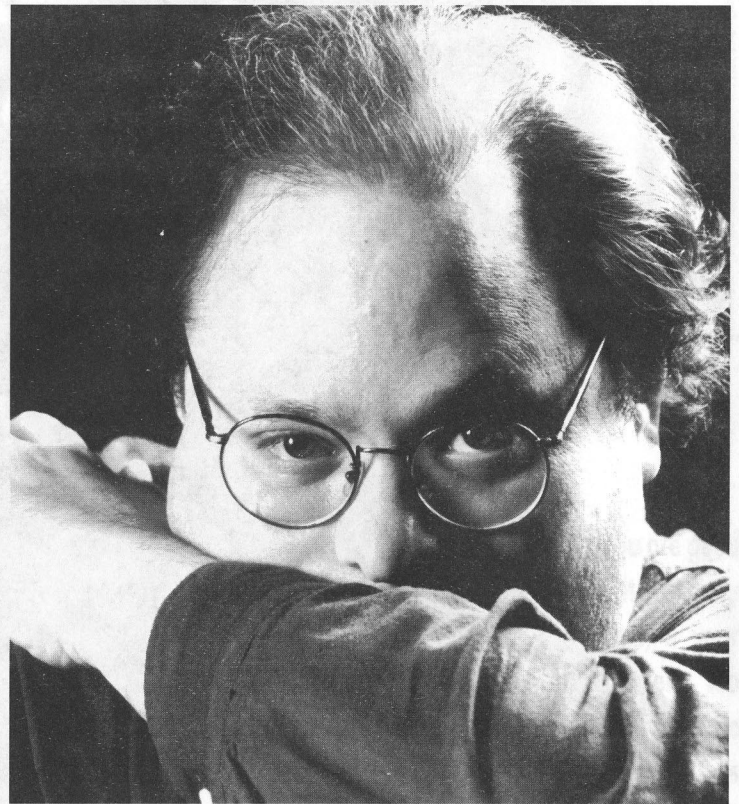
Reva (played by Dori Brenner): Laurie and Thea's demanding mother, who finds fault with everything and everyone, except herself. Though she wants the best for her children, she often appears to have only her own interests at heart.

Thunder (played by Dreyfus): A very large dog who has no respect for valuable and fragile objects.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Richard Greenberg

Richard Greenberg's plays include *Night and Her Stars*, *The Extra Man*, *The American Plan*, *Eastern Standard*, *The Author's Voice*, *The Maderati*, *Life Under Water*, *Three Days of Rain*, *Safe As Houses* and *Hurrah at Last*. For PBS he's written *Ask Me Again* ("American Playhouse," directed by Deborah Reinisch), *Life Under Water* (also "American Playhouse," directed by Jay Holman) and *The Sad Professor* (part of the "Trying Times" anthology). He provided the text adaptations for *The Hunger Artist*, Martha Clarke's performance piece on Kafka. Jujamcyn Theatres commissioned him to write a new book for the Rodgers and Hart musical *Pal Joey* which was produced in 1992 at the Huntington Theatre under the direction of David Warren. He is currently writing the book for the Broadway musical, *The Royal Family of Broadway* for the Weisslers. Mr. Greenberg received the *NY Newsday* 1985 Oppenheimer Award and has twice had his work included in the "Best Short Plays" anthologies and four times in the Burns Mantle "Best Plays" yearbook. He is a graduate of the Yale School of Drama.



A CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTISTS

Roundabout is pleased to have David Warren back with us this season. Subscribers will remember his direction of *Summer and Smoke* by Tennessee Williams, and more recently George Bernard Shaw's *Misalliance*. This time he is directing *Hurrah at Last*, a new play written by Richard Greenberg. Greenberg, who first came into the public eye with *Eastern Standard*, worked with Warren on the premier production of *Hurrah At Last* at South Coast Repertory Company. Consulting dramaturg Rachel Shteir had a conversation with Warren and Greenberg about their work on this remarkable play.

Rachel Shteir: Tell me about *Hurrah At Last*.

Richard Greenberg: I first wrote this play in January '97, to collect a commission from South Coast Rep.

RS: This is a play about a mysterious illness which transforms the

main character. Was there any particular event in your own life that inspired it?

David Warren: Rich, she's asking if you've been sick.

RG: (laughs) I had been hospitalized a few years earlier with Hodgkins. And it was difficult for the doctors to figure out what it was because there were these masking symptoms. So I guess you could say the play came out of my desire to write about that.

RS: You've said elsewhere that *Hurrah At Last* is in a lighter vein than some of your earlier work like *Eastern Standard* and *The American Plan*. But in some ways to me it seems more diabolical, more ferocious.

