

# UPSTAGE



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AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY • FEBRUARY 2002

Bringing  
*An Almost  
Holy Picture*  
into Focus



# Finding One's Way

THE WRITER'S PERSPECTIVE

a discussion with Heather McDonald

**SAMUEL GENTLE**, the primary--and only--character in Heather McDonald's play *An Almost Holy Picture*, is a man who tells stories. The stories told by this former minister, now employed as the groundskeeper for the Church of the Holy Comforter, focus on the important events and people in Samuel's life. Among the central figures in Samuel's life is his daughter, Ariel, who was born with a rare disease. During the play's four parts--individually titled "Sighs Too Deep for Words," "The Grace of Daily Obligation," "An Almost Holy Picture," and "The Garden in Winter"--Samuel also presents various rituals from his life. Some of these rituals are related to religion and spiritual exploration--such as prayer and church services--while others are connected to the meaningful moments of everyday life--like bathing or sharing a meal with one's family. These rituals provide Samuel with a sense of order, as well as help him define his faith and his relationships with people close to him. As the audience listens to Samuel Gentle's stories, they are silent participants in an important ritual of self-discovery and enlightenment.

Dramatist Heather McDonald has won awards for several of her plays, including *An Almost Holy Picture*. Her other plays include *Dream of a Common Language*, *Rain & Darkness*, *The Rivers and Ravines*, and *Faulkner's Bicycle*. While *An Almost Holy Picture* was in rehearsal, Ms. McDonald answered a few questions about her playwriting craft for UPSTAGE.

## WHAT ARE THE THEMES YOU LIKE TO EXPLORE IN YOUR WRITING? HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT?

I am interested in how people go on after loss or catastrophe-- How people move through fear toward some kind of faith, especially the deep sorrows that never go away--things you have to attend to every day, things for which there is no cure.

In the past ten years or so, I have found that I am writing about loss in one form or another. There is a line in *An Almost Holy Picture* that says something like "Loss is what defines us." I think this is true, not in a bad or depressing way, but it is what sculpts us. This play came out of a time in life when I was thinking about that a lot. I was seeing these enormous and bewildering losses in my own life and the lives of dear friends and family. It caused me to look back to childhood and remember a terrible time in my family for my parents and my sister, who are real presences in this play. My father, my sister and my mother haunt this play.

## UPSTAGE

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As I was writing it I thought it was just in one-person form temporarily, and that the other characters Samuel mentions (like Miriam or Inez) were so clear to me that surely they would wander in to the play at some point. But it just came to me in his voice, and I decided, "Well, even if I hate one-person things, I ought to trust this." Finally I determined that this is a journey you truly go on alone and that's why only one man stands there onstage by himself.

**WHO ARE YOUR FAVORITE AUTHORS?  
WHAT KIND OF WRITING INSPIRES YOU?**

I love Chekhov, especially Uncle Vanya. I would most like to have tea at the Plaza with Tennessee Williams and his sister Rose, who believed herself to be the Queen of England, and then go shoe-shopping (all three of us). I love Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*, Maria Irene Fornes's *Fefu and Her Friends*, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, and everything by Caryl Churchill.

Poetry also inspires me. For years now I have had a poem by Leonard Cohen, called "Anthem" taped over my desk. It goes:

*Ring the bells that still can ring.  
Forget your perfect offering.  
There is a crack in everything.  
That's how the light gets in.*

Also visual things - paintings, images -- usually set my playwriting in motion. I'll see an image somewhere that just won't go away, and then I start writing in order to try and find out what it means or who it is.

**HOW DID YOU DEVELOP AN INTEREST  
IN WRITING PLAYS?**

I turned to playwriting when I was 21 or 22 because I thought it was impossible to figure out what people were really thinking or why they did the things they did (as you have to do with a novel). I still think that people are unbelievably mysterious, magical and infuriating -- but as a playwright, all you had to do was write down what they did and what they said, and I thought, "I can do that." As a student at New York University, I was so hungry for the craft. I still love it - probably more than ever. I want a play to be bigger and its own, and not try to be like movies or television. I love the theatrical magic of real spectacle; there is a visual world that belongs only to the stage, and I love that metaphorical, dreamlike world.

