

by **BETH HENLEY** A WORLD PREMIERE COMEDY directed by **LISA PETERSON**

Introduction to the Guide

"I believe one cannot have a complete life as an actor without having performed or explored a Beth Henley piece... Henley fearlessly lets fly emotionally unashamed material and allows us to feel, to question, to argue, to hoot, to mourn."—Alfre Woodard

McCarter Theatre is thrilled to present the world premiere of *Ridiculous Fraud* by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Beth Henley. In her latest work, a McCarter commission, Henley tells the story of three grown brothers from a socially prominent New Orleans family whose reputation has seen better days. While their father serves time for fraud, Andrew, Kap and Lafcad Clay struggle to redefine their relationships with each other and to fathom the mysteries of love, family, commitment, responsibility and duck hunting.

Ridiculous Fraud is a bittersweet, often farcical comedy with a deeply human center. Hilarious, heartbreaking and self-dramatizing, its characters are as eclectic — and as unforgettable— as the city that is their home.

Plot Summary

On a summer evening, Lafcad Clay, the youngest of three adult brothers, is hiding in the garden of his family's New Orleans home. After returning from Lafcad's wedding rehearsal dinner in high spirits, his family is shocked to get a call with the news that he has broken off the engagement. The oldest brother, Andrew, is particularly upset, having hoped that Lafcad's marriage to a woman from a wealthy, respectable family would help clear the Clay family name after their father's incarceration for fraud. Meanwhile, Andrew's wife Willow is furious with her father Ed, who has recently married Maude just six months after his first wife's death. Andrew finds Lafcad in the garden and tries to convince him to call his fiancée and apologize. After Lafcad protests that he cannot marry her, Andrew and Kap, the middle brother, explain that he cannot go home, where the bride's family is waiting for him. Uncle Baites offers to take Lafcad to his cabin in the backwoods, along with Georgia, a young woman he met that morning and invited to the wedding.

In the fall, the family congregates at Uncle Baites's cabin to go to Andrew's fundraiser in his campaign for State Auditor. Lafcad is unemployed and living with Uncle Baites, as is Georgia. Andrew is annoying his family with his preachy speeches, and when they find his journal with his "daily affirmation," they cannot resist playing a trick on him. Willow has secretly decided to leave Andrew for Kap and slips a letter into Andrew's journal. Uncle Baites proposes to Georgia, and Andrew tries to talk him out of it. Kap, furious with Ed over a duck hunting incident, decides to leave, and Maude, who has cancer, asks for a ride home. Just as Willow is about to confront Andrew about ending their marriage, she learns that Kap and Maude have left together. Jumping to the wrong conclusions, she panics and tries to convince Andrew that everything is fine as Georgia announces her engagement to Baites.

That winter, Maude, who seems to be recovering from her cancer, visits Kap's cabin deep in the woods. Ed has discovered that Maude has been having an affair, and she is worried that he is out for retribution. Uncle Baites and Lafcad arrive to warn Kap that Ed is coming to the cabin, but Kap is nowhere to be found. When Andrew turns up, Uncle Baites leaves, furious with him for exposing Georgia as a 30 year-old who has abandoned her five children. Lafcad and

Andrew hear a noise in the loft and, thinking it is a wild animal, approach it with an arrow and a firewood. It turns out to be Maude, and in the confusion, Andrew stabs Lafcad with the arrow. We learn that it is Andrew, not Kap, who has been having the affair with Maude, and she leaves. When Kap returns, he and Andrew begin to argue, and the situation escalates into a fight. Lafcad tries to intervene and eventually knocks out Andrew. Ed shows up, and Kap allows Ed to cut his face, having promised Maude that he would be the decoy for Andrew. Andrew tries to convince Ed that he was the one having the affair, but Ed doesn't believe him.

On Easter Sunday, Andrew and Willow, now pregnant, visit his parents' tomb (his father died suddenly, just before his release from prison). Ed and Maude, whose cancer has returned, are with them. On his way to the cemetery, Lafcad has run into Georgia, now performing as a silver angel in Jackson Square, and arranged for her to come as a surprise for Uncle Baites. As the family honors the dead, we see the subtle changes in them and their relationships over the past year. Ed and Maude, then Andrew and Willow go home, leaving Lafcad serenely dancing with Georgia, as Kap makes duck calls and Uncle Baites reminisces about the dead.

Character Profiles

Lafcad Clay :

The youngest of the Clay brothers, Lafcad is a sensitive soul who calls off his own wedding. He thinks of himself as a poet and philosopher.

"It's simply that to insist on knowing things through mere fact and reason and sense—eschewing mystery, doubt and uncertainty— bodes emotional, mental, and spiritual decrepitude."

Andrew Clay:

The oldest of the Clay brothers, he has embarked on a political career. Ambitious, detail-oriented and worried about money, Andrew is intent on preserving the family name and his own honor in spite of his father's scandalous behavior.

"I must hold this family together all by myself without glue. There's no glue. Just blood. No paste."

Kap Clay:

The middle brother, he is laid back and has a reputation as a womanizer. He is a bit of a loner and an expert duck hunter.

"You can learn how to sound like a duck pretty quickly, but the next part is you're actually talking to those birds... In those flocks there'll be some dominant bird that'll kind of control the flock...I'm talking to that one bird. Convincing her to come to me. Basically it goes: demand, beg, plead."

Willow Clay:

Andrew's wife and Ed's daughter. She resents her father's marriage to Maude because it happened so soon after her mother's death. Dramatic and a little spoiled, she craves attention.

"I can't talk. There's so much to say. Don't you think there is? Do you think I'm pretty?"

Uncle Baites:

The Clay boys' eccentric, kind-hearted and philosophical uncle.

"I used to know things. There was a time I felt I had something of value to impart."

Georgia:

A runaway with a secret, befriended by Uncle Baites. She speaks her mind.

"Your speech was too long...I got so tired when you were talking. Everyone did."

Ed Chrystal:

Willow's father and Maude's husband. He is a wealthy man who helps fund Andrew's political campaign and is used to calling the shots.

"I consider you a loyal friend, just like your daddy. I can count on your daddy in every way."

Maude Chrystal:

Ed's second wife. She nursed Willow's late mother.

"The reason I love my husband is he lies. I understand people who do that. They have so many people they want to please. These liars."