RG: Well, it's more farcical, I hope. It's more on the surface in every way. At the same time, structurally it's more shambling and freewheeling, less tight and more playful. (cont'd page 5)

Laughing and Thinking and Feeling: The Fruits of Richard Greenberg's Writing

Dramatists have a great array of writing tools at their disposal to get their audiences to giggle, chortle and guffaw. As a seasoned playwright, Richard Greenberg knows about different techniques of comedy, and in *Hurrah at Last*, he employs a variety of comedic techniques. Theatregoers will find this play interesting because Greenberg uses comic techniques not only to tickle the audience's funny bones, but to engage them on several psychological and emotional levels as well.

Because the principal character in *Hurrah at Last*, Laurie, is a writer, Greenberg provides him with some remarkably witty lines. Some of these humorous quips are adaptations or variations on common sayings, like Laurie's unique take on the cliché that "money doesn't buy happiness." Laurie is also highly sensitive when the people around him use mixed metaphors, such as the odd description of the sudden change in one character's life resembling a tidal wave knocking at the door. Such jokes appeal to an audience's intellectual side and their appreciation of the English language.

Hurrah at Last is not limited to verbal jests, but also includes several instances of physical comedy. This type of comedy is essentially the opposite of word-humor, since it appeals primarily to spectators' eyes rather than to their minds. One of the most common forms of physical comedy is the prat-fall, but other gestures generate laughs. Sneezing, for example, can be a very humorous action, especially when it's done at an inappropriate time. Physical comedy can be thought of as a "pure comedy," since it rarely needs an explanation and can produce immediate and intense responses. Because character's actions are also a function of their personality, however, physical comedy is also an effective method to depict a character's weakness or internal conflicts.

Other comic mechanisms can relate to a character's increase or decrease in status, also known as inflation or deflation. Though

deflation can sometimes take a tragic turn, as when King Lear is reduced to wandering the wilderness in a rainstorm, it can also be used for comic purposes, especially if the change of status is sudden or unexpected. In *Hurrah at Last*, Laurie's status as a writer is often subjected to sudden shifts, as one moment his writing abilities may be praised and a few moments later someone else may belittle his talent. This contrast of inflation and deflation not only makes Laurie's experience comic, but it also generates some audience sympathy for him; most people have

had the experience of feeling rather proud and accomplished, only to have someone kick the chair out from under them. Akin to the idea of inflation is the classic comic device of exaggeration. Greenberg utilizes this device in several ways in *Hurrah at Last*. From the size of Oliver's dog to the preciousness of Thea and Eamon's art collection, rarely does *Hurrah at Last* incorporate ideas or concepts that are commonplace and regular.

Contrast is another comic technique found in *Hurrah at Last*. A talkative, opinionated wife with a reticent husband, and a woman who is constantly pregnant paired with

another who cannot conceive, are just two of the combination of characters who contrast strongly with each other. When the subject of someone's speech contrasts with the tone of voice, the result is sarcasm, another form of comedy Greenberg sprinkles throughout his play. Opposition is a particularly pungent form of contrast, especially when a character does the exact opposite of what one would expect him to do. In the play, Laurie asks his friend Oliver to do something revealing: either to disclose how much money he earns or to drop his pants. The response is not what most people would expect (or do), and it generates some of the play's biggest laughs. By incorporating strong contrasts of character, expression and events, Greenberg creates a unique perspective for the world of his play, which appeals to the theatregoer's imagination. (cont'd on next page)



Peter Frechette as Laurie

(A Conversation with the Artists, cont'd)

DW: What I love about this play is that I'm never ahead of myself--it continues to surprise me.

RS: *What role does this mysterious illness play here?*

DW: The play is about someone who slipped out of the world--Laurie--and made sense of it and his friends. He develops an illness and is confused and in his journey, much is clarified.

RG: What happens is that during his illness, Laurie starts to see deep down who the rest of the characters are; he has an alienated sense of clarity. He muddles fact and truth and arranges data, to get at what seems true.

RS: *I was intrigued by how savage Laurie is to the other characters. Is this how we are to each other?*

RG: Laurie experiences tenderness. We battle each other; our kindness is just a part of our character over the whole spectrum.

DW: Real tenderness involves trying to get at truth beyond appearances.

RS: *David, what's the difference between the South Coast Repertory production and this one?*

DW: The most obvious thing is that the set at the Roundabout is smaller than the South Coast Rep one. What that's meant is that the people are closer together on stage and so their responses are closer. And there's no place to hide. And we've added a turntable which allows the audience to see different perspectives of the world.