Looking back, it seems to me that my first plays are -- in very different ways and places and people and settings -- about the effort to find one's way through very limited or squashed circumstances. I was interested, and still am, in how people find small ways to thrive in confining situations. It reminds me of a quote I kept for a long time, though I've forgotten who said it: "Style is the manifestation of a free will on a limited environment."



Heather McDonald



# Rehearsal as Ritual

THE STAGE MANAGER'S PERSPECTIVE

by Roy Harris

*Roy Harris Explains How the Duties of the Stage Manager Become Rituals for Cast and Crew.*

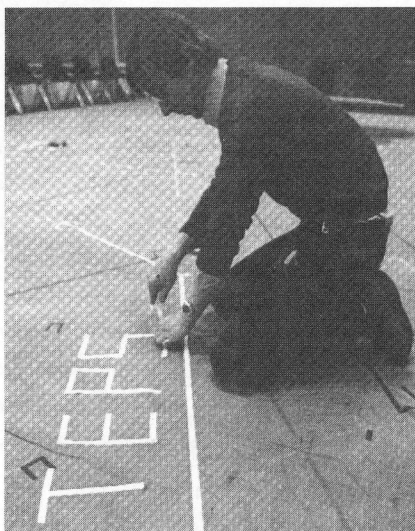
The chief responsibility of the stage manager is to be organized. If the rehearsal starts at 10:00am, I'm there at least by 9:30am, usually before. Stage managers have to set up the rehearsal space for the scene we're working on and get the props ready. Then later in the day, if we switch scenes, we have to set up those props. You also have to make sure that everybody is contacted for every rehearsal, what time they have to be there and what scenes are being worked on. You also have schedule that together with other events; for instance, an actor will rehearse for two hours, and then have a half hour break, and then go for a costume fitting. You have to organize all that.

My job also is to help make an atmosphere relaxed enough to be as creative as possible, for people. If I see something in a room that I think is not a good sign, I will do something about it, if I can. I may go to the director and mention that I sense something's wrong, and the director may make a suggestion. My job is not to make it right; it's just to create an atmosphere that is friendly and warm and embracing in the best sense.

Sometimes actors will get there on time and they'll spend ten minutes chatting. For one play I was rehearsing, when the cast first came in the morning, there was a little five-minute check up about how everybody's spouses were. You could think, "Oh, we're wasting time." But it was a part of people melding into getting ready to work. Some people have to chat about their personal things in order to dispel them so they can "go into another place" creatively. Other people have to chat about personal lives in order to feel relaxed about doing the ritual of working on a scene. (Of course there

have been times when people were chatting up a storm and I've had to say, "Hey guys, we got to get to work.")

To me, the rehearsal process is about discovery. The emotional texture of your show will be determined by how much you discover about the characters, about the relationships, about the whole situation. It actually is a ritual, the ritual of discovering what the play is about.



One of a stage manager's responsibilities is to prepare the rehearsal space by marking locations of key set elements. (NY Public Library Picture Collection)

My job as a stage manager is also to maintain a show throughout its run. All stage managers have to write some sort of daily report which includes notes about props, the set, costumes or the cast, among other things, because, in my mind, my job is to understand the play as well. (Most stage managers don't think of it that way. I'm not saying it's necessarily better, it's just the way I need to do it.)

I write a great deal about what we learn about the play: why certain things are occurring on stage or what the meaning of

the action is. I then have a reference to use if something feels odd to me later in the run. Stage managers often need to say to an actor "This moment is not working anymore." (An actor doesn't do it deliberately, it just happens.) A scene may have too much of one kind of emotion that it didn't have originally. If I have a record, I can go back and say "Remember in rehearsal, when we talked about this? Here's what we were after, and it's gotten a little different." It's especially useful if the show has a very long run, and you're going to be responsible for putting new actors into it later. If daily reports are full, then I've got all this great information about what went on in rehearsal.