Glossary

Antoine's: A famous New Orleans restaurant, Antoine's was established in 1840, making it the oldest family-run restaurant in the country and only three years younger than the oldest restaurant in the country. It is the birthplace of many dishes, including Oysters Rockefeller, Eggs Sardou and Pommes de Terre Souffles. Steeped in heritage, Antoine's still prints its menu in French. The fine restaurant has 15 lavish dining rooms.



Beignets and café au lait.

Beignet: From New Orleans, a square doughnut with no hole and with powdered sugar on top. The Café du Monde is known for its beignets.

Bienville: Oysters Bienville, a sumptuous dish served in many New Orleans restaurants. Antoine's Restaurant claims to have invented it in the late 1930s, and it is named for the Sieur de Bienville, Jean Baptiste le Moyne, founder of the City of New Orleans.

Cacophony: Discordant, jarring sounds.

Café au lait: Coffee mixed half and half with hot milk.

Café du Monde: When the Café du Monde opened in 1862 in the New Orleans French Market, by Jackson Square, it sold only coffee (particularly café au lait) and beignets. Its menu has expanded slightly today, but it remains very popular with both tourists and locals.

Crawfish: Crawfish are crustaceans that look like very small lobsters. South Louisiana is the crawfish capital of the world, with a multimillion dollar a year industry. Crawfish may be found in swamps, marshes, and rivers, and they are also raised on farms.

Decrepitude: The condition of being broken down, weakened, or worn out.

Echelon: A social class or a level of authority or responsibility

Eschew: To avoid or stop.

Incarcerated: Imprisoned.

Infinitesimal: Immeasurably tiny, insignificant.

Intestinal necrosis: The death of part of the intestine after its blood supply is cut off. It may be caused by a hernia, scar tissue, a blood clot, cholesterol buildup in the arteries that supply blood to the intestine, or very low blood pressure in patients with already narrow or weak arteries. Treatment requires surgery, and the condition can be fatal if not treated promptly.



Lafcadio Hearn: (1850-1904) Born to a Greek mother and an Anglo-Irish father, Hearn spent most of his childhood in Dublin, before moving to Cincinnati at age 19. He became a newspaper reporter and in 1877 moved to New Orleans, where he lived for about ten years writing a series of articles. He moved to Japan in 1889 and continued working as a journalist, writer, translator, and teacher until his death in 1904. He is particularly known for his books and lectures on Japan.

NRA: The National Rifle Association is an organization established for the protection of firearm rights in the U.S. Among its activities are political lobbying and sponsoring gun safety

training courses.

Paradox: A statement that seems to be contradictory but is actually true.

Parish: Louisiana is divided into parishes, rather than counties, a tradition kept from its days as a colonial territory of Spain and France. The Spanish Governor of Louisiana divided the province into 22 parishes in 1769.

Peccadillo: A minor infraction or sin.



A small potato cannon.

Potato cannon: A potato cannon is a device usually made out of PVC pipe that can be used to shoot various projectiles. Cannons may be combustion (using a propellant that is ignited to shoot the gun) or pneumatic (using compressed air). Legality for the use of these guns depends on local laws.

Progeny: Children, offspring, descendants.

Proximity: Physical nearness, accessibility.

Reneged: To break or take back a promise or commitment.

Retribution (payments): Something given or demanded in repayment, especially punishment.

Self-aggrandizement: The act or practice of enhancing or exaggerating one's own importance, power, or reputation.

Solvent: Financially stable, capable of meeting financial obligations.

Sovereign: One that exercises supreme, permanent authority, often a king or queen.

Taciturn: Reserved, silent.

Toadying: Flattering or deferring to others for self-serving reasons.

Torrid: Scorching, burning; passionate, ardent.

Uppity: Presumptuous, putting on airs beyond one's station.

Vitriol: Literally, sulfuric acid or a sulfate. It has come to refer to a bitterly abusive feeling or expression.

Wild Turkey: A popular brand of bourbon.

Duck Hunting



Two hunters in a duck blind, with decoys in the water. Photo courtesy of West End Outdoors.

In Louisiana, duck season extends roughly from mid-November through late January, with a separate season for Teal in September. Hunters construct duck blinds - small shelters camouflaged with leaves, reeds, and grasses - near lakes, marshes and swamps. These blinds conceal the hunters from the ducks as they fly to the water. Many hunters also place decoys in the water and use duck calls to attract the birds as they fly over the area. Rather than a rifle, which shoots a single bullet, duck hunters use a shotgun, which shoots a shell full of tiny pellets ("shot"), making it easier to hit the small birds with the least possible damage to the meat. Many hunters also work with dogs trained to retrieve ducks from the field or the water, often Labrador or golden retrievers. In Louisiana, the daily bag limit for Teal is four and for other ducks is six, with further specifications regarding the gender and type of duck (for example, no more than four of the six ducks

may be Mallards, no more than two of which may be females).

A Few Types of Ducks

Blue Teal: The Blue-Winged Teal is a particularly small duck, usually weighing just under a pound. They are usually the first ducks to migrate south in the fall and are most common in the southeast, living in swamps, wetland areas with grasslands, and fresh and brackish estuaries. The hunting season for Blue Teal is in September.

Canvasback: One of the largest North American diving ducks (averaging 2.5-2.7 pounds) and particularly wary, usually traveling in large groups. They are most often found in brackish bays and prairie marshes, nesting in areas with

vegetation to provide protective cover. In Louisiana, their population is currently low, so the hunting season is only 30 days, and the daily bag limit is one.

Mallard: The Mallard is the most common duck in the U.S. They tend to weigh 2.4-2.7 pounds and live in a variety of habitats including dry agricultural fields, shallow marshes, and oak-dominated forested wetlands.



Blue-winged teal. Photo courtesy of West End Outdoors.

The Culture of New Orleans

There is no city in the world quite like New Orleans. A product of French, Spanish, Irish, Italian, Native American and African influences, its Southern, Cajun, Creole and African-American cultures coexist, mostly peacefully, creating a vibrant crazy quilt of a city. Filled with bohemians and tourists, street performers and musicians, old families and new arrivals, it's a city of contradictions and decadent celebration, a city that embraces both delicate beignets and spicy gumbo.



