



Durang, Christopher (b. 1949)

by Brandon Hayes

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Christopher Durang is an openly gay playwright, screenwriter, and actor whose works have been produced on and off-Broadway and regionally since the late 1970s. A fiercely satirical comic dramatist, Durang often incorporates gay themes and gay characters in his plays.

Durang was born on January 2, 1949 in Montclair, New Jersey. He attended Harvard, where he earned a B.A. in English in 1971, and the Yale School of Drama, from which he received an M.F.A in Playwriting in 1974. At Yale he collaborated on several projects with fellow students Albert Innaurato, Wendy Wasserstein, Meryl Streep, and Sigourney Weaver.

In 1976, Durang's musical revue *A History of the American Film*, for which he wrote both lyrics and music, won a spot at the national Eugene O'Neill Playwriting Conference and was presented in Hartford, Los Angeles, and Washington. The next year it was produced on Broadway, earning Durang a nomination for a Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical.

In 1979, Durang and Sigourney Weaver presented *Das Lusitania Songspiel*, a parody of contemporary Broadway musicals performed in the style of a Brecht-Weill cabaret. Durang and Weaver both received Drama Desk nominations for their performances.

Durang's breakthrough in achieving critical and financial success came in 1981 with the Off-Broadway production of his scathing one-act play, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* (written in 1979), which has over the years become a popular vehicle for actresses as diverse as Nancy Marchand, Cloris Leachman, Lynn Redgrave, and many others.

In *Sister Mary Ignatius . . .*, Durang draws on his childhood experiences as a student in Catholic school. He satirizes the unbending dogmatism of the eponymous Catholic nun, who is oblivious to the absurdity of what she believes and to the harm that she causes. When four former students, one of them a contented gay man, return to embarrass Sister, she shoots two of them (including the gay man) dead.

The Off-Broadway success of *Sister Mary Ignatius* earned Durang his first Obie Award, and inaugurated a prolific period for him in the 1980s. Notable Durang plays from the decade include *Beyond Therapy* (1982), two semi-autobiographical plays, *Baby with the Bathwater* (1983) and *The Marriage of Bette & Boo* (1985), and *Laughing Wild* (1987), all of which premiered in successful Off-Broadway productions.

Durang, who jokes that he deserves an award for unproduced screenplays, has written a number of scripts for film and television, including *The House of Husbands* (co-written with Wendy Wasserstein, 1980), *The Nun Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1982), and *Beyond Therapy* (1986), adapted from his play. (Robert Altman's 1987 film *Beyond Therapy*, however, is only loosely based on Durang's screenplay, though the director and playwright share writing credit.) In 2001, Durang adapted *Sister Mary Ignatius . . .* as a Showtime television move directed by Marshall Brickman and starring Diane Keaton.

Since 1987, Durang's playwriting has become somewhat less prolific. *Sex and Longing* (1996), intended as an indictment of the Christian Right and starring Sigourney Weaver, was poorly received on Broadway. Durang's recent plays include a pop culture farce, *Betty's Summer Vacation* (1999), and a madcap riff on Dickens in *Mrs. Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge* (2002).

Among Durang's most recent works are a musical, *Adrift in Macao* (2002), with book and lyrics by Durang and music by Peter Melnick, and a play *Miss Witherspoon* (2005).

In addition to the plays mentioned above, Durang has written numerous one-act plays, sketches, parodies, and teleplays.

Durang's plays exhibit a distinctive style that blends comedy and anger into often over-the-top satire, which critic Charles Isherwood describes as "readily identifiable, absurdist-existentialist shtick." Durang uses often-hilarious exaggeration to comment on everyday life (a woman in *Laughing Wild* flies into a rage because she cannot reach a can of tuna); social and political events (in the same play, a bisexual man lashes out at the Christian Right's reaction to AIDS in the early years of the epidemic); and his own family (a gay man originally played by Durang observes his parents' unhappy marriage and divorce in the autobiographical *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*).

Durang often creates hyper-sexual characters (both gay and straight) in an attempt to unhinge attitudes about sexual behavior. In *Sister Mary Ignatius . . .*, Gary explains his homosexuality to his former teacher: "I was seduced when I was in the seminary . . . and then I went to New York and I slept with five hundred different people."

In Durang's more recent work, straight characters take on the hyper-sexuality stereotypically associated with gay men. Lulu in *Sex and Longing* needs to have sex every fifteen minutes, while in *Betty's Summer Vacation*, Buck proudly displays a scrapbook containing photos of his penis.

In addition to commenting on the state of contemporary life in the United States, Durang often reinterprets classic works of literature and film to exaggerate queer elements. His one-act play *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls* (1994) is a reworking of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* wherein the shy sister Laura becomes a young man obsessed with glass cocktail stirrers and whose "feminine" caller is a butch lesbian. Durang also makes explicit the underlying homosexuality of the character of the older brother, Tom, by having him cruise for sailors.

In addition to the Obie Award he received for *Sister Mary Ignatius*, Durang subsequently received Obies for *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* and *Betty's Summer Vacation*.

Although Durang is primarily a playwright, he is also an accomplished character actor. He has acted in his own works and, notably, with Julie Andrews in the Sondheim revue, *Putting It Together* (1993). Durang has made frequent appearances in small film and television roles.

Since 1994, Durang has been co-chair (with Marsha Norman) of the playwriting program at the Juilliard School in Manhattan.

Christopher Durang's popularity as a playwright was greatest in the 1980s, when his viciously funny, politically edged plays received a string of successful New York productions. His most successful plays combine autobiography with witty references to pop culture, literature, and drama. Durang's is a distinctive voice in American comedy, at once angry, intelligent, and queer.

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About the Author

Brandon Hayes is an undergraduate student concentrating in Humanities in the Honors Program at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Founder of a theater group, he has produced and directed Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, among other plays.