A stage manager has rituals in other ways. For instance, when I'm doing the show in the theatre, I always arrive an hour and a half early before the show; it doesn't matter what show it is. I come in and I have a cup of coffee. I may chat with a couple of stagehands I run into. It's part of my ritual. I take the calling book to the calling desk, usually a half hour before the house opens. I'll put on the headset to make sure it works, and if necessary, I will practice transitions.

For instance, when I did *The Heidi Chronicles* on Broadway, it was incredibly complicated technically. I had one ten-second transition that had 18 cues. For the first six months of that show, I went to the calling desk at about 7:00pm, and I would go over every transition, calling all the cues, simply as a rehearsal for me. I was so scared I was going to screw it up. Again it's ritual, it's a form of rehearsal. In a way rehearsing something is ritual. You're going over the same material to see what meaning is there; you're going over material again and again to see what new meaning you can find in it.



# Portraits of Rituals

Rituals take many forms. All such personal rituals enable us to come to terms with the reality of each day, imposing some kind of order on what otherwise might be chaos.

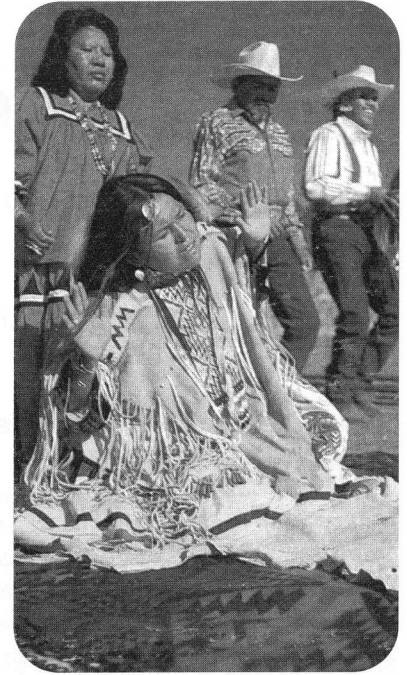
--James Roose-Evans, *Passage of the Soul*



Buddhist Monks preparing for discussion with their Master. (NY Public Library Picture Collection)



Nuns praying. (NY Public Library Picture Collection)

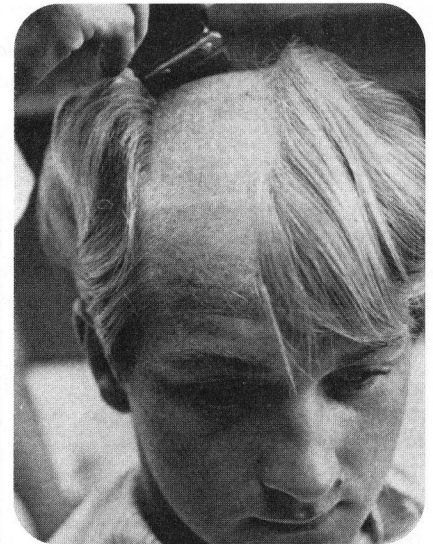


Sacred Apache "Sunrise Dance", the primary celebration of Apache identity. (NY Public Library Picture Collection)

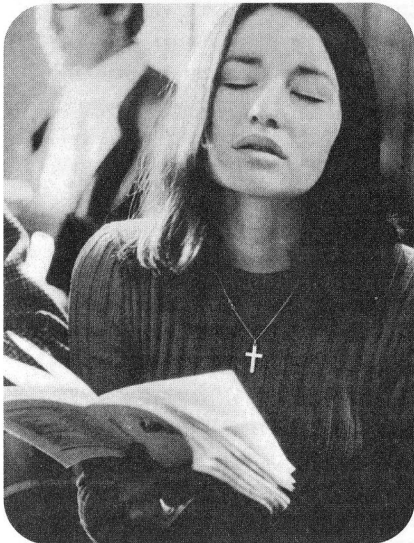
## Michael Mayer

director for *An Almost Holy Picture*

For me, this play isn't so much about faith as it is about personal possibility. That's what I relate to, as I look at this play again and again... Samuel Gentle has a lot of physical rituals in his life, which gives us a lot of permission to be inventive in rehearsal. Because it's an abstract world that we're living in, and because there's so much ritual, I've found that we can make up our own rituals, too.