The French Quarter, New Orleans



Photo by John Cooper

Above-ground tombs in a New Orleans cemetery.

New Orleans is a musical city, the home of jazz, Fats Domino, Wynton Marsalis, and Louis Armstrong. It has inspired writers from Tennessee Williams to William Faulkner to Anne Rice. And, of course, it is synonymous with Mardi Gras, a celebration of excess in the days before Lent. Mardi Gras organizations called Krewes spend all year and considerable sums of money preparing for the event, building and designing elaborate floats, and then riding them through the city, throwing beads and other small favors to the crowds. During Mardi Gras the rules of decorum seem to disappear.

New Orleans is a city full of beauty and ghosts. The French Quarter luxuriates in its decaying beauty, with 19th century homes decorated with lace-iron balconies

and Spanish moss. The dead are marched to burial by processions of musicians in jazz funerals, and in stylish cemeteries around the city, buried in above ground tombs, a concession to the soil and climate. It is, in short, a city where an "angel-robot-mime" fits in perfectly, picnics happen in graveyards, and the quirkiest and most eccentric inhabitants feel right at home.



A stately home in New Orleans's Garden District. Photo by Veselin Stoyanov

In recent months, the tragic destruction of Hurricane Katrina has put New Orleans much in the news. Many historic parts of the city, including the French Quarter, were spared or are being rebuilt, and the spirit of the city remains in those who called it home. Today's New Orleans isn't the pre-Katrina New Orleans of *Ridiculous Fraud*. Still, at this point in New Orleans history Henley's play seems very right. After all, as the actress Carol Kane once reflected: "Beth's characters are filled with hope. Insane, unstoppable hope against all reason. With this hope you are released to fly free in the face of doom."

"Carnival, for all its masks and disguises, mirrors New Orleans society, with its peculiar social hierarchies, its pockets of strange traditions, its wild diversity, its partiality to drama and spectacle." —Carol Flake, *New Orleans: Behind the Mask of America's Most Exotic City*



photo by Robert A. Walker

"The damp tropical heat, the permissive colonial regimes, the pomp-loving expatriate royalty, the human flotsam and jetsam washing up from the Mississippi, the enclaves of practical nuns and worldly priests, the pirates and prison escapees, the influx of Caribbean planters and slaves, the gens de couleur libres, the floods, the fevers, the voodoo altars, the madams of Storyville, the ragtime professors, Louis Armstrong, the spasm bands, the shot glasses of absinthe, the spices in the market, the iron-lace balconies, the jazz funerals, the Mardi Gras Indians, Tennessee Williams, and all the revelers just passin' through, made New Orleans a place like no other in America." — Carol Flake, *New Orleans: Behind the Mask of America's Most Exotic City*

"New Orleans' cemeteries are like New Orleans: they swing between destitution and opulence but always with style." — Andre Codrescu

TOP

Using This Guide in the Classroom



This resource guide enables teachers and leaders to explore drama as a mode of learning. Adding drama to the classroom is an active, process-oriented approach to education, in which the teacher and student interact together.

Drama-in-Education seeks to synthesize the activities of creative drama, arts-based curricula and theater conventions into experiences aimed at developing imagination, awareness of self and others, aesthetic taste and life skills. Often these goals are achieved through the examination of a particular theme or topic, which contributes to critical thinking about the world in which we live.

By providing structures and contexts that both excite the interest of participants and call for creative problem-solving, Drama-in-Education promotes deeper thinking about a wide variety of issues. This guide has been designed for teachers to utilize drama methods in an exploration of the themes and situations presented in the play. We encourage you to adapt these lessons and activities to your individual teaching situations, and thereby to discover the importance and power of drama in the classroom. The questions and activities included in this guide are designed to help students anticipate the performance and then to build on their impressions and interpretations after attending the theater. While most of the exercises provide specific instructions, please feel free to adapt these activities to accommodate your own teaching strategies and curricular needs.

Core Curriculum Standards

The Visual and Performing Arts are considered Core Curriculum areas for the New Jersey State Department of Education. This production of *Ridiculous Fraud* is designed to give your students exposure to the specific Core Curriculum Standards listed below.

Ridiculous Fraud and Curriculum Standards

This production of *Ridiculous Fraud* and related study materials will provide students with specific knowledge and skills to address the following Core Curriculum Content Standards in the Arts:

1.1	All students will acquire knowledge and skills that increase aesthetic awareness in dance, music, theater, and visual arts.
1.2	All students will refine perceptual, intellectual, physical, and technical skills through creating dance, music, theater, and/or visual arts.
1.4	All students will demonstrate knowledge of the process of critique.
1.5	All students will identify the various historical, social, and cultural influences and traditions which have generated artistic accomplishments throughout the ages and which continue to shape contemporary arts.
1.6	All students will develop design skills for planning the form and function of space, structures, objects, sound, and events.

Ridiculous Fraud is also designed to address the following Core Curriculum Standards in Language Arts Literacy:

3.1	All students will speak for a variety of real purposes and audiences.
3.2	All students will listen actively in a variety of situations to information from a variety of sources.
3.3	All students will write in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
3.4	All students will read various materials and texts with comprehension and critical analysis.

Pre-show Discussion Questions



1. Offer your students background information about playwright Beth Henley. Discuss what expectations they might have of *Ridiculous Fraud*.
2. Brainstorm a list of ideas and emotions that are associated with the word 'fraud.' What thoughts, phrases, or memories are associated with fraud? Consider the many different aspects of life that could be construed as fraudulent. Choose one idea or emotion from the list created and write a short passage inspired by that thought. What themes or emotions are highlighted in this passage? What themes or emotions may be brought up in a play titled *Ridiculous Fraud*?

3. Examine the 'Character Profiles' in this guide and ask your students how they imagine each character will look, act and speak. Improvise scenes between two characters and explore their different relationships. Have students write about their experiences playing these characters.

4. *Ridiculous Fraud* centers around the relationship of three brothers. The oldest, Andrew, says the following to his younger brothers:

"We're brothers, whatever that means, it must mean something. Maybe just that we are in the same family and have similar genetics or something more. You only have one family and life is short. Shorter than we think because you never know when something might erupt."

This theme of brotherhood is common throughout American theater. Research other plays that focus on family and brothers. Why do you think so many playwrights explore brothers' relationship? What themes or questions reappear in these relationships?