RS: *How has the play itself changed?*

PRODUCTION GUIDE FOR HURRAH AT LAST

Margaret Salvante, Education Director

Philip A. Alexander, Education Assistant

Liz Rothaus, Marketing Associate

RG: I've reshaped the ending a bit and done some rewrites, but structurally it's pretty much the same.

RS: *What does Hurrah At Last refer to?*

RG: It is a line from a poem.

RS: *The Delmore Schwartz one...*

RG: Yes, it's about the knowledge the play strives for, which is essentially "Hooray, it's terrible" that encapsulates the meaning of the play.

RS: *In much of your work, you pair two characters who feed off each other almost parasitically. Here Laurie is the brilliant outsider, but he needs others for the more mundane things of life.*

RG: Yes, I'm interested in how fractured people are. Often in my plays there are two characters who are really one person, bifurcated or disturbed oddly. People create the myth of the normal. I like to see everyone pushed to the extreme.

(Laughing and Thinking and Feeling, cont'd)

Another classic element of comedy found in *Hurrah at Last* is repetition, known in vaudeville slang as the "running gag." Greenberg includes several jokes that repeat, such as the use of obscure words which may or may not be the original titles of Woody Allen movies, or the awkwardness of asking people about their income. Like verbal comedy, repetition appeals to an audience's intellectual side, since the spectators can see the different ways in which the same ideas or phrases are applied.

By using several comic techniques, then, *Hurrah at Last* becomes a play rich in meaning and tone. Richard Greenberg uses the flexibility of comedy to create almost contradictory effects on his audience—from captivating the audience's emotions, intellect or imagination, to creating a simultaneous real and unreal world, or to physically depicting a character's true nature. So next time you find yourself laughing in the theatre—whether it's during Richard Greenberg's play or another playwright's—don't be surprised if you also find yourself thinking or feeling emotionally involved: that's the power of comedy.

ACTIVITIES: Exploring the Artist's Place in Society

Before the Play:

Investigate the life of an artist. Perhaps you know an artist, someone who writes books or creates sculpture for a living, for example. If you get the opportunity, ask your artist about her/his work and creative process. If you don't know any professional artists, find a book about one. Many actors and performers have biographies, as do many authors and playwrights. One such book is *Timebends*, Arthur Miller's autobiography. As you interview or read about your artist, consider the following questions:

- Who were the people closest to the artist: friends, family, or other artists?
- What made these relationships important to the artist?
- How did other members of the artist's community (e.g., business people, scientists, non-artists) treat the artist? With respect, indifference, or disdain?
- How did the artist view his/her place in society?

During the Play:

Several characters in *Hurrah at Last* are artists. Laurie and Oliver are writers, for example, and Gia is a singer. As you watch the play, think about their roles as characters as well as their status as artists. The following questions might help you:

- How are the two characters on stage similar to each other? How are they different?
- How does the artist feel about her/his work?
- How do the other characters feel about the artist's work?
- Does the artist care about the other characters' perception of his/her art?
- Does the character's status as an artist change during the course of the play?

After the Play:

Create a work of art that depicts the process of creating a work of art. Perhaps you'd like to paint a picture of yourself painting a picture, as many famous artists—from Rembrandt and Vermeer to Norman Rockwell—have done. Or maybe you'd like to write a poem about writing a poem. As you develop your work of art, think about the role of the artist, and try to integrate your ideas into your creation. Here are some ideas to consider:

- Do you feel writers and artists are valued in our society? How do people demonstrate how they feel about artists?
- How can you tell an artist is a good artist? Can you trust the artist's impression of herself/himself, or should you rely only on what others think about the artist?
- What kind of experience is the process of creating art? Is it fun, or difficult, or both? Does it change from artist to artist?
- What does an artist need to create a work of art? Think about the physical requirements (e.g., special equipment and workspace), as well as the psychological and emotional necessities one must have to participate regularly in this unique type of work.

Send your finished poem or work of art to Roundabout and we'll share it with people who are involved in the production of *Hurrah At Last*.

Send it to the attention of: **Magaret Salvante**, Education Director,
Roundabout Theatre Company
231 W. 39th St. New York, NY 10018

or send an E-MAIL to:
Margies@roundabouttheatre.org

WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

What To Look For

The lower lobby of the Gramercy Theatre has a number of resources for your convenience. There is a refreshment counter where you can buy soda or a snack, but please remember that you will not be permitted to take these items into the theatre with you. Student discounts are available to those who show a student ID card. The lobby is also an art gallery, so you might want to have a look at the paintings we have on display.

Ticket Policy

As a student participant in *From Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

*Thank You For Your Cooperation
And Enjoy The Show!*

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