Cutting hair, in this case as part of entry into military service, can be a ritual that shows membership in a group. (NY Public Library Picture Collection)



For an actress in rehearsal, memorizing lines can take on the intensity of prayer. (NY Public Library Picture Collection)



Hopi Flute Ceremony, 1902. (NY Public Library Picture Collection)



# Picturing Sound

THE SOUND DESIGNER'S PERSPECTIVE

by Rob Kaplowitz

## The Designing Process: Clearing the Mind

When I first see the text, I have to forget everything. I design for a lot of new plays, and one thing I've learned is that I don't know anything at all. I have to start from scratch every play. Sometimes I just have to look for what the overarching theme to the play is and then what my hook into the play is going to be. I have some tools in my bags, but I have to walk in with a blank slate because in this play we're sort of giving you the inside of Samuel's mind.

I read the script a lot, and I have a little ritual. The first time I read the script, I read through without a pencil, without music on, without any ideas. I just try to read it and put it down and walk away from it. I try to read it as a reader first, as an audience member, a theatergoer, just to see what it is. Then I go into as many rehearsals as I can and watch the actors. Sometimes I'll even watch the auditions.

## Samuel Gentle's Perspective

The play provides very traditional storytelling. Samuel Gentle's on-stage, telling a story.

But he's not going to the places he describes in a naturalistic way. He says in the play a couple of times, "I can only give you the images I know." So everything that we see is filtered through this character. It's not about Acoma, New Mexico, or Truro, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. It's about Samuel Gentle's experiences and perceptions of Acoma and Truro and the churchyard in which he's a gardener. Looking at the play thematically, it's the journey towards knowledge itself. For me, designing this play was a question of how do we find these sounds through Samuel.

## Finding the Sounds

Mitch Greenhill and Michael Mayer, the director, sat in a garage in La Jolla, California, with a member of the Ute Indian tribe and they read the script together. They decided that the acoustic stuff was going to be an Indian flute. They sat there and they read the section of the script together and then they talked about it a little bit. Michael would read the text and then the flute player would play. He was just sort of improvising straight out of the text. That sound became the feeling of the desert. But, it's not the feeling of the desert to you or to me; it's the feeling of the desert to Samuel Gentle.



Cape Cod, Massachusetts is one location designers for *An Almost Holy Picture* had to convey. (NY Public Library Picture Collection)

One big struggle we had on this production, in terms of finding answers, was for is, Samuel's daughter. His ritual is to drop a bean in a jar for every day that Ariel was alive. We had to find a sound of this bean dropping. We asked ourselves, "Do we want to put a microphone in the jar?" We said that's not interesting. But we asked, what's the meaning of Samuel dropping that bean?

The way Scott Myers, the other sound designer, found to describe it was as "the plucking of a heartstring." He and I each made several attempts at it. He brought in this very high sound, but Michael Mayer didn't like it. Then I came in with a bow cello sound and that was a great sound, but it needed something more. So, then I combined a [plucking] cello and a bow cello and he liked that more. Then Scott came in with a pizzicato violin and then it was layer after layer, attempt after attempt after attempt, until we found a sound, this great combination of a whole bunch of different things.

There are other moments that we associate with Ariel, such as the song *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*, which is in the play. We played it in that layered sound, because it was Ariel's sound. There's another version of the song that's sung chorally because it's in the churchyard.