5. On a sheet of paper draw a family tree that includes the Clay brothers, Willow, Uncle Baites, Maude and Ed. What thoughts or questions come to mind when examining this family tree? Keep this family tree handy, and after viewing *Ridiculous Fraud* make any changes necessary based on love and affairs. Looking at your revised family tree, write a monologue from the point of view of one of these characters. Be prepared to share this monologue with your classmates.

Post-show Discussion Questions



1. Why do you think Beth Henley wrote *Ridiculous Fraud*? What observations do you think she is making about family? How do your feelings on family life compare with those raised in the play?
2. Which character in *Ridiculous Fraud* do you like the best? What qualities make that character attractive? To which character can you best relate?
3. Is there one character whom you did not relate to or whose choices you questioned? Put yourself in the shoes of one of the characters. What would you have done differently?

4. Although Daddy is never seen in the play, his presence is certainly known. What do you think he would like to say to each of his three sons? Do you think his words could have changed any of the actions or choices that the sons made?

5. Towards the end of act two, Willow states that her "life is a fraud" and that she lives at war with her thoughts and her feelings. What do you think she means? Can you cite other examples of characters in this play whose lives may be fraudulent? Andrew speaks of his honesty. What actions can you cite that demonstrate or contradict his self-proclaimed truthfulness? Do any of the characters change throughout the course of the play? If so, how?

6. Despite Andrew's disagreement, Uncle Baites claims that:

"Genetics play a part and I have some bad marital genetics that Lafcad could have inherited."

Do you think there is any validity to this statement?

7. What surprised you in your viewing of *Ridiculous Fraud*? What would you have done differently if you were the director? The set designer?

Enhance the Performance: In-class Post-show Activities



1. Hot-Seating: Choose one student to take on the role of one of the three Clay brothers. Have the other students question and interrogate this character on the actions and choices this character made throughout the play. Have the class come up with several statements about this character and the choices he made.

2. The Big Easy: After seeing or reading *Ridiculous Fraud*, have students research the city of New Orleans and discuss what it might be like to live in such an energized environment. From photographs, newspapers, magazines, etc., students should evaluate why Beth Henley chose to make this the setting for *Ridiculous Fraud*. Have students make a list of qualities that make New Orleans unique.

What are some other cities this play might take place in? In the case of each city, talk about how this shift would impact the story. Are there key elements that are less effective? Is there any case where the shift makes some elements even more effective?

Or, research at least five other pieces of literature set in New Orleans. Are there common themes that exist in these works? Students should consider themes that might exist in plays that could be set in their own school's town. Are they interesting? Have students split up into groups to write an outline for a play that takes place in their school's town.

3. Character Objectives: The characters in *Ridiculous Fraud* have objectives they are trying to achieve. Divide your students into groups, each taking one character from the play. Have them try to name one goal, or objective, for their characters. Then, have them decide the following: How important is the objective to the character? What is the obstacle that stands in the way of achieving the character's goal? Is the obstacle a person? Is it a circumstance? Is it lack of information? What are the tactics the character tries to use to overcome the conflicting obstacle? Does he or she attempt more than one tactic? Does the character eventually attain his or her objective? If not, are there other tactics the character might have used? Have your students write their answers, and then discuss it when the class comes together again.

4. Tableau: Participants create a frozen picture that serves to crystallize an idea or to communicate a concrete image. These images may be brought to life or 'thought-tracked' by having individuals speak their inner thoughts. Have several students create a tableau the Clay family portrait. In what way can the students portray these

Tips and Hints for Improvising Scenes

Here are some helpful guidelines for improvising scenes with your students. Improvisation is a remarkable way to explore characters and their actions.

- Give your students some "given circumstances" for them to work with. These circumstances can be simple and will give your students just enough information to start their improvised scene. For example, choose two students to improvise a scene between Andrew and Lafcad. The given circumstance can be that Lafcad has broken off his engagement and does not want to get married. Andrew, however, may start the scene by announcing to him that he must marry Mary Anna because the Clay family's reputation has already suffered a great blow, and they are depending on this marriage to show that they are a respectable family. Improvise that scene.

- Give each student a "want." In our example, Lafcad's "want" is not to marry Mary Anna and perhaps also to make Andrew understand why he cannot marry her. Andrew's want is to save the family's reputation by persuading Lafcad to apologize to Mary Anna and ask her to take him back. Each actor should be going after his "want" and trying different tactics to achieve this "want."

- Once the scene begins, you may want to add some constraints to the scene. One way to do this is to announce that the Lancasters are on their way over. This will force Lafcad and Andrew to make a decision faster.

- Don't say "no." See if the students can improvise a scene without saying "no." This puts a roadblock on the scene and doesn't allow the scene to go further. Instead, by saying "yes" in your scene, you can add to and further the scene.

- Allow the students to explore outcomes and situations that may occur in the play. This is an exploration in character, and the students should feel free to make choices

characters' thoughts and emotions through only this frozen picture? Keep the frozen portrait. Have each student talk in character about the other members of the family.

and decisions based on the information they know of these characters.

Who's Who

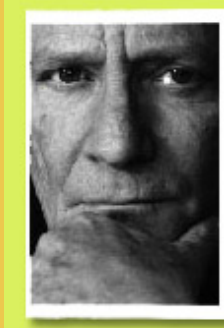
ACTING COMPANY



Tim DeKay



Barbara Garrick



Charles Haid



Heather Goldenhersh



Daniel London



John Carroll Lynch



Ali Marsh



Reg Rogers

Tim DeKay

Kap Clay

Barbara Garrick

Maude Chrystal

Charles Haid

Uncle Baites

Heather Goldenhersh

Georgia

Daniel London

Lafcad Clay

John Carroll Lynch

Ed Chrystal

Ali Marsh

Willow Clay

Reg Rogers

Andrew Clay

ARTISTIC STAFF

Beth Henley	<i>Playwright</i>
Lisa Peterson	<i>Director</i>
Michael Yeargan	<i>Set Design</i>
Jess Goldstein	<i>Costume Design</i>
Peter Kaczarowski	<i>Lighting Design</i>
Martin Des Jardins	<i>Sound Design</i>
Mara Isaacs	<i>Producing Director</i>
David York	<i>Director of Production</i>
Cheryl Mintz	<i>Production Stage Manager</i>
Janice Paran	<i>Dramaturg</i>
Laura Stanczyk, CSA	<i>Casting Director</i>

Catching Up with Beth Henley- By Sarah Powers



Photo by David S. Talbott, Courtesy of Actors Theatre of Louisville

Lee Anne Fahey, Kathy Bates, and Susan Kingsley in the 1979 premiere of *Crimes of the Heart*.

Beth Henley's work has been called "Southern Gothic," "feminist" and "grotesquely farcical" and is often compared to that of other great Southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams and Eudora Welty. While each of these descriptions may shed some light on Henley's unique style, each is also limiting and falls far short of defining her work. *New York Times* critic Frank Rich wrote in his review of *Crimes of the Heart*, her 1981 Pulitzer Prize winning drama, Henley "can serve us pain as though it were a piece of cake." Granted, Henley exhibits a Southern Gothic tendency to find humor in events that seem tragic, but her work also reveals a strong Chekhovian sensibility, a more nuanced form of tragicomedy, and some of her more recent plays push, or even explode, traditional theatrical boundaries. Drawing from, but refusing to be limited by, a host of influences, Henley developed a clear theatrical voice that is entirely her own.

Beth Henley wrote her first play when in the sixth grade in Jackson, Mississippi: a musical comedy called *Swing High, Swing Low*. Unfortunately, her shyness and unwillingness to speak to boys put an end to a proposed garage production. Nevertheless, theater was an important part of Henley's life from a very young age. Her mother enjoyed acting and frequently performed with the Jackson Little Theatre and the New Stage Theatre. Watching her mother onstage and later reading plays on her own, Henley became enthralled by theater and eventually decided to study acting at Southern Methodist University.

Henley moved to Los Angeles in 1976, intending to pursue an acting career but becoming a playwright instead. In 1978 she wrote *Crimes of the Heart*, based on a crisis in her grandfather's life that had reunited the family. She loosely modeled the play on Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, hoping to appeal to regional theaters that might produce the two plays in repertory. Henley had first encountered Chekhov in college, and a production of *The Cherry Orchard* had particularly inspired her. As she recounted in an interview, "It was just absolutely a revelation about how alive life can be and how complicated and beautiful and horrible; to deny either of those is such a loss."

Crimes of the Heart opened at Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1979 as part of its Festival of New American Plays. As Henley later recalled: "It was January and it was freezing... I remember standing in the parking lot, and these people in fur coats were getting out of their cars. And I thought, 'Oh, my God, they paid money, they hired babysitters, and they came out to see this,' and I started crying. I was terrified that I was going to be arrested for fraud." Two years later,

despite her initial anxiety, Henley's first professionally produced play garnered the Pulitzer Prize.

Henley followed the great success of *Crimes of the Heart* with several other darkly comic plays focused on families within Southern settings, including *The Wake of Jamey Foster*, *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, and *The Debutante Ball*. Her unique style of dark comedy shines through in each of these early plays. In his review of *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, Frank Rich wrote, "Who but Miss Henley can describe one tragedy after another and send us home smiling? This time, we hear about midgets, orphans and deformed kittens - and they're the fortunate ones....Even so, the evening's torrential downpour of humor - alternately Southern-Gothic absurdist, melancholy and broad - almost never subsides."

In the 1990s, Henley, while continuing to juxtapose the grotesque and the beautiful in her stage worlds, began to move away from Southern settings and to experiment with form. *Control Freaks*, which tackles particularly dark and difficult subjects, from mental illness to the sexual molestation of a child, is more overtly absurdist than earlier Henley dramas, and *L-Play*, perhaps her most structurally daring piece, was a further step in that direction. In an introduction to the play, Henley wrote: "I finally got the idea for the play when I realized I had no idea. I felt fragmented, decentralized, clueless...There were so many worldviews, endless realities, tones, messages. I decided to go with it - the mosaic of life. I wrote a variety of different scenes in different styles and different characters. The only unifying element would be that the title of each scene would begin with an L. An L is half a box. It is a letter that is searching to connect, to link."

Henley returned to her Southern roots with *Impossible Marriage*, produced in 1998. She was pregnant when she began the piece, and at the request of her mother, who prescribed a happy play that would not put the baby under stress, she wrote a love story - an off-kilter one, to be sure, but a love story nonetheless. In 2000 she followed *Impossible Marriage* with one of her most serious plays, *Family Week*, which explores the effect of a child's murder on family life. "I feel both plays are written from somewhere in me that is vital and present, without the veil of nostalgia or historic period," Henley later wrote. "I believe I'm catching up with myself, but life keeps running ahead."

Ridiculous Fraud has borne out that sentiment in more ways than one. Commissioned by McCarter, the bittersweet domestic comedy was a work-in-progress when Henley's mother died, and the play—which deals with the trials and tribulations of an old New Orleans family—was completed shortly before Hurricane Katrina arrived.

Humor in Calamity An Interview with Playwright Beth Henley

Beth Henley is a Mississippi-born playwright and screenwriter who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981 for her play Crimes of the Heart. Her subsequent plays include The Miss Firecracker Contest, The Wake of Jamey Foster, The Debutante Ball, The Lucky Spot, Signature, Control Freaks, Impossible Marriage and Exposed. She received an Academy Award nomination for her screenplay for Crimes of the Heart, which starred Diane Keaton, Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek and Sam Shepard. Her newest play, Ridiculous Fraud, was commissioned by McCarter. Dramaturg Janice Paran recently spoke with Henley about her life and work.

Janice Paran: When we first commissioned you to write a play for McCarter, we left the subject matter wide open. Did you know from the beginning that it would be a play about three brothers?

Beth Henley: Yes. I knew I wanted to write a play about men. To see if I could do it. And when I got the commission I had just done a play with four women and I thought it would be fun to watch men in rehearsal for a change!

Do you usually know where you're headed when you start a new play, or do you just set off and see where it takes you?

I had eight notebooks of stuff but I didn't have a very clear outline. I knew that the first scene was going to be about a

wedding that didn't happen, and the next was going to take place out in the country, and the next was going to be deep in the woods and the last was going to be in the cemetery. I didn't know who was going to die or if somebody was going to die. But here's an interesting thing: when I was being driven back to the airport after one of my trips to Princeton, my driver told me about his mother being in prison for a white collar crime. That kind of opened things up for me—imagining the reality of having a parent in prison. How devastating and disruptive and humiliating that would be.