In the second section about the ritual of dream life, which is sleepwalking, Michael Mayer wanted a past where everything is punctuated constantly. It's very jarring, daily-life sounds. One of the things we established very early on is that the sounds you hear should have nothing to do with what's happening on stage. Samuel says "It's 5 am," and he drops his clothing and you hear this loud splash. Then he says, "I'm sleepwalking again" and you hear the winding of a clock. It's these natural sounds completely out of place because he's sleepwalking and things are coming at him all sorts of directions that he doesn't understand. 99% of the sound design for this show has nothing to do with a natural ambiance. ■

*Rob Kaplowitz designs music for theatre and dance that has been heard all over the world. His previous Roundabout credit was for Uncle Vanya, also directed by Michael Mayer.*



# Activities

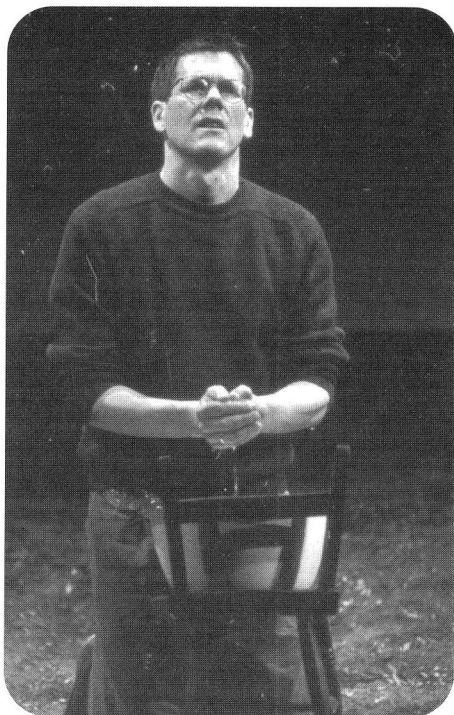
DISCOVERING YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE

## Before you go

**Explore** how people use both rituals and storytelling in their daily lives. Think about any rituals you participate in, either by yourself or with other people. Maybe your family has rituals about storytelling, such as when everyone is gathered for a holiday meal. You can also ask people in your family to tell you stories about rituals they perform, either informally or formally. As they tell you their stories, ask yourself these questions:

- Who participates in the ritual? Does it take place in a special location? How does the ritual help them develop meaning for their lives?

- How is this person telling me their story? How are they using their voice and gestures? How do they convey the thoughts and actions of other people? How does their choice of language affect the tone and mood of their story? How do they use props and setting to help communicate the important parts of the story?



Kevin Bacon in *An Almost Holy Picture*. The character of Samuel Gentle performs several types of rituals. Photo: Joan Marcus

## At the theatre

**Watch and Listen** for elements of ritual and storytelling in the play. Here are some questions to keep in mind:

- What are the rituals Samuel Gentle acts out during the course of the play? Who else, if anybody, is participating in the ritual? What does the ritual mean to Samuel? Which rituals do you think are the most important? Why?

- How does Samuel tell his story? How does the way he uses his voice and body help express the elements of his different stories? How effectively does he use props and setting to tell his story? How is the act of storytelling a ritual for Samuel?

## After the show

**Create** a work of art that explores ritual and storytelling. Perhaps you'd like to write a monologue, like Heather McDonald did, of one

person talking about how different rituals fit into his or her life. Or maybe you'd like to write a play or a story about someone looking for meaning in their life, and by doing so, develops a uniquely personal ritual. Some questions you might want to think about could be:

- Does the character's ritual draw on other established rituals, or is it uniquely personal? Does the character talk about the ritual or participate in the ritual, or both? What meaning does the ritual have for the character?

- How does the character participate in storytelling? Does the character talk directly to the audience, or to other characters? Who are the other characters? What does the character get out of telling her or his story?

**Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the people who created *An Almost Holy Picture*.**

**Mail it to:**

Education Department  
Roundabout Theatre Co.  
231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200  
New York, NY 10018

**Or email to:**

[Phila@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:Phila@roundabouttheatre.org)



Meeting with friends to share stories can become a ritual. (NY Public Library Picture Collection)

# When you get to the Theatre:

## Ticket Policy

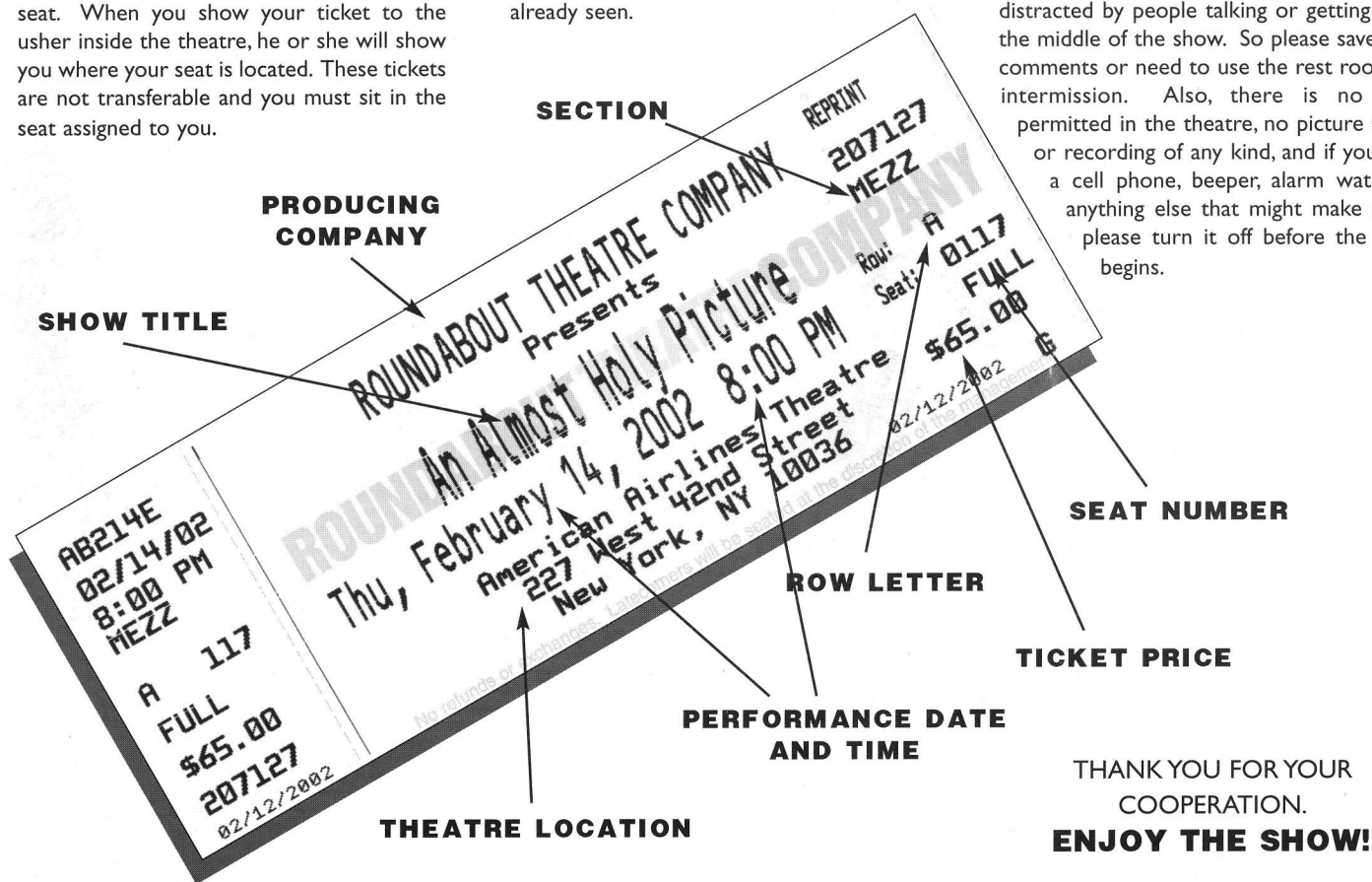
As a student participant in **Page To Stage** or **Theatre Access**, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside 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.

## Programs

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

## 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 cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



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