In some ways, *Ridiculous Fraud* reminds me of *Crimes of the Heart*. They're both about siblings trying to figure out what it means to be a family in the absence of, well, role models. The parents are pretty much out of the picture in both plays.

There are a lot of similarities, but *Ridiculous Fraud* seems to be darker. The damage is not as easily ameliorated. The scars are deeper. It's not like you can get somebody a birthday cake and it's going to be all better.

Still, there are lights at the ends of some of those tunnels!

I definitely don't mean that the play's a total downer, but just in comparison to *Crimes of the Heart* where there's this totally united front of sisters at the end blowing out the candles together. The picture's much different in this. It's more complicated. There are more voices in the choir.

Yes, but you always find the humor in calamity. I mean, you don't write earnest plays full of outrage and shame, you write plays where things go horribly but comically awry.

I believe the humor may be about survival. Growing up I didn't feel entitled to be outraged and shame had to be denied. Self-pity was definitely frowned upon. Perhaps because Southern culture at that time was dedicated to the glorification of lost causes. Also when I get earnest about something I'm usually just seeing one piece of the pie and I miss what is true and unsettling. One of my mother's favorite refrains was, "Let's not take ourselves so seriously."

Your mother died during the time you were writing this play. Did that affect where you took the story, do you think?

I have no idea. It obviously did, how could it not, but at the time I was just trying to keep working. I remember feeling grateful that I'd started a play because I thought I might never be able to start another one.

It's uncanny that you had already decided that the play would end in a cemetery.

It's so funny how sometimes when you write plays they're ahead of you. They're definitely ahead of you spiritually. They know more than you do.

Talk about New Orleans for a moment. It's the setting for *Ridiculous Fraud*, which you finished just before Katrina.

I went there from the time I was a child. My cousins lived there, and we would go down there to visit them or for Mardi Gras, and in high school I would take a bus or a train for the day. It was very glamorous. I've vacationed there a lot, and the last year my mom was alive we went there at Easter. It's such a bizarre thing how the play bookends *Crimes of the Heart*, which was set five years after Hurricane Camille. To me it's very poignant.

Your mother was a community theater actress. Was she your introduction to the theater?

Yes. It was kind of unusual, being raised in Jackson, Mississippi, to be hooked into the theater. There were always Samuel French acting versions of plays around the house, and I would help her learn her lines. Like when she was playing Blanche Dubois—I would hear the play over and over and over again. And I loved going into a theater that had a set. And backstage there was coffee and cookies and people wearing costumes. And closing night they knocked down the set with big hammers—I just thought it was all so great!

Well, your own theater career started off with a bang. *Crimes of the Heart*, which was your first professionally produced play, won the Pulitzer. Looking back, what were the costs and benefits of that early success?

The benefits were enormous in that I got to be a writer! When you have a Pulitzer Prize for a play you get other jobs, and you sort of have to believe you're a writer, which up until that point I wasn't even sure I was. The hard part is that I was kind of obnoxious and a little bit arrogant. And I think I was arrogant because I knew I didn't know what people thought I should know, and I felt like a phony. But I studied a lot, went back to school, and I keep learning through writing. I feel very lucky to have gotten to be a writer in my life. That's the main thing.

Beth Henley bio



© Susan Johann

Beth Henley (Playwright) Her plays include: *Crimes of the Heart*, *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, *The Wake of Jamey Foster*, *The Debutante Ball*, *Abundance*, *Control Freaks* and *Impossible Marriage*. Her work has been produced internationally and translated into over ten languages. Ms. Henley was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, New York Dramatist Critics Circle Award, and a Tony nomination for her play, *Crimes of the Heart*. She is a member of The Pen/Faulkner Writers in Schools National Advisory Council, The Fellowship of Southern Writers, and The Dramatist Guild. Presently Ms. Henley is serving as the President's Professor of Theatre Arts at Loyola Marymount University.

What is Southern Gothic? - By Janice Paran

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines Southern Gothic as "a style of writing practiced by many writers of the American South whose stories set in that region are characterized by grotesque, macabre, or fantastic incidents."

Derived from the Gothic genre—popularized by Horace Walpole's 1765 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, whose medieval setting and supernatural elements were widely imitated—the term has been invoked to describe a wide range of American writers, notably William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams and Carson McCullers, but also contemporary authors as diverse in their interests and literary imaginations as Anne Rice, Cormac McCarthy and Beth Henley.

These days "Southern Gothic" encompasses all manner of lurid, mysterious, otherworldly or merely eccentric goings-on in Southern fiction, and while scholars, critics and the writers themselves variously dissect, debate or dismiss the tag, many would agree with Carson McCuller's observation that Southern writers frequently juxtapose "the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail."

On a less exalted plane, the novelist Pat Conroy put it this way: "My mother, Southern to the bone, once told me, 'All Southern literature can be summed up in these words: On the night the hogs ate Willie, Mama died when she heard what Daddy did to Sister.'" "

Beth Henley, dubbed a Southern Gothic writer from the beginning of her career, finds the designation of limited value. Still, she acknowledges that something of her Mississippi upbringing adheres in all of her writing, regardless of setting. "As much as I try to shake it, I can't," she concedes. "It's just there. A kind of sensibility that's dark and light at the same time. A kind of Grand Guignol view of life." From Babe's singularly inept suicide attempts in *Crimes of the Heart* to the graveyard picnic in *Ridiculous Fraud*, Henley's plays routinely locate the glorious histrionic streak that courses through calamity.

Interview with Director Lisa Peterson



Director Lisa Peterson

How and why did you decide to become a director?

I wanted to be an actor first and started acting as a kid, just in community theater. I went to Yale thinking that I would be an actor, and I did study acting there as an undergraduate. There wasn't a directing program, but the head of the theater decided on a whim to teach a directing workshop one semester. I took it and had an epiphany in the presentation of my first scene. I just loved standing in the back of the room working the light switch, and the experience of having people laugh was just much more potent as a director than as an actor. So I left college wanting to be a director and moved to New York and just started trying to do it.

What about Beth Henley's writing is most attractive to you, and what drew you to this play?

It's full of surprises, and I'm always drawn to writing that doesn't fulfill your expectations. I was struck by the combination of humor and darkness in the play, the range of characters - it's a panoply of unusual people, and they all have surprising dimensions to them. And then structurally, this play interested me because of its classical four-act structure. It seems grand on the one hand and really personal and detailed on the other. Classically I'm drawn to Shaw and Brecht and Shakespeare, and Beth's writing is so intuitive and moves from an emotional and rhythmical place that is slightly new for me. The play just seemed like a gourmet meal when I first read it.

Critics have called Beth Henley's work Chekhovian. Do you think that applies to *Ridiculous Fraud*?

When I first read it, I thought that immediately. When I was in college and first reading Chekhov, I found it to be very difficult to read on the page. In a similar way Beth's play doesn't become clear unless you start to see it in three dimensions and in time. There are just so many different stories going on, and so many of them are hidden. So it does feel like working on Chekhov, but when I first read it I also thought of Marivaux because it is a comedy of manners. In that way it is not Chekhovian. I don't think of Chekhov as being so much about style as this play is, but it did feel to me like it was cut through various layers of society within a particular geography. It reminded me of what would happen if Chekhov were to meet Marivaux now.

What do you think the biggest challenge of directing *Ridiculous Fraud* will be or has been?

First I'd say it's a very challenging conducting job, meaning that there are lots of themes and set themes and melodies and harmonies, and so to keep those all consistent, moving forward and balanced, is tricky. I also think it's going to be tricky for us to find the right balance of the ridiculous and the real. Tonally, it's tricky. Ideally I'm quite certain that it needs to shift tone and rhythm constantly, and do it with a great amount of truth. So the style of it is difficult, and the physical element is also challenging. When we were [workshopping the play] at Sundance I remember the phrase "glorious traffic" came to my mind to describe the physical life of the play. And it's very true because it's the end of the day, and I feel pretty exhausted just from trying to manage the ins and outs and the demands of eight very wild characters.

How long have you been with the play?

Almost two years. I didn't know Beth, but I did have a history with McCarter, so they called and asked if I would like to go to Sundance with Beth to work on the play. We went to Sundance in the summer of 2004 and spent three weeks working on it with actors there. Since then we've had several one-day readings, and whenever I was in Los Angeles Beth and I would meet and talk about the play, actors, and the design.

What was your role in developing the play?

I have a lot of experience working on new plays, and my level of involvement depends on the writer and the state of the play, but in this case, Beth and Janice Paran and I spent a lot of time conferring about the script at Sundance. But Beth's ear is very true to herself, so she's a cautious rewriter, and rightly so, and waits until the characters need her there. She doesn't force a rewrite on the play. So the changes that have been made are all fairly subtle. We have thought a lot about the mother's role in the boys' lives and her role in the play, and the father's as well. In a way the focus has always been on how we bring the offstage characters more into the action of the play. Lafcad reading the letter that his father wrote him was something that we found at Sundance. I can never remember whose idea it was, but in a conversation the thought was, what's in that letter? And I think I said to Beth, "Why don't you write it as an exercise, and maybe it's useful in the play, and maybe it isn't." That's the kind of thing that you might do at Sundance, just write something as an exercise and then see if you can use it.

How do you find a balance in directing a comedy that is so dramatic, with such an emotional core?

First of all, I think we're lucky we have actors who have deep souls, and so partly I trust that if we can get the rhythms of the play right technically, we can fill it in. I'm a bit of an outside-in director because I basically think that filling it in emotionally is the actor's job, and I trust them to do that, although I do try to help suggest how to get there if I can see that they are lost or confused. I'm also focusing a little bit more on the comedy of it because I think comedy is technically so difficult. And Beth's play is very rhythmically precise. You can feel in rehearsal a kind of pull back and forth as we find what feels right rhythmically. We're happy for a while when it feels rhythmically loud and funny, and then the next hour we might suddenly feel empty because we haven't actually filled it. So we just keep exploring it and searching for the right rhythm.

Lisa Peterson bio



Director Lisa Peterson

Lisa Peterson (*Director*) Upcoming projects: *Water and Power* (Mark Taper Forum); *Mother Courage* (La Jolla Playhouse); and *Major Barbara* (Guthrie). Recent credits: *The Rainmaker* (Arena Stage); *Tight Embrace* (INTAR); *Carol Mulroney* (Huntington Theatre Co); *Oedipus* (Guthrie); *Electricidad* (Mark Taper Forum); *Casino Paradise* (Prince Music Theatre); *Candida* (McCarter); *Birdy* (Women's Project); *The Fourth Sister* (Vineyard Theatre); *The Country* and *Be Aggressive* (La Jolla Playhouse); *Chavez Ravine*, *The House of Bernarda Alba* and *The Body of Bourne* (Mark Taper Forum); *Two Days* (Long Wharf Theatre); *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (Guthrie); *The Glass Menagerie* and *Description Beggared, or the Allegory of Whiteness* (Actors Theatre of Louisville); *All's Well that Ends Well*, *A Winter's Tale* and *Love's Labours Lost* (Cal Shakes); *The Square* (Public Theater), produced by the Ma-Yi Theatre Company; and *Fall* (Center Stage and Berkeley Rep). Currently Resident Director at the Mark Taper Forum, she is a member of Ensemble Studio Theatre and the Drama Department

Theater Artist Spotlight: Dramaturg Janice Paran

Let's start simple. What is the role of a dramaturg? What do you do?

This may be a simple question, but there's no simple answer, at least not one I've figured out! It's tricky to define the profession, since there are so many aspects of it. A dramaturg's tasks can vary tremendously depending, for instance, on whether you're talking about a freelance dramaturg or one affiliated with a theater like McCarter. At McCarter, the dramaturg helps to develop and identify projects for future seasons; works with playwrights as a sounding board to nudge and champion the creation of new work; and provides research or other resources for the director and actors during the rehearsal process and for the audience via program notes, post-performance discussions, etc., once a play is up and running. My connection with *Ridiculous Fraud* began when I was the Resident Dramaturg and Director of Play Development at McCarter. Now I'm a freelance dramaturg, but luckily I've been able to stay attached to this project.

Dramaturgy is a relatively new profession in America. Can you talk about its history in today's theater?

Dramaturgy as a profession began in Europe in the 18th century. The first dramaturg, a German playwright and critic named Lessing, was hired by a theater company in Hamburg to write plays for them and to write regular articles in response to their work. Mostly they didn't listen to what he had to say, and the theater folded in two years' time, but he fought the good fight. Dramaturgs (or literary managers, as they're often called in this country) began to appear in the U. S. in the 1960s and '70s in conjunction with the rise of the regional theater movement.

It is probably hard to talk about dramaturgy without having a sense of what the process is for playwrights who work with one. Can you talk about what the evolution of *Ridiculous Fraud* was since its inception, and what your role on this particular project has been like?

First of all, dramaturgy in the realm of new play development is a tricky proposition—even the phrase “new play development” is apt to send some playwrights into cardiac arrest, suggesting as it does that new plays need to be “developed,” which is too often a code word for “fixed.” Every playwright has his or her preferred method of working, which may or may not include the collaboration of a dramaturg. Ideally, new play dramaturgy grows out of an established relationship between a writer and a dramaturg; I'm pretty much opposed to “shotgun dramaturgy,” where a playwright and a dramaturg who have no history together are thrown together on a project. (Having said that, I've had some wonderful arranged marriages with playwrights, so there are exceptions...)

Ridiculous Fraud was commissioned by McCarter in our usual laid-back way. That is, we asked Beth Henley (a writer we'd admired for ages but never worked with) to write a play for us, and then we tried to stay out of her way while she did it. She and I had a couple of early conversations about what she might be interested in writing—she knew early on that she wanted to write a play whose main characters would be brothers, and that there would be duck hunting involved somehow—and then she worked on it off and on for a couple of years. She lives in L.A., so I stayed in touch with occasional letters and phone calls (trying to walk that treacherous line between encouraging and nagging), and Beth came to Princeton twice to take part in McCarter's annual writers' retreat, which helped jumpstart her writing. She ended up writing three or four drafts of the play, making small but significant changes with each new draft, and I ventured some careful feedback at each stage—usually in written form. Unlike writers who thrive on lots of contact and give-and-take during the writing process, Beth cherishes her solitude, and needs the space and time to go off and rewrite on her own. As we've gotten to know each other better, of course, we've been able to talk to each other with more ease and trust. My role hasn't changed, though; I have thoughts, suggestions and opinions about the work, but I'm there to follow Beth's lead, not vice versa. I happen to love this play—it's got Beth's heart and humor woven into it—so it's been a deep pleasure to help curate its creation.

Once McCarter had committed to producing the play, we submitted it to the Sundance Institute's Theatre Lab, and it was selected for a three-week workshop in the summer of 2004. There, Beth had the opportunity to see the play on its feet and to continue revising. Our collaborative partnership had expanded to include director Lisa Peterson (who brings a sensitive and perceptive eye to new play development) and a wonderful company of actors, many of whom are now in the McCarter production.

How did you come to this profession? Would you have any advice for students who are interested in pursuing a career as a dramaturg?

I came to dramaturgy in a roundabout way—I started out acting, then got a degree in directing before I discovered an interest in and aptitude for a dramaturgical career. I have an M.F.A. in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from the Yale School of Drama. I would advise students to get a good liberal arts education under their belts, first of all. Read lots of plays and learn theater history, but read widely and deeply in other fields as well—history, art, even economics. A dramaturg needs to have an eye on the big picture, but shouldn't presume to be an expert on anything. And when it comes to working with playwrights, I think dramaturgs need to earn their authority instead of claiming it; because sometimes the best dramaturgy is no dramaturgy at all.

You have worked with such a fantastic variety of playwrights over the years; Emily Mann, Dael Orlandersmith, Nilo Cruz, Regina Taylor, to name-drop just a few. What sorts of new challenges and adventures do you face with each new collaboration? Are there any particularly noteworthy experiences you'd like to share?

It's a new ballgame every time out. You have to do a lot of waiting and listening before you can hear the heartbeat of a new play, and then you have to figure out if, when, and how to talk to the playwright about what you're hearing. I'm sometimes amazed that playwrights would ever willingly enter into a conversation with a dramaturg. A new play is like a new baby—if you're entrusted with it, you had better be very, very careful what you say!

Of course, I've broken my own rules on that score. When I first read Nilo Cruz's *Anna in the Tropics* (which had already premiered in Florida), I had an idea about a structural change I thought might improve the play. Now by this time, Nilo and I had worked together frequently and had become good friends, so I knew I could talk frankly to him about it. I thought it would be easier to show than to explain the re-arrangement of scenes I had in mind, so I took the liberty of cutting and pasting the script and giving it to him over lunch in New York one day. To my relief, Nilo was utterly open to the suggestion—he had wanted to take another crack at the play but had gotten stuck, so my scene shuffle gave him the prod he needed. His revised version of the play, which McCarter decided to produce the following season, subsequently won the Pulitzer Prize, and the McCarter production moved to Broadway. So that was a happy ending to a bit of dramaturgical hubris.

Janice Paran bio

Janice Paran (*Dramaturg*) is a freelance dramaturg and writer who was the Dramaturg and Director of Play Development at McCarter Theatre from 1991 until September of last year. While at McCarter, she worked closely with numerous writers on the development of new plays, musicals and adaptations, including Christopher Durang (*Miss Witherspoon*), Stephen Dietz (*Last of the Boys*), Nilo Cruz (*Anna in the Tropics*, *Two Sisters and a Piano*), Regina Taylor (*Crowns*), Dael Orlandersmith (*Yellowman*), Emily Mann (*Having Our Say*), Stephen Wadsworth (the Marivaux trilogy and Molière's *Don Juan*) and Polly Pen (*The Night Governess*). Janice recently worked with The Civilians on the development of (*I am*) *Nobody's Lunch*, and she has also worked as a dramaturg for the Sundance Theatre Labs in Utah and White Oak, Florida. She serves as an artistic advisor to the Weston Playhouse Theatre Company in Weston, Vermont, and is currently teaching a dramaturgy course at Princeton University. She holds M.F.A. degrees from the Yale School of Drama and Catholic University.

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Online Resources

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Ducks Unlimited: Duck Hunting and Conservation
<http://www.ducks.org/index.asp>

Website for Antoine's
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